

## Was June Cleaver a Working Woman or Playing a Role Known as “Stay-At-Home Mom?”

The jury is still out on that one because American society is still conflicted in its opinion. Let's take a look at this issue with June, who was one of the most recognized, perhaps even idolized, moms over fifty years ago. She can help us interpret why working at being a home maker, domestic engineer, parent and caregiver still doesn't carry much clout, yet the “working” designation seems readily recognized as a title for other women and mothers. The word domestic as a noun means *hired* household servant if that's any clue how we've let a person caring for their own home lose value.

A title of “working woman” and other such misnomer titles of trendsetting magazines help perpetuate labeling by mistakenly referencing “earnings” and monetary compensation when employed by a company or self-employed for wages as the woman's new role-- as if it's a given that a man is always employed. That's why no Working Father or Working Man magazine exists. Society has come to believe if we aren't paid to **work**, then we must be playing or somehow enjoying a leisurely time. Caregivers are dubbed as good hearted—altruistic in many cases, without the necessity of compensation. This could be defined as philanthropic charity I suppose. We need more stay-at-home philanthropists.

In 1957 June Evelyn Bronson Cleaver debuted on *Leave it to Beaver*, the television show that made her something of an altruistic American icon and controversial symbol of domesticity. Not to mention a parent available to her two mischievous growing sons and a loving wife to Ward, who was “working.” Quite possibly he considered her a benevolent domestic dictator on the home front.

It wasn't until the late 1960's that progressive families and feminists began to fear Mrs. Cleaver's persona. There was nothing more terrifying to a society about to embrace the sexual revolution, and finally equal rights, than being asked to mirror the matriarch of the Cleaver household; a respected member of the community, whose morality, patience and common sense were all possibly a combination of talents that engaged the reciprocal love of her husband Ward. “Absolutely outrageous,” women of the new freedom era ranted. “Who could aspire to this example of a disciplined, overly comfortable housewife created by Hollywood writers? She has no goals for herself.” These sentiments still exist today behind water coolers and under glass ceilings that salaried women continue trying to break through. It's still being said about the women who are relatives, friends and neighbors. Now it's being said about men caring for families—[men who aren't “working”]. The critics aren't targeting June any longer, but homemakers and “stay-at-home adults” in general. Creative engineers--- if you will indulge me.

Martha Stewart set out to revolutionize the importance of domestic goddesses. Even after being sentenced to prison for insider-trading, she's a “working” mother we did, and many of us still do admire except for her bad choice in the recipe for success in making her stock options pay dividends. Why do we keep waffling between embracing home life and then criticizing those who choose it? Many times it's because not everyone believes they can afford

to work at a home and family life and single women or men don't have a choice if there's no other income source but their own active employment outside the home. Few can afford the ideals Martha professes as commonplace for her lifestyle.

Along with reproduction, household duties, outdoor chores, community activities and immediate and extended family responsibilities have mostly fallen into the hands of women. It seems many of the attitudes and viewpoints about life at home changed early in the twentieth century. The right to vote, finally, in 1920 aided the transformation with regard to women's status in the labor force and in the home. Maybe men could have gone back into the home after serving our country in WWI (and then decades later in WWII) and found out how wonderful and challenging it was to nurture family and create community life. But they didn't. Men wanted back the jobs in industry and the marketplace that many women had willingly filled in their absence. Married women silently struggled to re-fill the void as they retreated to home again.

Describing their impact on the workforce in America's Working Women; A Documentary History: 1600 to the Present the editors Baxandall and Gordon state how the numbers and proportions of jobs and occupations lured married women.

First, .... New kinds of service work—more often commercial and public as opposed to domestic service—drew in women, such as waitressing, saleswork, and operating telephones.... In 1920, married women constituted 23 percent of employed women; by 1940,... they made up 36 percent—but this proportion never dropped,... Married women's employment, which had long been common among the poor and especially minorities, not only changed the shape of many families but also changed the nature of the labor force. (193)

Drawn to jobs with less meaning and importance than helping make and maintain a comfortable, successful home and family life became prevalent because; previously women at home had been unappreciated, taken for granted and unpaid! Even though many women were in the "work force" in service, industry or factory jobs to support their parents and siblings to put bread on the table in previous generations the married women entering the job market in the 60's came to **need** the incomes they were beginning to generate to afford the new conveniences being marketed. "Women started to feel that working outside the home gave them economic power that had traditionally been provided only to men and were now able to provide for life's necessities that were typically bought by men's earnings," as pointed out by Mary E. Williams in her book Working Women—Opposing Viewpoints. Instead of just affording the necessities there was extra money to purchase modern appliances, second cars, children's desirables and little luxuries like the Joneses had that couldn't be provided on just their employed husband's earnings. Male egos took a blow because they had been led to believe, by their predecessors, that a married man was financially responsible to his wife and her need to have outside employment showed his failings in that area.

Maybe June didn't have a grip on the real world, and the pearls were a bit much, but then we all have freedom of expression. Surprising as it seemed, her life was filled with the same adversities and aversions that family life handed anyone in the category of "middle class." The way she handled the situations offered plenty for other women to want to emulate, but too many times male, and a sisterhood of female critics have put little positive recognition in the essential

tasks that women [or men for that matter], with or without children, do to make a house a home. The list is limitless for those motivated to be a productive stay-at-home spouse/mate, for no tangible or visible wages.

Many feminists believed—maybe still do, that showing admiration for June Cleaver and other successful stay-at-home women and moms destroys a generation of female accomplishments outside the home. Those same people might want to consider writing to the editor of “Working Women” and “Working Mothers” magazines to ask them if they are enabling the goals of *all* women or just those who are “working” for wages in the labor force. Judging from the titles and content which is geared to women and mothers employed anywhere but in the home, anyone that chooses to stay home and nurture family principles would *not* be the audience for these magazines. Are we undermining the home based woman’s accomplishments? Until we, as a collective group acknowledge there is worth and pride in home life whether overseen by men or women, moms or dads, we will continue to lose the sense of value we place on the home and community. The millennial generation is migrating back to the home. The era of in-home offices and not commuting to a job location which evolves into a stay-at-home work life via technology could help the nurturing of a home regain importance. Cocooning once again, will be in vogue.

Much of this can’t be argued as valid. It just is. What is open for debate is how the families of today can thrive if no one is working to take care of a home, and everyone is devoted to earning an income elsewhere. Who will be responsible for the children, aging parents, booster club bake sales and volunteerism in the community, not to mention maintenance of a demanding living space? One answer will be multi-generational families occupying one home to allow the overlap of young parents, their parents and grandparents caring for the home and each other’s needs.

Women have been conflicted over their decisions to “have it all” as described by an attorney, Cheryl Mendelson, who wrote the book, Joy of Cleaning, that was reviewed by the New York Times in 1999 and who was also quoted in James Q. Wilson’s book; The Marriage Problem: How Our Culture Has Weakened Families.

“On the first page... homemaking, she said, was her “secret life” that she had struggled for years to conceal from friends. ‘Being perceived as excessively domestic can get you socially ostracized,’ she remarked” (182).

This perceived social attitude was validated by John Lennon and Yoko Ono’s song lyrics in 1972, “Woman is the Nigger of the World.” Who on earth would want to be part of a home life relating them to a nigger? Sad to think, like John sings, “we leave her flat for being a fat old mother hen, we tell her home is the only place she would be, then we complain that she’s too unworldly to be our friend.”

The inspiration that June Cleaver and women like her, including my mother, have given the American family lost ground in the last three decades of the twentieth century, starting around the time the Beatles broke up. Coincidence?—Maybe it was a sign of the times for institutions to be disbanded. It’s not a matter of how “working” mothers/women, (those employed outside the traditional home), are affecting the well being of children they leave in day care, but how those who *work* at raising a family and creating a home (which arbitrarily does

include housework—domestic duty) are being categorized as succumbing to drudgery. Who wants to stay home and be devoted to an unpaid occupation that society in general has demeaned and remains conflicted over its importance. There's definitely something wrong.

When the XY&Z generations of all nations see Pink, Barrymore, Levine, Beyoncé, Mayer, Jay Z, Kidman, Jolie, Hawke, Pitt, Timberlake and Pitbull head for the home life to nurture a family, maybe learn to cook and possibly care for their aging parents it will be acceptable once again. Hopefully they will have their own reality TV shows, because we'll all want them to show us how it's done in Hollywood. No one will be home to show us.

Can we resurrect the importance of what was traditionally called 'women's work' now that men, married to higher wage earning spouses want in on the fun? What are we waiting for? What would June Cleaver do? The answers are not rhetoric. It's time for discussion.

## Works Cited

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