



For the Family?: How Class and Gender Shape Women's Work

By Sarah Damaske

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In the contentious debate about women and work, conventional wisdom holds that middle-class women can decide if they work, while working-class women need to work. Yet, even after the recent economic crisis, middle-class women are more likely to work than working-class women. Sarah Damaske deflates the myth that financial needs dictate if women work, revealing that financial resources make it easier for women to remain at work and not easier to leave it. Departing from mainstream research, Damaske finds three main employment patterns: steady, pulled back, and interrupted. She discovers that middle-class women are more likely to remain steadily at work and working-class women more likely to experience multiple bouts of unemployment. She argues that the public debate is wrongly centered on need because women respond to pressure to be selfless mothers and emphasize family need as the reason for their work choices. Whether the decision is to stay home or go to work, women from all classes say work decisions are made for their families. In *For the Family?*, Sarah Damaske at last provides a far more nuanced and richer picture of women, work, and class than the one commonly drawn.

Winner of the 2011 National Women's Studies Association Sara Whaley Prize for best book on women and labor.

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Editorial Review

Review

"This simple, yet powerful explanation for women's work pathways illuminates two clear mechanisms for facilitating women's steady employment: creating and providing access to better jobs and encouraging men to become equal partners in paid and unpaid labor... Scholars of work, family, gender, culture, and inequality will find *For the Family? How Class and Gender Shape Women's Work* a book worth reading, citing, and integrating into our thinking for years to come." --*American Journal of Sociology*

"Sarah Damaske probes the complex factors that influence how and why women move in and out of the labor force during their 20s and 30s, the years when the demands of constructing both families and careers are most intense. Her challenge to the usual dichotomies between women who 'need' to work and women who 'choose' to cut back or quit their jobs advances our understanding of the interplay between work, family, class, and race." --Stephanie Coontz, Member of the Faculty, History and Family Studies, Evergreen State College, and author of *A Strange Stirring*

"At a moment when messages about working mothers have never been more mixed, *For the Family?* provides a bracing fact check. Moving beyond facile understandings, Sarah Damaske gives us a much-needed exploration of women across the class and race spectrum, revealing commonalities and differences in their weaving of work and family. Nuanced and insightful, this meticulously researched book offers a new take on work and motherhood which gives lie to the mommy wars." --Pamela Stone, Professor of Sociology, Hunter College and Graduate Center, CUNY, and author of *Opting Out?*

"This book is essential reading for work-family and gender and work scholars, especially those interested in how early life experiences affect opportunities and constraints in later life. It could be used in both undergraduate and graduate courses. It makes important contributions to the work-family literature exploring women's experiences in the U.S. by building on cannons in the field..." --Chardie L. Baird, Assistant Professor of Sociology, Kansas State University

"In this pathbreaking book, Sarah Damaske shows us what should have been obvious all along: financial resources actually help women find a good job and establish a stable career, rather than push them out of the workplace. Yet the pressure to be considered a good mother means women of all class backgrounds describe their actions as a matter of family need rather than personal desire. Beautifully written and persuasively argued, *For the Family?* overturns conventional wisdom and compels us to reconsider what we thought we knew about women and work." --Kathleen Gerson, Professor of Sociology, New York University, and author of *The Unfinished Revolution*

"A major contribution... Damaske draws compelling conclusions about the need for more extensive parental leave and childcare policies. It is this vision that has the greatest potential to inform future federal and state policy... Damaske's *For the Family?* has a lot to offer future research... Ultimately, Damaske does an excellent job debunking myths about women's labor market status and expanding our theoretical understanding of women's work patterns." --*Contemporary Sociology*

"A refreshingly different and novel argument... This pathbreaking book is valuable reading for students of labor economics, sociology, and gender studies, as well as faculty, policy makers, and related professionals... Highly recommended." --*CHOICE*

About the Author

Sarah Damaske is an assistant professor of Labor Studies and Employment Relations and Sociology at the Pennsylvania State University.

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