

# Family-friendly as a double-edged sword: Lesson from the "lactation-friendly" workplace

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**Family-Friendly as a Double-Edged Sword:  
Lesson from the  
“Lactation-Friendly” Workplace**

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## **Abstract**

Critics of family-friendly policies contend that family-friendly policies should be retooled in support of the struggle to restructure the capitalist labor contract, dismantling the gendered assumptions that underlie the ideal worker as a detached and disembodied individual, unencumbered by external commitments. This paper considers whether accommodations for breast-feeding women who pump their breasts in their place of employment possess such a radical potential. Interviews with a small group of middle-class women indicates that, in many cases, these accommodation exacerbate, rather than alleviate, women's double burdens. In addition, this paper shows that rather than challenging capitalist organizational culture and its ideal disembodied worker, women who pump in the workplace reproduce this image. By turning their bodies into a project to be managed, they create a distance between the "woman in the suit" and "the woman in the body", thereby failing to challenge the standard capitalist ethos.

Grounded in women's experiences in "lactation friendly" workplaces, this paper also provides an ethnographic backdrop to a growing body of literature that calls for the development and implementation of lactation-friendly policies.

The persistent wage and opportunity gap between men and women in modern capitalist economies is central to academic, political, and cultural debates and research programs on work and family. Following research that pointed to the conceptual incompatibility between achievement in a capitalist labor market and successful parenting (Glass 2000), a new term came into vogue: “family-friendly policies”. Ideally, the family-friendly workplace recognizes that workers have caretaking duties that extend beyond the workplace and strives to accommodate these responsibilities. Many organizations now offer employees choices such as flexible schedules, shorter working hours, and telecommuting.

Some researchers and advocates consider family-friendly programs a potential redress to working parents’ (especially mothers’) double burdens (Galinsky 1992; Galinsky and Johnson 1998; Zedeck 1992), and possibly to the gender gap in occupational attainment and pay equity, including the “mommy tax” (Budig and England 2001; Crittenden 2001). Others are more cautious. Research has shown that family-friendly policies are often underutilized due to employees’ fear of losing their jobs or status (Fried 1998; Glass 2000; Hochschild 1997). Workers who do utilize family-friendly policies may be penalized in other ways. For example, part-time work is relatively less well paid (Ferber and Waldfogel 1998), and flexible schedules often entail longer and less predictable working hours (Golden 2001a, 2001b). In addition, family-friendly policies are regarded by many employers as perks, rather than a matter of general entitlement. As a result, lower income employees rarely have access to them (Golden 2001b).

Most significantly, many family-friendly policies have the effect of reinforcing capitalist organizational ideology (Lewis 1997, 2001). Often adopted by employers who are persuaded by the business case (see Galinsky and Johnson 1998), family-friendly policies fail to dismantle the gendered assumptions that underlie the ideal worker as a detached and disembodied individual, unencumbered by external commitments (Acker 1990; Martin 1992; Williams 2000). Thus, though family-friendly policies assist individual employees in balancing their work and family commitments (Lewis 2001) and play a major role in women’s job retention following childbirth (Glass and Riley 1998), these policies nonetheless fail to challenge the dominant ideology that cordons work and reproduction, or more generally market and care, into the separate spheres of public and private.

Feminists have long criticized the trend towards the feminization and privatization of the costs of child rearing and other forms of care in capitalist societies. Challenging the dichotomous “hostile worlds” view of social life (Zelizer 2002), recent scholarship suggests that work and family, or market and care, be woven together (Folbre 2001; Garey 1999). This scholarship is part of a “care movement” (Stone 2000) that emerged in response to what Arlie Hochschild (1995) termed the “care deficit”. Comprised of a network of activists, policy makers, and scholars from diverse fields such as political science, philosophy, sociology, and economics, this movement seeks to expose, name, and challenge the devaluation of care in capitalist societies. Writing from different disciplinary perspectives and employing varied tools of research and analysis, economist Nancy Folbre (1994, 2001), sociologists Francesca Cancian and Stacey Oliner (2000), Jennifer Glass (2000), and Anita Garey (1999), legal scholar Joan Williams (2000), philosopher Joan Tronto (1993), and investigative reporter Ann Crittenden (2001) argue that a society that values care and caring relationships would be a kinder, nicer, more egalitarian, and just society (Glenn 2000).

This body of scholarship provides a critical perspective on the goals of family-friendly policies. It implies that, rather than searching for “andocentric” solutions that render female workers, especially mothers, more like their male peers, *family-friendly policies should be retooled in support of the struggle to restructure the capitalist labor contract, dismantling the image of the ideal worker as a male breadwinner, with a supportive wife at home, and the societal expectation that parents alone shoulder the costs of reproduction*. Family-friendly policies could help advance us towards a utopian, “gentler, kinder workplace” (Glass 2000) that more equitably spreads the costs of reproduction among parents, their childfree peers, and employers.

This paper considers a family-friendly policy, that appears to possess such a radical potential – accommodations for breast pumping while the mother is in her place of employment.<sup>1</sup> Allowing women to take several breaks during the day (often euphemistically referred to as “nursing breaks”) in relative privacy, lactation policies, or accommodations for breast pumping, are designed to facilitate the provision of breast milk to infants while their mothers are away from them, in line with the 1997 recommendation of the American Association of Pediatrics

(AAP 1997).<sup>2</sup> Though rare, discretionary, and often self-negotiated, “lactation-friendly” policies are gaining prominence in the United States. Some employers are convinced by the business argument (for example, research shows that breast-feeding reduces absenteeism; see Cohen, Mrtek, and Mrtek 1995); others have adopted lactation programs in response to recent legislation (Galtry 2001).

The lactation-friendly workplace may serve as a prototype of the gentler, kinder workplace. Accommodations for lactating mothers are premised on realities often overlooked by employers: that women reside in reproductive bodies and that parents have caretaking duties that extend beyond the home. In this way, lactation policies expose the myth of the disembodied and unencumbered worker.<sup>3</sup> In addition, by allowing family time to seep into the paid workday, these policies may represent a genuine step towards social support for the costs of reproduction.

Within this framework, this paper provides an account of women’s experiences with pumping at lactation-friendly workplaces. Do these family-friendly accommodations alleviate women’s double burdens? Do women experience these accommodations as a form of social support for parenting? To what extent do these accommodations challenge dominant capitalist organizational culture and its ideal worker? Though in recent years there has been a growing interest in women’s experiences “at the breast” (Blum 1999; Carter 1995; Maclean 1990; Stearns 1999), women’s experiences “at the pump” have remained unexamined (Blum 1999: 134).

Informed by a keen interest in women’s everyday, lived experiences at the pump, this paper explores to what extent lactation-friendly policies and accommodations deliver for the individual women who utilize them. In a debate that focuses on policy, the experiences of the beneficiaries of family-friendly policies often go unexamined. By grounding the analysis in women’s experiences at lactation-friendly workplaces, this paper attends to issues that extend beyond utilization. In addition, it provides an ethnographic backdrop to a growing body of advocacy, policy, scientific, and feminist literature that calls for the development and implementation of lactation-friendly policies, as well as legislative initiatives on the state and federal levels (Galtry 2000, 2001).

## Methods

This paper is based on 15 in-depth, semi structured interviews I conducted with first time, middle-class mothers in the San Francisco Bay Area. Some subjects were recruited by a snowball technique. Initial contacts were personal acquaintances and a mothers' groups moderator. Other subjects were recruited through the UCB Parents Network, a local virtual parents' organization that distributes several weekly electronic newsletters.<sup>4</sup> In addition, I have followed discussions on breast-feeding and pumping on this organization's newsletters for over two years, and I occasionally draw on some of these discussions.<sup>5</sup>

The women I interviewed are all college graduates, and most hold professional or graduate degrees. Consistent with the demographics of this group of women, most interviewees were in their mid to late thirties when they had their first child. At the time of the interviews, the babies' ages ranged from 6 to 20 months. Some women were still breast-feeding and pumping at the time of the interview, others had "weaned" their babies off the pump but were still nursing their babies and supplementing with formula, and several had weaned their babies altogether.

The initial focus of the project was on the breast-feeding practices and ideologies of middle-class women. However, I soon learned that pumping was central to the breast-feeding experiences of many interviewees and in particular for mothers who worked outside the home (for similar findings, see Blum 1999). These mothers strove to continue to supply their infants with breast milk during their absence. I modified my interview schedule accordingly. In interviews with working mothers, I asked them to describe how they negotiated accommodations for pumping at work, what accommodations were made, and about their experiences with pumping on the job, including peer and managerial reactions.

The employment positions and settings varied widely, ranging, in the private sector, from a small architectural firm, through mid-size law and technology firms, to large research institutions and a production plant. Several women worked for non profit organizations, where they held equally diverse positions. However, they all shared a sense of being valuable employees to their organizations. Accordingly, most women had sufficient control over their time to accommodate several pumping breaks during the workday and sufficient organizational clout to ensure access to a private pumping site. Though most organizations had not formulated

official lactation policies, all the women I interviewed had effortlessly negotiated accommodations to fit their needs.

A sole focus on middle-class women's experiences with pumping at the workplace somewhat limits the scope of inquiry into the challenge lactation-friendly policies may pose to organizational culture. However, it has been established that middle-class employees are most likely to enjoy the benefits of family-friendly programs (Golden 2001b). In addition, research has shown that schedule flexibility, more easily accessible to middle-class women in white-collar professions, reduces job-family conflict for parents (Hill, Jawkins, Ferris, and Weitzman 2001). Finally, breast-feeding in the United States, especially for women who work outside the home, is stratified by race and class (Forste, Weiss, and Lippincott 2001; Ryan 1997); white, educated, middle-class women are more likely to initiate breast-feeding at the hospital and continue to breast-feed after returning to paid employment.

Thus, the experiences of middle-class women shed light on the ways in which family-friendly policies, and in particular accommodations for breast pumping at the workplace, may be utilized and experienced by other women. Other groups of women, who enjoy less flexibility, autonomy, and control over their schedule and work environment, will undoubtedly encounter greater limitations on their efforts to pump in the workplace.

In addition, this group of women represents an interesting paradox: on the one hand, they subscribe to the standard of the disembodied, unencumbered professional worker (Bordo 1993). On the other hand, the experiences of pregnancy, lactation, and motherhood bring to the surface tensions between the private/public mind/body, disembodied worker/embodied mother, often calling women's professional identity into question. As Laura, a 38-year-old lawyer, put it, "You think you have it altogether, everything is under control, and then you discover your silk shirt is drenched right as you walk into a meeting."

### **The Lactation-Friendly Workplace**

Pumping in the workplace is a time-consuming, stressful, exhausting, and challenging enterprise. It is predicated upon access to facilities and conditions that include access to a clean, convenient, safe, private, and comfortable site with electric outlets; the opportunity to pump



frequently enough to maintain milk supply and avoid painful and possibly infectious engorgements; an efficient breast pump; and an adequate place to store expressed milk. Although some women are able to negotiate the necessary accommodations on their own, many others are unable to do so and are thus effectively barred from combining breast-feeding and paid work. Quantitative studies conducted in the U.S. suggest that, without facilitating measures, combining breast-feeding and paid employment is difficult, if not impossible (Galtry 2001: 5; Gielen, Faden, O'Campo, Hendricks-Brown, and Paige 1991; Kearney and Cronewett 1991; Lindberg 1996; Roe, Whittington, Fein, and Teisl 1999; Viness and Kennedy 1997). Under these circumstances, women usually choose to stop breast-feeding and continue to work (Roe, Whittington, Fein and Teisl 1999).

For decades, international health organizations, such as WHO and UNICEF, and breast-feeding advocacy organizations, such as IFBAN and WABA ([www.ifban.org](http://www.ifban.org) and [www.waba.org.br/](http://www.waba.org.br/), respectively), have campaigned for legislation supportive of breast-feeding mothers who return to paid employment. In the U.S., their efforts achieved momentum with the 1997 AAP statement on breast-feeding. During the late 1990s, several states have adopted laws that require employers to accommodate lactating mothers to varying degrees (see the summary of this legislation, updated to August, 2001, at [www.lalecheleague.org/LawBills](http://www.lalecheleague.org/LawBills)). Federal legislation, introduced by Congresswoman Carolyn B. Mahoney in 1999, is pending.

Lawmakers, advocacy organizations, and the public health literature have rhetorically used the business argument to promote workplace lactation policies. As Galtry (2001) points out, legislation outlining employer support for breast-feeding upholds the American narrow conception of rights, as well as the perception of work-family benefits, as employer, rather than governmental, responsibility. In other words, while this legislation brings breast-feeding to the public domain, it does not frame it as a social responsibility, but as a private matter, to be encouraged through market mechanisms. The aim is to persuade employers that costly lactation programs are cost-effective (see Ball and Wright 1999; Cohen and Mrtek 1994; Galtry 1997; Wiemer 2001). By 2000, 22 percent of United States businesses reported providing some workplace provisions for lactation (Galtry 2001), though current data are insufficient to determine the type and extent of accommodations offered. However, it is fair to assume that only

a fraction of American employees have access to these provisions, and these tend to be relatively privileged employees (Galtry 2001).

## **At the Pump: Women's Experiences at the Lactation-Friendly Workplace**

### **Introducing the Woman at the Pump**

Most of the women I interviewed had purchased an electronic double pump, which costs about \$250; others had rented a hospital grade pump at a similar expense. The emphasis was on efficiency: extracting the greatest amount of milk in the shortest period of time. If possible, the woman will leave the pump set up at her chosen pumping station, usually an office, a conference room, and occasionally a low-traffic bathroom. Before pumping, she will secure the tubes that connect the pump to the bottles or containers in which the milk is collected; these tubes and bottles are washed after each pumping session. She will shut curtains and doors. Most women also post some sort of note on their door. Once ready to pump, the woman has to partially undress. The extent depends on the type of clothes and bra she wears; nursing bras and nursing shirts provide quicker and easier access. Some women also purchased "hands-free apparatus," an accessory that secures the pump to the bra, leaving the hands-free to do real work while the maternal body is at work at the pump. The pump is then started, and suction begins.

The woman waits for the milk flow to commence. This physiological process, known as the "let down", requires a certain level of emotional serenity – often difficult to achieve in the work setting. Waiting for the letdown was often a frustrating exercise; the competing demands on time and general work stress and routine affect the pumping woman. Janine, a 34-year-old researcher at a large non profit organization said:

There were days I knew there were five ounces in there, and I could only get two, total. Or I couldn't get a letdown. And it has to do so much with stress. And I would just sit there, and try.... And if I was held up because of a meeting that had gone longer than it was supposed to, then I was more stressed...and I would be angry at the people – I think that it's their fault – who stressed me out.

Pumping can then take anywhere from 10 to 20 minutes; during this time, the pump makes a very monotonous, distinct noise. After pumping, the tubes and containers are washed, and the milk is stored.

In interviews, women told me of the systems they devised to facilitate pumping. In these descriptions, pumping emerges as a labor-intensive production, requiring time, space, and access to clean, hot water and a refrigerator.

I had taped a piece of paper on the window, from here to here [points], and I could lower this [blind on glass window].... And I also had the pump plugged in all the time. I had all my supplies over there [pointing to a desk drawer], so I could bag the milk when I was done. There's a refrigerator here and also a sink that has 90 degrees water. And I always had my permanent marker for writing on the little bags. (*Janine*)

On the one hand, these requirements underscore the importance of lactation policies. Flexibility, autonomy, and control over one's work environment, including stress factors, contribute to more successful pumping (Hills-Bonczyk, Avery, Savik, Potter, and Duckett 1993; Kurinij, Shiono, Ezrine, and Rhoads 1989). These prerequisites for success did not go unnoticed. Many of the women I interviewed considered themselves lucky to have such control over their schedule and access to private space. For example, Jennifer, a 36-year-old accountant, considered her secretary's odds of pumping at work:

It's easier for me because I'm the accountant and I have my own office, and I can shut the door. So that's already a big difference. And if I were a secretary at my office, I'd have to ask for a place to be put aside for me to do this, and I'm not sure they would be very supportive of that at my work, although it hasn't been tried yet. Or I'd have come kick [my boss] out of [her] office to use the pump.

On the other hand, women's narratives reveal that success was predicated upon huge time and energy investments on their part and that pumping at work comes at a price. As pumping cuts into the workday, women experience an increased time squeeze. They respond to this challenge by constructing pumping as a project, one of the many tasks to be accomplished during the busy workday. The competing time demands, combined with women's commitment to the

stated goals of the pumping project and the physiology of lactation, take a physical and emotional toll on many women.

### **Negotiating Time: How Pumping Interferes with Work**

Let's face it, no matter how considerate your work environment is, you cannot just take off for 20 minutes stretches every 2/3 hours (*an anonymous posting to the UCB Parents Network*)

Most of the women I interviewed pumped two or three times a day and spent between half an hour and an hour and a half at the pump during the workday. Some supplemented with additional pumping sessions at home. In all cases, pumping cut heavily into the workday. To ensure maximum results and to avoid painful engorgements as well as embarrassing leaking, women also attempted to pump on a routine schedule; pumping thus further interfered with the flow of the workday. Women arranged their workday around their pumping routine.

The total amount of time spent at the pump often depends on how efficient the woman is at producing and extracting the milk. Like many mothers, Sara, a web designer who worked four days a week, felt she was an inefficient producer; she pumped twice during the workday and a third time in the evening:

I've never been an abundant producer, I have to work on it.... I would hear stories about people who can pump five ounces in five minutes. And even after I've been doing this for nine months, it takes me an hour and a half a day to get eight ounces.

Margaret makes a similar connection between productivity and time spent at the pump. Her narrative also hints at the time squeeze women experience:

I have a great work situation. And I [get] two 15-minute breaks and an hour lunch break a day. You would have to have breast-feeding breaks a little bit longer because, if you've got to set the thing up, you've got to relax, you've got to pump, and when you're done, you've got to wash everything out. And you can't do all that in 15 minutes unless you're really, really productive. Milkwise. If you have a lot of milk that comes out really fast, maybe you could pull that off. But I can't. But I'm not hourly; I'm salaried, and the assumption is the work gets done. So if I don't finish my work during the day, I'm going to finish it at home or work it out.

Because pumping takes so much time, women explored various ways to accommodate this activity. For example some women took breaks from productive work while pumping; most strove to identify the kinds of tasks they could engage in while pumping – driving, returning client phone calls, reading email, or thinking. Leslie, a self-employed consultant, pumped in the car:

In my mind, the distance from Fremont to Mountain View is three ounces. I would have a little thing you plug. I figure it's 20 minutes. So I would have my little cape. I got really blasé about it.

Jennifer, an accountant who worked more than 40 hours a week and was very time conscious, raved about the hands-free apparatus:

I didn't have to just sit there. You could have your hands-free while you have this stuff hanging off your breasts.... I know a lawyer in San Francisco who didn't know about this hands-free thing, so she just sat there while she held the thing. And I said "oh my gosh, you've got to get the hands-free stuff. It'll change your life." So that made it just a lot more effective. It wasn't dead time. I could talk on the phone or make full use of the computer.

Though pumping was not dead time, it nevertheless impeded her work. She felt she was chained to the desk and inaccessible to her colleagues.

Other women did not purchase the hands-free apparatus, seemingly undermining their ability to be doubly productive while pumping. Denise, a 35-years-old scientist at a research institute who pumped in a rarely used women's one-seater bathroom, perceived pumping as a break she was entitled to:

It was actually a nice break for me. I didn't feel like I had to justify my going into the bathroom for 15 minutes to anybody, not even my boss. I think I told him once and that was it. Just FYI, if he wonders why I was in the bathroom for half an hour every day, that's why. And I had the kind that you have to hold, so I didn't have any freedom with my hands.

Ironically, though she came to appreciate these breaks, her focus was not on her emotional well-being, but on the ways in which these breaks enhanced her productivity:

Generally, I would spend that time thinking about what I was working on. And it turned out to be productive time for me. Now I can see that you're more productive if you take a break every once in a while, just stop what you're doing. Think about something else, and then go back to what you're working on. And say that was kind of silly and needs to be changed. So its really always productive time. So I didn't feel in any way guilty about what I was doing.

Yet, she often resented these forced breaks:

Sometimes I thought, ahhhh, got to go pump again. There was a little bit of that. And of course when you're using this 15 minutes twice a day, being hooked up to machine, its not the greatest thing.

Some women found it impossible to work while they were pumping, and thus took real breaks from productive work. Most resented the routine interruptions. Christine, an engineer at a software firm, spent almost two hours of her nine-hour workday at the pump:

There is that psychological thing about the letdown. I couldn't be doing the analytical work and pumping. And there was some stress about having to stop work. Because I'd have a lot to do at work. I really like my job, and I like my work, and I'd want to do it. But I'd have to take these 45-minute chunks out of my day. And there were times where I really resent that.

Though all the women I interviewed successfully incorporated several pumping sessions into an already busy schedule, the additional time demand came at a price. Many felt that they could not afford to take additional breaks during the workday, and often the workday stretched longer than they had intended. Most women acknowledged that pumping was work, a physically demanding task, but they viewed their pumping sessions as breaks from real work. Few women thought that their workload should be reduced on account of their pumping; as Margaret put it, it was each woman's responsibility to "work it out". Thus, in practice, pumping breaks translate into no breaks for the doubly re/productive worker. Accommodations for pumping at the workplace translate into a flexibility to schedule an additional task into the workday.

## **The Pumping Project: Tackling an Unpleasant Task**

It had to do with the whole power thing. And also you get really into “look how much I pump!” And if you don’t get as much one day, you’re bummed. And the days you have 22 ounces you’re like, oh my god. So there’s definitely some ego bound up in that (*Jennifer*)

Women construct pumping at their place of employment as a project, a task.<sup>6</sup> Pumping is work. None of the women enjoyed pumping; many said they hated it, that it was a drag, a nuisance, draining, hard work, stressful, painful, and inconvenient. Several said that pumping took a huge physical toll on them. Denise felt it had been detrimental to her health. When I interviewed her, several months after she had stopped pumping, she was still extremely underweight and exhausted. Pam, a 32-year-old lawyer who was promoted to partner soon after her daughter was born, struggled to fit pumping into her 10- to 12-hour day:

During the period I was pumping and back at work, I was stressed, depressed, tired, sleep deprived, feeling like I was not doing a good job either with the baby or at work.

Articulating what many women insinuated, Jennifer felt that pumping was a sacrifice:

It’s a pain in the b.... It’s a pain. It’s a pain to do that. It’s to schlep all the stuff around, take all this time out of your day, and hook all this stuff up, and wash out all these bottles, remember everything in the morning. And occasionally you forget the thermos or something, and you have to rig up some system at work.... So I felt like it’s significant labor, and it should be appreciated by my husband and my daughter and people around me should be acknowledging that I was making this sacrifice. That’s how I felt about it.

Women came to terms with these difficulties by constructing pumping as a project, a task to be done. They framed pumping in terms familiar from the workplace; they were task and goal oriented. The goal was exclusivity: to provide all of their babies’ milk requirements until they turned one, in accordance with the recommendations of the AAP. Most women failed at this goal. During the interviews, most women spontaneously offered that the focus on exclusivity was in many respects irrational, because formula babies “do just fine”. Many women, especially those interviewed retrospectively, found their insistence on exclusivity somewhat ridiculous.

However, viewing pumping as a project renders this focus very rational indeed: as goal-attaining individuals, they were determined to meet their target, stated in terms of ounces produced per day over a certain period of time:

There were a couple of points where I thought, well, I could stop, but I never really seriously entertained it. And at some point, it became like running a marathon. You just seem so close, why stop now? Then you can say I did it for a year! As opposed to wimping out at eight months. I probably would have felt like I failed on some level a little bit. I knew that rationally [formula] was just fine. That's where I think [it got] personal, feeling that I wasn't meeting the quota. I did think it was inferior to my breast milk. And I hated to substitute an inferior food substance for the purer one that I wasn't producing enough of. So I think I blamed myself on some level. (*Jennifer*)

Reflecting on her futile insistence on exclusivity, which involved up to an hour of pumping at work and two more pumping sessions at home, Denise says:

It's just the way I attack things. I won't take on anything I don't do 100 percent. And pumping was just an extension of that.

An additional aspect of the pumping project was the extent of preparation, planning, and consumption it involved. Women prepared in advance by reading, attending lectures, and talking to professional lactation consultants, as well as colleagues and friends. They *invested* in electric double pumps and related items, such as the hands-free apparatus and nursing bras. These findings echo Davis-Floyd's (1992) research on the way women construct and approach pregnancy. In addition, many women approached pumping as another task that had to be worked into their workday: they scheduled pumping, allocated time for it.<sup>7</sup> Women worked out both a routine and a system to accommodate pumping. For example, Angela, a 36-year-old consultant who worked out a self-tailored part-time position after her daughter was born, was particularly religious about pumping on schedule in order to avoid painful engorgements. Pumping for her was a scheduling problem, a hassle. She handled pumping just as she would any other task that appeared on her desk:

The setup is the biggest hassle for me. Getting the tubes set up, getting everything together, blah, blah, blah, doing it, putting it back, washing it off. From start to



finish, it takes about 20 minutes. Once I have everything set up it only takes 10-15 minutes max. It's just the whole thing. OK, I'm right in the middle of something. Or I can't schedule meetings because I need that break, so I can't go from one meeting to the other. Or I'll have to duck out of a meeting.

Finally, as befits a project, women constantly monitored its progress and success, often accompanied by an unconscious rivalry with other mothers. Margaret, who felt she was fighting an uphill battle to produce sufficient amounts of milk, brought these themes together:

I was trying so hard to get milk for him. I pump twice during the day. And I can usually get about six ounces total, which is nothing compared to some of the other women at work.... One woman pumps once a day, and she gets eight ounces, but she's well endowed and I'm not.

Jennifer, who began to supplement with formula at eight months, says:

I was bummed. I was really sad about that. It's somewhat irrational, but I felt like I failed. And I think there was ego thing. Oh look what I can do. And I couldn't do it anymore.

Faced with decreasing supply, Margaret, like many other women, attempted to increase her milk supply. The focus on quantities as measurement of success, along with women's creative and endless inventory of solutions to increase their milk supply, enhance the project quality of the pumping enterprise.

### **Assessing the Product: Exclusivity and the Failed (Privatized) Producer**

I know some people who have so much milk that it's not an issue. But I really needed three pumpings to keep up. She was drinking 20, 21 ounces every day. And pumping 20 ounces in a day is really draining. There was a time where I'd squeeze in an extra pumping at night to keep up. I did everything I had to do to get enough milk. At one point I had a stock. I got a little bit extra, so I stored it in the freezer. But then my stash started to run out. There were some stressful periods of feeling like I'm running out of milk, and what am I going to do. I felt like I can't pump any more. I'm doing everything I can. And I tried mother's tea [an herbal supplement] at one point because I wanted to try to increase supply. There were times when it was very stressful because I was worried about not having enough. And it was really important for me to do it. (*Christine, a 34-year-*

*old engineer who worked full-time for a software firm and pumped three times during a nine-hour workday for almost eight months)*

Most of the women I interviewed reported how much their infants drank during the day and how this quantity measured against the amounts they were able to produce. Women strove to exclusively meet all of their babies' milk requirements during their first year of life. However, most noticed a widening gap between their babies' demands and the amounts they were able to supply. This gap seemed to make sense:

Pumps just aren't as efficient at the breast. My understanding is that gradually your milk will decrease because it's not as efficient. The pump just wasn't as good at getting the milk out, and the body responds to it. Gradually, you'll get less and less. (*Christine*)

The thing that gets production up is being able to nurse multiple times. Not so much how long, but how often you get the baby at the breast. And I didn't have a baby to get at the breast. I'm at work. I have a pump on me all the time. (*Jennifer*)

Although most women's experiences confirmed these observations, the ideal, exclusivity during the first 12 months of life, remained fixed. As Christine's account demonstrates, many women struggled with and against their failing bodies, attempting to enhance milk production. Christine was one of the few who met the exclusivity goal (though she fell two weeks short of her 12-month-target); yet, her success came at a price. Pumping left her physically and emotionally drained.

Women who pump at work are thus faced with a task: managing their uncooperative bodies. A thread of discussion on the UCB network newsletter illustrates women's attempts to increase their milk supply. In response to a posting in which a mother sought advice for enhancing her diminishing milk supply shortly after she returned to work on a part-time schedule, women offered a long list of solutions. These included drinking, eating, and sleeping sufficiently, additional pumping sessions, taking herbal supplements, investing in a "workhorse" of a pump, looking at baby pictures while pumping, and so on. Although most of the responses acknowledged that pumping at work is challenging and shared stories of insufficient production, the majority of the messages conveyed a strong commitment to pumping, sometimes against all odds. The original posting explained that the woman seeking advice was pumping three times

during a ten-hour workday, and was exhausted by frequent nighttime nursing. One typical message suggested:

If you are unable to pump more than three times a day at work, perhaps you should try pumping additional times during the day not at work. Milk production by the body is at its highest overnight and in morning hours. Could you get up a little earlier and pump before work as well as your three times during the day? Your child nursing more at night should not affect the amount of milk you are able to pump during the day.... Pumping more frequently over a longer period of time can get your...supply up.<sup>8</sup>

However, for many working women, despite all efforts, the gap between the body's supply and the baby's demand becomes unbridgeable after several weeks or months of pumping. Women who are faced with this reality "succumb", "give in", or "allow themselves" to supplement with formula, arriving at a comfortable compromise. Eventually, as they realize that formula intake surpasses breast milk intake, some decide to give up pumping short of their one-year goal. For example, Leslie, who pumped in the car, was shocked when her milk supply began to diminish:

I realized I'm getting *one* ounce between here and Mountain View. This is not working for me anymore. And I was dying on the pump. About a month ago I *succumbed* [emphasis added] and now I only nurse her twice a day. I was exhausted all the time. I was just so tired. When I stopped relying on myself for all her milk needs, she started to gain a little more weight, I started to lose a little weight, I started to have more energy. It didn't fit with my ideal, but it fit with as it turned out and what our reality is.

Pam, a partnered lawyer at a law firm who worked a "part-time" 50-hour week said:

I would do it while I was returning client phone calls. It got really difficult because there was a point at which I was getting so busy that I didn't even have time to eat lunch. So I would wolf down a sandwich between meetings. But it got to the point where I wouldn't be able to pump frequently enough because I just didn't have time, so I was getting so engorged and painful.

Following several months of futile efforts, she decided to stop pumping, branding herself as a "failure". Pam did not make it to the end of Jennifer's imagined marathon:

I pumped less and less and less. And finally, I was like this is not worth it; this is absolutely not worth it. I don't care how much we have allergies in the family, how guilty everybody is making me feel, but this is making me miserable. I was at a breaking point. I was literally "I can't do this anymore". At four and a half months, I made the decision to stop pumping. Things got much better after that.

Ironically, although women seemed to understand that the physiology of lactation renders long-term exclusivity almost unfeasible and most were familiar with stories of failure, the ideal for each individual remained unaffected: exclusive breast milk for the first 12 months of life. Failing to see the structural obstacles inherent in the interaction between lactating bodies and the capitalist labor market, most women privatized their failure. Yet, it is clear that the balance women strike sets them up for failure, within their own definitions of success. Most women could not maintain the emotional serenity that successful pumping requires. Nor could they eat, drink, and rest sufficiently during the day, further undermining their efforts. Studies confirm that the well-rested, well-nourished, and calm woman will produce and be able to extract more milk than a stressed woman who has to "wolf down sandwiches between meetings" (see, for example the advice in Huggings 1995; Sears and Sears 1993). Thus, it is not surprising that, for most women, the simultaneous double shift not only placed a huge burden on their bodies, but also interfered with their performance both at work and at the pump.

As long as successful balance is defined as producing a certain quota of milk, most women are destined for failure. Even for those who succeed (and it is important to emphasize that many do), as Christine's narrative shows, pumping takes both a physical and emotional toll, leading to exhaustion and feelings of guilt and inadequacy, and sometimes, to contempt.

### **The Worker in the Suit and the Woman in the Body**

So I'm partially undressed in the closet with this weird apparatus that looks faintly obscene. For someone who's in a professional context, it's kind of a mind bender. It was a very private thing for me to do in the office. (*Lara, a senior administrative assistant, who pumped in a rarely used, spacious supply closet*)

I would put [the pumped milk] in a paper bag, so it wasn't really obvious, in case it made people uncomfortable. I didn't want that to be an issue. I wasn't trying to

put it in anyone's face. I didn't go around talking about it. I didn't bring it up at lunch. I didn't carry it around. (*Christine, an engineer at a software firm*)

Employing terms like goal, supply, demand, production, success and failure, women's narratives of their experiences with pumping in the workplace are pervaded by technical, capitalist, and consumerist metaphors that privilege substance and product over process. Women construct pumping in the workplace as yet another task added to the working mother's daily list of duties. By constructing pumping as work, they reproduced the cultural norm that assigns reproduction to a separate sphere from work.

Pumping was rarely explicitly talked about. Women sensed that their colleagues did not want to be made aware of their pumping, nor of the product. As demonstrated by earlier excerpts, women went to great lengths to devise systems that ensured both privacy during the pumping process and discreetness of the product, which was usually stored in a refrigerator accessible to others. Though "everyone" knew exactly what was going on behind closed doors and what the inconspicuous brown bag, thermos, or lunch box contained, women rarely talked about "it", nor did their colleagues inquire.

The euphemisms women employed in the notes they hung on their doors to ensure privacy are illuminating. For example, Janine told me about her sign:

I will be *available*.... It didn't say I will return, or I'm writing, or doing stuff.... I will be available in 20 minutes. And people knew what that meant. And I put it right at face level. It was the same piece of paper for six months that I was doing that. Most knew what I was doing.

Lara's sign simply read 'Lara is in here. And people knew what it meant.' Jennifer's sign, strategically located near the door handle, said, "please knock and wait to be invited before you enter." From women's narratives, it was clear that they were not only protecting their privacy and ensuring optimal stress-free conditions. Often, they were concerned about protecting their colleagues from possible embarrassment. When people walked in on Lara she "felt bad for them, thinking that they might be embarrassed."<sup>9</sup> She was not embarrassed, because she felt she was entitled to pump, and pumping seemed "the natural thing to do". Similarly, women

explained that they stored the pumped breast milk in inconspicuous containers in order to protect their colleagues.

However, women were clearly concerned about much more than their colleagues' uneasiness with the sight of pumped breast milk. Their professional identities were also at stake. Lara's "mind bender" was clear enough to all the women I interviewed; pumping jeopardized hard-earned professional identities. Both the women who pump in the workplace and their colleagues inadvertently become (or are made) conscious of the fact that lactating bodies transgress the image of the disembodied worker.

You have to schedule around [pumping]. I couldn't go to some professional meeting and ignore it because I would start dripping. So you have to, you have to listen to your body. But there were times where I wished I could just turn off, pretend that I'm not breast-feeding for a day. But you can't. (*Christine*)

If I had some extended kind of thing, I needed to let people know that I should take a break and go pump because otherwise I was going to explode. So, I would excuse myself and then go do what I needed to do. (*Denise*)

Clearly, the breast-feeding mother, or the pumping worker, is continuously aware of her embodiment. Thus, though in comparison to breast-feeding, breast-pumping emerges as a disembodiment endeavor (Blum 1999: 53), in the context of the workplace, pumping in effect serves to embody women. The woman who pumps in the workplace quickly learns that, not only is it difficult to sustain the appearance of the ideal disembodied worker, but several times a day she has to become involved in a very embodied process, on the job. First, the basic facts of lactation serve as a constant reminder: lactating breasts are sensitive; if they are not relieved on schedule, they may become engorged, painful, and possibly infected. Second, lactating breasts may "leak". Almost everyone told me stories of milk-stained shirts; avoiding leaks and maintaining a professional appearance were crucial to these women. Finally, several times a day, this worker has to partially undress in order to pump her breasts. This certainly creates a paradox for the professional.

Yet, women seemed to refuse to acknowledge their embodiment. Transforming the problem from one of competing identities to one of body management, they construct pumping as a project. For example, Angela said she learned to pump on schedule to avoid embarrassing

episodes or painful breasts. She also had to pump off site often and emphasized that the pump was stored in an inconspicuous, professional looking bag. As Blum (1999:55-58, 136) argues, pump manufacturers are aware of professional women's concerns and tailor their advertisements accordingly.

Denise told me about a three-day trip to the East Coast, during which she had to manage her lactating breasts during a full schedule of meetings:

The next day I had meetings. So I hooked myself up in the morning, and I pumped as much as I could. Probably for half an hour. And came back 12 hours later. I said [to my boss] "I need at least half an hour." So I started pumping, and half an hour wasn't at all enough. So I went to dinner and [later] I pumped for another hour. There was just so much milk. If I hadn't done that, I would have gotten mastitis certainly. And then the next morning again I got up as early as I could and just pumped. And that afternoon I was supposed to fly out. And we had a meeting at.... And I asked that professor if I could use his office, and he says "why", and I say "well, I have to relieve myself before I get on the plane". And he has two children and he understood. So I did that minimally. And if I hadn't done that, I would have been in big trouble.

Through these women's narratives, we see how the secrecy surrounding both the practice and its product sends a strong message that pumping, which signifies embodiment, sexuality, and motherhood, stands in stark opposition to the real business that goes on in the workplace. Combined with the designation of the lactating body as a project, this points to a paradox that working women face, but do not attempt to confront: *the woman in the body versus the woman in the suit*. Rather than challenging capitalist organizational culture and its ideal disembodied worker, women who pump in the workplace reproduce this image. Though individually women recognize the fallacy of this ideal worker, they nonetheless do their best to maintain its image. Many women marveled at their lactating bodies, but they perceived of lactation as perilous to their professional identities and possibly offensive to their surroundings. By turning their deviant bodies into a project to be managed, they created a distance between the "woman in the suit" and "the woman in the body", thereby failing to challenge the standard capitalist ethos.

## Conclusion

Undeniably, the lactation-friendly workplace possesses a radical potential. By disrupting the notion of the disembodied worker and allowing family time to seep into work time, accommodations of breast pumping in the workplace emerge as a step towards the gentler, kinder workplace called for by Jennifer Glass (2000). Women who pump in their workplaces, along with their peers and supervisors, are confronted with the realities and demands of caretaking. The woman at the pump also exposes the fallacy of the male/productive/disembodied ideal worker.

However, this paper points to some troubling limitations of the radical potential of lactation policies and accommodations. Some of these are conceptual and contextual; others emerge from women's experiences at the pump. Lactation experts, parenting books (e.g. Huggings 1995; Sears and Sears 1993) and magazines, internet sites (e.g., [www.breastfeeding.com](http://www.breastfeeding.com), [www.lalecheleauge.org](http://www.lalecheleauge.org) and [www.pumpingmoms.org](http://www.pumpingmoms.org)), and other public health literature assure women that combining work with breast-feeding is feasible, but women's narratives demonstrate that pumping takes a tremendous toll on working mothers. These experiences reveal the underside of pumping at the workplace, providing an ethnographic backdrop both to lactation advocates and to the quantitative research on the interface of work and lactation. The story that I construct from women's narratives is a pessimistic one. It is a story of women/mothers/workers who strive to achieve a goal, measured in the number of ounces of mothers' milk produced and extracted per day. It is a story of *workers* who almost universally fail to achieve their production goal; success, too, comes at a price. It is a story of *women* who often push their doubly working bodies to the limit. It is a story of *mothers* ridden with guilt about their failure to provide their babies "the very best" – breast milk.

This story also has symbolic aspects; pumping at the workplace exposes fascinating paradoxes that women face as they attempt to accommodate their professional, maternal, and embodied identities. Thus, although accommodations for pumping in the workplace allow women to combine work with a certain component of early mothering, it also complicates their lives. Many of the women I interviewed perceived of pumping as an exhausting and unpleasant exercise that drained them both physically and emotionally.



Placing this enterprise in context further illuminates the limitations on the radical potential of the lactation-friendly workplace. Accommodations to breast pumping negotiated by the women I interviewed do not come in a vacuum; they dovetail with a societal pressure on women to breast-feed, which is unaccompanied by attempts to spread the costs of breast-feeding. The difficulties faced by those who choose to pump in the workplace illustrate the dual trend faced by modern mothers. On the one hand, the burdens placed on them are intensifying (Hays 1996). On the other hand, the responsibility for children's well-being is increasingly privatized (Glass 2000). The women I interviewed certainly did not perceive of accommodations for pumping in the workplace as redressing neither trends. Though many viewed pumping as an entitlement, they did not expect a reduced workload. To the contrary, as Margaret put it, it is the woman's responsibility to make sure the work gets done, in spite of the lost work time at the pump. In this way, accommodations for pumping in the workplace reinforce the privatization of the burdens of motherhood, contributing to the production of drained, tired, and frustrated mothers. Indirectly, they may also reinforce a conservative perception that work and family responsibilities are inherently incompatible.

Lactation-friendly policies do not *create* any of these difficulties, but by allowing women to develop expectations that are difficult to fulfill in the modern, busy workplace, they certainly exacerbate them. More significantly, given the unchanged broader context of the contemporary capitalist workplace, rather than offering a genuine support to mothers, such an isolated family-friendly policy leaves undisturbed many assumptions that underlie the capitalist labor contract.

In other words, the limitations on the radical potential of the lactation-friendly workplace are also conceptual. Rather than challenging the norms of the capitalist workplace or the ideal of the disembodied worker, lactation-friendly policies reinforce its values and priorities. Founded upon the expectation that young infants spend many hours a day away from their parents and valuing efficiency, technology, and detachedness over process, nurture, and connectedness, these accommodations do not challenge some of the norms at the heart of the capitalist workplace and the image of the ideal worker.

Lactation-friendly policies thus emerge as a double-edged sword. Though they facilitate mothering choices that may otherwise be inaccessible to many women, they also create burdens

and expectations that produce drained, tired, and frustrated women. In addition, the mothering choices these policies facilitate are laden with much cultural and social pressure. The lessons gleaned from the lactation-friendly workplace suggest that short of a more sweeping challenge to the capitalist labor contract and its ideal worker, potentially radical policies ultimately fail to advance us towards a gentler, kinder workplace. Work-family advocates must carefully consider what they wish for.

## Notes

1. For the purposes of this paper, I use self-negotiated *accommodations* and company-set *policies* interchangeably.
2. This was the AAP's first comprehensive policy statement on the issue in 15 years. The AAP recommended that infants be breast-fed exclusively for 6 months and that mothers continue to provide breast milk up to at least 12 months. The policy statement also suggests that employers be encouraged "to provide appropriate facilities and adequate time in the workplace for breast pumping."
3. My analysis differs from that of Linda Blum, who sees pumping solely as a disembodied enterprise. This paper highlights the ambiguities of pumping. Though pumping is a disembodied enterprise compared with breast-feeding, in the context of the workplace, lactation and pumping emerge as an embodying device (see Blum 1999: 53-60).
4. The network provides an on-line forum, in the form of several weekly digests or newsletters, that allow parents to share experiences and concerns relating to all aspects of parenting; breast-feeding is a popular topic of discussion. The newsletter allows subscribers to post anonymously; in a recent discussion many parents maintained that this anonymity provides for sincere inquiries and advice. UCB Parents Network was started in 1993 by a graduate student at Berkeley as a support system for 14 student parents in electrical engineering and computer science. In 1995, the list was opened to all campus parents and subsequently to all Bay Area parents. Membership is free of charge, and the newsletters and website are maintained by volunteer moderators. The network now has a circulation of over 4,500 members. For more information, see the UCB Parents Network website at <http://parents.berkeley.edu/>.
5. The discussions this paper draws on are all posted on the website, fully accessible to the public.
6. In a related paper, I argue that many middle-class women construct breast-feeding, not only breast pumping, as a project (Avishai-Bentovim 2000).
7. Listening to women's stories, I was reminded of the introduction Arlie Hochschild's *The Second Shift* (Hochschild and Machung 1989). Professor Hochschild describes how she negotiated her duties as an Assistant Professor with those of a new mother: she would bring her baby with her to campus and schedule him into her posted office hours. The women I interviewed employed a similar tactic with pumping.
8. This message alludes to two themes central to women's experiences with breast-feeding: the emphasis on exclusivity and the accompanying sense of societal and cultural pressure to breast-feed. The significance women attach to pumping is in large part a product of the broader support – but also pressure – to exclusively breast-feed or exclusively supply breast milk, which is constructed by many women as a personal choice or a parenting preference. Some women were

aware of this pressure to breast-feed and were critical of their own attempts to achieve exclusivity. I address these issues in a related paper (Avishai-Bentovim 2000).

9. Lara lamented that, if her place of employment had a private lactation lounge, she probably would not encounter some of these issues. But she wasn't sure if she would use such a space, because pumping was a private thing for her to do in the office, and a shared lactation lounge would create other problems because normally women in a professional context would not "dream of undressing in front of each other."

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