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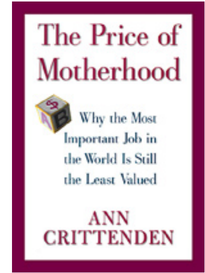
Women's Work



The choice to become a mother, a journalist argues, imposes an enormous cost.

By PAUL STARR

In the language of American politics, "motherhood" is synonymous with bland causes that no politician can publicly oppose. Yet, properly understood, motherhood is no motherhood issue. As Ann Crittenden argues in her powerful and important new book, the choice to become a mother in America today imposes enormous costs on most women, including lower incomes and higher risks of poverty than men or childless women face. And the remedies, far from being bland matters of consensus, raise some of the most difficult and divisive questions about work, family life, law and social policy.

The failure of our institutions to make systematic provision for bearing and raising children means that not only do women's incomes fall just when their family's costs increase; the interruptions to their careers also reduce their lifetime earnings and savings. Even more than sex discrimination, this "mommy tax," as Crittenden calls it, exposes women to higher risks of poverty in old age or in the event of divorce.

Those risks are aggravated by the built-in bias of law and policy toward paid employment. Unpaid work in the home does not count toward Social Security pensions, nor does it qualify for disability or survivor benefits. In a marriage, whoever earns the paycheck has the right to it. Astonishingly, now that alimony has nearly disappeared, a woman who faces divorce after raising children rarely gets consideration in the settlement for the loss to her earning capacity.

While documenting these and other penalties for maternal virtue, "The Price of Motherhood" is not a dreary or predictable book. Written with a fine passion and at times a biting wit, it challenges the received ideas of economists, feminists and conservatives alike and ought to be read by all of them. An accomplished economic journalist and a former reporter for The New York Times, Crittenden has worked for five years on the book, conducting interviews, attending conferences and court proceedings and synthesizing research in economics, law, history and sociology. The result is a work that is as informative and engaging in its details as it is compelling in its overall argument.

Despite all the customary praise of mothers, the devaluation of their work is deeply entrenched in our thought and institutions. It's not just a matter of casual remarks implying that women who stay home with the kids aren't working. When our official economic statistics add up the goods and services in the economy, they leave out the unpaid services performed inside the household. Mothers at home are, by definition, unproductive, even though by educating and socializing their children, they contribute to the human capital that is critical to economic growth. And because their work isn't quantified, they disappear from pictures of the economy that are drawn with the data.

As frustrating as such ideological blind spots may be to Crittenden, they're not the reason she wrote the book. At the root of "The Price of Motherhood" is a personal experience produced by the great

historical collision of the past 35 years between change in women's lives and unchanging institutions. Crittenden says the stimulus for her work came from the loss of status and identity she felt when she interrupted her career to have a child. This pattern has scarcely been unusual among women in her generation. Unlike their mothers, who typically had children first and took paid jobs later if at all, women who came of age in the 1960's and afterward have generally established their careers first and then had babies. This sequence raises the perceived "mommy tax," and it highlights the failure of employers and government to accommodate the demands of child-rearing. Compared with the European societies that offer paid maternity leave of up to a year (with benefits based on prior earnings) as well as child benefits (cash payments per child not contingent on poverty), America has not done much to spread the costs of motherhood. Nor have we made systematic provision for part-time work and career paths that allow taking time out for motherhood.

No major group any longer seriously contests the right of women to pursue higher education and careers. Many argue, however, that if women then decide to have children, they do so voluntarily, and if they have to give something up, that is their own choice. But raising children is not just another form of personal satisfaction; the flourishing of the entire society depends upon the willingness to undertake it. And for that choice, as Crittenden argues, women should not have to pay the price of social marginalization and diminished economic security.

This simple idea represents a challenge to women on two fronts -- to the traditional-minded, who may not believe they have a right to take the martyrdom out of motherhood, and to feminists, who may be uneasy about Crittenden's assumption of women's primary responsibility for raising children. Many feminists frame the problems of women entirely around sex discrimition and are loath to focus on the disadvantage that women experience specifically from the decision to become mothers, because it separates women with children from childless women. The primary solution to the low status of child-rearing, in their view, is that men should share the work more equally. But, as Crittenden writes, "feminism needs a fresh strategy," since after 30 years of exhortation, most women continue to do nearly all the parenting work. Her approach is to accept at least some imbalance in the parental division of labor but to seek changes in law, policy and the workplace that reduce the social and economic losses mothers experience.

After long being accused of slighting mothers, a feminism that gave high priority to their interests could open up new political possibilities. For one thing, it might create bases of cooperation with conservatives on at least some issues, like tax policies affecting mothers. The child benefits and other European policies that Crittenden holds up as models have long enjoyed conservative support, partly because of their pro-natalist implications. If the white Protestants who make up the heart of American conservatism start to worry more about their own falling birth rates, they might begin moving in that direction. But, for the moment, there is no realistic prospect of a substantial commitment to reduce the cost of motherhood. Let us hope that this book will make it part of the mainstream discussion. "The Price of Motherhood" ought to receive a fair-minded hearing from any man who worries about the ability of his daughters to live a full life that includes children, and from any daughter who fancies that the work of the women's movement is done. For the reform-minded, there is enough in Crittenden's agenda to fill a lifetime of work and, at the rate we're going, it may take that long.

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