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In a Rocky Job Market, New Pressure on Moms

By EILENE ZIMMERMAN
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MEN have been hard-hit by this recession, accounting for about 80 percent of United States job losses, and that is pushing more women into the work force. Many of those women are former stay-at-home mothers, thrust back into jobs sooner than they had planned.

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Steve Kagan for The New York Times

When her husband's income fell, Linda Stolberg took a job as a benefits coordinator at the Lake Forest Graduate School of Management, in Illinois.

Linda Stolberg is one of them. Until last November, Ms. Stolberg's days were devoted to raising her two children and managing the family's home in suburban Chicago. Her husband, Gary, works on a commission basis, selling time on local television to advertisers, and his earnings have dropped 20 percent this year from last.

Bracing for further declines, Ms. Stolberg, a former human resources benefits manager, started looking for work.

"I checked every job board, not even necessarily ones in my field, because I had been out of the work force for six years," she said. "I applied at Trader Joe's; I even pursued jobs with a funeral home and managing a doctor's office. I wanted something flexible so we wouldn't have to pay for child care."

After responding to an ad on [Craigslist](#), Ms. Stolberg landed a job in her previous profession, working 20 hours a week at the Lake Forest Graduate School of Management as a payroll benefits coordinator.

Her days of volunteering at the elementary school are gone, as is almost any time she used to have for herself. "I'm really time-stretched, but I'm way more organized," Ms. Stolberg said. "I have a calendar a month out what I'm cooking for dinner."

From the Depression through the recessions of the early 1980s and '90s, financial necessity has forced women at home with children to head into the work force, said Katherine A. S. Sibley, chairwoman of the history department at [St. Joseph's University](#) in Philadelphia, who researches women's history.

During World War II, about 36 percent of American women worked outside the home, Ms. Sibley said. During the recession of the early 1980s, about 48 percent of women were working and, in the downturn of the early 1990s, about 54 percent, according to the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#). Today, 55 percent of women are working, and they make up nearly half the work force.

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Allison O'Kelly, chief executive of Mom Corps, a staffing firm in Atlanta, has noticed a change in the last year among her clients, 90 percent of whom are mothers. "In the past, they wanted to work to make a little extra money for themselves or the kids' summer camp, things like that," she said. "Now it's an urgent necessity that they work." Women are also being less picky, she said. The type of job, as well as its hourly schedule, isn't as important.

Kathryn Sollmann, co-founder and managing partner of Women@Work Network, a recruitment firm in Wilton, Conn., says the biggest obstacle these women face can be a lack of confidence. Because they have been so focused for years on parenting, it is often hard for them to switch gears and repackage themselves as professionals, she said.

That includes creating a résumé that reflects both previous career experience and skills gained while out of the work force. "If you have been running the book fair at school, for example, that is marketing and advertising with results that can be measured in revenue," Ms. Sollmann said. "I can't tell you how many times women have done part-time work, volunteer work, been active in industry associations and they ask me, 'That counts?'"

Career transition advisers usually recommend that mothers who want to re-enter the work force take the time to do a thorough skills assessment, to rebuild their network of professional contacts and to decide whether they want to return to their previous careers.

But those in dire financial straits do not have the luxury of time, and must often return to a previous career by default.

Women with gaps in employment must also overcome employers' concerns that they are not technologically current. Ms. Stolberg brought herself up to speed on software programs like [Microsoft](#) Excel and Word by using free tutorials at the public library.

Karen Roth, a director at Hyatt Leader, an administrative and human resource staffing firm in New York City, said she advised mothers needing a job quickly to do temporary work.

"Your résumé won't necessarily be scrutinized, you build your confidence and computer skills, reacquaint yourself with the corporate environment and meet people that might be able to help you find permanent work," Ms. Roth said. "And every day you temp is like an eight-hour interview because every person you meet at that temp job is a networking opportunity." There is also the chance a temporary position will become a permanent one.

Even though the additional income often eases financial worries, the sudden change from stay-at-home to working mother can take an emotional toll.

LAST May, when Loreen Madsen's husband, Erik, was laid off as an organizer for the [Teamsters](#) in San Diego, she began looking for a job immediately. Ms. Madsen already waited tables a few nights a week for extra money and spent her days managing the house and ferrying the couple's 12-year-old daughter, Jenna, to dance lessons and regional competitions. Ms. Madsen found a job at Wawanesa Insurance as a support clerk.

She says she is concerned about the effect her time away from home could have on her daughter. "I feel like I'm disconnected to her school and schoolwork," Ms. Madsen said. "I'm very stressed, but I try really hard not to show it."

Recently, though, Jenna wrote a note to her parents in which she listed what she called "Rules for the House."

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The rule for her mother? "Be happy again."

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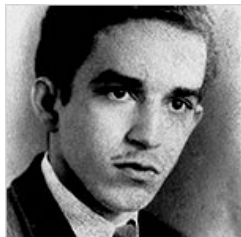
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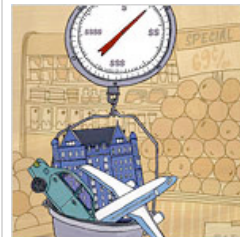
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