The Over-baked Cookie Cliche
by Heidi Brennan and Catherine Myers

Hillary Clinton’s glib statement (“I suppose I could have stayed home, baked cookies and had teas”) has jolted mothers across the nation. Many of America’s at-home mothers are experiencing a range of feelings from disappointment to outrage in response to this comment.

While Mrs. Clinton’s comment may be understood as an unintentioned slight in the face of campaign stress, it is precisely this type of unorchestrated moment which offers us a glimpse into underlying attitudes held by many people in our society. Her remark is significant because it reflects the same misconceptions about motherhood that pervade the thinking of most of the intellectual elite of this country.

Although Mrs. Clinton bears responsibility for her cookie comment, she is not responsible for the cultural conditions in America which engendered it. After all, throughout our political, educational and media institutions, the “just bake cookies” cliche is demeaning shorthand freely used to refer to the lives of at-home mothers. Mrs. Clinton did, in her interview, provide the politically correct follow-up to her gaffe (“the work that I have done... has been aimed in part to assure that women can make the choices that they should make”). Her point that women must have adequate educational and career choices is one with which most mothers at home would agree.

But somehow, underneath the discussion of choices, our cultural arbiters believe that there really is only one meaningful choice for a woman – a career to call her own, separate from the role of mother and more than equal. What is not said, but almost always implied, usually through the cookie metaphor or references to June Cleaver and Harriet Nelson, is that the choice to be an at-home mother is made by nostalgic, frivolous, or unenlightened women. The use of these stereotypes erodes the dignity of nurturing work.

In spite of being raised in a culture that misunderstands and scorns the life of at-home mothers, millions of women still make the choice to forego employment in order to spend time caring for their children. They do this because they believe it makes an enormous difference in their children’s lives. They also discover unexpected challenges and fulfillment for themselves.

The common media portrayal of at-home mothers is that of a drastically shrinking group of women, whose lives and needs may be ignored. However, according to the Census Bureau (Who’s Minding the Kids?, 1990), most young children (60%) are cared for primarily by their mothers. This includes those cared for by their mother only (47%); dualtime mother, who earns an income while caring for her children (5%); and tag-team – mother and father share care between themselves (8%). In addition, another 11% are cared for by relatives, bringing to 71% the number of young children cared for by their families.

Furthermore, the overwhelming desire of most families, reported in poll after poll, is to have a parent, usually the mother, at home to care for their children. Typical is a recent USA Today poll which reported that 73% of two-earner families would have a parent at home if money were not an issue.

This stated desire of families is not part of the primary agenda for many of those who claim to speak for the needs of children. Today, many children’s advocates battle to increase the prestige and salaries of “child development professionals” while ignoring, sometimes even dismissing, the value of children’s most vital champions: their own mothers.

Disregard for the importance of child-rearing has had the effect of marginalizing at-home mothers, leaving their needs unaddressed in public policy debates, and their abilities undervalued in the marketplace. When a mother reenters the paid workforce, her economic opportunity will be severely diminished if our society, and thus, potential employers, see the time spent at home as “time off from real life”. And yet, the work of caring for and guiding children,
managing homes, and participating in one's community is the foundation of real life.

Criticisms of the "cookie" comment is more than a defense of at-home mothers. It is a call to include them in any discussion of domestic public policy. Indeed, solutions to social and economic problems will not be realized without understanding and supporting the nurturing work of mothers and fathers.

Mrs. Clinton's "cookie" comment may be forgiven. However, the issues it has spotlighted must not be forgotten. It has created an important opportunity to examine underlying attitudes toward mothers, and to reflect on the consequences for us all when society diminishes the value of its nurturers.

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**Cookie Crumbs**

by Heidi Brennan and Catherine Myers

The now famous "cookie" comment by Hillary Clinton ("I suppose I could have stayed home, baked cookies, and had teas"), had an impact on the staff of Mothers At Home, as does, inevitably, any current event involving mothers. The media, searching for a relevant quote, often seeks out our organization, as it does other mothers' groups.

In preparing a response to an issue, we have found that we must first identify our personal feelings and beliefs. We speak to as many other MAH staff members as we can and discuss what Welcome Home readers have been telling us in their letters and manuscripts. We develop a consensus statement which reflects our organization’s viewpoint. We then review our position in light of the MAH goals and standards: to support at-home mothers and those who would like to be at-home; and to correct misconceptions and address stereotypes about all mothers.

As a non-partisan education/support organization we have a difficult job commenting on politicized issues in a way that respects the diverse political beliefs of our readers, especially in an election year.

The experiences of the MAH staff with media interviews has shown us that statements may be misinterpreted, especially when taken from their context. We have always strived to avoid stereotypes about mothers' lives.

As careful as we are, we occasionally receive complaints that a particular statement we have made to affirm at-home motherhood is a criticism of employed mothers. This happens despite the fact that our staff includes formerly and currently employed mothers who participate in the development and review of our statements and publications.

Initially, we certainly did our share of personal groaning at the "just bake cookies" quote. We realized that much of our frustration was the result of hearing and reading similar comments for years.

Mrs. Clinton's subsequent explanation of the comment seems plausible: she said that she was addressing her choices (as the wife of a governor) to either fulfill a ceremonial function or to pursue her own interests independently; and that this "cookie comment" was not a statement about her view of homemakers.

The day after Mrs. Clinton's comment first appeared in the press, we began drafting a response to the situation to either submit to a newspaper and/or to use when talking to reporters. After a couple of late-night editing sessions over the phone when our children were in bed, we had a written commentary that we felt addressed the issue fairly. We faxed it to several newspapers—however, it was not published. Within the following week, we were interviewed by radio and print reporters as well as CNN television. It took a tremendous amount of time out of our family lives for several days, but we hoped that we could refocus the incident into a constructive discussion about the needs of mothers.

The theme of our editorial ("The Over-Baked Cookie Cliche") is primarily cultural. The one element that has been consistently missing in public policy debate as well as in media portrayals of mothers is a serious regard for nurturing work.

Although we were disappointed that this editorial was not published by any of the newspapers we sent it to, we found it useful as "notes" when interviewed by reporters. We share it with WH readers in the hope that some of the ideas presented may be useful when writing or speaking on issues affecting at-home mothers. Our thanks to all who sent us mail about this matter. We received letters and notes, along with readers' clippings from local newspapers and other publications. Although we can't respond personally, each letter adds to our understanding of what mothers across the country are thinking.

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