

[on Mothers At Home letterhead]

February 21, 1997

(This letter was sent to each of the
“25 Most Influential Working Mothers”
Each wa individually addressed.
See enclosed list for the names
and addresses.)

Dear.....,

My name is Catherine Myers, and I serve as Publications Director for the national nonprofit organization Mothers At Home. I am writing to each of the women named by *Working Mother* magazine as “The 25 Most Influential Working Mothers” to alert you to the unjust and harmful statements made by Judsen Culbreth, Editor-in-Chief of *Working Mother*, when she speaks as “the voice of authority for America’s career-committed working mothers.” (The quote is from *Working Mother’s* Editorial Mission Statement.). Working mothers deserve intelligent, fair advocacy, as do all mothers. I am asking that you contact Ms. Culbreth to suggest that she find ways to support working mothers without denigrating the lives of mothers who choose to be at home.

Your profiles in *Working Mother* demonstrate the range of experiences women have in caring for their children: Fran Rodgers quit her job and became a management consultant so she could care for her chronically ill child; Sue Shellenbarger works out of her home around her children’s school schedules; Patty Murray knows what it was like to be called “just a mom in tennis shoes” when her children were young; Charlene Barshefsky cites her “exceptionally supportive husband.” You have allowed *Working Mother* to name you one of “The 25 Most Influential Working Mothers.” Now I ask that you examine what is being said by your “voice of authority.”

In the February 1997 issue of *Working Mother*, the article profiling you as one of the “25” was accompanied by “Why It Pays to Keep Working” by Leslie Alderman. Ms. Alderman’s article is outrageous in its misrepresentation of the issues women (and men) struggle with when making decisions about their employment and the care of their children. The article begins with an “us vs. them” statement: “There is yet another movement afoot that’s conspiring to send working moms back home again. An offshoot of a trend called voluntary simplicity, the argument goes that if women would just simplify their lives – that is, cut back on daily expenses – they could afford to quit their jobs and become stay-at-home moms.” Ms. Alderman labels those who advocate cutting expenses “simplists,” and her tone throughout is one of disdain. She never acknowledges that many

parents consider factors other than economic ones when making decisions about employment and the care of their children. Her own arguments, however, go far beyond the economic “facts:”

“You’ll lose influence in your marriage.”

“...if you quit your job there is also the psychic price you pay if your life is such that you never need to dress in anything other than jeans and sweats.”

[quoting Stephanie Coontz] “I don’t know many people who have been able to save enough to put their kids through college by buying flour in bulk.””

Over the years, I have read other articles from *Working Mother* and heard media interviews given by Ms. Culbreth. In publishing Ms. Alderman’s article, Ms. Culbreth continues a pattern of “supporting” working mothers by portraying at-home mothers as ignorant and foolish. Ms. Culbreth not only perpetuates stereotypes, she embroiders them -- while at the same time she insults the intelligence of her own readers and plays on their insecurities.

On January 22, 1997, Ms. Culbreth appeared on the Today show, espousing themes similar to those in Ms. Alderman’s article. Ms. Culbreth stated “the theory is that if you cut back, if you can tomatoes, if you buy your kids’ clothes at yard sales, if you make rugs out of pantyhose, that you can afford to cut back and stay home. Well, the problem with this is it oversimplifies, it is a simple-minded theory in some ways, and also it -- it really defeats the image that working mothers have.”

While some proponents of “simplifying your life” may suggest measures which seem extreme to some of us, financial sacrifice is a very real part of many families’ lives. To have Ms. Culbreth dismiss careful spending and thoughtfully-considered sacrifices as “simple-minded” deeply offended thousands of mothers who saw this interview. If not deterred, Ms. Culbreth will most likely continue to make such insufferable statements.

It’s not merely a question of being offended, however. While in the past, we’ve been able to dismiss *Working Mother’s* attitudes as merely annoying and narrow-minded, the current issue generated significant media attention along with a luncheon at the White House. Ms. Culbreth’s access to the media and to policy-makers has the potential to have serious repercussions throughout our culture. Our recent experience with most media organizations and policy groups is that they have been able to transcend the narrow definitions of “at-home” and “working” mothers and abandon long-held stereotypes. Unfortunately, Ms. Culbreth and her magazine appear to be working in opposition to this progress.

Nowhere in Ms. Alderman’s article or during the Today show interview do children’s needs or a mother’s desire to spend time with her children come into consideration. *Working Mother’s* readers are told “You may, like some moms, have the occasional stay-at-home fantasy.” Is *Working Mother* telling women that if they carefully examine the option of staying at home to care for their children they are indulging in a fantasy? The editors of *Working Mother* seem to distrust their readers’ ability to fully analyze all their options in deciding how to care for their children. I have news for *Working Mother*: I and the more than seven million other at-home mothers across the U.S. live a very real life.

Mothers At Home is the largest national non-profit organization offering support to women who have made the choice to be home with their children. We have published our monthly journal, *Welcome Home*, for over thirteen years, and our readers cross political, religious, and socio-economic lines. Our policy is to speak out against the “Mommy Wars” media nonsense and to speak up for at-home mothers without criticizing mothers who are pursuing a career. We refuse to participate in media interviews which seek to pit us against working mothers – even though we know it would give us much-needed publicity. As we have been repeatedly pointing out for years, mothers cannot be divided into two camps -- “working” and “at-home”. Mothers’ lives are much too complex for that. Indeed, of the two-parent families where the mothers of children under age eighteen are counted as “employed” by the Department of Labor, half these mothers work part-time! The Mothers At Home Mission and Values statements are included in the brochure which I have enclosed. Please note the care we have taken to respect the work/home choices of all mothers. In contrast, *Working Mother’s* editors ignore the reality and complexity of women’s lives in a seemingly desperate search for sensationalism and superficial “sound bites.”

Many of our *Welcome Home* readers contacted us to express outrage about the Today show (they most likely do not read *Working Mother* magazine). In *Welcome Home*, we regularly report to our readers on media coverage regarding at-home mothers, and we will be writing about both the February issue of *Working Mother* and the Today show.

I appreciate the time you spend considering my concerns. If you would like to speak to me, you may call me at home at 703-698-8383, or contact me by e-mail: cfmyers@erols.com.

Sincerely,

Catherine H. Myers
Publications Director

p.s. At Mothers At Home, we have employment policies which allow women to hold meaningful, part-time positions. We use a variety of flex-time, job-sharing, and/or work-at-home arrangements. A lot of our work is accomplished by volunteers. (In fact, the time I spent on this letter is volunteer time – our budget is very small, and my “work” time is devoted to our own publications projects.) We have a playroom in the midst of our office and children who play everywhere and sometimes help with the real work. We will never be one of the Fortune 500, but we take our work seriously and invite you to visit us any time – we are approximately fifteen miles from Washington, D.C. I am enclosing information about Mothers At Home and a sample copy of our monthly journal, *Welcome Home*. As you can see in our brochure, we have published two books: “*What’s A Smart Woman Like You Doing At Home?*” and *Discovering Motherhood*. I would be pleased to provide you with complimentary copies of these books, please let me know if you would like to receive them.