

Working moms: Looking for more than a paycheck

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Working mothers may be busy, but they like it that way. A recent study of employed moms finds that most would work even if they didn't have to, but they're also looking for new ways to negotiate the demands of mothering and the pressures to be an "ideal" employee.

Unlike earlier research, the study – published today in the February issue of *Gender & Society* – finds that many employed [mothers](#) emphasize the benefits they, and their children, receive from their paid work. Both married and single mothers said they found more fulfillment (and gained self confidence) in paid work than in parenting – and this is an essential reason why they do not stay at home with their children. Most women – regardless of their class, race/ethnicity, or marital status, said they would work (at least part time) even if they didn't have to. The study was conducted by Karen Christopher, an associate professor of Women's/Gender Studies and Sociology at the University of Louisville.

Over the past several decades, mothers' employment rates have risen sharply. By 2010, approximately two-thirds of North American mothers with young children worked outside of the home. Unlike many previous studies on [working mothers](#), the new research looks at a more diverse, young group of mothers, including women from both Canada and the U.S., as well as women with different racial/ethnic backgrounds, class and marital status. Most women in the study were born between 1970 and 1985. Prof. Christopher interviewed 40 working mothers, each with at least one child under the age of 5; over half the women had two children.

Although the women enjoy their careers, they also place limits on how much they work so that they can remain connected to their children. Many women sought out jobs (even high-powered professionals, such as lawyers) with employers who would not demand that they work overtime or nights on a regular basis. Several women stressed that they only work "reasonable" hours. For example, Jana, an African American nurse with one child, said that she was unwilling to trade in her 8-hour shifts for 10-hour shifts and receive overtime pay. At the same time, whether they were married or single, African-American or white, lower, middle income, or higher income – almost all of the mothers interviewed by Prof. Christopher said they wanted to work. Prof. Christopher argues that while these [moms](#) are not spending intensive amounts of time with their kids, they see themselves as involved parents who are "in charge" of their children's lives.

For these [women](#), a new emphasis on their own needs as people helped supersede any feelings of guilt or ambivalence over working for pay. "About one-third of the 40 employed mothers expressed some ambivalence or guilt over their employment, but most employed mothers justified their paid work by saying it made them more fulfilled people, in addition to better mothers," Prof. Christopher says. "So, these mothers are not only reframing what good mothering entails, they also frame employment in ways different than do earlier studies of mothers."

Some Things Haven't Changed

The paper cites research showing that mothers with male partners still perform about twice as much child care and housework as their partners. In addition, Prof. Christopher suggests that inflexible workplaces and inadequate public policies are constraining North American mothers' (and fathers') ability to combine employment with involved parenting.

Provided by Sociologists for Women in Society

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