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Do Childless Workers Get the Short End of the Stick?

* In one author's view, parent-friendly office policies and tax breaks discriminate against employees who don't have children.

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Attention working parents: The jig is up. The party's over. No more free lunch. We're mad as heck, and we're not going to take it anymore. According to one writer, those are just the beginning rumblings of an unspoken fury that has been building in the hearts and minds of many childless working adults.

Giving voice to this silent scream is Elinor Burkett, whose latest book, "Baby Boon: How Family-Friendly America Cheats the Childless" (Free Press), hit bookstores this month. Burkett's book is the latest in a wave of but-what-about-me books bombing the American psyche for yet another infraction of human rights. This time it's about workplace discrimination against childless workers.

Who picks up the slack when Betty leaves early to take Janie to the doctor? Who goes to Cleveland on a moment's notice or works the holidays or covers when Joe leaves early to coach his son's Little League team?

Working folks without kids, that's who, according to Burkett.

And by the way, ever notice that parents get more job benefits and tax breaks than people without children? What happened to equal pay for equal work? So goes the position championed by Burkett, 53, a married, "childless by choice" veteran journalist.

And the gloves are off.

While some childless adults heartily identify with Burkett's message, others claim the issues don't affect them. On a macro level, critics charge that Burkett's notions hurt the women's movement, pit parents against nonparents and are selfishly inconsiderate of society's needs.

"I find myself getting really angry listening to her thesis," said Ruth Rosen, professor of history at UC Davis and author of "The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America" (Viking, 2000). "One of her presumptions is that we've achieved the goal of a family-friendly workplace. That's not reality. The people with the hardest lives are men and women, particularly women, who work and have children. If anything, parents feel pressed to do more to prove they are not slacking off."

But Mike, who works in computer sales, says Burkett is singing his song. (Mike, like most people interviewed for this story, asked that only his first name be used.) A member of the San Fernando Valley/Ventura chapter of No Kidding, an international support group for childless adults, Mike is 35, single and childless. He's outraged by the dispensation he believes parents get on the job. "They get so much more flexibility. If they have to leave early to pick up the kids, it's not just excused, it's encouraged."

At his former job, Mike said, he was assigned the undesirable travel. "I was always the person sent to Minneapolis because I was single and unfettered. The others in my department had families. At first I didn't mind, but eventually I did. I never spoke up because I didn't feel it was an environment in which I could."

If Clinton's support for federal unemployment insurance goes through, Mike really will be miffed. Currently an employer is required to provide family leave to new mothers and fathers but not for pay. If Clinton gets his way, unemployment insurance will kick in. "Why should my tax dollars pay for this when the government wouldn't pay for me if I wanted to take leave to go travel? That's just as valid a choice."

Darcy, 41, works in the retail industry and also has felt slighted by what she views as preferential treatment given parents. She believes a lot depends on the boss. In her last job, where she worked as an executive for a major department store, her boss had children and always assigned holiday shifts to nonparents. "My schedule at Christmas was always the last to be considered, which assumed A) that I don't have a family, which I do--I just don't have children--and B) that I don't have a life."

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She recalled one female employee who came in 45 minutes late and left 45 minutes early each day to accommodate her child-care situation. Her pay was never affected, and Darcy and her colleagues had to cover.

"There was no appreciation," she said. "Never a nod of gratitude to those of us who didn't leave all the time or who picked up the load. . . . It's expected." Of course, some small monetary compensation, or an offer to go home early one Friday, would be better.

That's exactly Burkett's point. "Mothers expect childless people to cover as if it's an entitlement. The fact that it inconveniences me never registers. I've yet to meet any parent who felt at all guilty about ripping off a childless person," said Burkett, a New York resident who is in Minneapolis working on her next book.

The women's movement gave women choices, she added. "But why am I expected to do more because someone else chose to do too much? Every time I hear that phrase, 'It takes a village,' I want to scream. A village that diminishes my rights is not a village I want to live in."

Rosen, 54, thinks Burkett's gripes may be a case of sour grapes. "Some of these women who didn't have children feel so deprived that they don't want younger women to have the choice of family and career. In essence these older women attack the younger women by saying, 'Why should you have it all? I never did.' "

Childless workers who feel discriminated against don't speak out because it's politically incorrect, and they're afraid of being tagged as anti-child, said Burkett. Others believe childless workers should hold their tongues in the interest of the bigger picture.

After all, the women's movement has fought 30 years for a family-friendly workplace, flextime, family leave, job sharing and child-care assistance. Although they haven't gotten all they wanted, working mothers have made the workplace less rigid and more humane--a reality fathers and nonparents now enjoy.

"I personally don't care if people leave early as long as I can leave early for my personal needs, which I can," said Cindy, deputy attorney for the California attorney general's office in Los Angeles. "I know it sounds surprising, but the government is so much more progressive than private industry in this regard."

Cindy, who is 40, single and childless, has flextime. Like many people in her office, she can take every other Monday off. If she wanted to telecommute one day a week, she could. These are not options open only to parents. As for benefits, "I never thought of it as parents getting more. If I had to provide insurance for dependents, part of that money would come out of my paycheck. I just figure I'm taking more home."

Diane, 35, who works in advertising in San Francisco, believes that working mothers have done her a great service. Even though she's childless, her boss let her have the same flexible schedule as moms when she was diagnosed with diabetes two years ago.

"I noticed women were working four days a week and leaving at 4 p.m., and I wanted that too. The fifth day they worked at home, but everyone knew that meant they ran errands and checked their e-mail every two hours. I felt my 10-hour days were a contributing factor to my health problems, and I wanted more balance."

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She believes a lot of people have shifted their focus in the last 10 years from pure career to a more balanced life. "When you get to your mid-30s, you realize there's more to life than work. Before, women were trying to prove they were just as competent as men. We've blazed that path. Now men and women can have balance at work, and we owe that to the women's movement."

Although she's still single, Diane hopes to someday have a family. When she does work late for a colleague who needs to leave and pick up a child, she doesn't mind. "I just hope someone does the same for me someday."

Her situation has even created opportunities: Last year her boss couldn't go on an important trip because of her children, so Diane went to Germany instead, which thrilled her.

Sometimes the upside is financial. Chiqeeta, 43, who sold ads for 17 years, said she never felt discriminated against for not having children. If anything, it worked to her advantage. "When someone did want to cut back a bit to spend more time with children, that often meant I got more territory so I could make more money."

Susan, who considers herself "child free," not "childless," and works for a Southern California public library, said she's often asked to cover evening shifts and Sundays for parents who need the time off. "It's not a problem for me because we trade the hours, and if I pick up a Sunday, it's time and a half. We're never asked to cover someone's turf without pay."

However, she did note that it's easier for parents to ask for time off for family matters than for nonparents. "We have two cats and three dogs. If my pet is ill, I'm grumbled at if I need to take it to the vet's. That really frosts my cake."

But once the emotions have quieted, Burkett says some inequities perhaps need a closer look. Her main complaints are three: Parents get more tax breaks, better benefits and more paid time off.

Families with kids do get a small tax advantage, but compared to the cost of raising kids--who, if raised well, could be an asset to all of society--it's moot, says David Blankenhorn, president of the Institute for American Values, a family-policy-oriented think tank.

For most households, the tax cuts equal a per-child savings of about \$800, said Mission Viejo tax accountant Mark Yegsigian. Plus they get a \$500 tax credit. So it may amount to \$1,300 per child per year, he said. But "if you look at having children strictly from the dollars-and-cents standpoint, it's absolutely not a good deal."

As for benefits, many company benefits are family driven--from medical and life insurance packages to on-site day care or summer camps for the kids of working parents. For many parents, such benefits make working possible. But some nonparents begrudge this.

Burkett argues that it's unfair if two employees do the same job for the same salary and one employee's benefits package outvalues the other because one has children. Burkett advocates a menu choice of benefits, where an employee can trade dependent medical insurance for, say, a gym membership, or trade family leave for travel.

Such unequal compensation, she said, violates the 1963 Equal Pay Act. Before that went into effect, men could be paid more for the same job as women simply because they were "heads of households."

Burkett also faults the current political scene, in which candidates discuss working-family this and family-values that. "One in five baby boomers is childless. Of those women born between 1956 and 1972, 22% will never reproduce--many by choice. Don't we matter? When did we get written out of the political equation?"

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Burkett hopes to start a national discussion. "The heart of the issue is the belief that what parents do with their lives is intrinsically more important than what the rest of us do. Saying that a parent's life is more important than yours is hard on a childless person."

But, as Rosen observed, the issue shouldn't be between mothers and nonmothers, or parents and nonparents, but between nonparents and

management. "If the goal is for parents to have more time with their kids, the burden shouldn't fall to nonparents. But management needs to accommodate parents."

Kids or no kids, anyone could hit a point in life at which he or she could use a worker-friendly employer. Karen, for example, who's childless and works in retail, now takes a karmic view. "Six months ago if you'd asked me, I would have told you I had a lot of issues . . . about the way nonparents were treated."

But a diagnosis of cancer changed her point of view. The company she now works for has "bent over backward" to accommodate her need for time off as she has fought her illness. "I've gotten back way more than I gave. The bottom line is the employer really has to have empathy toward everybody's unique situation."

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