Mothers at work

by Mary T. Stimming in the May 23, 2001 issue

The Price of Motherhood: Why the Most Important Job in the World Is Still the Least Valued by Ann Crittenden

When I called a mortgage company recently to discuss refinancing our home loan, I dutifully answered the loan officer's questions--amount of current loan, bank balances, 401K balance, husband's salary--while washing the breakfast dishes and protecting my four-year-old son from his three-year old sister and her plastic hammer. Then the loan officer asked, "Do you work?" Empowered by Ann Crittenden's book, I answered, with a hint of challenge in my voice, "Yes, but I'm not paid for it." My response was met with silence. Then he seemed to catch my meaning, "Oh, you mean taking care of your kids. No, no, I mean real work." Only the laws of nature prevented me from clubbing Mr. Snide with Kathryn's hammer.

The Price of Motherhood will inspire similar urges among other readers. A book that can arouse so much passion has a lot going for it, whether or not people disagree with the author over details or even major conclusions. With its call for an end to society's "free ride" on the backs of women's unpaid labor, this book will be of particular interest to feminist and liberation theologians. But it deserves a wider audience than that. For example, those involved in the discussions about family and culture and everyone engaged in ministerial work (a field as undervalued as parenting) will find valuable insights and possible strategies for action in this volume.

Crittenden attributes her motivation for writing to the sting of being asked, shortly after leaving the *New York Times* in order to care for her infant son, "Didn't you used to be Ann Crittenden?" But the loss of social status, though taken seriously, is not the main focus of her attention. Her research in economics, sociology, history, child development, family law, public policy, demography, anthropology and evolutionary psychology, as well as the interviews she conducted on both sides of the Atlantic, are marshaled to document the economic risks and losses endured by American parents--above all, by American mothers.

Mothers (and fathers who parent in comparable fashion; but let's be honest, their number is minuscule), Crittenden argues, produce human capital, and this is of economic value. By definition then, mothers work, but contemporary capitalist theory does not count unpaid labor. The repercussions of not valuing unpaid labor are immense. Because our economic and legal systems equate child-rearing with doing nothing, American mothers not only lack respect but are at higher risks of poverty. It didn't used to be this way and it's not this way everywhere.

One person who deserves a special whack with Kathryn's hammer is 1870s U.S. census director Francis Walker. His decision to remove "keeping house" from the list of "productive employments" helped invent the myth of the unproductive housewife. Since then the time spent on creating a home and rearing children has been viewed, officially, as insignificant to the economy. By the early 20th century, the shift from a precapitalist view of women's labors in the home as an economic asset to Walker's view of women as economic dependents was complete. "The idea that money income was the sole measure of human productivity had triumphed."

For women, who provide twice as much unpaid labor as men do, this view is disastrous. It creates a culture in which "not only is caregiving not rewarded, it is penalized." Crittenden's description of how this occurs is depressing and exhaustive. Moving ably from discussions of American laws governing divorce, child support and alimony to immigration and child-care options, Crittenden exposes the systemic disadvantages facing mothers.

Stay home and raise the children? Great, but hope your husband never leaves you. If he does, in most states the homemaker will discover that there is no such thing as family income. If he earned it, it's legally his. Forget compensation for the years you've spent making the home. Only the "oldest, most helpless long-term housewife" has a shot at that. Your best hope is for child support and alimony, and this most likely will be bareboned, temporary and difficult to collect. Across the income spectrum, "typical arrangements [post divorce] left the husband with more income than all of the other people in the family put together." Better for a mother and her children if her spouse dies. At least then they will receive comparatively generous Social Security benefits.

Given the dismal prospects for formerly unemployed divorced women, you decide that perhaps the wisest course is to remain gainfully employed. To do so you need to find adequate daycare for young children (a cost that is not deductible as a

business expense). Maybe a nanny? Very few Americans seek such jobs, and the current immigration law classifies trained nannies as "unskilled," thereby severely limiting the number of visas available and reducing the pool of legal labor. If you want to get ahead, you can't risk a Zoe Baird situation.

The local daycare center may seem the better alternative. But try to find one with well-trained and well-paid caretakers. If you can't, you are putting the children's development at risk and subjecting them to repeated losses of attachment when their caregivers leave for better paying jobs. If you are married, you face the "marriage penalty tax." Married or single, you will not progress in your field unless you are willing to be an "unencumbered" worker. That is, unless you are willing to do whatever your employer requires or requests without considering its impact on your family. Should you have another child, expect minimal paid maternal leave and a subtle mark against you in the eyes of your employer.

If you want to hedge your bets and work part time, put down this journal now and start stalking this elusive beast. While you're at it, start plotting a way to secure benefits, as it is highly unlikely that they will come with the job.

According to Crittenden, there are plenty of targets for one's anger over this situation: government, employers, husbands, feminist organizations. And there is plenty they could do to redress the injustice of the current situation. Consider the superior position of two comparison groups she describes, American soldiers and Swedish parents. In the U.S., members of the military, like mothers, forego income in order to provide a service to society. But members of the military are compensated for this sacrifice. For example, they qualify for government-guaranteed home loans, special auto insurance rates, subsidized child care, free medical care and educational grants. "None of these benefits is contingent on service in combat."

In Sweden, parents are entitled to one year paid leave after they have a child. They have the right to a six-hour workday until the child is eight. Child support is indexed to inflation. And they receive a government stipend for child care. Crittenden suggests that if American businesses and government adopted some of these policies in relation to mothers (e.g., one year paid leave, shortened workweeks, child allowances), "the most obvious result would be a massive shift of income to women." Which, she concludes, is "why all of them have met with such resistance. But paying women for services rendered is precisely the point."

For Crittenden, "Changing the status of mothers, by giving real recognition for their work, is the great unfinished business of the women's movement." (For a variety of reasons, American feminists have been reluctant to crusade for this change. Instead, they have grown hoarse exhorting men to "do more," but in most households little has changed. Maybe a change of strategy is needed.)

For Christians the challenge is to change the status and economic reality of all caregivers--mothers, fathers and those in affiliated caregiving professions (e.g., elder caregivers, ministers). The "mommy tax" is paid by all conscientious parents. Fathers who, in order to devote more time to their children, spend 4 percent less time at work than their colleagues suffer an annual earnings loss of 20 percent. Crittenden acknowledges that the problems she describes are not restricted to gender. The great majority of those so affected are women but, Crittenden argues, indirectly so are we all. We all live with the ill effects of impaired parenting and rising poverty among women and children. The noxious rhetoric of "it was her choice to have a baby, it's her problem now" willfully ignores the structural realities that constrain women's lives.

From a Christian perspective the American equation of human productivity with paid employment is bankrupt in theory and lethal in practice. Christian admonitions against violence preclude me from using my daughter's hammer at will. But Christian faith requires that we swing the hammer of justice--for mothers, for children, for us all.