A Working Girl Can Win

THE CASE AGAINST STAYING AT HOME WITH THE KIDS.

By Meghan O'Rourke

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Get to work, Linda Hirshman admonished American women in a polemical article in the American Prospect last December, in which she argued that it's imperative for women not to "opt out" of employment to stay home with the kids. Only by working, she claimed, can women have a fully "flourishing" life. A full-scale assault on Hirshman ensued, from conservatives and liberals alike. What has riled everyone up isn't just Hirshman's message that only in the work force will women find fulfillment. It's that Hirshman attacked the sacred cow of the motherhood debate: the notion that it's a good thing liberated women are allowed to choose whether to work or stay at home—an intellectual paradigm Hirshman dubbed "choice feminism."

The hostility is understandable. Hirshman's approach is dictatorial, contradictory, and often self-important. ("I am not the first to apply the long-standing insights of philosophy to women's lives," she writes. Uh, thanks.) She claims there's a new epidemic of high-powered women opting out, when substantial evidence suggests that their drop-out rates have held fairly steady for the past 20 years. Finally, she challenges not only long-standing assumptions about gender (say, that women are more suited to domesticity than men), but also our deepest assumptions about freedom: namely, that having more choices is better than having fewer, and that how we organize our private lives is our own damn business, thank you very much.

But—though I almost hate to say it—buried beneath Hirshman's overblown rhetoric is a useful idea, now set out in a short book titled Get to Work: A Manifesto for Women of the World: namely, that our obsession with choice prevents us from asking tough questions about how to achieve further equality. "Deafened by choice, here's the moral analysis these women never heard," she says: Until there is more equity in the cultural norms for child-rearing and household tasks, each time a woman decides to "opt out" she is making a political decision that reinforces an already ingrained social inequality. Women who believe otherwise suffer from a mixture of false consciousness and impractical idealism. It's when Hirshman is at her most radical—when she sets aside the language of personal fulfillment in favor of injunctions about the collective good—that she is at her most valuable. I would never write this book, but I'm glad somebody did.