

# PewResearchCenter Publications

## The Harried Life of the Working Mother

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Women now make up almost half of the U.S. labor force, up from 38% in 1970. This nearly 40-year trend has been fueled by a broad public consensus about the changing role of women in society. A solid majority of Americans (75%) reject the idea that women should return to their traditional roles in society, and most believe that both husband and wife should contribute to the family income.

But in spite of these long-term changes in behaviors and attitudes, many women remain conflicted about the competing roles they play at work and at home. Working mothers in particular are ambivalent about whether full-time work is the best thing for them or their children; they feel the tug of family much more acutely than do working fathers. As a result, most working mothers find themselves in a situation that they say is less than ideal.

They're also more likely than either at-home moms or working dads to feel as if there just isn't enough time in the day. Four-in-ten say they always feel rushed, compared with a quarter of the other two groups. But despite these pressures and conflicts, working moms, overall, are as likely as at-home moms and working dads to say they're happy with their lives.

Whether women work outside the home or not, family responsibilities have a clear impact on the key life choices they make. Roughly three-in-ten women who are not currently employed (27%) say family duties keep them from working. And family appears to be one of the key reasons that many do not break through the "glass ceiling" to the top ranks of management -- that's the view, anyway, of about a third of the public.

### Working Mothers

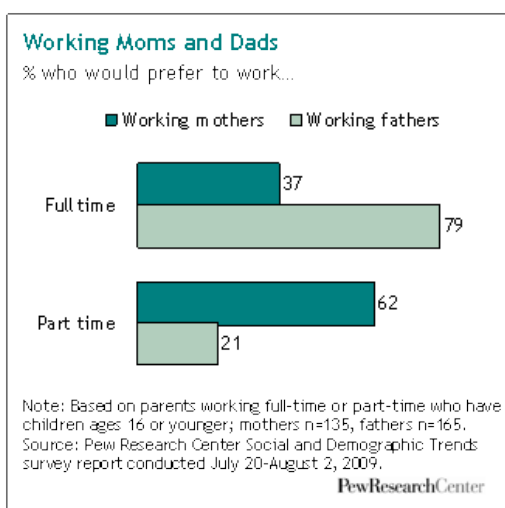
According to data collected by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 59% of women now work or are actively seeking employment. An even higher percentage of women with children ages 17 or younger (66%) work either full or part time. Among those working mothers, most (74%) work full time while 26% work part time.

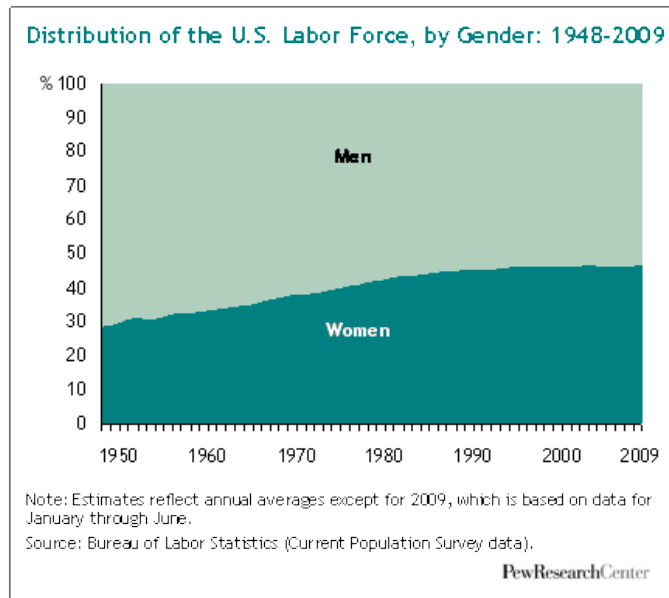
A survey taken this summer by the Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends Project asked [working mothers whether they would prefer to work full time or part time](#). A strong majority of all working mothers (62%) say they would prefer to work part time. Only 37% of working moms would prefer to work full time. Working fathers have a much different perspective. An overwhelming majority (79%) say they prefer full-time work. Only one-in-five say they would choose part-time work.

These findings echo the results of a 2007 Pew Research Center survey in which a [majority of working mothers \(60%\) said the ideal situation for them would be to work part time](#). This represented a significant increase from 10 years earlier when only 48% of working mothers said the same.

### Women's Growing Presence in the Workforce

The percentage of women working or actively seeking employment grew steadily from the 1950s onward, peaking in 2000. As an overall share of the labor force, women today comprise 47%. The growth in the share of women in the workforce has leveled off in recent years, just as women's participation rate has stopped climbing. Nonetheless, the fact remains that women have transformed the American workplace over the past 50 years, and in so doing have created a series of conflicts and challenges for today's working women that have proven to be difficult to resolve.



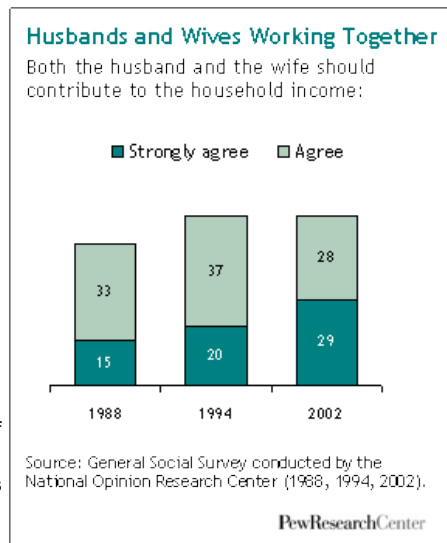


**Public Views on the Changing Role of Women**

As women have taken a more active role in the labor force, public opinion has become increasingly supportive of this new reality. The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press has been tracking public attitudes on social and political values, including the changing role of women, for the past 20 years. In 1987, 30% of Americans said women should return to their traditional roles in society, while 66% disagreed with this statement. Today, only 19% agree that women should return to their traditional roles while 75% disagree.

Women and men are equally likely to reject the notion that women should return to their traditional roles. Young people are among the most progressive on this issue. Among those under age 30, 84% disagree with the idea that women should go back to a more traditional role.

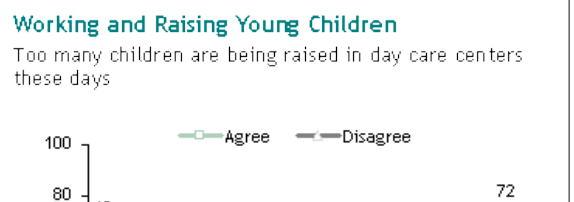
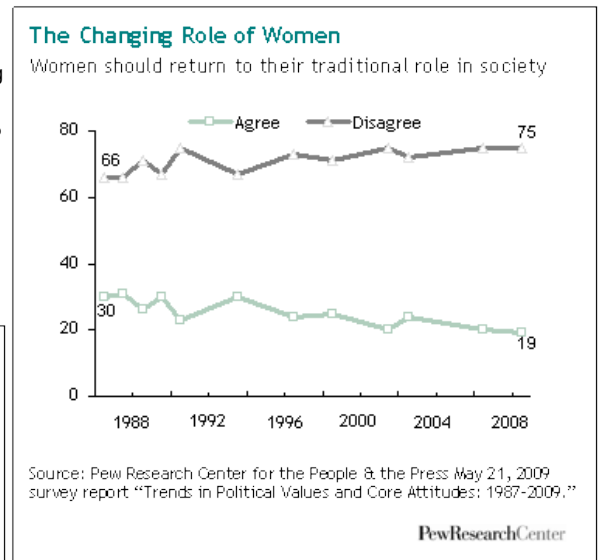
Further evidence of the changing attitudes about family and the role of women can be seen in another item included in the Pew Research Center's values surveys. Seven-in-ten Americans (71%) agree with the statement "I have old-fashioned values about family and marriage." While still a strong majority, this is down significantly from 87% who held this view in 1987. Again, men and women are in agreement on this issue, and young people express the least conservative views: 61% of those under age 30 say they have old-fashioned values about family and marriage.



Looking more specifically at the question of women and the workplace, data from the General Social Survey shows how attitudes changed from the late 1980s to the turn of the century. When asked whether they agreed or disagreed that both the husband and the wife should contribute to the household income, the percent of Americans who strongly agreed grew steadily from 1988 to 2002. In 1988 only 15% strongly agreed that both spouses should contribute to the household income, by 2002 29% strongly agreed (another 28% agreed but not strongly).

Even as society has become more accepting of women's role in the workforce, attitudes about a special class of female workers -- namely mothers of young children -- have changed very little. In 1994 and again in 2002 the General Social Survey asked whether women should work outside the home under certain circumstances. In both years, strong majorities said a woman who is married but has not yet had children should work full time. However, only 10% in 1994 and 11% in 2002 said a woman with a young child should work full time. Respondents were more accepting of full-time work for a woman whose youngest child had started school. However, even then pluralities in 1994 and 2002 said part-time work would be preferable under those circumstances.

Pew Research Center data shows that strong concern over the impact of day care on the nation's children has persisted over time. In 1987, 68% of the public agreed that too many children are being raised in day care centers these days. In 2003, 72% agreed with this



statement.

Mothers themselves are particularly concerned about this issue. In the 2003 Pew Research Center survey, 50% of mothers with children under age 5 completely agreed that too many children are being raised in day care centers today. This compared with 36% among the general public.

Continue reading the [full report at pewsocialtrends.org](http://pewsocialtrends.org).

