New Choices, New Families
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Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

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As the three previous chapters have shown, lesbians consider a variety of factors when making their mothering decisions. They weigh their mothering desires in relation to their personal beliefs about motherhood, the amount and kinds of support they receive from lesbian networks and communities, and their relationships to intimate partners. Many of these factors overlap with one another, thus shaping complex decision-making processes. In addition, work also overlaps with these three factors, particularly because work is partly what makes up class status (see chap. 3), and class status shapes the entire decision-making process. However, because only limited research to date has examined decision-making processes among women in general, regardless of sexual identity, we know very little about how work—separate from other factors—shapes women’s mothering decisions.

Instead, much of the literature on work as it relates to motherhood looks at how mothers balance work and family after their children are born. Research often focuses on a multitude of factors affecting this balance, including the second shift that women do in the form of housework after they come home from a day spent in the paid labor force, how the service economy increases women’s and men’s need to work more, thus reducing time at home, the amount of money women lose by taking time off work to become mothers, how to find acceptable
and affordable childcare, family-friendly policies at work, whether it is better for children to have mothers who stay at home or who have occupations, and a host of other concerns about how to balance work and family responsibilities (Crittenden, 2001; Gerson and Jacobs, 2004; Hochschild, 1989; Steiner; 2006). Although the research focusing on work-family balance is rich and insightful as it describes perhaps the most significant issue today facing families with children, the literature lends little insight into how women, regardless of sexual identity, decide to become mothers or remain childfree.

Because so little research has focused on the very question of how women make mothering decisions, and because the women I interviewed stressed the importance of work in their decision-making processes, it is critical to look at how work—separate from other factors—shapes the processes women go through in order to decide if they will become mothers or remain childfree. In other words, in addition to understanding how work shapes women’s lives after they have children, we also need to understand how work shapes women’s decisions to have children at all. This chapter describes how the lesbians I interviewed drew on the benefits and barriers of work to decide to become mothers or remain childfree, and how those benefits and barriers varied by race and class.

The little information we do currently have on work’s influence on mothering decisions pertains exclusively to heterosexual women and shows how heterosexual women draw on the benefits and barriers of work to help them achieve their personal goals, including their mothering desires. In some cases, heterosexual women take into consideration the balance between work and family responsibilities in their decisions to become mothers or remain childfree. For example, for middle- and working-class White heterosexual women, the lure of a career is the single greatest factor drawing women away from motherhood (Faux, 1984). Rising work aspirations and expanding work opportunities allow women to explore interests outside of domestic ones (Bartlett, 1994; Faux, 1984; Gerson, 1985; Ireland, 1993). In addition, both middle- and working-class women may find it difficult to fit children into their work schedules, although the reasons vary by class. For middle-class college-educated women, careers mean not only upward
mobility but also a degree of job satisfaction that allows them to expand upon educational and professional interests. In contrast, many working-class women choose work over motherhood for the chance to move ahead financially (Gerson, 1985; Morell, 1993).

Contrary to the ways in which work encourages White heterosexual women to remain childfree, declining work aspirations due to blocked mobility and dead-end careers often lead heterosexual women into motherhood (Gerson, 1985). Even a heterosexual woman who “harbors deep-seated ambivalence toward mothering and domesticity but over time experiences falling work aspirations” will move toward motherhood (Gerson, 1985, p. 19). In other words, when work offers few benefits in terms of upward mobility or personal fulfillment, motherhood becomes more attractive than work. However, for all women, regardless of sexuality, the option to leave the workplace and to move into a primarily domestic role is a privilege of class because it requires that there be a second income large enough to support the family.

Although there is some information about lesbians’ general experiences at work (Rasi and Rodriquez-Nogues, 1995; Reimann, 2001; Sullivan, 2004), we know virtually nothing about how work shapes their mothering decisions. My research shows that, like heterosexual women, lesbians draw on the benefits and barriers of work to help them decide how to achieve their personal goals, including goals related to motherhood. In addition, lesbians take into consideration their understanding of the relation between work and family responsibilities to help them decide to become mothers or remain childfree. However, because of how sexuality and gender intersect with race and class to shape the institution of work, how work shapes lesbians’ decision-making processes varies in important ways from the experiences of heterosexual women.

**How Work Encourages Lesbians To Remain Childfree**

Among the lesbians in my study, work encouraged some of them to remain childfree, both by providing benefits to those who wanted to achieve personal goals outside of motherhood and also by imposing constraints that encouraged lesbians who wanted to become moth-
ers to ultimately decide to remain childfree. More specifically, work encouraged lesbians to remain childfree in two major ways. First, work helped lesbians to achieve upward mobility or to maintain their current economic status. Second, by denying some lesbians access to health insurance and domestic partner benefits, work encouraged some lesbians to remain childfree.

Most of the lesbians in my study actively drew on the benefits of work to help them attain personal goals, including those pertaining to mothering desires. Within every group I interviewed, lesbians discussed how they used work to address concerns about financial stability. However, there were variations in the focus of that concern, particularly by class and mothering desire. Much like heterosexual women, working-class lesbians and those from working-class backgrounds spoke primarily about how remaining childfree allowed them to achieve upward mobility. For some lesbians, work provided the material opportunity needed to achieve their goal of economic freedom, a goal many saw as being mutually exclusive with having children. Furthermore, work provided a means of reducing fears of downward mobility, which many lesbians, particularly those coming from working-class backgrounds, equated with motherhood.

For example Kristy, a middle-class White lesbian who came from a working-class background and who was ambivalent about motherhood, stated:

I had a real strong drive to get out of my working-class background. And where I grew up was a very small town, and I wanted to get out of the small town, get out of the trap that I perceived it to be . . . And I was really driven to succeed. I’m sure that much of the reason that I moved up as far as I have so far is because I was able to make that kind of a single-minded pursuit. And I was able to keep going to school while I was doing it, and get the degrees that I’ve gotten. And [being driven] has made me promotable, and I don’t think I could have ever done that if I’d had a family.

Other participants from working-class backgrounds voiced similar views about the inability to be upwardly mobile if also a mother. Terry,
a working-class Black lesbian, stated that work greatly influenced her decision to remain childfree:

**Terry:** Right now I’m still trying to move forward, and I have one more goal to reach. Even though I have a good job, there’s one place that I want to work inside of the office itself. So moving around, I don’t think that’s good for a child anyway, you know?

**NM:** So right now your job aspirations take precedence and are more important [than becoming a mother]?

**Terry:** Yeah, yeah. They come first right now.

Whereas Kristy said that having children would be bad for her in terms of achieving upward mobility, Terry voiced her concern that having a job would be bad for a child. Regardless of the meaning they assigned to the relation between work and motherhood—and the difficulties in balancing the two—many working-class lesbians wanted to move up the financial ladder and did not see motherhood fitting into that goal. Mabel and Kerry, two working-class White lesbians, also commented on the conflict between becoming a mother and achieving personal financial goals:

**Mabel:** I think when you don’t have children you tend to work more, you tend to go after promotions or maybe working more, or transfers or just different things. I think your work becomes a bigger part of your life maybe than it would if you had children. So I think you either have one or the other.

**Kerry:** I agree with what she was saying, because when the boys were living with us, they [took all] the time. That was where my focus needed to be at the time, and so at work I just went in and punched the clock, did my job, and went home. Well, now I’m in management, which takes up a lot more time, and I’m working towards going up the chain, and I really don’t feel it would be fair . . . to any child at this point in time.

In addition to wanting to climb the economic ladder, some working-class lesbians, particularly lesbians of color, found that even if they
wanted to become mothers, their jobs did not provide them with adequate financial stability to help them fulfill their desires to become mothers. A few working-class White lesbians and working-class lesbians of color stated that they had stable, well-paying jobs. However, many others said that a lack of finances was a major barrier to having children. In such cases, working-class lesbians often waited to be more financially secure before having children. Pam, a Latina who was a financially strapped graduate student from a working-class background, explained that the problem of delaying the decision to become a mother is that lesbians risk becoming too old before they become financially stable. This is particularly true for lesbians as opposed to heterosexual women, because lesbians cannot rely on a male income to support them. Because men on average earn significantly more than women (Andersen, 2006), if a working- or middle-class heterosexual woman is married, she can expect to have a household income higher than that of a lesbian and her female partner.

In explaining the events that led to her remaining childfree, Pam stated:

When you look back on it, it was really a long series of events. I mean, when I was feeling the biological pressure, which was about the time that I was 42, [it] was at the time when a lot of my friends who are little bit younger than me were like 38, 39, and said, “Bing, I have to have a child now. I am either adopting or artificial insemination.” And leading up to that, at that time I was two years into a doctoral program and said, “It doesn’t look like I’m going to be done anytime soon. I don’t have any money. I’m not in a relationship. If I did want to have a child, as far as me biologically having a child, it’s either now or never.” Also because I could tell through my body changes that I’m probably [going to] go through menopause before I’m 50. And so I decided that there’s enough children in my life surrounding me that I’ve decided that probably this just isn’t gonna work out. And in some ways it’s a regretful decision. You know, like if you had enough money in the world or you had
someone else to raise a child with, I think it would be something I would seriously consider. I probably wouldn’t have even thought that when I was in my 20s. In my 20s I definitely said, “I don’t want to have children.” I didn’t feel any biological urge.

Pam struggled with her mothering decision more than most of the other participants who ultimately remained childfree. But Pam’s discussion illustrates a few important points. First, it demonstrates how a lack of money, as well as the lack of a partner (see chap. 7), created a structure of constraints (Gerson, 1985) that prevented her from becoming a mother. In addition, Pam’s remarks illustrate how age eventually makes the decision for women, regardless of sexual identity (Morell, 1994). She mentioned later in the interview that she was aware that conceptional technologies are available to older women who wish to have children. However, she said that she would have to “win a million dollars” before she could afford such services. And coming from a working-class background, she most likely did not have the option of borrowing money from her family of origin. A class status that created financial instability, combined with the lack of a partner at the “right” time in Pam’s life, ultimately sealed Pam’s decision to remain childfree.

Like Pam, Diane, a working-class Black lesbian, delayed having children because she could not afford them. Had it not been for finding a younger partner who wanted to become a mother, Diane’s lack of financial security might have led her to be childfree much in the same way as it did Pam. Diane explained:

I would not choose to have a child if I was unemployed and on welfare. You know, I wouldn’t do that. Children are very expensive, and all your money goes to the child. And I would want to be able to provide everything for the child, so unless I had a decent job, I wouldn’t do that. And in the past, if I didn’t have a good job, I would work two and three jobs to make it up, and then there’s no time [to raise a child]. So that’s not going to work either, ’cause I don’t want my child raised by a babysitter. After I started working and I went to school . . . and then my income was not where I thought [it was] stable enough where
I could raise a child, and I kept waiting and waiting, and time kept going on.

Diane took into consideration how to balance work and family to the point at which, at age 44, she thought she had lost her opportunity to mother. However, when she and Kizzy became partners, she felt that she had a “second chance.” Because Kizzy wanted children and was younger than Diane, Diane was hopeful that she would still become a mother. One advantage that lesbians have over heterosexual women in similar situations is that lesbians can find younger or more fertile partners who are able to get pregnant. Whereas older heterosexual women have the option of adopting a child or using conception technologies, older lesbians have the added opportunity of becoming a mother through younger partners.

Although working-class lesbians had deeper financial concerns than middle-class lesbians, middle-class lesbians also discussed concerns about work and financial matters. However, they differed from working-class lesbians in that they were less concerned about moving up the financial ladder and more concerned with maintaining their current financial position. Not only did middle-class lesbians see motherhood as a barrier to upward mobility, they also saw it as a cause of downward mobility. This view was tied closely to racialized and gendered ideas about motherhood, particularly among middle-class White lesbians. Because many of them interpreted their own mothers’ experiences as being mutually exclusive with work (see chap. 4), and because many of them believed that mothers should stay home with their children, many of the middle-class White lesbians in my study did not see how they could maintain their financial positions and still become mothers. Andrea, a middle-class White lesbian, said that if she were to become a mother, she would want to take time off to raise the child. However, taking time off would compromise her and her partner’s financial stability, as she explained:

I have the higher income of the two of us, and should I decide to take time off to have a child and things like that, economically it would affect our economic status and [the] possibility for
promotions at work and things like that. So that was a factor [in my decision to remain childfree].

Andrea’s comment reflects not only a fear that motherhood would prevent her from being upwardly mobile (i.e., getting promoted) but a fear that motherhood and the need to stay home would cause her and her partner to be downwardly mobile.

Many lesbians’ discussion of work revealed that they used the combination of their jobs and their childfree status as a strategy to meet their personal financial goals. Lesbians from less secure financial positions within working-class backgrounds used work and being childfree as a strategy for gaining upward mobility. Middle-class lesbians, on the other hand, who came from financially secure backgrounds, used work and being childfree as a strategy for not only improving but also maintaining their financial position. As with many heterosexual women, for these lesbians their desires for economic stability outweighed their desires for motherhood. In addition, work intersected with gendered and racialized notions of motherhood to steer those lesbians (regardless of class) who viewed motherhood and work as mutually exclusive, and as hindering personal economic mobility and freedom, toward remaining childfree. In other words, work provided the necessary financial benefits to help some lesbians attain personal economic goals and therefore encouraged them to remain childfree.

Work also encouraged lesbians to remain childfree by creating a barrier to motherhood in the form of denied access to health insurance and domestic partner benefits. This was particularly true for working-class lesbians. Jobs that did not offer strong health benefits also did not offer the financial support that lesbians needed to become mothers. Because health benefits are mostly accessible through work, work deterred some of the lesbians in my study from becoming mothers because without benefits, they were unable to pay for costly contraceptive technologies or to cover the medical expenses incurred after a child is born or adopted.

The lack of health insurance was important to lesbians’ decisions to remain childfree because those who wanted to become mothers
and have a biological connection with their children needed to access expensive conceptive technologies such as donor insemination. If they encountered any fertility issues, then additional medical services might be necessary, such as IVF. The middle-class White lesbians in my study were less concerned with insurance issues because they were more likely to hold jobs that offered such benefits. But the lack of health insurance occupied the minds of many working-class lesbians who had less secure jobs or fewer health benefits than their middle-class counterparts. When I asked working-class White lesbians if there were any resources not available to them, Amanda laughed and answered jokingly, “Excuse me, I’m sorry: the obvious one.” Although here she was referring to sperm, she then added more seriously:

As far as resources not available, I think in general [it] would be finances. I mean, we had some friends who for five years kept trying to get pregnant. This was back almost ten years ago, and the cost for each attempt of artificial insemination was $1,000.

Like Amanda, most of the lesbians in the study knew that conceptive technologies were expensive. For those without substantial savings, a large income, or help from health insurance or family members, the cost of conceptive technologies was prohibitively high.

Because of the expense, only lesbians with health benefits that covered at least some of the cost were able to use conceptive technologies, particularly when they faced serious fertility problems. As Beth, a middle-class Black lesbian, explained, both she and her partner Kathy (a middle-class White lesbian who also participated in the study) needed fertility treatments that led to the use of more expensive medical procedures. But their health insurance covered some of the cost:

It was real interesting because we were in an HMO [and] while they will cover any of the pills [and] any of the medical tests—the HCG [hormones], the whole nine yards—they won’t cover the insemination itself, which again became our own cost.

Given the health insurance coverage Beth and Kathy received through their middle-class jobs, covering the extra cost was manageable. But for working-class lesbians, not only would they have to cover the extra...
cost on a limited income, but they would also have to cover the entire cost because either they had no health insurance at all or the insurance did not cover conception technologies.

A related concern to the lack of health care benefits for working-class lesbians was the lack of domestic partner benefits. Because of heterosexist policies that prevent the instituting of same-sex marriage, civil unions, or domestic partner benefits on a federal, state, local, and private level, sharing health and other work-related benefits is not an option for most lesbian couples. Unlike many married heterosexual women whose husbands’ health benefits automatically cover their families, lesbians rarely have that privilege. The lack of domestic partner benefits, coupled with the lack of health insurance, made accessing conception technologies nearly impossible for working-class lesbians. When working-class lesbians began considering the barriers of work, particularly in the form of a lack of health and domestic partner benefits, they often decided to remain childfree.

Frustration about the lack of domestic partner benefits was most loudly voiced by working-class White lesbians. Their frustration was compounded by their own beliefs that mothers should stay home with their children. Lack of domestic partnership benefits that could provide health insurance to the potential stay-at-home partner and the children was therefore a serious concern. For example, Clara, a working-class White lesbian who was ambivalent about motherhood, explained:

Insurance is a big thing. If a cost is a big thing to me, then insurance would be a big thing to me. Getting partners covered on the insurance. I mean, it’s all a chain reaction right there, so I would say that would be one point.

Many of the other working-class White lesbians I interviewed shared Clara’s sentiment. Clara’s comment that “it’s all a chain reaction” indicates how sexual discrimination shapes the institution of work such that work policies and mothering decisions become closely related to one another. Most adult Americans who have health and financial benefits get them through work or their legal spouse. And most American employers do not offer domestic partner benefits. The result is that many working-class lesbians may not have access to health insurance
through their work and cannot be covered by their partner’s health insurance. Without the economic ability to finance contraceptive technologies on their own, working-class lesbians found that economic barriers created through work thwarted their personal desires to become mothers. As Amanda, a working-class White lesbian, explained about her and her partner:

For the majority of ten years one or the other of us has not had insurance, and that’s been a medical drawback and a big financial drawback.

So for working-class lesbians with limited finances and jobs without domestic partner benefits, the lack of benefits and the economic strain that may follow because of medical expenses become a huge barrier that ultimately led many working-class lesbians to remain childfree.

But for working-class lesbians, heterosexism and homophobia may run deeper than just a lack of domestic partner benefits. Not only did many working-class jobs lack domestic partner benefits, but my study suggests that working-class lesbians may be reluctant to take advantage of such benefits even when they are offered. Kerry was the only working-class lesbian in my study who said her partner’s job offered domestic partner benefits. When she shared this information with the others in the focus group, they all responded with surprise: “Wow! Really?!” Kerry said, however, that she could not persuade her partner to fill out the necessary paperwork to activate the benefits. Just as I found it difficult to recruit working-class lesbians to participate in my study for fear that they would be “outed,” Kerry’s experience suggests that some working-class lesbians are wary of taking advantage of domestic partner benefits for fear of “outing” themselves at work, an act they believe could cost them their jobs. With only a handful of state and local governments protecting them against sexual discrimination, lesbians and gays have little or no legal recourse once fired. Thus, for lesbians whose financial survival fully depends on their ability to work, and who have few job skills or little educational collateral on which to rely, the risk of losing a job often outweighs the advantages of accessing domestic partner benefits. The intersection of class structures (in the form of limited financial security among the working class) with
sexual structures (in the form of sexual discrimination of lesbians) means that work presents different barriers to lesbians than to heterosexual women, barriers that often led the working-class lesbians in my study to remain childfree.

**HOW WORK ENCOURAGES LESBIANS TO BECOME MOTHERS**

While the benefits that work offered in helping lesbians attain personal economic goals, and the barriers that work created through a lack of health and domestic partner benefits, encouraged some lesbians to remain childfree, work also presented benefits and barriers that led mostly middle-class lesbians to become mothers. When middle-class lesbians, regardless of race, considered their personal goals in relation to work, they found that work presented them with a variety of options. Their options derived from the fact that many of them were able to achieve their personal career and financial goals early enough in their lives that they still had time to become mothers if they so desired. As with heterosexual women, the class privilege of the middle-class lesbians in my study allowed them to find job satisfaction and achieve financial security through their jobs. Achieving their career goals through middle-class positions provided lesbians with the benefit of having the financial security and flexibility they needed or wanted in order to become mothers.

For example, Beth, a middle-class Black lesbian, explained:

Kathy and I have been together for quite a while, so we both were career folks, and we had kids later in life. Kathy was 30 when the twins were born and I was 40 when our third child was born, so we were in a much different place. Work was never an issue 'cause again later we were both older, we were both already in career paths, and the jobs just flexed with the kids.

Beth and Kathy both had established careers and secure, flexible jobs, which gave them the option of having children without making any significant personal and economic sacrifices. Because of their middle-class privilege, work provided them with secure jobs and finances that supported and reinforced their desires to become mothers.
Also in contrast to working-class lesbians, the privilege of their job status gave middle-class lesbians the option to change how they perceived the relation between work and motherhood. June, a middle-class White lesbian who “had always sworn up and down that [she] would not be a mother,” explained that once she and her partner achieved their career aspirations, they were not only financially secure but were also willing to put their careers “on the back burner.” Middle-class privilege allowed June to quit her preferred job and take a more flexible job working from home. She explained that job flexibility was central to her decision to become a mother:

I think the fact that we’re both in our mid-40s, and at a point where our careers, we’ve kind of been there, done that. We’ve both gone to school and both have pretty decent jobs, and have obtained some goals that we probably wanted to do twenty years ago. The fact that we’re more financially secure than we were twenty years ago, it just makes life a lot easier. And I do think it had a lot to do with [our decision]. I mean, ten years ago we wouldn’t have been able to do it probably financially, and so I think it’s really helped. I personally was working at the university, and when I knew that we were starting to look at adoption, I quit my job and I took a job where I could work from home. It’s not a great job, and I never would have done it if I wasn’t gonna have a child, but it’s definitely rearranged our priorities. And the jobs are, obviously, they’re secondary to anything else now . . . My partner’s very career-minded. I even think that her career has been really put on the back burner since we had a child, and Lord knows mine has. And I do think that especially at this age and being able to kinda say, “Well, you know, we’re not still in graduate school, we’re not still working crazy hours, and we’re not still trying to make ends meet so much,” really, really had a lot of effect on us.

June’s story shows how she weighed concerns about how to balance work and family in her decision to become a mother. In addition, because June and her partner had already achieved their desired career aspirations and had established financial security, they were able to
consider motherhood later in life and were willing to make a change in their careers because they had already “been there, done that.” Furthermore, because her middle-class status had already privileged June with a solid, established, and financially secure career, being able to switch jobs from one with a rigid schedule to one with a more flexible schedule was a benefit of her job that encouraged June to become a mother.

In addition to June, other middle-class participants discussed how the benefit of job flexibility and the financial means to reduce their work hours fostered their ability to choose motherhood. Rita was a single middle-class White lesbian who decided to adopt a child. At the time of her decision she was working long hours as an accountant. Anticipating the need to balance work and motherhood, Rita looked for a job with reduced hours that would better fit with her anticipated parenting schedule:

If I hadn’t been able to find a job where I could work part-time, I don’t think I would’ve made the decision [to be a mother]. I don’t think I could’ve been a full-time-plus working single mother. I just decided that. So it did make a big difference to me. How many hours I would work and how much stress there would be in the job made a big difference as to whether I would’ve even had a child.

Having a marketable job skill gave Rita and most other middle-class participants the flexibility to maintain their careers in a way that accommodated their mothering responsibilities. Being able to negotiate their careers while remaining financially stable allowed many middle-class lesbians either to pursue their desires to become mothers or, as in June’s case, to develop new desires to become mothers that they would not have anticipated prior to having an established and successful career.

Like middle-class lesbians, working-class lesbians also discussed how they wanted to prioritize motherhood over work. However, the lack of the economic security and job flexibility they needed to balance motherhood and work created barriers to becoming mothers. Joy, a working-class Black lesbian, was ambivalent about motherhood. She knew that although her day job could accommodate motherhood, her
evening job as a professional party giver could not, and she needed her evening job in order to maintain a comfortable income. She said that when she was ready to become a mother, she would have to give up her evening job:

I’m a party giver here. It’s going to be kind of hard to be a party giver and have a baby too, or be at the party when you’re seven months pregnant or something like that. It’s just, you know, striving to achieve more and knowing that to do that I may have to work two jobs. It’s not going to match with . . . when you have kids. But I would give that all up and just be okay if I had children.

Joy’s statement that she was willing to give up her evening job in order to have children is a sentiment that many working-class participants also expressed. However, for working-class lesbians, putting children first meant forgoing part of their income, which was not easy for most of them to do, a point many of them stressed. So although middle- and working-class lesbians shared similar desires to prioritize motherhood over work, class privileges that shape the institution of work made it possible for middle-class lesbians to turn desire into reality, whereas class constraints left working-class lesbians without the financial means to do so. Joy’s working-class and racial position ultimately created enough barriers—in the form of limited economic security through her job, a lack of an intimate partner with whom to share mothering responsibilities, and a lack of integration into lesbian networks—to lead her to decide to remain childfree.

The working-class positions of many of the lesbians I interviewed also meant that, unlike middle-class lesbians, they had trouble finding jobs that fulfilled their career goals. Although many working-class lesbians had well-paying jobs, those jobs did not complement their career aspirations. The result was that working-class lesbians had to choose between going back to school, keeping their current jobs, and having children. Janet, a working-class White lesbian, articulated this position well:

My partner and I both have very good jobs. I mean, they are working-class jobs. I identify as working class. We could afford to have as many children as we wanted. But school—my part-
ner had already finished her bachelor’s, but I didn’t. [In] my job, I had to work shift work, so it was hard to go to school working a midnight shift or a relief shift where I’m working all three shifts in a week. And I made the choice to stay at that job rather than quit and go back to school. But I always wanted to finish school.

Janet did eventually complete her associate’s degree after her children were old enough to occupy themselves without constant supervision. And while Janet was able to maintain her job and become a mother, being a mother meant she had to at least temporarily decide between having children and finishing her degree. No middle-class lesbians in the study discussed making such sacrifices. They did not have to, because the jobs they held offered the benefit of being able to attain their career goals.

There is no question that both middle- and working-class lesbians made sacrifices at work in order to become mothers. But just as for heterosexual women (Gerson, 1985; Morell, 1993), work benefited middle-class lesbians by allowing them to attain career goals, be financially secure, have health benefits, and have flexible work schedules. Work created a system of barriers for working-class lesbians by not providing financial security, health benefits, flexibility, or avenues for attaining career goals. The result was that in order to fulfill their desires to mother, working-class lesbians needed to delay having a child, relied on the support of an intimate partner, or sacrificed or delayed career goals. As Janet’s example suggests, some working-class lesbians (particularly those who were White) were able to negotiate work and motherhood despite the many barriers work presented. However, as Joy’s example suggests, the barriers work presented discouraged some lesbians, particularly working-class lesbians of color, from deciding to become mothers. In other words, the ways in which work provided benefits that encouraged some lesbians in my study to become mothers were shaped largely by race and class.

Just as work encouraged some lesbians privileged by race or class to become mothers by providing fulfilling careers and financial stability, for some lesbians work did not hold any real personal lure or excitement. As with heterosexual women (Gerson, 1985), for lesbians
with limited work aspirations, motherhood seemed like a viable substitute, a way to fill a personal void. The lesbians in my study who had declining work aspirations had partners who worked in professional positions such as lawyers and physicians and therefore were able to survive on one income.

Desiree and Miriam, a couple who both came from working-class backgrounds, exemplified this position. Desiree, a Latina, was a lawyer who wanted to become a mother. Miriam, a Black lesbian, always thought she would remain childfree. As Desiree explained, they decided to have children at a time when neither was earning much money and Desiree was tired of being in law school:

We had moved away from [home]. We had no friends. I was in law school. I hated it. Miriam had a job she hated. We’re like, “Hmmmm, what should we do? We don’t have much money. We have health care. Hmm, don’t really like people at law school. Let’s make someone who we could really hang out with.” I’m not kidding!

Desiree and Miriam were willing to become mothers at a time when they were not financially secure mostly because they were tired of their current positions and wanted to do something they felt would be more meaningful than work or graduate school. Although they both came from working-class backgrounds, as adults they gained class privilege through their educations and job training. Therefore, they were able to decide to become mothers because they had enough work experience and educational training to give them confidence that one of them would find a job with a large enough salary to support their family. Both Miriam and Desiree also felt strongly that at least one parent should stay home with their child. As Miriam explained, she was less career-oriented and did not have a job, so they decided she would be the stay-at-home parent:

I didn’t know what I wanted to do, so it didn’t really—I mean, I guess that helped the decision a little ’cause I knew that I wasn’t going to [have], like, some powerful career or something. So if you’re thinking about kids getting in the way of
your career, I wasn’t really a career-minded person. I guess that would’ve helped the decision or probably decided differently had I been.

Miriam acknowledged that her lack of job aspirations affected her decision to become a mother. Desiree was more career-oriented and wanted to pursue her opportunities as an attorney. The combination of educational training for both of them, career opportunities for Desiree, and a lack of career aspirations for Miriam granted them enough financial stability to raise their child and have one parent stay home. The few other stay-at-home mothers interviewed in the study reported a similar experience. As discussed in chapter 4, Carly, a middle-class White lesbian, had little job experience and few career aspirations, so she stayed home while her physician partner earned their income. Several lesbians who ultimately decided to remain childfree mentioned that they would have considered motherhood if they and their partner had been able to afford to have one parent stay home with their children.

THE BENEFITS AND BARRIERS OF WORK

My research shows that, like support networks and intimate partners, work creates a system of support and constraints that shape different groups of lesbians’ mothering decisions in different ways. When examining how lesbians consider the benefits and barriers of work in making their mothering decisions, it becomes clear that class and race privilege shape those benefits and barriers. For middle-class lesbians, and particularly middle-class White lesbians, work provided a variety of options that ultimately supported their mothering decisions. Middle-class White lesbians could decide to remain childfree and have work support their economic and personal career goals. They could decide to become mothers and have work provide the necessary financial security, career satisfaction, flexible schedules, ability to switch jobs, and health insurance needed to balance work and motherhood on one or two women’s incomes. Although there were not many differences among middle-class White lesbians and middle-class lesbians of color, middle-class lesbians of color voiced greater concern
about health insurance, suggesting that their jobs did not offer this benefit as readily as the jobs held by their White counterparts.

For working-class lesbians, the options work provided were very narrow. Working-class lesbians had limited financial security and relied on their jobs to provide upward mobility. Their jobs had little flexibility, offered limited career satisfaction, and forced working-class lesbians to choose between a job, education, and motherhood. Working-class jobs also lacked adequate health insurance and domestic partner benefits. These barriers concerned working-class lesbians, regardless of race. However, whereas working-class White lesbians voiced their frustration with not having good health insurance and domestic partner benefits, working-class lesbians of color most strongly voiced their concern about a lack of financial stability and their limited options in terms of balancing work and motherhood. As a result, working-class lesbians of color were more likely than their White counterparts to delay motherhood, which in some cases meant not becoming mothers at all. Particularly for working-class lesbians, my findings show how structures of race and class intersect with sexuality to take away a safety net that working- and middle-class heterosexual women may enjoy through the benefits of their husbands’ work that marriage automatically guarantees them.

The responses of the lesbians in my study suggest that lesbians are aware of, and take into consideration, issues concerning the need for mothers to balance work and family. Working- and middle-class lesbians who wanted to fulfill goals of economic and personal freedom—two benefits that came directly from work—often decided to remain childfree because they saw motherhood as undermining those goals. Lesbians who had established and flexible careers with adequate health benefits, or who had unfulfilling careers but economically stable partners, knew they could adequately balance their work and families, and so were inclined to become mothers. Lesbians’ work situations were thus shaped by structures of race, class, gender, and sexuality, and were also a major factor that helped them decide to become mothers or remain childfree.