

## Rosen to Romney Leaves Some Women Weary of Mom Debate

By Lisa Lerer - Apr 17, 2012

Democrat Kadie Whalen, 32, is a stay-at-home mother raising three kids. Republican Evelyn Valleao, 44, works full-time yet says she wishes she was financially able to be home with her four children. And Rosie Kohn, a 60-year-old Republican skeptical of [Mitt Romney](#), went back to work 10 years ago after raising five children.

There's one thing they all agree on, though: Politicians shouldn't be wasting their time wading into the mommy wars.

"There are bigger issues," Kohn said, standing outside a supermarket in suburban Philadelphia. "God almighty, why do people worry about stuff like that?"

The comment by Democratic strategist Hilary Rosen that Ann Romney, the wife of the Republican presidential contender, "never worked a day in her life" sparked a political dispute that pulled in some of the most prominent women in politics.

While Romney, trailing President [Barack Obama](#) among women in the polls, has tried to capitalize on the comment as a sign that Democrats don't respect the work of stay-at-home mothers, interviews with more than a dozen female voters in swing states show it isn't working. The women say they want candidates to talk about the economy, gas prices and fiscal issues that affect their lives, not about the choices they've made in them.

"I think it's a little old-fashioned for this day and time to be even having that conversation," said Tricia Graham, a mother of two who works as a school principal in Phoenix. "Personally, I know more men that stay home with kids than I know women. It's a much different conversation now."

### 'Patronizing' Debate

The political debate "feels patronizing" to many women voters, said Ruth Mandel, [director](#) of [Rutgers University](#)'s Eagleton Institute of Politics in [New Brunswick, New Jersey](#).

"The challenges women are facing have to do with how to make their lives work as workers outside the home and as managers inside the home," she said. "It's taken for granted that women are trying to manage complex lives."

With women likely to make up more than half the electorate next November, the pressure is intense for both parties to find a way to connect with them. The stakes are highest for Romney, who is running behind Obama by 16 points among women voters, according to a CNN/ORC International [poll](#) released yesterday. The poll was taken April 13-15, after Rosen made her comment on CNN.

### 'Early Birthday Gift'

Seeking to gain some ground, Romney's campaign also seized on Rosen's remark as a chance to elevate [Ann Romney](#)'s profile. At an April 15 fundraiser, a day before her 63rd birthday, she told supporters that the comment was "an early birthday gift," according to NBC News, calling it "a really defining moment."

"I love the fact that we're talking about this," she said yesterday in [an interview](#) with ABC News.

Yet while most of the women interviewed disagreed with Rosen's remarks -- which Obama campaign officials also denounced as inappropriate -- they say they don't relate to Ann Romney either.

"It wasn't hard for her to stay at home because she could get all the help she needed," said Whalen, as she tied flowers into small bouquets for her two daughters in a Wynnewood, [Pennsylvania](#), park. "She's not a figure women today can identify with."

More than 71 percent of mothers work, according to the 2011 Bureau of Labor Statistics Databook on Women in the [Labor Force](#). Women also held a majority of nonfarm payroll jobs in January 2010 -- for the first time since the U.S. Department of Labor started collecting

data in 1964.

## Would Do Same

A number of women interviewed said they envied Ann Romney's ability to stay home with her children, saying they would do the same if they could afford to take the pay cut.

Sherry Woods, a sales manager and mother of a 14-year-old, said Rosen's comments were "callous" and showed a lack of respect for those Republicans, like her, who take family values seriously.

"It is a hard job," she said. "You're a housekeeper, you're an accountant, medical personnel."

Still, Woods questioned whether Ann Romney understood the sacrifices most women have to make. Mitt Romney, 65, who co-founded private-equity firm Bain Capital LLC, has an estimated wealth of as much as \$250 million, according to his campaign.

Woods, a 41-year-old from Hampton Woods, [Virginia](#), stayed home for eight months after she had her children. Then, she had to go back to work so her family could get medical benefits.

"I had no choice; I would be home if I could," she said. "Ann Romney doesn't know what it's really like."

## Financial Sacrifice

There are also those who decided to stay at home, even though it was economically challenging for their families.

Watching her children play in a suburban Philadelphia park, Jen Russo recounted the financial sacrifices she and her husband made so she could raise their four children at home. The couple has chosen to have one car to save money, and when they were younger once had their phone service cut off because they couldn't pay the bill.

"We made those choices," the former preschool teacher said. "But it was better than the alternative for me."

Russo said she plans to return to work once her youngest, a 4-year-old playing in a nearby stream, enters school. Even now, though, she sees a lot of common ground with her sister, who is raising her children while working. Both of them, she said, balance their children with other household priorities, like cooking dinner, helping with homework and paying bills.

"There's still negotiations that everyone has to do," she said. "There are good days and bad days. You just try not to yell too much."

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