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"The False Choice of Working Daughters"

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The False Choice of Working Daughters

by **LIZ O'DONNELL** The Gilmer Mirror

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I was riding home from work on the Commuter Rail one night when the train lost power. In the dark, without the hum of the engine, I could hear every detail of my fellow passengers' conversations.

"Listen honey," I heard a man behind me comforting his wife on the phone, "Take your mother to her doctor's appointment. This is important. If your boss seriously fires you for going, we will deal with it."

My heart at once broke for the wife and swelled for the husband. How I could relate to her dilemma: go to work or help an elderly parent. And how grateful I was that she, absent the flexibility to both earn a living and have a life, at least had the support of an understanding partner.

That woman from my train ride faced a situation that is far too common. There are an estimated 44 million unpaid family caregivers in the United States and the majority are women. According to a new survey by Home Instead, Inc., half of working female caregivers feel they have to choose between being a good employee and being a good daughter. Another study calculated the financial hit women take if they make that false choice between work and family. According to MetLife and the National Alliance for Caregiving, women lose an estimated \$324,044 in wages due to caregiving because they reduce their hours, take jobs with less responsibility or quit altogether. Or perhaps, they try to hang on to their jobs and are penalized anyway. The Home Instead survey also includes the fact that 13 percent of women reported they were passed over for a promotion or raise due to caregiving and 25 percent say that at their place of work there is a stigma attached with taking time off to care for a parent or aging relative.

Caregiving is stressful enough under good circumstances. The responsibility of helping someone through aging, illness and end of life, is tremendous. Caregiving while worrying about your job and financial security can feel unbearable. And yet, every day working daughters soldier on. They soldier on because they know if not them, then who? The Society of Human Resource Management says working female caregivers spend, on average, approximately 60 percent more time caring for aging loved ones, compared to their male counterparts. And a recent New York Times article noting both the propensity for women to manage family care and the lack of a national infrastructure to support our aging citizens, pointed out, daughter care, "is arguably the most reliable form of care in America." If daughters don't step up, who will? And of course, they soldier on because regardless of how challenging it may be to balance family and work, they need to earn a living.

Perhaps you believe caring for mom and dad is a private family matter, or that caregiving is yet another so-called woman's issue. Think again. Never mind the fact that how we support our oldest citizens should be a matter of national pride, their care is also a national economic concern. Caregiving costs American businesses between \$17.1 billion and \$33.6 annually from absenteeism, workplace interruptions and replacement costs. If millions of women aren't contributing to their bank accounts or retirement funds during their earning years, who is going to pay for the care they will some day need? Currently we are looking at deep and potentially devastating cuts to Medicaid at the same time our senior population is rapidly expanding. As a result, more and more women, and

men, will be called on to assist their parents in the coming years.

Businesses must do more to support working caregivers. Adopting policies like flexible schedules, paid family leave policies, employee assistance programs, and eldercare referrals and subsidiaries, will help caregivers navigate their competing roles as workers and daughters. Better yet, creating workplace cultures that truly value families and care will mean those two roles will no longer need to compete against each other.

Liz O'Donnell is the author of *Mogul, Mom & Maid: The Balancing Act of the Modern Woman* and founder of WorkingDaughter.com.

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