Contemporary Homemakers

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In *Faces of Feminism*, Sheila Tobias writes that the "labor force is an arbitrary categorization designed for keeping a census and for keeping track of who's working in America, but this definition effectively excludes women [as homemakers] from many privileges associated with work, such as unemployment compensation [social security and health insurance]" (43). Using an on-line search program through the United States Census Bureau, information requested for homemakers indicated, "No documents matched your query", "at-home workers" were defined as people who worked for pay at home. The broadest definition of a homemaker is someone who participates in household-related tasks. Whether people prefer the name homemaker, domestic engineer, part-time housewife or full-time housewife, at least one person in each of the 100 million households in the United States does what it takes to keep the home front running smoothly (American Demographics).

When I came of age in a rural central Illinois farming community in the late 1970s, our community and schools did not offer many opportunities for me to question my place in the male-dominated, patriarchal society in which I lived. I expected to graduate from high school, work full-time, attend the local community college part-time, and eventually marry my boyfriend. My story was similar to the majority of females in my hometown, many who married shortly after high school and worked as secretaries or tele-

phone operators. Like my mother and grandmothers, I knew that I wanted marriage and children, but I never thought much about being a full-time homemaker. My mother worked full-time outside the home when I was growing up; I always assumed I would be doing the same.

After marrying at age 19, I spent the next five years working full-time and attending college part-time while my husband finished his undergraduate engineering degree. I gave birth to our first daughter four days after his graduation, and immediately I knew that I wanted to be a stay-at-home mom. My desire to stay at home was influenced by my mother-in-law who, in my eyes, had been a successful homemaker since my husband's birth. I did not want to return to work and leave our daughter with a sitter. However, the opportunity to buy our first home pushed me back into the workforce where I continued working until the birth of our second daughter 18 months later. In 1986, I left full-time paid employment for a full-time unpaid job as a homemaker. The birth of our third daughter in 1988 sealed my fate, and I have spent the past 14 years at home enjoying my children. Despite my positive experiences as a full-time homemaker, there were many times when I felt my unpaid work at home was invisible to society.

My own positive and negative experiences as a homemaker encouraged me to consider researching the lives of contemporary homemakers. Through my interviews with women currently staying at home with their children, I hoped to find out how and why women coming of age in the 1970s—influenced by the second wave of feminism—chose homemaking over paid employment. Some of the questions I asked about homemakers included:

- Do they view homemaking as a job?
- Do they see their work as skilled?
- What are the rewards to homemaking? Costs?
- Do they feel appreciated by their spouse and children?
- Did the importance of their husband's career and opportunities for success influence their decision to work as a homemaker?

This project is relevant to the understanding of gender inequality at work because it explores how female homemakers in contemporary society respond to the socially devalued status of their work. Housework, performed in the home primarily by women, is often not viewed as real work because homemakers are not paid a salary for their labor. The terms "work" and "labor" have come to mean an exchange of a person's time and effort for wages, and only work exchanged for a wage is considered real work. Additionally, many women do not view their homemaking jobs as real work or labor because they consider themselves "acting to meet the needs of their families out of affection or love" (Collins et al 9). A homemaker's unconcerned attitude toward her job makes homemaking and homemakers easier to exploit and, thus, makes the true value of their work difficult for others to see, respect, and appreciate.

Data and Methods

I interviewed four homemakers from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds to see if different income levels affect a homemaker's degree of satisfaction. The women, all who describe themselves as white, range in age from 30 to 40 years; all have a minimum of a high school education. One woman has a master's degree, one has a one-year technical certificate, and one has five years of college credit. All the women are married; this is a second marriage for one of the women. They have been married from 2 years to 18 years. Two of the women have three children, one has two children, and the fourth has one child. They are all members of the Michiana At-Home Mothers Group, a local affiliate of the national organization, Formerly Employed Mothers at the Leading Edge (FEMALE). FEMALE is a nonprofit group that helps women make the transition from paid employment to unpaid work as homemakers.

The interviews ranged from 1 hour to 2 hours, and were conducted in different locations to accommodate my interviewees' schedules. The first interview was conducted at my home, the second at the Indiana University South Bend Schurz Library, the third

in my van in the parking lot of a local competitive cheerleading gymnasium, and the fourth interview was held at the interviewee's home.

Interviewee Backgrounds

Interview One: "Becky"

Becky is a 38-year-old white female. She has been married for 8 years and has three daughters, ages 6, 4, and 2. After the birth of her first daughter, Becky, a professionally trained horn player, briefly returned to her part-time job at a university in California. She has been a stay-at-home mom for over six years. Becky and her husband initially tried dovetailing their employment so that at least one of them was always home with their daughter. Although Becky's employer was very generous in allowing her to bring her daughter to work, she found it difficult to switch from a mommy mode to a work mode with her child in a playpen in her office. When her husband was at home caring for their daughter, Becky was still occupied at work pumping breast milk. That she did not love her job made it easier for her to quit. Additionally, their family stood to benefit financially if Becky stayed at home. Her husband could work the additional hours at his job and make about twice as much as she did at her part-time job.

Becky and her husband were freelance musicians in Los Angeles until about 2 years ago when they gave up careers as performing artists for the opportunity to receive a regular paycheck and benefits. Her husband's quality control, design, and development position with a local musical instrument company provides the family with adequate income to enjoy a comfortable lifestyle. Although Becky can see herself returning part-time to the workforce after her children are in school full-time, she would like to be at home as much as possible while they are at home.

Interview Two: "Cindy"

Cindy is a 30-year-old white female. She has been married for 2 years and has been a stay-at-home mother since the birth of her daughter, nine months ago. Cindy has a one-year dental assist-

ing certificate and was employed in that profession until her daughter's birth. She was encouraged and pressured to stay home after the birth of her child by her very traditional in-laws and her husband's extended family. Her husband's mother, sisters, and cousins' wives all stay home with their children; consequently, everyone in the family assumed Cindy would do the same. Cindy agreed to try homemaking. She found that she loves staying at home with her daughter.

Although Cindy's husband and father-in-law own a local decorative tile installation company, Cindy never realized how much she contributed to the family income until her salary ceased. She states that they have had to cut back quite a bit on extras. She and her husband plan to have another baby in the next two years, and she will stay at home until both are in school full-time.

Interview Three: "Susie"

Susie is a 37-year-old white female. She has been married for 18 years and has one daughter and two sons, ages 6, 13, and 3 respectively. Between the births of her oldest son and 6-year-old daughter, Susie and her husband lost a prematurely born son when he was 19 months old; soon after, they lost a set of twins. After the birth of her daughter, Susie returned to work. Susie has a high school diploma and was employed in the purchasing department of a local corporation. She enjoyed her job and never considered that she would not work outside the home. However, she believes that the loss of three children was the driving force behind her decision to quit work after a couple of months. When she chose to quit her job, her boss was extremely hostile and made disparaging comments about her choice.

Susie's husband is self-employed in the family construction business. His income, along with the decision to give up some materialistic things, has made it possible for Susie to be a stay-at-home mother for the past six years. Originally, Susie planned to return to work after her youngest child was in kindergarten; however, she now questions whether she will ever return to the work-

force again. She has found that the older children still need her at home.

Interview Four: "Sally"

Sally is a 40-year-old white female. She has been married for three years and has two children. She has a 15-year-old son from her first marriage, along with a 4 year-old daughter from her second marriage. Sally worked before and after the birth of her son, often working double shifts to support the family because her first husband had difficulty holding a job. She and her second husband were self-employed for the past four years in an arts and craft business that allowed them to spend quantity and quality time at home with their daughter. However, after they went into debt, Sally's husband took a temporary job at a local hardware chain until he found permanent employment six months ago as a graphic artist. For financial reasons, he would prefer that Sally seek full-time employment.

Sally has had five years of college classes but did not graduate; she hopes to obtain her degree in the future. Sally holds firm in her belief that she should be at home until their daughter is in school full-time. Sally grew up in a dysfunctional family without much nurturing and emotional support. She believes that is why she feels so strongly about being at home with her children.

The Contemporary Homemaker

In *The Economic Emergence of Women*, Barbara R. Bergmann writes that,

> to be a housewife is to be a member of a very peculiar occupation, one with characteristics like no other. The nature of the duties to be performed, the method of payment, the form of supervision, the tenure system, the market in which the workers finds jobs, and the physical hazards are all very different from the way things are in other occupations. The differences are so great that one tends not to

> think of a housewife as belonging to an occupation in the usual sense. It is sometimes said that a housewife doesn't work. The truth is, of course, that a housewife does work, does get a reward for her work, and not infrequently gets fired or quits.
>
> (99)

The doctrine of separate spheres states that a man's place is in the public sphere and a woman's place is at home in the private sphere. In 1963, Betty Friedan wrote *The Feminine Mystique* to challenge the idea that women achieved success and happiness by their acceptance of and participation in traditional wife and mother roles. According to feminist theory, "gender, unlike sex, is defined as a socially constructed role" (Tobias 1). The nurturing "female gender identity was socially constructed for the purpose of maintaining male power and privilege" (Tobias 255). Feminist thinking about the full-time homemaker concludes, "women should not be forced into assuming that role and that alternative choices should be available" (Bergmann 225).

Some feminists have focused on increasing the dignity of the homemaker, while others would like to see more females and males as homemakers. However, in her essay, "Families and Feminist Theory: Some Past and Present Issues," Susan Moller Okin writes that "women's typically lower pay reinforces the rationality, in most two-parent families, of the mother's being the primary child-rearer, which continues the cycle of gender inequality between the sexes" (18).

The women I interviewed chose homemaking for a variety of reasons, including financial concerns, family pressures, the loss of a child, or the desire to be with their children. While most women and their families did not support the doctrine of separate spheres for men and women, Cindy stated that her husband and his family placed an enormous amount of pressure on her to stay at home with her daughter. Her husband's mother, sister, and cousins' wives are all stay-at-home mothers; it was assumed that Cindy would stay home also. However, Cindy also commented that:

> if I really, really wanted to work, he [her husband] wouldn't have been too happy, and I know his father wouldn't have been happy about it, but I could have done it.

Although Becky's decision to stay home with her newborn daughter was supported by the fact that her husband could make more money working than she could, her husband was an involved parent. Becky stated that the kids are the first priority for her and her husband. Before they had their first daughter, "we talked extensively about who would raise this child, and we decided unequivocally that it would be us." After deciding to quit her job, Becky said:

> If for some reason it didn't turn out to be the best thing for him to be working, I would go to work and he would be home with the kids. It doesn't sound real but it is. I swear. He is a real person and he's home right now. He's got a little kid on his lap and is telling them some silly story about a pig...or something. But he's there cause that is what he values.

Susie stated that her husband helps her around the house and cooks more now than he did when she was working at her full-time job. Sally spoke fondly about her husband and his "hands-on" attitude toward parenting. She believes that her family is blessed because of the time she and her husband had at home with their daughter. She elaborated:

> My daughter bonded so well with her father...she loves him equally. And he's such a good, hands-on dad...I really feel she needs that connection with her dad...That's the kind of man I think [she'll] marry when she grows up...And she'll feel like she

> deserves that type of respect and love...She's not going to fall short when it comes to choosing her life partner. [That's a gift that] is worth a lot more than money. You can't place a value on that.

Is Homemaking a Job? Does It Require Skills?

As I stated earlier, housework is often not viewed as a "real job" because homemakers are not paid a salary for their labor. Homemakers are on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week for a job that is physically and emotionally exhausting. Using a conservative estimate of 10 working hours a day, the average homemaker will devote over 3,500 hours per year to a job that the United States Census Bureau does not even recognize.

When I asked my interviewees if they viewed their work as a job, three women quickly said "yes." Cindy stated that homemaking is a valid career because it is nonstop from morning to evening; Becky echoed Cindy's views because:

> it's really HARD, and it takes a lot of effort and a lot of time...It has all the aspects of a job, as far as I know. It requires certain things of you, there are obvious points at which you are assessed by several people...You have times when you don't want to do it but you have to anyway. It has a time clock; the bus comes at a certain time...Every baby must be diapered and fed and put to sleep...Everything has to be done for children...It's somebody's job to care for children. In our case, it's mine. That's my job.

I then asked my interviewees if they viewed their work as skilled. The same three women who felt homemaking was a job also saw their work as skilled. Their definitions of the skills needed for homemaking differed, but one thing was the same: either parent could share the necessary skills. Sally commented that she sees her work as skilled because:

> I realize how unskilled I am every day when it comes to juggling a million different things...And, I am not the most domestic person in the world...I think it takes a tremendous amount of skill...You need to be a bit of everything...You need to be a psychologist, a mathematician for budgeting things...You have to be able to dramatically multi-task to be a stay-at-home mom to keep the place running smoothly and to be the kind of parent you want to be.

Susie was the only interviewee who did not view homemaking as a job or skilled work. She talks of homemaking as her life and states:

> I guess I view [homemaking] as my life. This is my life. This is my family. This is what I need to do...I wouldn't call my life a job. I don't say that I have to get up and go to work. I don't view it as a job because it is my life. My everyday thing. This is what I do. I am a mom. I think anyone could be a mom. It just depends on what level, how good of a mom you are.

Rewards and Costs to Homemakers

"Man may work from sun to sun, but a women's work is never done."
Arlie Hochschild, (Reskin & Padavic, 1994, p. 147)

In contrast to men receiving a paycheck from their employer in recognition for their contribution to the workforce, the rewards for homemakers are typically not monetary. From her husband's income, a homemaker can expect to receive a roof over her head and money to buy household goods and clothing. However, their lack of income keeps many homemakers from having a voice in family decisions. Other disadvantages of homemaking cited by my interviewees included isolation, confinement, self-doubt, low self-esteem, and loss of personal identity. Betty Friedan writes of the

problem that has no name—a problem often described by homemakers as a feeling of desperation, an emptiness. The women interviewed by Friedan complained of a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning, and an "Is this all?" attitude toward their lives as unpaid homemakers (Friedan 15).

In my interview with Susie, she stated that one of her least favorite aspects of homemaking is when she feels like she is not doing her job and not making the right decisions for her children. She commented that employees are fired when they make mistakes, but the same is not true of parents.

> When you are a parent and you don't feel, maybe, you have made the right decision or handled a situation right...you can't go back and repeat anything...that's the worst.

However, when I asked my interviewees to rate their level of satisfaction from 1 to 10, their scores were high: 10, 8, 10, and 8. In their eyes, the rewards of being a stay-at-home mom appeared to far outweigh the costs. When I asked Cindy what the rewards are for her as a stay-at-home mom and homemaker, she stated:

> Just being able to spend quality time with my daughter. I love every minute I spend with her...I get a lot of personal satisfaction in the work I do at home...It gives me a feeling of accomplishment.

For Sally, the reward is time spent with her family. She worked many hours when her oldest son was growing up, and values the time spent with her four year-old daughter even more because of her earlier need to work. Her rewards include:

> being able to cuddle with [my daughter] and talk...we will just sit and talk about things that happened and share...I think it just enables me to be

> more of the kind of mom that I really wanted to be [with my son].

Rewards for Susie were many. She noted:

> The number one reward is not having to put up with people in the office…and, at home…I am my own boss. You basically decide what you want to do.

Homemakers and Appreciation

A homemaker's principle job is to provide "childcare, food preparation, housecleaning, laundry, grocery shopping, and a host of other chores or errands" (Bergmann 200). When I asked if they felt appreciated by their spouse and children, all of the homemakers responded that they felt appreciated. Sally says that she feels her family appreciates and values her work as a homemaker, but feels she does not get the validation she needs at home. She commented:

> a lot of women don't understand that it's the hardest job and it can be the most rewarding, but it also is very unsatisfying when it comes to appreciation. I think it's really important for moms to hang together because you gotta get it [validation] from each other. And our society does not value a mother's position in the home…I think that sometimes [my husband and son] just think that the sock fairy comes and does the socks and laundry. Somehow, it arrives…and the dinners…out of sight, out of mind. Also, I feel like all the jobs are my jobs. It comes and goes, the appreciation. I'm trying to learn to hear it in different ways.

With the exception of Sally's husband who, for financial reasons, would prefer that she seek a full-time job, the remainder of the interviewees stated their husbands and children were very support-

ive of their decision to stay at home. Cindy receives a lot of verbal support and appreciation from her husband. His family, who place a great value on homemaking, does not speak of their appreciation but Cindy said she can tell from their attitudes towards her that they are very appreciative of her decision to stay at home with her daughter. Susie also feels appreciated by her husband and family. She states that:

> [My husband] tells me he would work an 80 hour week rather than stay home with the kids all day. He's my biggest supporter. He helps me around the house, he cooks…he knows it's hard.

Becky knows that her husband appreciates and values her job as a homemaker. Prior to marriage, they discussed the importance of raising their children together. She states that her husband:

> places a very high value on my work as a homemaker. He is absolutely supportive and expresses deep gratitude to me for being "willing to do this," which I always respond with "it's what I want to do." His kids are important to him and this is the only thing he would find acceptable, either him or me being with them.

Becky also feels her children have appreciated her time at home with them. Having a parent at home has:

> made them appreciate what it is to have a family, be a family. Everybody working together…the intimacy of lives that are intertwined from the moment of waking until the moment of going to sleep…that dance that we do as we spend the whole day together and interact in every conceivable way…[with a] whole range of emotions. They see me exhausted, excited, and all the things that I am every minute of

> the day. This is a cliché...but I really don't think it's the quality time but...the quantity time...because only in quantity do you get every aspect of an emotional being.

Husbands and Their Careers

In *Faces of Feminism: An Activist's Reflections on the Women's Movement*, Tobias writes that "a working man and his wife together will fulfill a two person career, as it takes a hostess, suitcase packer, laundress, and so forth...to move a working husband ahead in certain careers" (180). When I asked my interviewees if their husband's career and opportunities for success influenced their decision to work as a homemaker, none of the women said that they felt influenced or pressured by their husbands' career choice. However, three of the women felt their positions as homemakers had contributed to their spouse's career success. For example, Susie frees her husband from numerous interruptions throughout the day by running errands and answering the phone for his construction business. Becky stated that she believes her decision to stay at home has been an asset to her husband's career because:

> as a consequence of me being home, I do a lot of the things at home [cooking, cleaning, laundry] that are needed or helpful for him in pursuing his career...I feel we are partners in that way, but I wouldn't if we didn't have kids...we would both do laundry and we would both go to work outside the home...we do have kids...and if I didn't stay home he would have to be doing something with them because we agreed that we were going to raise them between the two of us.

When I asked Cindy if the importance of her husband's career influenced her decision to stay at home with their daughter, she said:

> I don't think that was a part of it really. It was more for her. To stay home with her...Things haven't really changed since I've been at home...other than the financial situation...of course, it's been tighter, but that's about it. He's the same old worker he was before.

Conclusion

I found that a woman choosing homemaking as a career in the 1990s does so for many reasons, just as there are reasons to choose other careers. The loss of a child, family pressures, financial concerns, and the desire to be with their children were some of the reasons my interviewees cited for choosing to stay at home with their children. In the post World War II era, Betty Friedan writes in *The Feminine Mystique* of women suffering from a "problem that had no name." Friedan believed that their unhappiness stemmed from the fact that the women felt they had no choice but to assume the role of the happy homemaker as portrayed in the media.

Unlike the women in Friedan's book, all the homemakers I interviewed expected to work outside the home when they were younger. Full-time homemaking was a luxury, not a realistic consideration. However, most found that the birth of a child changed their views about working outside the home. The women interviewed further stated that they felt the rewards of staying at home with their children far outweighed any costs to them financially or personally. The majority of homemakers felt valued and appreciated for their work at home, but the degree of appreciation expressed by family members varied. One interviewee, concerned that she was not valued enough for what she was doing at home, planned a family meeting to address her family's belief that as a wife and mother she was responsible for the majority of the housework. Based on comments from my interviewees, any real or perceived gender inequality felt by the women was confronted rather than ignored.

I also found that most of the women viewed homemaking as a job, and their work as skilled. However, whether or not the

women viewed homemaking as a job or skilled work mattered little to their overall satisfaction as a stay-at-home mother. What mattered most was that the women felt they were doing what was best for them, their children, and their families. Even though many of the women interviewed suffered initially from feelings of isolation and low self-worth, they found support from the Michiana At-Home Mothers' Group, and were all happy to be at home caring for their families. My research suggests that women who are not forced by society into assuming the role of homemaker are happier than women in Friedan's book who view homemaking as their only career choice. In fact, most of the women interviewed experienced disapproval from someone at work or in their family for homemaking as a career.

Additionally, none of the homemakers felt pressured by their husbands' careers to stay at home with the children. Most felt that although their position at home had contributed to their husband's career success, it was still necessary to adjust their budgets to accommodate their missing salary. If I had interviewed women from higher socio-economic groups, I may have found homemakers supporting Shelia Tobias' observation that success for some men's careers is dependent upon a wife at home to manage the house.

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