



Review of *For the Family: How Class and Gender Shape Women's Work* by Sarah Damaske

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REVIEW

Gender continues to play a significant role in women's workforce participation. This book is based on in-depth qualitative interviews with 80 randomly selected women (age range 32-42). Half of the women were from the working class/working poor and half were from the middle/upper-middle class. The author considers several other demographic characteristics in the sample, namely: marital status (73% married, 23% never married, 19% divorced); women with and without children (76% vs. 24%); and a range of ethnicities (71% white, 11% African American, 11% Latina, and 6% Asian). 81% of the women were employed at the time of the interviews.

First and foremost, the author draws a distinction between research that suggests that women need to work rather than want to work. She argues, quite convincingly, that a focus on need inaccurately pigeonholes the role of class in women's work and inadequately explains the workforce participation of women. Furthermore, this pigeon-holing reinforces stereotypes that middle-class women find rewards in choosing to work whilst working class women struggle with the need to work. Through examples given in the book of the women's stories, the author very clearly demonstrates that this is not the case. Some working class women choose to work and some middle-class women need to work.

The author argues that in order to make sense of class in women's workforce-related decisions, we should not ask whether a women is working at a particular point in time but rather how women have worked over the course of their lives.



In this way, the focus shifts from employment status to work pathways. With this focus, the author identifies three distinct work pathways – steady workers, pulled-back workers, or interrupted workers instead of just two categories – working or not working.

The book is divided into three parts. Part 1 examines the expectations about work that the women held when they were younger (i.e. how women develop early expectations about work) and also discusses the shape of women's work pathways. The author notes that interesting work and recognition from employers makes women invest in continuing with steady work rather than opting to leave the workforce. This section of the book discusses the effect of women's employment on increased financial independence and how this increases the family's access to social and cultural opportunities. Part 2 examines work pathways – and takes a closer look at the steady workers, the pulled-back workers and the interrupted workers. This section was eye-opening. It examines how women in each of these pathways view work – some expected that good work will come to them while others anticipated that they would leave the workforce at some point to return later. The steady workers (from both the working and middle class) considered their steady work as an achievement they were proud of. Middle-class steady workers, however, have more workforce options whilst working class women are more constrained in their options. This section also describes the divergent factors that can lead a women to pull back from work – family devotion is not the driving factor - many of these women expected to leave work to have children.

This section also discusses the cumulative disadvantages that can disrupt plans and cause women to interrupt their steady work. While the first sections of this book show how class, race, work experiences, and family support contribute to women's decisions to pursue different work pathways, the final section of the book takes a look at how women explain their decisions to leave and then re-enter the workforce. For both these scenarios (the decision to leave or to re-enter the workforce), women explain that their family needed them (to either stop working or to return to work). These responses stress the obligations women feel towards their families rather than self-fulfillment, thus affirm the cultural expectations about women's selflessness. Part 3 of the book also examines how women negotiated their expectation about work, the importance of families and how women reduced work-family conflict. With regards to the latter, the author notes that while both the middle and working class faced work-family conflicts, the reasons for these were not the same. Middle class women were more likely to face extremely long work hours while the working class women were more likely to face inadequate child care provisions or to lack resources to afford paid child care. Broader access to subsidized day care, paid parental leave, and built in flexibility for work would greatly assist women's participation in the workforce. However this may not be enough if gendered stereotypes of who is the best worker remain unchanged. At present, women remain obligated to legitimize their work decisions and this needs to change.

The highlights of this book were the stories and quotes from the women transcribed during the interview process. Each chapter includes carefully selected sections from the interviews in order to enable the reader to fully understand the decisions made by women with respect to work. Since the interviews ask the women about their past work, their current work and their future work plans, the reader is given a comprehensive picture of what drives women's decisions around work over their lifetimes, with respect to their work pathways, race, marital status and presence of children. These stories truly capture the struggles and choices women make and

provide the context in which to fully understand the decisions women make around work. I highly recommend this book to undergraduate and graduate students pursuing gender studies. Those interested in the effects of class on the decisions women make to work and how these decisions change over a woman's lifespan will find this book rich in data.