

# “OPT OUT” OR PUSHED OUT?: HOW THE PRESS COVERS WORK/FAMILY CONFLICT

The Untold Story of  
Why Women Leave the Workforce

**WORK LIFE LAW**  
UC Hastings College of the Law



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Why Women Leave the Workforce

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Coined in 2003 by *New York Times* journalist Lisa Belkin, the so-called “Opt Out Revolution” attempts to explain many women’s decisions to leave the paid workforce for full-time care of their children. This “Opt Out” storyline has created a fever of news stories in other media publications that reinforce the idea that women are increasingly choosing to leave their work.

This report presents a content analysis of 119 print news stories that discuss women leaving the workplace, published between 1980 and 2006. Our review of these article finds that the Opt Out story line, which predominates in American newspapers:

- focuses overwhelmingly on the lives of professional/managerial women, who comprise only about 8% of American women;
- pinpoints the pull of family life as the main reason why women quit, whereas a recent study showed that 86% of women cite workplace pushes (such as inflexible jobs) as a key reason for their decision to leave;
- gives an unrealistic picture of how easy it will be for women to re-enter the workforce; and
- virtually always focuses on women in one situation: *after* they leave the workforce and *before* they are divorced, which is unrealistic in a country with a 50% divorce rate.

The study not only critiques the Opt Out story line that predominates today. It also provides new, more accurate analyses of existing data, notably that:

- although mothers are *not* increasingly like to stay home with their children, a *real* trend is that both men’s household contributions and women’s work hours have stalled;
- better educated women are *more likely* to be in the labor force than less educated women; and
- women’s decisions to opt out do not represent a return to “traditional” values; in fact, much of what contemporary professional moms stay home to do is not traditional.

Finally, the report provides new, more accurate story lines about women and work:

- ***Workplace/workforce mismatch.*** Today’s workplaces often are designed for a workforce that no longer exists: the workforce of the 1950s, in which male breadwinners were married to housewives who took care of home and children. Today, 70% of families have all adults in the labor force.
- ***Macroeconomic deskilling story.*** The United States cannot maintain its competitiveness if it continues to pay large sums to educate the many women who then find themselves “deskilled” — driven out of good jobs and into less good ones — by inflexible workplaces and family responsibilities discrimination.

- ***Inflexible, all-or-nothing workplaces drive women — and men — into neo-traditional roles.*** Inflexible, all-or-nothing workplaces drive women out of breadwinner roles and men out of caregiver roles. The result is many fathers working longer hours than they would like and many mothers working fewer hours than they would like.
- ***Lack of supports for working families impedes work/family reconciliation.*** The United States lags far behind most other industrialized countries in supports for working families. This lack of supports is a major reason many American women are pushed out of work.
- ***Stereotyping and discrimination drive men into breadwinner roles and women out of them.*** Many women quit because they encounter “maternal wall bias”: gender bias triggered by motherhood. Such women are not freely opting out — they are being pushed out by gender discrimination.

# INTRODUCTION

*“I was tired of juggling. I was tired of feeling guilty. I was tired of holding the household reins in one hand. So I quit.”*

## THE BIRTH OF THE “OPT OUT” REVOLUTION

On the cover of *The New York Times Magazine* for October 26, 2003, a classy looking white woman with long straight hair sits serenely with her baby, ignoring the ladder that climbs behind her. “Why Don’t More Women Get To The Top?” trumpets the headline. “They Choose Not To.”

Inside, *Times* work/family columnist Lisa Belkin reported on interviews with eight women who graduated from Princeton, now in a book club in Atlanta, as well as four women, three of whom hold M.B.A.s, in a playgroup in San Francisco. All are “elite, successful women who can afford real choice,” Belkin acknowledges, yet the *Magazine* does not evince any hesitation about making generalizations about “women” based on this group’s decisions to — to use Belkin’s phrase — “opt out” (Belkin, 2003).

“There is nothing wrong with money or power,” Belkin muses, “But they come at a high price” (Ibid.). She is explicitly autobiographical, describing how she, herself, opted out. She began her career with her sights set on being editor of *The New York Times*. “My first readjustments were practical” (Ibid.), as she recognized that she could not jump on a plane to explore the wilds of Texas and also nurse a baby. “Quickly, though, my choices became philosophical...I was no longer willing to work as hard — commuting, navigating office politics, having my schedule be at the whim of the news, balancing all that with the needs of a family — for

a prize I was learning I didn’t really want” (Ibid.).

Many of the women Belkin interviewed attribute their choice to biology; she signals an endorsement of their position. “When these women blame biology, they do so apologetically, and I find the tone as interesting as the words. Any parent can tell you that children are hard-wired from birth: this one is shy, this one is outgoing; this one is laid-back; this one is intense. They were born that way” (Ibid.). The issue is not whether certain personality traits are genetic — that’s been proven. A given individual may inherit a genetic predisposition to shyness; but it’s a long leap from there to the claim that men and women as groups have conventional gender roles etched into their genes. These distinctions are glossed over. “It’s all in the M.R.I.,” says one of Belkin’s interviewees (an English major).<sup>1</sup> Belkin notes that her informant was “describing studies that show the brains of men and women ‘light up’ differently when they think or feel. And those different brains inevitably make different choices” (Ibid.).

An important point: The decision to cover work/family issues, both in *The New York Times Magazine* and in Belkin’s “Life Work,” in a breezy opinion-column style is an editorial decision. A controversial one, perhaps, but given that choice, Belkin has been extraordinarily successful in fulfilling the role assigned to her. “The Opt Out Revolution,” published in 2003, shifted the cultural frame for understanding women’s workforce participation.

Prior to Belkin’s piece, coverage typically focused on women who had “dropped out” — left the workforce altogether. Belkin’s key insight was that this was not the crucial issue, because many women

1. The only biologist Belkin quotes, Sarah Blaffer Hardy, admits that the stereotype that women lack ambition applies to her, even while expressing worry about reinforcing stereotypes (Belkin, 2003).

who remain in the workforce nonetheless step off the fast track, by working part-time, becoming independent contractors, or working full-time on the “mommy track.” Belkin lumped part-timers with stay-at-home moms as evidence that many women who had not “dropped out” had, nonetheless, “opted out” of the fast track.

Belkin’s success in naming and framing reshaped and refreshed a well-entrenched story line: that women are returning home as a matter of choice, the result of an internal psychological or biological “pull” rather than a workplace “push.” In what Bonnie Erbe has called “*The New York Times*’ bizarre and suspiciously predetermined editorial effort to talk women out of working” (Erbe, 2006), the “Opt Out Revolution” was followed by story after story reinforcing the Opt Out narrative. In May 2004, *The Times* reported that black women also were opting out. The tone is distinctly celebratory: When one woman “could neither work nor care for her husband and young daughter after delivering her second child,” the story reports, “her stay-at-home friends came over and ‘cleaned, babysat and supplied her family with home-cooked meals” (Schumer, 2004). “‘It brought tears to my husband’s eyes,’” ends the story, inviting us to be misty-eyed, too (Ibid.). That story was followed by a 2005 Labor Day op-ed by anti-feminist Warren Farrell, who — using shaky data<sup>2</sup> — asserted that women’s disadvantaged workplace position does not reflect sex discrimination; the persistent wage gap was, according to Farrell, simply attributable to women’s choices (Farrell, 2005).

Later that month, a cub reporter snagged a coveted front-page spot with her story “Many Women at Elite Colleges Set Career Path to Motherhood,” featuring interviews at Yale and the helpful information that “a lot of the guys were like, ‘I think that’s really great’

[and] ‘I think that’s really sexy” (Story, 2005). In the same month, another front-page story cried “Forget My Career. My Parents Need Me At Home” and went on to explain that “Middle-aged women may see leaving a high-powered career as an opportunity, not a sacrifice, many experts say” (Gross, 2005).

The coverage continued: For May Day, *The Times* reported that executive women are leaving for reasons that “have less to do with discrimination in the corporate suite or pressures at home than with frustration and boredom on the job” (Deutsch, 2005). In early 2006, another front page story entitled “Stretched to the Limit, Women Stall March to Work” once again stressed personal rather than workplace factors in women’s decisions, concluding that women’s disadvantaged workplace situation reflected their own failure in family negotiations: “‘We got equality at work,’ Ms. Watson-Short said. ‘We really didn’t get equality at home” (Porter, 2006).

Although reaching fever pitch in the last two years, the Opt Out story line has been the interpretation of choice at *The New York Times* for decades. One opt-out mother, whose words are the epigram to this Introduction, was quoted in a September 2, 1953 article, entitled “Case History of an Ex-Working Mother” (Weingarten, 1953). In 1961, a reporter covered women’s decisions to quit in an article entitled “Career Women Discover Satisfactions in the Home” (Bender, 1961). By 1980, *The Times* was re-announcing a trend that has continued to arise, phoenix-like, ever since in such articles as “Many Young Women Now Say They’d Pick Family Over Career” (Kleiman, 1980); “Putting Career on Hold” (Basler, 1986); “Professional Women Do Go Home Again” (Richardson, 1988); “Ideas & Trends: For Some Two-Paycheck Families, The Economics Don’t Add Up” (Lewin, 1991); “One Who Left and Doesn’t Look Back” (Chira, 1994); “Once Employed, Now Discussing Problems of Coping at Home” (Delatiner, 1996); “Women Leaving Medicine for Home” (Bailer, 1997); “More Mothers of Babies Under 1 Are Staying Home,” (Lewin, 2001). Both *Time* (Wallis, 2004) and *Newsweek* (Brenner, 2001) have featured cover stories on the opt-out trend in recent years.

2. According to Economics Professor Barbara R. Bergmann, some of Farrell’s statistics were figures “compiled by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, but not published, because they are based on tiny samples, which can give grossly misleading results,” such as that “female transit and railroad police make... 418 percent of what their male counterparts get,” a figure Farrell “didn’t quote...because he knows nobody would believe it...[T]he other numbers that he presents from the same source are dubious as well” (Barbara R. Bergmann, personal communication to Council on Contemporary Families listserv, September 6, 2005).

Happily “the newspaper of record” more recently began to introduce a class dimension to its coverage of work/family conflict, as will be discussed further below (Kantor, 2006; Gotbaun & Rankin, 2006). Yet the Opt Out story line lives on. This Report presents a content analysis of 119 print news stories collected in a survey of news coverage discussing women leaving the workplace between 1980 and 2006. Our review of these articles finds that the Opt Out story predominates in American newspapers, which focus overwhelmingly on psychological or biological “pulls” that lure women back into traditional roles, rather than workplace “pushes” that drive them out. Furthermore,

“Greater participation by women in the labour market could help to offset the effects of an ageing, shrinking population and hence support growth.”

Opt Out stories focus overwhelmingly on white, affluent women with white-collar jobs, a skewed demographic from which to draw conclusions about the majority of women in work, given that only about 8% of American women hold such jobs (Rose & Hartmann, 2004). Additionally, Opt Out stories are often presented as soft human interest stories that underplay the serious economic consequences of female unemployment to society, to the women themselves, and to their families.

Other ways of reporting on the issue of women leaving the paid workforce for family reasons do exist. In sharp contrast to the Opt Out story, which depicts workplace issues in a framework of individual choice and ignores the economic implications of systematic de-skilling of mothers, *The Economist* magazine presents the issue firmly in a macroeconomic frame in a 2006 article on mothers’ employment. Entitled “A Guide to Womenomics,” the article treats women’s relationship to work as an important economic issue (2006). *The Economist* article recognizes that “[d]espite their gains, women remain the world’s most under-utilized resource” (Ibid.). It reports: “Many [women] are still excluded from paid work; many do not make best use of their skills... Greater participation by women in the labour market could help to offset the effects of an ageing,

Only 12% of the articles surveyed discuss the negative impact on the U.S. economy of the deskilling of American women.

shrinking population and hence support growth” (Ibid.).

*The Economist* takes the natural next step to examine how

mothers’ workforce participation can be supported through public policy: “To make full use of their national pools of female talent, governments need to remove obstacles that make it hard for women to combine work with having children,” such as “parental leave and child care, allowing more flexible working hours, and reforming tax and social-security systems that create disincentives for women to work” (Ibid.).

This Macroeconomic Deskilling story is an obvious alternative to the Opt Out story as presented in U.S. newspapers. Though more than one quarter (25.5%) of the articles reviewed do mention one or more women who has taken a lower-status or lower-wage job because of work/family conflict, only 14 out of 119 articles, or 12%, discuss the negative impact on the economy of that loss of talent. One article, from the *Bangor Daily News*, puts a particularly positive spin on it:

Before choosing to stay home with their children, [these women] held jobs in engineering, mathematics, entomology, marine sciences, education and environmental science. They have worked for corporations, governments and nonprofits. They are well-dressed, witty, worldly and informed. Their intelligence and resourcefulness as mothers is as much a boon to the world of children and society as it is a loss to the professional world. (Anstead, 2004)

## THE FEMINIST RESPONSE: DENIAL

*“You read all the statistics about working mothers with children under 6, and you look at yourself and say, ‘Am I weird, or a statistical anomaly?’” (Librach, 1989).*

Many feminists have responded to the Opt Out story line by denying the existence of a trend. The most elegant study is that of economist Heather Boushey of the Center for Economic and Policy Research. Boushey found that, at the same time that women’s employment dipped after 2000, so did men’s (Boushey, 2005). Women’s employment dipped more than men’s — but that effect was not due to motherhood. Boushey found that non-mothers’ employment dipped about as much as mothers’ did; the recent (small) decrease in employment among women does not appear to be attributable to motherhood (Ibid.).

This response is convincing as far as it goes, but it overlooks the elephant in the room: The effect of children on women’s employment may not have increased over time, but it is substantial. The Opt Out story reflects the brute reality that most high-level jobs remain overwhelmingly male, and in fact, large numbers of mothers stay home full time and many more have left the fast track.

Simply telling reporters that they are telling the wrong story does not give them new stories to tell; reporters need ready access to accurate data to paint a complete picture. The purpose of this Report is to begin to provide this information.

**Women’s employment dipped more than men’s — but that effect was not due to motherhood.**

## AN ALTERNATIVE STORY LINE: MANY WOMEN ARE PUSHED OUT

*“More than once, when I say I work three days a week, I’ve heard from women, ‘Wow, if I would have done that, I’d still be at work’” (Cummins, 2006, March 28).*

*“The problem is that the workplace hasn’t changed” (C.L. Reed, 2004).*

If critics want to replace the Opt Out story, they need to provide a new explanation for why so many women do not follow the accepted paths to workplace success. This Report argues that most mothers do not opt out; they are pushed out by workplace inflexibility, the lack of family supports, and workplace bias against mothers.

Returning to the 2003 Belkin article, the first woman Belkin discusses is Sally Sears, a former TV anchorwoman in her late 40s. Belkin tells us that Sears took nine years to quit, and “she did so with great regret” (Belkin, 2003). “I would have hung in there, except the days kept getting longer and longer,” [Sears] explains. “My five-day 50-hour week was becoming a 60-hour week” (Ibid.). So she quit, recognizing she lacked the fire in her belly, right? No, actually. She tried to negotiate a part-time schedule. The station refused: “They said it was all or nothing” (Ibid.).

**“They said it was all or nothing. It was wrenching for me to leave Channel 2... I miss being the lioness in the newsroom... [and i]t kills me that I’m not contributing to my 401(k) anymore.”**

Only then did she leave. “It was wrenching for me to leave Channel 2...I miss being the lioness in the newsroom... [and i]t kills me that I’m not contributing to my 401(k) anymore” (Ibid.). (This reference to the economic vulnerability of women who “opt out” is never followed up in the story.)

As it happened, the same all-or-nothing employer for whom it was unthinkable to allow Sears to remain in her job on a part-time basis later offered her part-time work — presumably at a rate far below her original six-figure salary rate and without benefits. So the real message is that Sears, despite her talents, ended up with a bad job (low pay, no benefits or advancement) instead of a good one. Her husband, Richard Belcher, who was also a reporter when they married in 1988 is now a news anchor at the station. A more accurate headline for Sears’ story might have been, “Talented Mother Pushed Out of a Good Job Into a Bad One; Economic Vulnerability Results.”

What Belkin’s claim that women are “opting out” boils down to is that mothers do not work the all-or-nothing schedule required for success in high-profile jobs. This is true: 95% of mothers aged 25 to 44 work less than 50 hours per week, year round (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). Why? Perhaps biology is the answer, but try for a moment to do without it. The first step is to examine how we define the “ideal worker” for high-profile jobs: as someone who starts to work in early adulthood and works, full time and full force, for forty years straight. That means no time off for childbearing. Or childrearing.

Whom does this Ideal Worker describe? Not mothers. It is an ideal framed around men living the traditionally masculine biography of a breadwinner married to a homemaker. This ideal was well suited to the workforce of the 1950s. It is not well suited to today’s workforce, when 70% of households have all adults in the labor force (Kornbluh, 2003).

Experts call this “workforce/workplace mismatch.” Kathleen Christensen of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation describes it this way:

A workplace that requires, full-time, full-year work, with minimal opportunities for time off or for flexible career paths, subverts the needs of many in today’s diverse workforce. Many do not want to work full time, full year, year in and year out, on a rigid lock step career path for their entire lives. But right now they have little choice. The rigidity

of the workplace is profoundly mismatched with the needs of the changing workforce. (as quoted in Maranto, 2003, p. 6-7)

The Opt Out story line overlooks the fact that this outdated workplace ideal drives out not only mothers, but also increasing numbers of men who refuse to “mistake their job for a life” (Lazear, 2001). In a rare news story documenting that employers lose talented men, too, when they insist on a culture of overwork, a Newhouse News Service story featured Larry Gelman, a partner in a national accounting firm who quit his job because, “If you left the office at 6 p.m., it was seen as shirking your responsibilities” (Heglund, 1997). Also featured in the article was a popular Detroit TV anchor with a reported income of \$700,000 who left because there were days when he literally did not see his four children. “My family is very important to me,” he explained (Ibid.). In fact, a growing consulting industry helps employers deal with Generation X and Generation Y employees who are challenging the traditional notion that truly committed workers offer 24/7 availability (Tulgan, 1996; Lazear, 2001).

The story of workplace/workforce mismatch is the microeconomic version of the Macroeconomic Deskilling story. It connects the dots that explain *why* women’s deskilling occurs: because women are

“A workplace that requires, full-time, full-year work, with minimal opportunities for time off or for flexible career paths, subverts the needs of many in today’s diverse workforce. Many do not want to work full time, full year, year in and year out, on a rigid lock step career path for their entire lives. But right now they have little choice.”

driven out by inflexible workplaces designed around an outdated image of the Ideal Worker. This is one new story line that newspaper reporters and their editors need to consider. It could readily be linked with a third story line: that the loss of women from the paid workforce is the failure of U.S. public policy to support working families and

help them balance work and family adequately. (We did not find an example of that story line to highlight here.)

A fourth new story line that has begun to take hold is that mothers often leave the workforce when they encounter workplace bias. New research documents that motherhood is one of the key triggers of gender stereotyping, that women across income lines hit the maternal wall, and that many women — far from interpreting their work/family conflict as their own decision to “opt out” — are suing their employers for unfair treatment. The result is a sharp rise in lawsuits challenging discrimination based on family responsibilities (Still, 2006; Williams, 2006).

This story was aptly captured in a recent CNN News story about Julia Panley-Pagetti, a corporate communications executive who was fired while on maternity leave. Julia was considered a very successful employee when she gave birth to her first child at age 34. But her bosses proceeded to contact her repeatedly with work-related requests despite the fact that she was on maternity leave and challenged her commitment to the job before eventually laying her off while she was still on leave. The loss of Julia’s income meant that she, her husband, and their newborn daughter lost their home and had to move into an elderly relative’s apartment (Zahn, 2006).

This is a dramatic departure from the Opt Out story line. Rather than focusing on a woman at home full time, who has every psychological motivation to characterize her departure from the workplace and her unemployment as her free choice, Julia Panley-Pagetti is depicted as a mother who clearly wanted to stay at work but was forced to leave because she hit the maternal wall of stereotyping and discrimination against mothers at work. It also depicts, in a more realistic way than most Opt Out stories, the serious economic consequences that Julia’s family faced from her loss of income.

This Report aims to expose the realities behind the Opt Out story line and provide reporters and editors with the information they need to tell other stories. Chapter 1 documents the Opt Out story line and examines its flaws. Chapter 2 draws on recent data to enable editors and reporters to understand what is really going on with respect to women “opting out.” Chapter 3 introduces three new story lines that explain why U.S. women are leaving the paid workforce — because they are being pushed out by (1) an outdated, unrealistic workplace structure designed around the 1950s concept of the Ideal Worker, (2) workplace bias and discrimination against mothers, and (3) the failure of U.S. public policy to help workers balance work and family responsibilities.

One overriding question is why the Opt Out story is such a perennial. Perhaps it rings true to the editors who assign it over and over again because the acute work/family conflict in journalism creates a maternal wall that forces many talented women — along with some men — out of their jobs. Opt Out stories depict the dramatic failure of high-hours, high-pressure workplaces (such as newspapers) to retain and promote proportionate numbers of women as nobody’s fault; in fact, it’s inevitable given that the “brains of men and women light up differently.” The Opt Out story line sends the reassuring message that nothing needs to change.

In sharp contrast, the untold story that mothers are pushed out of the paid workforce by inflexible workplaces, discrimination, and the lack of public policy to support working families creates challenges for employers and policymakers alike. The key message for employers is that they need to match today’s *workplace* to today’s *workforce*. For policymakers, the key message is that working families need greater supports and that, without them, U.S. competitiveness in a rapidly globalizing world is at risk.

# CHAPTER 1

## THE “OPT OUT” STORY LINE

*“No one told me that this was the greatest love affair or all time. When you hold your baby in your arms, that’s it...All of this ‘Me, me, me, I need to do this for me,’ starts melting away... You begin to realize you can really impact the world and society just by this one little baby in your arms.” (Chira, 1994)*

For the most part, the Opt Out story line paints an unquestioning picture of professional women “getting real” about their limitations and choosing to forgo careers to pursue motherhood. This story line, overwhelmingly popular with newspapers, has five major weaknesses.

First, and fundamentally, it attributes women’s decisions to leave the workforce to “pulls” out of the workforce, particularly the pull of children, and glosses over the many “pushes” that force women out. Employers hear this message: “It’s not what the [employers] are doing,” one law firm partner told us, “These women just want to stay home with their children.”

Second, Opt Out stories often are “soft” human interest stories, at times explicitly autobiographical, that exhibit strong tendency to focus on white women in high-status or other traditionally masculine jobs, thereby ignoring the life experience of the large bulk of American women. This may be a conscious editorial decision: One reporter confided that his editor had told him to cover work/family issues in a way that “appealed to our demographic” — that is, to focus on the concerns of professional women, like those who read his newspaper.

Third, reporters writing such stories tend to interview women at one specific stage of life: after they have dropped out and before they divorce, ignoring the link between opting out and economic vulnerability.

In a country with a 50% divorce rate (Conlin, Gard, Doyle & Arndt, 2005), this is a disservice.

Fourth, most Opt Out stories paint an unrealistically rosy picture of women’s chances of picking up their careers where they left off, when they decide to opt back in, almost never including the stories of women as they try to re-enter the paid workforce.

Finally, many Opt Out stories are based on scant or selective data.

### COVERING “PULLS” WITHOUT “PUSHES”

**In nearly three quarters (73%) of the 119 U.S. newspaper stories we examined, the overall tone was one of pulls rather than pushes.** The classic Opt Out story line depicts women pulled into traditional roles by biology or psychology — a picture not backed up by the available evidence. While many articles mention workplace forces that push women out, such as workplace inflexibility, only 6% of the articles surveyed make this the focus of the article.

Only 16% of highly trained professional women always intended to quit when they had children.

A 2004 study suggests that pushes play a more important role than pulls in most mothers’ decisions to leave the workforce. The study

found that only five out of the 43 highly qualified women surveyed exhibited a stable preference to be stay at home moms (Stone & Lovejoy, 2004). Only 16% of highly trained professional women always intended to quit when they had children. In sharp contrast, work-related reasons were key considerations in the decision to quit for 86% of

the mothers, who cited such pushes as the “amount, pace and inflexibility of work” (Ibid.). This is not at all reflected in the newspaper articles surveyed — only 6% of which focus on workplace pushes as key reasons for women’s departure.

Headlines are even more misleading than the stories themselves. Only two out of 119 headlines hint that many women would prefer to work, but are unable to do so because of employer inflexibility. The rest, to varying degrees, stress the “pull” of children. An example is the headline “Mothers who choose to stay home,” a *Boston Globe* article that features a woman who had an “ideal arrangement” working part time from home (Gardner, 2001). The headline does not disclose that she and 40 other women quit only after their part-time arrangements were eliminated. An alternative headline could have been “Committed Workers Pushed Out by Workplace Inflexibility.”

“Pull” themes predominated in 88 of the 119 (74%) articles we surveyed, including the following examples:

- “Debbie Korkodilos doesn’t consider herself a trendsetter. She was just following her heart when she decided to leave her public relations job in 1998 to stay home with her baby daughter.” (O’Crowley, 2002)
- “Well, you can’t have it all, and you have to make some hard choices.” (Coolidge, 1997)
- “It’s about when you have a child, your life changes. Your need to be with your child is stronger than your desire to advance up the corporate ladder.” (Widhalm, 2005)
- “I’ve read that what I’m doing is a trend. It seems more and more women are becoming aware that you can’t have it all.” (Price, 1995)
- “I’d done the career thing. I’d been in a managerial position of 15 years, and I’d had my fill of it. I was ready for a change.” (Intel human resource manager) (Auer, 2003)
- “I always expected to return to work after maternity leave. But the thought of leaving Anthony in day care...we just couldn’t do it.” (Veciana-Suarez, 1994)
- “For many modern mothers, it’s hip to be home.” (Gormly, 2005)
- “Motherhood, it turns out, is fashionable.” (Anstead, 2004)
- “For Sarah Hunt of Northport...an evolutionary process began as a ‘logistic decision,’ when she and her husband realized that they could not afford child care, even if she continued to work. The decision making, she said, ‘blossomed into a philosophical reason during my maternity leave, when I realized this was best for the baby, that he deserved a good start in life from me.’” (Delatiner, 1996)
- “[Sue Anne] Ciccone went from making \$20 an hour as an administrative sales assistant for Marriott to a \$10 an hour job and then to nothing. She said she made the sacrifice so she could stay home with her firstborn, Nicholas.” (Bryce, 2004)
- “I have always known I would stay home with my children, even before I met and married my husband,” [Jennifer] McNeeley said. ‘I want to be part of my child’s educational, social and emotional development.’” (Ernest, 1999)

One important fact, rarely mentioned, is that employed moms spend almost as much time with their children as stay-at-home moms do. Studies have shown that children with working moms spend 86% as much time with their mothers as do children with non-employed moms, and that employed moms spend 82% as much time on childcare activities as do non-employed moms (Bianchi, 2000, p. 406). Presumably working parents, too, are part of their children’s “educational, social and emotional development.”

Employed moms spend 82% as much time on childcare activities as do non-employed moms.

Another theme is the notion that parents do not want their children to be raised by strangers, or do not want strangers influencing their children. For example, “You take a child from nothing to the point where he feeds himself, talks, and walks. If it’s not the mother, it will be someone else influencing him. I don’t want anyone else influencing my children” (Irwin, 1980). And another: “But as soon as I found out I was pregnant I knew I wanted to stay home. I didn’t want someone else raising my baby” (Starr, 1996). This is a common American theme, and an intriguing one. Why is a child’s day care, pre-school, or after-school program peopled by “strangers,” but not the child’s elementary, middle, or high school classroom?

Southern newspapers, in particular, tend to give Opt Out stories a distinctly celebratory tone. An example from *The Houston Chronicle*:

Linda Hardin has high hopes for her daughter, Kristine...Perhaps she will follow in her father’s footsteps and become an engineer. Maybe she will earn advanced degrees and become a college professor. Either would be fine with [her mother]. “But when it comes time for her to have children I would be disappointed if she didn’t choose to be a stay-at-home mom...I just feel like it’s the noblest calling.” (Owens, 2002)

This article shows that such ideology is often linked with conservative Christianity: It goes on to discuss a conservative group called FamilyLife, who believes that staying home is a choice “with exalted value in God’s plan for the family.” Even when the religious focus is absent, however, the celebratory mood typically persists, as in a story in *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*: “They, not a day care worker, wipe their children’s tears. They greet their children after school or just goof off with them in the yard. Quality time is good. Quantity time is better” (Torpy, 2003). “Moms grateful for chance to stay home; Adolescents, parents laud changes in quality of life when wife quits job,” says the headline of the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* (Hansen, 1999). “I might not get a paycheck,” ends an article in the Raleigh, North Carolina *News and Observer*, quoting a stay-at-home mother, “But I get hugs and kisses” (Wotapka, 2001). A common formulation and, again, a curious one: Don’t working parents get hugs and kisses, too?

Many articles that follow the Opt Out story line do, nonetheless, document some “pushes” in the form of workplace inflexibility and employers’ lack of responsiveness to family needs. Yet even when workplace pushes are mentioned, they do not disrupt the well-entrenched Opt Out story line. A few examples:

- “Even while she was preparing for her trial she raised the possibility of a part-time schedule...‘Every once in a while I would raise my head from the grind of getting this case ready and I would say, Where are we with my proposal,’ she remembers...‘My partners had chosen not to place my request on a high-enough priority.’” (Headline: The Opt Out Revolution) (Belkin, 2003)
- “The final straw came when [her employer] ‘refused’ to give her part time work, three days a week.” (Headline: Homeward bound; Many are trading in long hours, little satisfaction for family time, peace of mind) (Lewis, 1998)

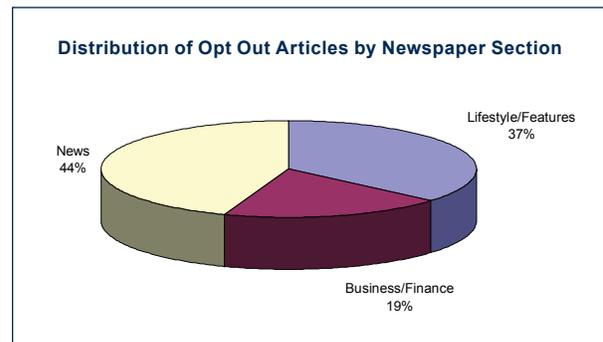
- “Most of the mothers of the Bow Road group, frankly, do not want to be home full time. They want to work, part time.” (Headline: Career moms; They’ve just said no to juggling job and family) (Stocker, 1991)
- “Brundage...felt forced to quit. She and her husband, also a mail carrier, would have happily shared a job, but the postal service wouldn’t allow it.” (Headline: Women change paths; more choose to stay home with children) (Osborn, 1991)
- “When other lawyers in her firm ruled out a part-time arrangement, she gave up a lucrative partnership to stay home.” (Headline: Sometimes a career must be put aside; The new parents) (Klemens, 1984)

## HUMAN INTEREST STORIES, OFTEN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL

**Opt Out stories often are “soft” human interest stories, at times explicitly autobiographical, that tend to focus on white women who (like most reporters) are in high-status or other traditionally masculine jobs.** Nearly one third of the Opt Out articles appear in the Lifestyle/Features section of the newspaper; many more that appear in the News section (47.2%) are feature stories. Only 16% appear in the Business section.

No major paper would cover unemployment by having a reporter interview a handful of well-heeled acquaintances and muse on a personal period of unemployment. The idea is ludicrous; unemployment is a serious economic issue. Except, in U.S. papers, unemployment among mothers.

This is part of a larger tendency to treat women’s unemployment as a “soft” human interest issue. The Opt Out story line is implicitly autobiographical in its focus on white, professional women similar to the reporters themselves. Over half (58%) of the women discussed in opt-out themed stories in *The New York Times* were in high-status or other traditional masculine white-collar jobs; this figure spiked up to 100% in *The Washington Times*.

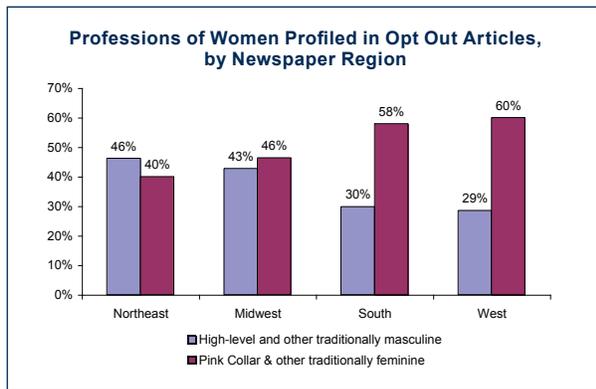


More problematic, however, is that the Opt Out story line paints an inaccurate picture of the issues surrounding women’s workforce participation, given that less than 8% of U.S. women hold high-level and other traditionally masculine jobs (Rose & Hartmann, 2004). Privileged women are overrepresented, and less privileged ones are underrepresented. For example, in *The New York Times*, only 2% of the women discussed held low-wage or blue-collar jobs, while 27% of American women hold such jobs<sup>3</sup> (U.S. Department of Labor, Women’s Bureau, 2005). Newspapers’ persistent focus on professional/managerial class women is ironic, given that more affluent mothers are less likely to be out of the labor force than are less affluent mothers, as discussed in Chapter 2.

Regional trends also emerge in the class position of the women featured in opt out stories. Papers in the Northeast were the most likely to feature professional/managerial class (PMC) women (46% of women mentioned in articles) and the

3. Includes service occupations; production, transportation, and material moving occupations; and natural resources, construction, and maintenance occupations.

least likely to feature pink-collar, blue-collar, or low-wage worker women (40%). Papers in the South and West focused least on PMC women (30% and 29% respectively) and were much more likely to focus on less affluent women (58% and 60%). Papers in the Midwest showed a similar pattern to the Northeast, although they focused slightly more on less affluent women (46%) and slightly less on PMC women (43%).

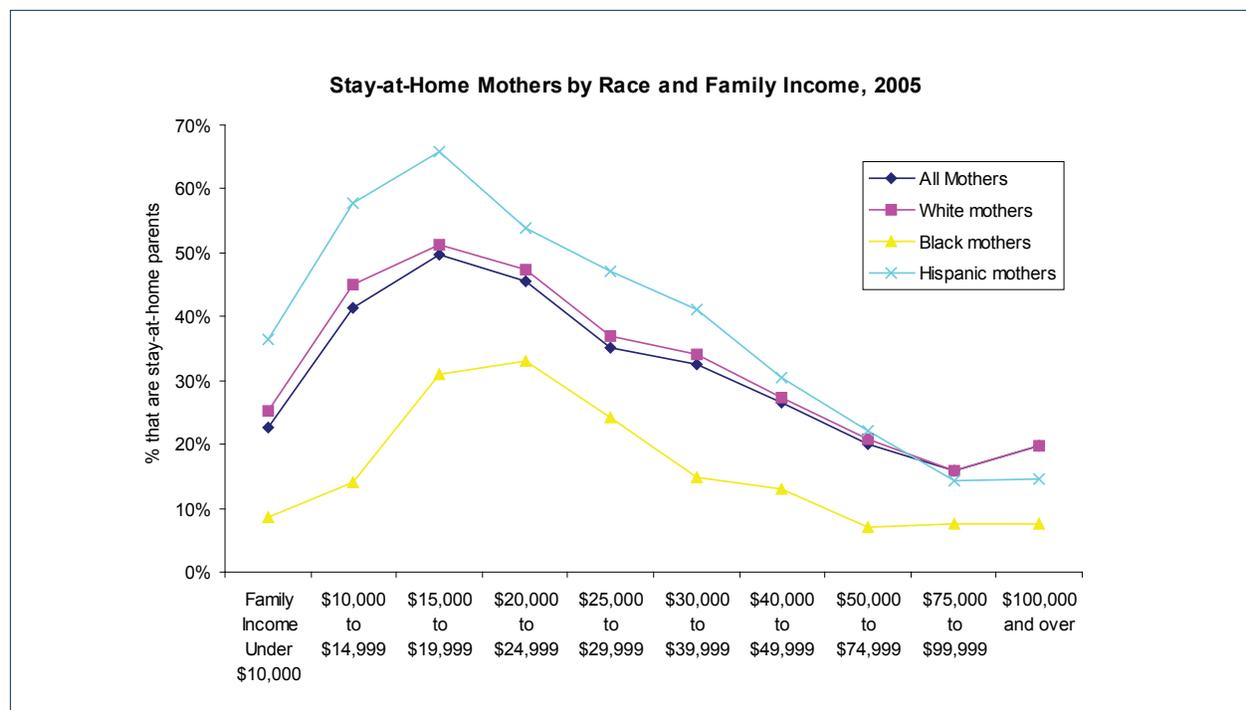


One example of what happens when the Opt Out story includes the voices of those with less income: *The Times Union* in Albany, New York, reprinted a column written by Ana Veciana-Suarez, family

columnist for the *Miami Herald*, that discusses a mother who was a new account clerk married to a husband “self-employed in pest control and property management.” Immediately a different perspective emerges: “[L]ike many mothers, she was forced to return to work to provide health insurance for her growing family” (Veciana-Suarez, 1994). Yet this perspective did not gain much ground since the story was published in 1994. A recent online survey of 22,000 working women by the AFL-CIO found that 97% are concerned with the rising costs of health care and 88% are worried about retirement — two issues that are rarely included in the Opt Out story line (Amusa & Moawad, 2006). The majority of respondents also said they cannot afford *not* to work (Ibid.).

Overwhelmingly, the mothers quoted in Opt Out stories appear to be white. Only 6 of the 119 (5%) articles explicitly discuss any African-American women. Latina women are also underrepresented, which is ironic given that Latina mothers are more likely than white mothers to be out of the labor force, as is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2005a

Figure 1 shows that race and ethnicity play an important role in who stays home full time. Among married parents, black women have much higher employment levels than do other groups. (Figure 1 tracks both race and income level. The class dimensions are described in Chapter 2.) Focusing virtually exclusively on white women gives only one piece of the overall picture.

## UNREALISTICALLY ROSY PICTURE OF OPTING BACK IN

*“The skills I use in my job will not leave me. They will always be there.” (Kissinger, 1998)*

*“I see a lot of women 40 and older coming back into the work force and doing just fine” (Kissinger, 1998).*

### **Opt out stories typically paint an unrealistically rosy picture about women’s chances of picking up where they left off in terms of their careers.**

Well over one-third (36.8%) of the articles with the Opt Out story line explicitly adopt the view that women are being “realistic” when they recognize that they cannot “have it all” (i.e., what men have always had). For example, in one article, according to demographer William Frey of the Brookings Institution, “Boomer moms, now generally in their 40s and 50s, ‘blazed a trail, but sometimes they could not live up to their expectations of having it all. Generation X moms are more realistic’” (Peterson, 2003). Another article reiterates this message: “At the height of the women’s movement and shortly thereafter, women were much more firm in their expectation that they could somehow combine full-time work with child rearing,’ said Cynthia E. Russett, a professor of American history who has taught at Yale since 1967. ‘The women today are, in effect, turning realistic’” (Story, 2005).

In fact, many of the articles are, themselves, unrealistic about women’s chances of getting back into a good job after “opting out.” “My degree is my insurance policy,” includes one article (Belkin,

2003). Reports another, “It’s important to have a back-up plan. If I want to go to work, I will have something I can really use” (Voell, 2005). Positive experiences opting back in again come from individual anecdotes: “People are afraid that once you get off the career track, there’s no getting back on. But I know women who have returned to work after taking years off to be with their families” (Carr-Elsing, 1997).

Few of the articles in the survey discussed the difficulty of picking up one’s career, and 27% downplayed the difficulties mothers face in picking up where they left off. Other articles acknowledge the difficulties of re-entry (“It is something that scares me. When I go to re-enter the work force, what kind of a blemish will this be on my resume?”) only to return immediately to the Opt Out narrative. (This particular article ends by quoting a mother saying, “I can always come back to this struggle, this war [of the workplace], when my kids are older” (C.L. Reed, 2004).)

Recent studies show that many women find it much harder to re-enter than they anticipate. According to prominent demographer Sylvia Ann Hewlett, “Many talented, committed women take off-ramps, but an overwhelming majority can’t wait to get back in” (as quoted in A. Reed, 2005). Of the 93% of women who want to return to work, only 74% succeed, and only 40% return to full-time, mainstream jobs (Hewlett, Luce, Shiller & Southwell, 2005, p. 42). Almost none (5%) want to return to their original employer (Ibid., p. 48).

Another recent survey of 130 highly qualified women who had spent at least two years away from work confirms that reentering the labor force after “opting out” is difficult (McGrath, Driscoll, & Gross, 2005). While 70% of those surveyed reported feeling positive about their decisions to leave the labor force, 50% felt “frustrated” when they tried to return to work and 18% became “depressed” (Ibid.). Some women reported that employers interviewed them as if they had no work experience at all (Ibid.). Over a third (36%) of the respondents thought they might have to take a lower-level position than

they had left (Ibid.). One particularly frustrated respondent said she was thinking of taking her

“Companies have work-life policies, but a woman with an MBA who is out for five years, she’s greeted in the workplace as if she’s not that interesting, she hits a wall.”

MBA off her resume. “Be prepared for the realization that in the business world your stepping-out time counts for less than zero. Be prepared that your stepping out time may make potential employers think you are not as reliable as other applicants,”

another respondent said (Ibid.). In addition, 61% of respondents changed industries and 54% changed functional roles upon their return; only one in five found jobs in larger companies (Ibid.). “Companies have work-life policies, but a woman with an MBA who is out for five years, she’s greeted in the workplace as if she’s not that interesting, she hits a wall,” said one of the study’s co-authors in an article in Women’s eNews (Nance-Nash, 2005).

A third study found (Spivey, 2005) found that women experience a significant negative effect on wages even 20 years after a career interruption.

Women experience a significant negative effect on wages even 20 years after a career interruption.

Studies such as these have made little dent in the Opt Out story line’s habit of cheerfully reporting women’s “sequencing”

and their expectations that they will be able to re-enter the workforce whenever they choose to do so.

## SHORT-TERM PICTURE OF GIVING UP LUXURIES

**Opt out stories invariably focus on women in one particular situation: after they have “opted out” but before any of them divorce, presenting the economic consequences of losing a breadwinner as a matter of a short-term giving up of luxuries and ignoring the long-term economic consequences of “opting out.”** Mothers who have dropped out of the workforce and still are married

have every motivation to describe the situation as reflecting their free choice. What is the point of sacrificing a career for the good of the family and then souring the family dynamics by complaining bitterly about one’s loss?

If reporters talked with women before they dropped out, while they were still trying — often with little workplace support — to “make it work,” quite different stories might well emerge. If reporters talked with opt-out women who found themselves divorced, again they would hear quite different stories. Yet these groups virtually never appear in opt out stories. The steady diet of interviews *only* with relatively affluent women, *only* after they opt out, and *only* before any of them divorce, paints an unrealistic, incomplete picture of the “choice” these women have made.

Here is a representative quote that captures the breezy quality of many stories when discussing the economic consequences of opting out:

None of these moms worries about dependency. Besides earning power, they have more financial savvy than older generations did. Many tend IRAs or 401(k)s from a former job. Joint bank accounts are the norm, as are joint decisions about savings and insurance. (Quinn, 2000)

Another article quotes one mom as follows: “‘When I’m an old gray-haired lady, I’ll have three men to take care of me,’ [Nancy] Brown, 32, said. ‘There’s something about boys and their moms’” (Bryce, 2004).

The Opt Out story line minimizes the economic impact of women’s decisions to leave the paid workforce by focusing on families’ short-term inability to buy luxuries. The articles showed a strong tendency (37%) to discuss economic consequences of women opting out, if at all, in terms of short-term belt tightening, without any significant discussion of the long-term consequences on women’s economic vulnerability. The articles were more than twice as likely to discuss the short-term rather than the long-term impacts of women’s decisions. A few of the rosier from among a torrent of examples:

- “We have had to tighten our belts a bit. We don’t do out all the time. I used to be a shop-a-holic. Now I wear jeans and T-shirts.” (Nakao, 2001)
- “Typically, giving up a second salary means also giving up first-class vacations, newer and fancier cars, household help, entertainment, and eating out. But most women who have done it say it’s a small price to pay to stay home with their children.” (Librach, 1989)
- “Right now, we only have one car, and I know there are sacrifices to be made, but I also know it’s better to stay home than to have another car.” (Carr-Elsing, 1997)
- “Gone: the babysitter, the cleaning lady, the dry cleaner, summer camp for the 6-year-old, expensive vacations, the chi-chi hairdresser, the shopping sprees.” (Veciana-Suarez, 1994)
- “Another surprise for Deford is how little the loss of her salary has affected the family’s standard of living. She’s waiting an extra year to buy a new car. ‘But it’s sobering to see how you don’t miss it noticeably. When you work, you have the cost of child care, of clothes, of lunches. Even at my salary, what was left wasn’t that much.’” (Stocker, 1991)
- “[S]he figured that if she continued to work after having two children she’d only be netting \$30 a week.” (Vincent, 1995)
- “For her family, staying home meant lifestyle changes like shopping at consignment shops, driving a used car, packing lunches, not eating out. But the sacrifices are worth it.” (Dunstan, 2006)

The lack of attention given to the serious, long-term consequences of a mother opting out is downright irresponsible, given that employed women, on average, bring home 28% of the family income (Gornick & Meyers, 2003, p. 68-69, Figure 3.8). Although 21% of women in dual-income households earn more than their husbands (Freeman, 2000), a woman earning more than her husband was mentioned in only 1 out of 119 articles. The CNN news story mentioned in the Introduction, in which a family lost its home when the mother was pushed out of her job by discrimination, illustrates the potential gravity of the loss of a mother’s income.

Employed women, on average, bring home 28% of the family income.

All of the phenomena associated with “opting out” — women staying home full time, the steep penalties associated with part-time work, and women leaving the fast-track for the mommy-track — serve to make women economically vulnerable, yet this message rarely surfaces in Opt Out stories. In a society in which fathers’ incomes rise sharply and mothers’ incomes fall very sharply after divorce (Williams, 2000, p. 115), only 11% of the articles surveyed (13 of 119) discuss the long-term economic consequences of opting out.

Among the 119 articles surveyed, none linked women’s opting out to the fact that women over their prime earning years earn only 38% of the wages of men (Rose & Hartmann, 2004), or that mothers earn only 67 cents for every dollar earned by fathers (Gornick & Meyers, 2003, p. 68, Figure 3.7). Not one of the articles tied women’s opting out to the fact that two out of three of the elderly poor are women (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005b), or that just 32% of retired women have pensions, compared to 55% of men (Munnell, 2004). Women’s average benefit is half that of men’s, and, in 41% of couples, the husband’s private pension is not left to his wife upon his death (Ibid.). A surviving spouse needs an estimated 60-80% of the living expenses of the couple, but on average, a surviving wife’s Social Security benefit drops to 40% of the couple’s joint benefit (Heinz, Lewis & Hounsell, 2006). What economists call the “motherhood penalty”

often has very real consequences for many women, and women who opt out are particularly vulnerable to poverty, relative or absolute. These are topics rarely mentioned in Opt Out stories.

Opt Out articles are equally circumspect about divorce. Only two out of 119 articles featured the stories of any divorced women. Only seven mention the possibility of divorce. One article that did address divorce (not included in our calculations because it was an opinion piece) was by Terry Martin Hekker, who had made a minor splash when she published an op-ed in the *The New York Times* 25 years ago defending her decision to become a stay-at-home mom. At the time she wrote, “It’s an absolute truth that whereas you are considered ignorant to stay home to rear *your* children, it is quite heroic to do so for someone else’s children...And treating a husband with attentive devotion is altogether correct as long as he’s not *your* husband” (Hekker, 1977). In

Only two out of 119 articles featured the stories of any divorced women. Only seven mention the possibility of divorce.

2006 she explained, “I was simply defending my choice as a valid one... the importance of being there for your children as they grew up, of the satisfaction of ‘making a home,’ preparing family meals and supporting your hard-working husband” (Hekker, 2006). She continued, “So I was predictably stunned and devastated when, on our 40th wedding anniversary, my husband presented me with a divorce...Five children and six grandchildren later...I was stunned to find myself, at this stage of life, marooned” (Ibid.).

Hekker is explicit about the vulnerability, and the consequences, of divorce for an opt-out mom.

“[D]ivorced” doesn’t begin to describe the pain of the process. “Canceled” is more like it. It began with my credit cards, then my health insurance and checkbook, until, finally, like a postage stamp, I felt canceled, too....He got to take his girlfriend to Cancun, while I got to sell my engagement ring to pay the roofer. When I filed my first nonjoint tax return, it triggered the shocking notification that I had become eligible for food stamps. (Ibid.)

When the judge awarded her temporary alimony (average alimony is low, typically for two to five years (Williams, 2000)), the judge suggested that “[She] go for job training when [she] turned 67” (Hekker, 2006). What happened to Hekker is absolutely standard, documented again and again in the reports written by task forces assembled to examine gender bias in the courts.<sup>4</sup> This harsh fact of life never breaks through the rosy glow of the Opt Out narrative. “[M]odern marriage demands greater self-sufficiency,” Hekker concludes (Ibid.). This is a message young women are not getting; the Opt Out story line ignores it.

“He got to take his girlfriend to Cancun, while I got to sell my engagement ring to pay the roofer.”

## STORIES BASED ON SCANT AND SELECTIVE DATA

**Opt Out stories are often based on scant and selective data.** The lack of data in many Opt Out stories was highlighted by Jack Shafer’s critique published in *Slate* of Louise Story’s 2005 article (“Many Women at Elite Colleges Set Career Path to Motherhood”), pointing out *The New York Times*’ heavy use of statements such as “[m]any women at the nation’s most elite colleges say they have already decided that they will put aside their careers in favor of raising children” (Story, 2005 as quoted in Shafer, 2005). In fact, “many” was used twelve times in the piece, including the headline (Shafer, 2005). Shafer noted, “You could as easily substitute the word *some* for every *many* and not gain or lose any information. Or substitute the word *few* and lose only the wind in Story’s sails. By fudging the available facts with weasel-words, Story makes a flaccid concept stand up — as long as nobody examines it closely” (Ibid.).

4. Reports examining gender bias in the courts have chronicled decisions in the Ninth Circuit as well as in the states of Missouri, Illinois, Maryland, and Washington (e.g., the Washington State Task Force on Gender and Justice in the Courts 1989 report, “Gender and Justice in the Courts”).

Unfortunately, this strategy of declaring a trend without numbers to back it up is a common occurrence in news stories about women and work. In a critique of media coverage of women’s trends, a 2006 *San Francisco Chronicle* article pointed out that “trend stories built on such flimsy social science are demoralizing, even dangerous” and quoted journalism professor Caryl Rivers: “These stories seep into the culture” (Harmanci, 2006).

At times, reporters’ inattention to data becomes comical. A 2003 story from *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer* covering the 13% jump in stay-at-home moms in the prior decade quoted a demographer who said “I don’t really see a dramatic change” (Denn, 2003). The reporter then went to the local La Leche League, a breastfeeding support group that often functions as a support and advocacy group for stay-at-home mothers, and quoted the volunteer coordinator as saying that she “[had] noticed a definite upswing” (Ibid.). The remainder of the article then continues in an Opt Out frame, discussing the increasing “awareness about [the benefits] of staying close to your kids,” and kids who “kind of envied [their] friends’ lives that had their mom at home” (Ibid.).

Why is fuzzy data so uncontroversial in this arena? People tend to accept stereotype-affirming information readily; data that disconfirm stereotypes are more likely to trigger demands for formal documentation (Krieger, 1995; Heilman, 1995). This is just one of many ways the Opt Out story repeats and reinforces stereotypes about women.

\* \* \* \* \*

The endless recycling of the Opt Out story line is not surprising. Reporters work under severe time pressure. They are not in a position to reinvent the wheel; much of their effort goes into the time-intensive job of finding people whose stories they can use to illustrate a given trend. Editors are even further removed and are under time pressures of their own.

But the Opt Out story has real consequences. This framing of the debate over women’s workforce participation sends a clear message to employers. Said one law firm partner, “It’s not what the [employers] doing. These women just want to stay home with their kids.” The Opt Out story’s profound cultural influence is all the more troubling because it is inaccurate. If experts want the media to develop a more informed take on social trends, they need to yank the data out of obscure professional meetings and journals and make it readily accessible. The following chapter begins that process.

# CHAPTER 2

## EMPLOYMENT TRENDS AMONG WOMEN: SEPARATING FACT FROM FICTION

This section is designed to help the press tell an accurate story about how and why women “opt out.” It complements Heather Boushey’s 2005 study for the Center for Economic and Policy Research, “Are Women Opting Out? Debunking the Myth,” discussed in the Introduction. Boushey’s study documents that moms are *not* increasingly likely to opt out, and that recent data suggesting that they are overlooks the fact that the workforce participation of *all women, whether they have children or not*, dipped recently due to a bad economy.

The data suggest five trends overlooked by the Opt Out story line. First, the real trend is not that women are “opting out” of the paid workforce, but that the rise in both men’s household contributions and women’s workforce participation have stalled — and are likely related.

Second, contrary to what the flurry of Opt Out stories seems to indicate, better educated women are *more likely* to be in the labor force than less educated women. Yet third, those better educated women who do leave the paid workforce usually end up returning to work later in worse jobs.

Fourth, extremely wealthy women — those in the top 5% of incomes — are less likely than other women to be in the labor force, but roughly 50% of even this group is employed.

Finally, despite Opt Out stories’ common references to women leaving the workforce as a return to “traditional” values, much of what contemporary professional moms stay home to do is not traditional. Instead, it reflects a clash between newly intensified

ideals of motherhood and newly intensified ideals of a worker, all-or-nothing standards that have only taken shape in the past few decades.

### THE STALLED GENDER REVOLUTION

**The key trend story is not that women are embracing traditionalism and returning home, but that the gender revolution has stalled.** The Opt Out story line

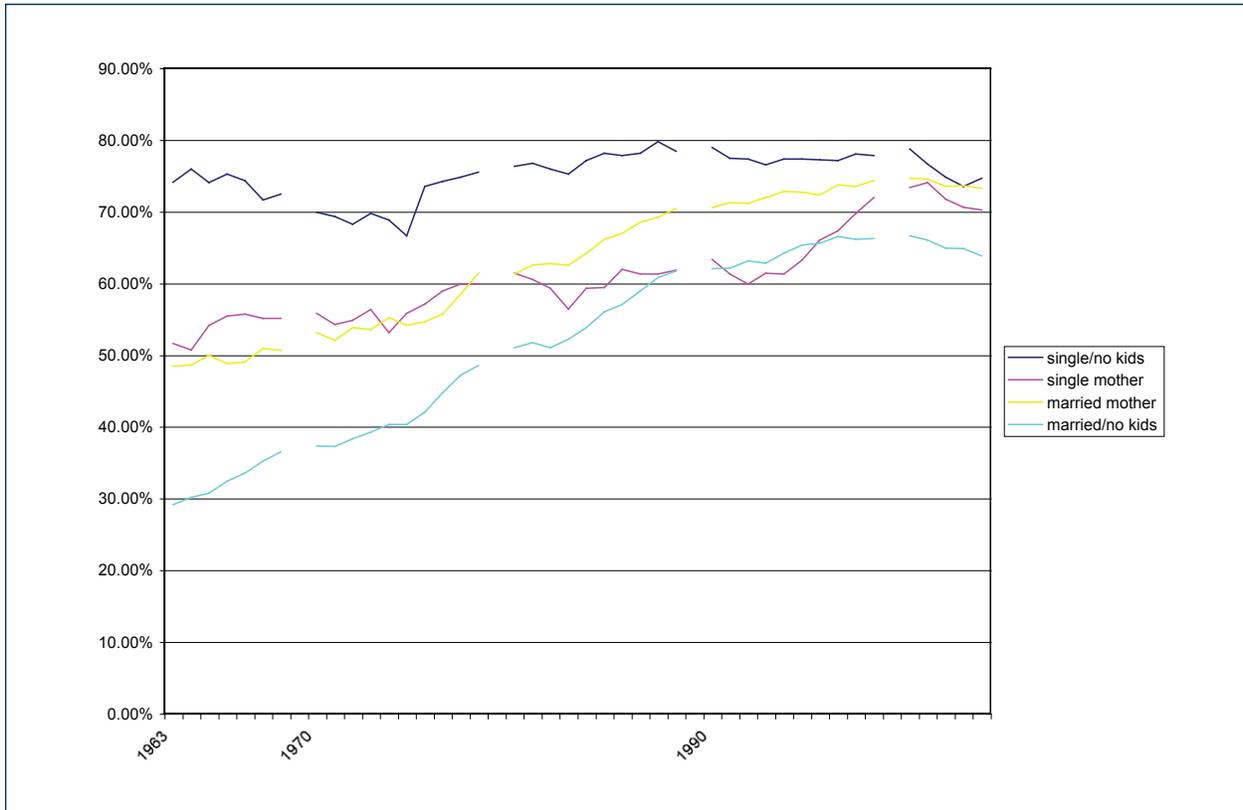
seems to indicate that only women with children are leaving the labor force, or are leaving at greater rates than women without children. This is untrue: As Figure 1 shows, the workforce participation of all women has fallen since 2000, both for mothers and for women without children. All women, regardless of whether or not they had children, were negatively affected by an economic slowdown (Boushey, 2005).

Mothers still spend nearly twice as long as fathers doing core household tasks and nearly twice as much time as fathers caring for children as their primary activity.

Simultaneously, as mothers’ workforce participation has leveled off, fathers’ household contributions have, too. Figure 2 shows that fathers’ household contributions rose sharply until the mid-1980s and then leveled off.

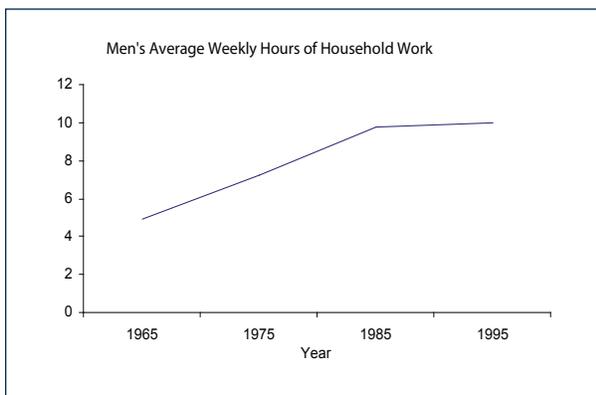
Yet the division of labor is hardly equal. Mothers still spend nearly twice as long as fathers doing core household tasks such as cooking and cleaning. They also spend nearly twice as much time as fathers caring for children as their primary activity (Bianchi & Raley, 2005, p. 31-33).

Figure 1



Source: England, 2006

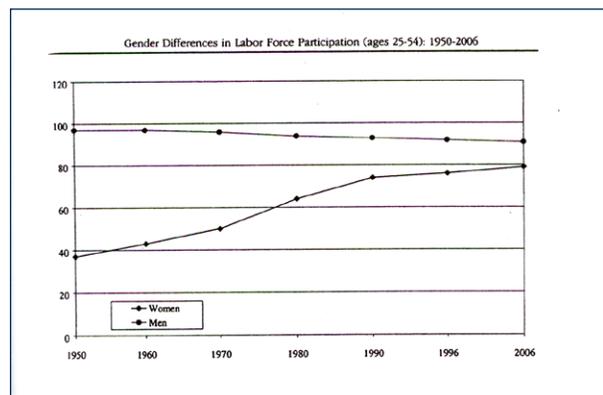
Figure 2



Source: Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer & Robinson, 2000, p. 207

Roughly five years after men’s household contributions stalled, so did women’s workforce participation, as illustrated by Figure 3.

Figure 3



Source: Casper & Bianchi, 2002, p. 286

The leveling off of women’s employment and men’s household contributions are likely related. Because most men do not carry an equal share of household work, women’s ability to accept promotions or to remain in good jobs is constrained. One example: “When making her mind, [Lorrie] Montgomery looked around at friends who, one by one, had fallen into the supermom

trap. Sure, they juggled jobs and children, some heroically so. But they were exhausted” (McDaniel, 1996). Note how the language — the “supermom trap” — sends the message that wise women avoid that trap by cutting back on employment.

Arlie Hochschild coined the term “the stalled revolution” over 15 years ago, but her analysis never reached a wide audience (Hochschild & Machung, 1989). Instead, Opt Out stories continue to depict women as wisely recognizing they cannot be “supermoms” — a narrative that leaves inflexible workplaces, unsupportive husbands, and failures of public policy below the horizon, silently taking them for granted.

highly educated a woman, the greater the chance she will be in the labor force (Cotter, Hermsen & Vanneman, 2004). In fact, the effect of the mother’s educational level on the likelihood she will remain in the labor force has *increased* (Cohen & Bianchi, 1999).

## BETTER EDUCATED WOMEN WORK MORE

**Women with more education are less likely to leave the labor force, and tend to work more hours, than women with less education.** In both the United States and Western Europe, the more

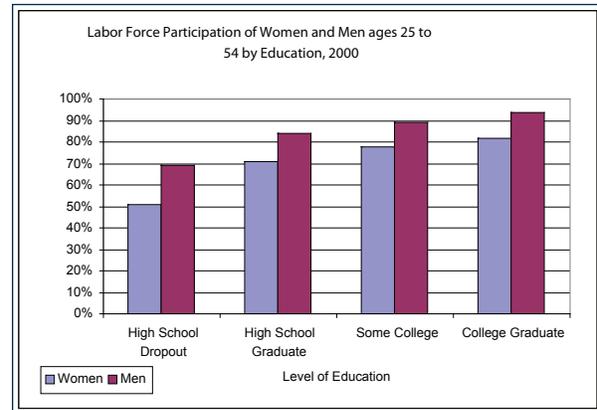
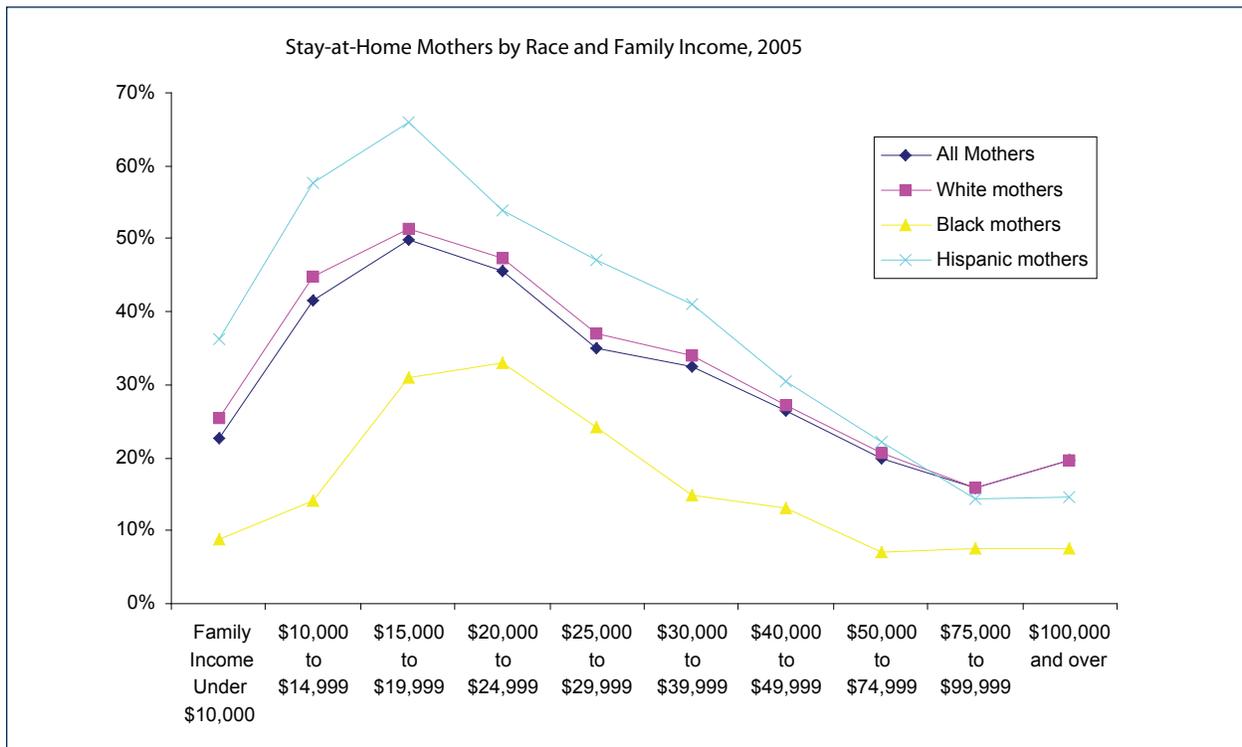


Figure 4

Source: Cotter, Hermsen & Vanneman, 2004, p. 9

Figure 5



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2005a

Figure 5 illustrates the correlation of family income and race on the likelihood that a mother will stay at home. Women with family incomes between \$10,000 and \$40,000 are more likely to stay at home than those with family incomes over \$40,000. (Figure 5 tracks both race and income level. The racial dimensions are described in Chapter 1.)

Not only are more highly educated women less likely to leave the labor force; they also tend to work more hours than do less educated women, as Figure 6 shows.

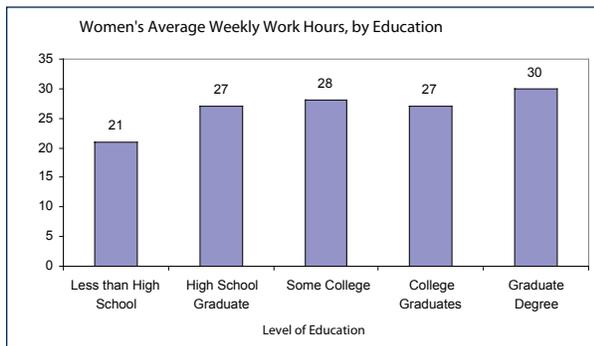


Figure 6

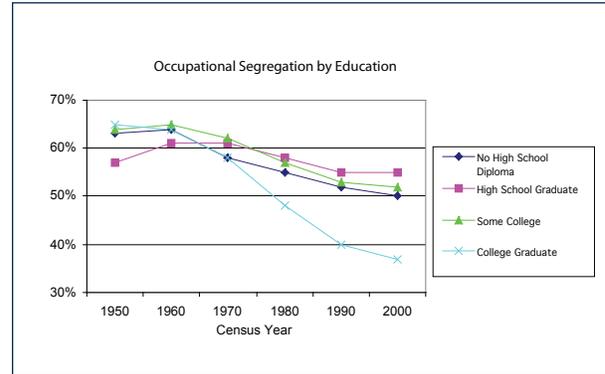
Source: Gornick & Meyers, 2003, p. 47 Table 2.3

Why do more highly educated women tend to work more? They have more to lose by passing up employment: As economists would say, their opportunity costs of eschewing employment are higher. Being a waitress is not as attractive a career track as being a middle-level manager or professional, and quality child care is much more affordable for an executive or a middle manager than for a waitress.

50% of the highly trained mothers never take off more than six months total. On average, mothers take off only 2.1 years.

Figure 7 shows that women with more education have access to much better jobs than less-educated women: College-educated women have flooded into high-paying, high-status traditionally masculine careers, whereas female high-school drop outs are much more likely to be stuck in low-paid, dead-end sex-segregated jobs.

Figure 7



Source: Cotter, Hermsen & Vanneman, n.d.

Education fuels employment: Women with more education are more likely to be employed and to work more hours — a strong and consistent trend that the Opt Out story ignores.

## OPTING OUT LEADS TO WORSE JOBS FOR HIGHLY EDUCATED WOMEN

**Many highly qualified women do leave the fast track, and end up in much less desirable jobs as a result.** The tendency of women to leave the workforce because of children, and the effect of husbands’ incomes on women’s workforce participation, both have *decreased* over time (Cohen & Bianchi, 1999). At the same time, however, many fast-track women do take time off from work. Sylvia Ann Hewlett and her coauthors surveyed a sample of college-educated women (56% of whom had graduate degrees) and found that 58% described their careers as “nonlinear”: either they had worked part-time, taken a “mommy track” full-time job that reduced their hours, or put up with deskilling in order to access a family-friendly job (by declining a promotion or taking a job with fewer responsibilities and lower compensation that they were qualified for) (Hewlett et al., 2005, p. 14, 16).

Fully 37% of the women studied surveyed “off ramped” — left their careers altogether for a period of time (Ibid., p. 14). In an example of good reporting, the Ventura County Star notes that the underlying message is that 63% of professional women stay in the labor force with minimal time away until retirement (A. Reed, 2005). This helps explain why demographers get outraged at unscientific data such as the survey used by Louise Story in reporting that 60% of Yale women expect to “opt out” (Story, 2005). This statistic is misleading.

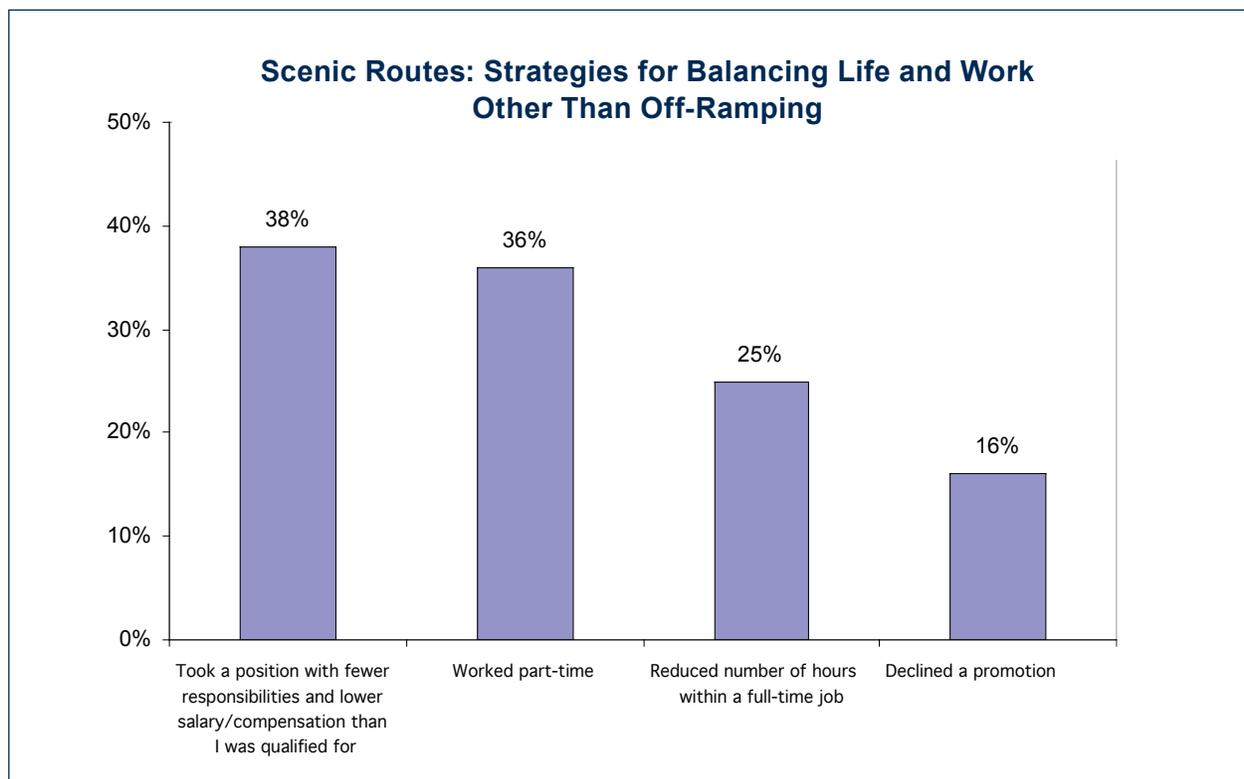
That said, the high level of deskilling evidenced by the Hewlett study is dramatic.

“Full time” in professional and managerial jobs has spiraled up towards 50 or more hours a week in recent decades, requiring fast-track professionals to have a “two-person career,” in which their ability to devote all their attention to work is supported by a stay-at-home spouse who can take care of every other area of life (Kuhn & Lozano, 2005).

This describes many men but few women. Hewlett’s study documented that, far from having a spouse who supports their careers full time, 41% of the women surveyed felt that their husbands created more work than they contributed (Hewlett et al., p. 18). Few husbands took primarily responsibility for specified household tasks: 9% of husbands help with homework, 11% transport kids to afterschool activities, 7% take time off from work for checkups, 9% take time off from for child sickness, and 3% organize activities (Hewlett et al, 2005, p. 18 Exhibit 1.3).

Though mothers end up in deskilled, dead-end jobs, they do not permanently leave the labor force. “Women who graduated 25 years ago from the nation’s top colleges did not ‘opt out’ in large numbers, and today’s graduates aren’t likely to do so either,” wrote economist Claudia Goldin in *The New York Times*, in an op-ed presumably designed to balance the flood of recent Opt Out stories in that newspaper (Goldin, 2006). Women’s workforce participation, Goldin argued, can only be understood by taking a longitudinal view of women’s careers over

Figure 8



Source: Hewlett et al., 2005, p. 30

a period of several decades rather than a snapshot of the percentage of women in or out of the workplace during a given year. Two other studies confirm Goldin’s findings; both found that highly educated women took off an average of 2.2 years (Stone & Lovejoy, 2004; Hewlett et al., 2005, p. 37).

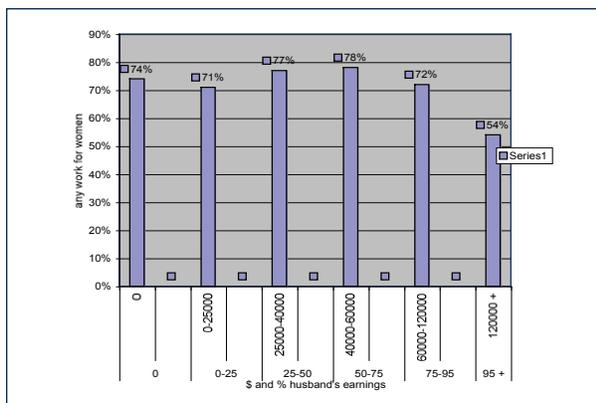
In summary, few mothers drop out: they tend instead to drop from good jobs into bad ones.

## MORE THAN HALF OF EVEN THE WEALTHIEST WOMEN WORK

**Women married to the wealthiest men have lower levels of employment than any other group, but over half of even this group is employed.** No wonder reporters get confused: Although more educated women tend to have higher workforce participation rates than less educated ones, very rich women are a subgroup whose behavior tends to differ from that of other highly educated women.

As shown in Figure 8, employment of married women whose husbands’ incomes are between zero and the 95th percentile of earnings clusters in a tight range between 71% and 78%. In other words, for 95% of income brackets, husbands’ income does not have much effect on whether or not their wives are employed (England, 2006). Women married to men in the over 95th percentile — that is, the top 5% of income brackets — were much less likely to be employed, although a majority (54%) still remains in the labor force.

Figure 9



Source: England, 2006

Lower employment rates among these highly affluent women probably stem from two overlapping causes. First, few men enter this earnings stratosphere unless they can devote themselves entirely to work. Typically, their wives function virtually as single parents; they also buy and decorate a succession of ever-larger houses and are active in the right charities and country clubs to signal their husband’s continually rising status as a “star” (Ostrander, 1984). In other words, the top jobs in professional and managerial hierarchies require a “two-person career” (Papanek, 1973), which is why, if you look high up in virtually any business, profession, academic institution, or government office, you will find a disproportionate number of men married to homemakers (90% of CEOs, according to a 1995 article in *Psychology Today*) (Hendershott, 1995).

The depressed workforce participation of women in highly affluent families also reflects the influence of inherited wealth. In the rarified stratosphere of high society, women tend to devote their time to their children’s private schools and to the work of fundraising and helping to run a variety of charities, activist organizations, and social service agencies. These women do work that school administrators, executive directors, and fundraisers are paid good salaries to do. They are, in fact, doing highly skilled market work; they just aren’t paid for it.

## THE NEW “TRADITIONALISM” AND THE GREAT AMERICAN SPEED-UP

What most Opt Out stories describe as a return to the “traditional” roles of stay-at-home mom and worker dad ignore the fact that today’s work and home patterns are not those of yesteryear: **Women are caught between new, more time-consuming versions of what it means to be a good mother and a good worker.** Nearly two-thirds (64%) of the articles in our survey refer to a return to “traditional” roles — for example, “Like their mothers, they’re shifting to more traditional roles — investing in their husbands’ careers rather than their own” (Quinn, 2000). Claims of a return

to “traditionalism” are supported by quotes from women who say they always knew they wanted to stay home after they had children.

- “Staying home is also something that’s important to her vision of the kind of parent she wants to be. ‘I always knew I wanted to be a stay-at-home mom,’ [Lindsey] Garr said.” (Lee, 2005)
- “[Tammy] Hughey said she and her husband always knew she’d stay home. ‘You want them to have one parent home to give them some sense of values.’” (Lee & McCall, 2002)
- “Jennifer McNeeley, 29, refused to buy into the trend [of balancing work and family]. ‘I have always known I would stay home with my children, even before I met and married my husband,’ McNeeley said. ‘I want to be a part of my child’s educational, social and emotional development.’” (Ernest, 1999)
- “Kristin O’Hare-Blumberg’s mother stayed at home with her, and although she enjoyed working, she’d always planned to do the same with her own children.” (Auer, 2003)

Sometimes, the sense of traditionalism comes less from the interviewees than from the reporter. “I had every hole in the dike and had run out of fingers, but I was stuck...I made 60% of our family income,’ says a formerly exhausted reinsurance underwriter. Then her husband was transferred to Massachusetts, and [Anita] Waldron had to quit anyway” (English, 1998). *Had* to quit? The assumption that men’s careers come first, period — regardless of who is making more money or of any other factor — stems from the English common law view that married women were “dead to the law.” One element of married women’s status as “covered” was that they were legally required to move wherever their husbands chose to make the family’s domicile — an expression of the view that

wives were subject to the household governance of their husbands. That’s traditionalism.

Other claims of a return to traditionalism typically overlook two important points. The first is that women’s

“My husband... doesn’t come back at the end of the day, stick his feet on the couch, and expect dinner.”

expectations of men have changed dramatically. “My husband and I are both conscious of that. He doesn’t come back at the end of the day, stick his feet on the couch,

and expect dinner” (Wen, 2003). Quantitative and qualitative research confirms that this quote represents a larger trend. When Lillian Rubin returned to study working-class families in 1994 to update her 1976 study, one key shift she spotted was that “[t]he same women who once felt indebted to a husband who helped out — who cleared the table once in a while, who dried the dishes occasionally, who knew how to push a vacuum cleaner, who ‘baby sat’ his children from time to time — now want their men to share more fully in the tasks of housekeeping and child rearing” (Rubin, 1994, p. 83-84). Rubin quotes one woman: “‘It’s not fair,’ grumbles Josephine Kimball, a white thirty-six year-old manicurist, married seventeen years. ‘Why should be get to read the paper or watch TV while I run around picking up the kids’ toys and stuff, cooking supper, cleaning up afterward, and trying to give the kids some quality time?...I put in my eight hours every day just like him, so I think he should do his share’” (Ibid.).

The second point is that not only men’s, but women’s roles have changed in professional/managerial families, too. Recent studies document that much of what these “new traditionalist” professional women stay home to do is *not* traditional. Sociologists Annette Lareau and Sharon Hays have documented the “ideology of intensive mothering” that has arisen in professional/managerial families (Hays, 1996; Lareau, 2003). The sense that children need concerted cultivation — as opposed to just being left for natural growth to take its natural course — is quite new (Lareau, 2003). If one rereads the Mrs. Piggle-

“These kids, it’s incredible. They have a real peel-me-a-grape attitude.”

Wiggle books, published in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the ideology of natural growth reigns supreme. In these books, mothers focus on getting invited to the Ernest Workers Club and having the boss over to dinner in order to help their husbands’ careers, on serving meals to husbands who are cross when dinner is late; on appeasing husbands to avoid having them spank the children; on making brownies, cocoa, chocolate, coconut and applesauce cakes, and gingerbread; on setting out petunias and zinnias, nursing cottage tulips, and phlox. No mother is ever shown playing with her children. Nor do children expect to be entertained. Children do an endless stream of chores for adults and hope for time left over so they can entertain themselves. They go down to the basement and build a workbench, ride, repaint and repair bikes, make caramel apples, establish a Neighborhood Children’s Club and a Picnic Club. Only one child — a rich, spoiled one — ever takes a lesson (Williams, 2000, p. 36).

A growing literature has begun to document the drawbacks of intensive mothering with phrases such as “helicopter moms” (Wade, 2005) and “micro-mommy” (Schumer, 2004). Judith Warner’s 2005 book *Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety* is a cultural critique of the contemporary model in which anxious moms spending their days in the care driving over-scheduled kids to a steady stream of “enrichment” activities, and work themselves into a frenzy to “be there” for their children. Some quotes from Warner:

- “[I]f I’ve only got twenty-five hours a week with my children after school and they’re spending fifteen hours a week on activities, when do I get to be the mom? I’m having trouble finding time to spend with my two-year-old. When my big kids were small we just hung out. We stayed home. Now I’ve actually hired a part-time nanny so that my two-year-old doesn’t grow up thinking that he lives in a car.” (p. 230)

- “I heard of a Montessori school that had to cancel a field trip because it had drawn too many parent volunteer chaperones — *not one of whom* was willing to step down and stay home.” (p. 29)

Many Opt Out stories mirror the ideology of intensive mothering without questioning its appropriateness. Here’s an example: “Meeting the physical, emotional and scheduling needs of her three children younger than 6 is so time-consuming, said Karen Shore Meyer of Columbus, that she sometimes doesn’t shower until 10 p.m. Yet she refuses to relinquish their care to a sitter for more than one day a week” (Rosen, 2003).

Some commentators are beginning to side with Judith Warner, and argue that intensive mothering has gotten out of hand. “Of course we love our kids like crazy. But when we idolize — and idealize — them, we’re not doing them any favors,” said Betsy Hart, Chicago author and mother of four (Culbreth, 2005). “The Millennials — kids born after 1981 — are America’s most protected, overwatched generation ever,” argue authors Neil Howe and William Strauss (Ibid.). Parents who constantly swoop in can undermine a child’s self-confidence and ability to cope, according to distinguished professor Laura Berk, author of *Awakening Children’s Minds* (as cited in Ibid.).

“[K]ids born after 1981... are America’s most protected, overwatched generation ever.”

Claims of “new traditionalism” not only erase the newness of the intensive mothering; they also erase the newness of all-or-nothing workplace, which often appears unquestioningly in Opt Out stories. What many women are rejecting is not work *per se*, but the new all-or-nothing workplace:

- “One Chicago lawyer lived with her two children in a hotel suite for nearly a year and a half while she was litigating a case in Washington, D.C. Her marriage didn’t last.” (C.L. Reed, 2004)

- A nanny reported that “Neither parent ever got home before 7 p.m., and then they ordered pizza.” (C.L. Reed, 2004)
- “There really are no in-between options. You either work and do not see your child, or you don’t work at all.” (Lewis, 1998)
- “I’m not surprised that women are leaving the workplace. I don’t want things to go back to the 1950s, when women felt they had to stay home, but jobs are so demanding these days that it is hard to find one where you can be home for dinner every night.” (Lewis, 1998)

A 2002 study found that dual-earning couples with children worked a total of 91 hours a week in 2002, up from 81 hours in 1992 (Bond, Thompson, Galinsky & Prottas, 2002). Men as well as women dislike the new all-or-nothing workplace. A recent study showed that 95% of fathers and 90% of mothers wish they had more time with their families — far higher levels than in many other industrialized countries (Gornick & Meyers, 2003, p. 81 Figure 3.19).

**95% of fathers and 90% of mothers wish they had more time with their families.**

The all-or-nothing workplace is not traditional. One contemporary woman who left a corporate job in favor of freelance work noted that her guiding principle was, “I like to be with my family for dinner” (Vincent, 1995). This is a goal virtually any Company Man of the 1950s could attain.

Women find themselves “torn between deadlines, day-care and domestic duties — some to the point of exhaustion” (Librach, 1989). Yet these new and potentially controversial developments are sheltered from criticism by the “return to traditional values” slant that permeates the Opt Out story line. The real story is of an anxious generation in a time bind, caught

between sped-up ideals of work and family that leave little room for balanced lives (Hochschild, 1997). That’s a trend worth discussing.

\* \* \* \* \*

If papers publish Opt Out stories, they should publish accurate ones. This Chapter is intended to help them do so, untangling the complex demography of the workforce participation of women and correcting inaccurate claims of a return to “traditionalism.” While this Chapter is far from a complete picture of the demography of women and work, it highlights five major data trends that are ignored by the Opt Out story line.

**Women are caught between the new norms of intensive mothering and newly intensified work demands — the Great American Speed-Up at home and at work.**

# CHAPTER 3

## WHAT PUSHES WOMEN OUT OF WORK: THE MATERNAL WALL

Many women are pushed out of good jobs and into economic vulnerability, when they hit the “maternal wall” — the equivalent for mothers of the glass ceiling that all women face. Three related phenomena combine to make the maternal wall a particularly high one for women to scale in the United States: workplace inflexibility, the failure of U.S. public policy to adequately help working families balance work and family responsibilities, and bias against workers with family responsibilities.

### INFLEXIBLE WORKPLACES

**Workplace inflexibility emerges clearly in Opt Out stories, but is not processed as evidence of market failure.** Occasionally reporters *do* highlight the role of workplace inflexibility in driving mothers out of good jobs, yet typically this does not change the overall message that mothers freely choose to “opt out”; there is no discussion of the need for U.S. workplaces to offer more alternate and flexible work schedules. The issue of flexible workplaces affects people differently depending on whether they are professional/managerial- or working-class and whether they are women or men.

### Effects of Workplace Inflexibility on Professional/Managerial Class Families

*“[R]igid anti-family employers may have left mothers with no other choices but to leave their jobs.” (Joanne Brundage, founder of Mothers & More, as quoted in Azzara, 2004)*

*“There really are no in-between options,” the 32-year-old lawyer said of her decision last April. ‘You either work and do not see your child, or you don’t work at all.’”(Lewis, 1998)*

In a promising development in reportage of work/family conflict, news stories are increasingly likely to mention that women leave as the result of workplace inflexibility. In our survey, stories written since 2000 were more likely than stories written earlier to mention instances in which women left work only after being refused flexibility or part-time work. This theme appeared only three times in each half of the 1990s, but in 11 articles published between 2001 and 2005.

Marilyn Gardner, one of the savviest reporters in the country on work/family issues, provides an example:

As a young career woman, Elizabeth Drew Scholl could not imagine a life without paid work. Armed with a master’s degree, she landed a plum job, managing a \$50 million capital campaign for one of Chicago’s top cultural institutions, the Lincoln Park Zoo. “I was extremely career-oriented,” Mrs. Scholl recalls. She even timed her first pregnancy so it would not conflict with the project’s completion.

But before her daughter was born, she received an unhappy surprise: Her employer gave new mothers only a six-week disability leave. “Babies don’t even lift their heads up at six weeks on their own,” Scholl says, indignation still rising in her voice at the

thought of such a short leave...When her boss denied a request for part-time leave, she decided to resign. (Gardner, 2001)

Gardner continues on, to note that “[f]or many women, part-time work remains an elusive dream.” She quotes Kristin Maschka, of Mothers & More: “Anyone who cuts back [on work] is not a team player, and is not considered for [quality]...assignments... In most companies, you’re taken off the fast track and you miss out on plum assignments” (Ibid.).

Gardner’s article is, however, the exception: While more than a third (34%) of the stories surveyed mention workplace inflexibility, the mention rarely changes the overall message that mothers freely choose to “opt out.” The failure of stories to fully process the impact of workplace inflexibility emerges clearly by comparing stories that discuss women forced to quit after being refused part-time schedules with the headlines of those stories:

- “[She] asked her company to let her work part time on a permanent basis. When it said no, [Melissa] Kimball said goodbye. ‘I didn’t want to quit. I loved my job.’” (Headline: Some moms quit as offices scrap family friendliness) (Armour, 2004)
- “But office jobs she went to school for... are almost nonexistent in part-time hours.” (Headline: Less salary, more benefits; Mothers forgo paychecks to care for families) (Lee, 2005)
- “Her first son was six months old and she was told she couldn’t work part-time.” (Headline: Hopping on and off the career track) (Quinn, 2004)

Only the first story’s headline bucks the Opt Out story line trend. The others interpret situations in which women are driven out of their jobs by workplace inflexibility as evidence of mothers’ choice to leave.

News coverage of work/family conflict often glosses over what sociologist Phyllis Moen of the University of Minnesota has called “the problem of 13 eggs.” Why do we buy beer in six-packs? Eggs by the dozen? Dinner rolls in a package of ten? “There is no intrinsic rationale for the ways products are prepackaged, but prepackaged they are” (Moen, 2005, p. 13). Our inability to buy 13 eggs is not a big problem; our inability to find good jobs requiring 30 to 40 hours per week is.

The American economy has lots of good 50-plus hour-a-week jobs, with health insurance, a good salary, and a future; working less often means professional oblivion. Thus nearly 40% of college-educated men work 50-plus hours a week. This is a major reason why so many college-educated women want to work part time — although sometimes that “part-time” work in fact means 40 hours a week (Gerson, 2003; Williams & Calvert, 2001). A survey of highly educated women found that 89% of women in business wanted access to reduced-hour jobs (Hewlett et al., 2005, p. 62). In a national survey of 500 dual-career families, 65% of women working full time said they would prefer to work part time (Grossman, 2001).

If women want to work part time, why don’t more do so? The United States has relatively few good, 35 to 40 hour per week jobs, as compared with Europe. Among employed men and women, aged 25 to 50, only 3% of male workers work between 35 and 39 hours per week, as do fewer than 9% of female workers (Gornick & Meyers, 2003, p. 153). Part-time work in the United States tends to be short-hours work in a few low-paid industries.

Even where part-time work is available in more desirable jobs, often it is severely stigmatized. Said one lawyer:

I wanted to find a way to protect my evenings and weekends so I could calmly clean the house, cook dinner, attend church, read non-law books, work in the yard...[W]hen I looked in the policy manual, there it was — a part-time policy...It looked great! “Don’t do it.” This was the wise advice of

the senior associate I had adopted as my older brother and protector to guide me through the labyrinth of large firm life and politics...“It’s professional suicide — don’t even ask”...

I discovered that my colleague was right. Even though I had extensive expertise...on a particular set of cases, I was simply dropped from all of my work, with no questions or discussion. The partners avoided meeting my eyes in the elevator or halls...I had not anticipated such a drastic response. (Uelmen, 2005)

It comes as no surprise that the economic penalty associated with part-time work is very harsh. U.S. women working part-time earn 21% less per hour worked than full-timers, a part-time penalty that is seven times higher than in Sweden and more than twice as high as in the U.K. (Gornick and Meyers 2003, p. 63 Figure 3.4). Part-timers often end up taking “scut work at low pay to get a part-time schedule” (Lewis, 2005). In the United States, those who work 45 hours per week earn twice what those working 35 hours per week earn (Farrell, 2005).

In the United States, those who work 45 hours per week earn twice what those working 35 hours per week earn.

The all-or-nothing workplace often forces American families into a pattern in which fathers work very long hours, while mothers work very short ones and function virtually as single mothers — hardly an ideal pattern that should be celebrated as a return to traditional values.

American families are pressured into an all-or-nothing pattern in which fathers work very long hours, while mothers work very short ones and function virtually as single mothers — hardly an ideal pattern that should be celebrated as a return to traditional values.

*Effects of the “all-or-nothing workplace” on women*

Reporters typically treat the part-time penalty as an uncontroversial fact of life. “[Catherine Triantis, who gave up a six-figure income as a marketing professional] accepted a part-time position...that was ‘very much downscaled and a giant step backward’” (Rosen, 2003). Nor do reporters recognize that the exhaustion some women express reflects the fact that dual-earner couples tend to work much longer hours in the United States than in other industrialized countries. Over half of U.S. dual-earner couples work between 80 and 91 hours a week, a sharply higher percentage than elsewhere (Gornick & Meyers 2003, p. 62).

Opt Out stories often overlook costs of the breadwinner/homemaker pattern that have been well documented since the 1950s. Nearly half (43%) of Opt Out articles mention opt-out women’s depression, loneliness, boredom, isolation, or loss of identity or self-esteem. Here are a few from among the flood of examples:

- “You’re walking a delicate balance, trying to talk to others but not seeming desperate.’ Staying home is best for her two children, [Laura] Yamashita, 40, is quick to say. But she missed the adult interaction and the sense of accomplishment she had gotten from her career. ‘At home you wash dishes, they get dirty again,’ [says Yamashita, an MBA]. ‘Change a diaper, same thing. It’s not like ‘Look at this report,’ getting feedback, getting reviewed.’” (Torpy, 2003)
- “You get lonely...It gives you a feeling you’re not worthy.” (Lee, 2005)
- “I was calling my husband twice a day until he finally said I needed to find other people to talk to.” (Starr, 1996)
- “Self-esteem and self-worth are big issues for many stay-at-home mothers.” (Carr-Elsing, 1997)

- “I had to admit I felt depressed...I liked being a mother, but it was hard to adjust to being just a housekeeper.” (Pesmen, 1996)
- “I was at my wit’s end. I was desperate.” (White, 1998)
- “At first I thought it was boring. I felt I didn’t have anything to say that was interesting. I felt my husband would find someone more interesting at work... In the beginning, I found myself in mourning.” (Miller, 2004)
- “It can be very isolating. During the first three months at home, I was in tears watching my husband walk up to the subway. I’d think, ‘I’ve got nine or 10 hours on my own here. How can do this day after day?’” (Coolidge, 1997)
- “But she, too, misses the friendships, the lunches, the stimulation of work.” (English, 1998)
- “Most at-home mothers have stories about being snubbed at dinner parties or having friends ask when they plan to do something important.” (Evans, 1989)
- “Like thousands of Minnesota women who have left promising careers for full-time motherhood, [Kelley] Dorn has confronted unexpected loneliness, boredom and a daily search for identity.” (Miller, 1994)
- “‘Sometimes you wonder whether your husband respects what you are doing,’ she says.” (Miller, 1994)

Yet, once mentioned, these painful moments are quickly subsumed into a triumphant tale of women coming to love the homemaker role. An example: “Many women feel isolated and lonely when they first elect to stay home, because they are in transition between two lifestyles. They need a year of going through the seasons, getting a new rhythm to their lives. It’s a temporary problem” (Stovsky, 1991).

We can read these stories very differently: as evidence that today’s families are often pushed by workplace inflexibility into old-fashioned homemaker/breadwinner roles that ill suit them. This theme is rarely pursued, although a considerable literature documents that homemakers are more likely than

Many women aren’t rejecting work; they are rejecting inflexible workplaces while trying hard to find viable alternatives.

employed women to be depressed (e.g., Barnett & Rivers, 1996).

Many women aren’t rejecting work; they are rejecting inflexible

all-or-nothing workplaces while trying hard to find alternatives. The theme does occasionally emerge in stories that document that women are founding businesses at double the overall rate (Lynn, 2006). One such story quotes a mother who describes how being self-employed provides her with the flexibility she used to lack:

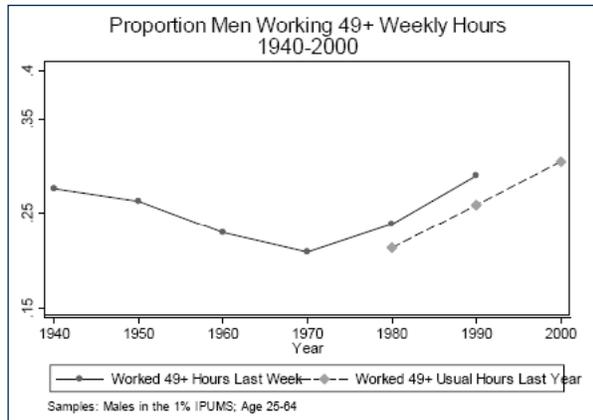
I am the one who kisses their boo-boos and finds their first tooth...I determine when I work or if I want to help my daughter identify where her nose is. I can leave my computer and have a tickle-fest. I will determine how much the outside world can have of my time. Typically, I put my daughter in day care one day a week and line up as many meetings in the office as I can. (Rosen, 2003)

“They just want to have both a family life and a business life,” said Penni Naufus, director of the Women’s Business Center in New Jersey (Lynn, 2006).

*Effects of the “all-or-nothing workplace” on men*

The proportion of men working long hours has increased steadily since 1970, and sharply since 1980, as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**



**Source: Kuhn & Lozano, 2005**

Professionals are much more likely than nonprofessionals to work long hours. For 30% of men in salaried jobs, “full time” now means working 50 or more hours a week (Selmi & Cahn, 2006). This is an important development that impacts women’s ability to remain in the workforce, yet none of the articles we surveyed included data on the recent rise in the working hours of professional/managerial men.

Although professional men’s intensive schedules would be impossible unless their wives cut back on work, only 8% of the articles we examined mentioned that stay-at-home moms support their husband’s careers — an erasure of women’s role in two-person careers that severely disadvantages divorcing women. Only one article mentioned that having a wife at home enhances a husband’s earning power. In fact, one study showed that men married to stay-at-home wives earn an average 30% “wage premium” (as cited in Torpy, 2003), presumably because the homemaker’s work at home allows him to perform as a “zero-drag” (Hochschild, 1997) Ideal Worker. The few articles that acknowledge this respond by inviting us to celebrate the good fortune

of the breadwinner:

- “As Seymour sits on the career sidelines, her husband, Eric Small, is making great strides professionally.” (“Moms stay home,” 1994)
- “Staying home ‘enables’ her husband, David, in his computer management career, she says. He’s done well. She can’t even keep up with his current title: He has been that busy moving up and taking opportunities as his wife has taken on most of the household responsibilities.” (Torpy, 2003)

The sharp rise in men’s working hours plays a central role in driving women out: One study of highly qualified women notes that they cut back on work to fill a “parenting vacuum,” given that their

Only 13% of the Opt Out articles mention that a husband’s demanding job made it difficult for his wife to continue to work.

husbands were rarely around (Stone & Lovejoy, 2004). The same study found that husbands were a key influence on two-thirds of the women’s decisions to leave the workplace (Ibid.). While the women almost unanimously described their husbands as supportive, they also told how those husbands refused to alter

their own work schedule or increase their participation in caregiving. One women expressed this explicitly: “He has always said to me, ‘You can do whatever you want to do.’ But he’s not there to pick up any load” (Ibid., p. 76).

Many of the articles unreflectingly reinforce the stereotype that caring for children is women’s business. Fifteen percent (15%) don’t mention husbands at all, and in nearly two-thirds (64%), the husband’s role is described chiefly as a breadwinner whose income enables the wife to stay home. In one of the few stories in which a reporter brought this up, Laurie Neylon, a former international business consultant laughs, “We had the discussion, but it didn’t last long...He just didn’t want to stay home,

and I didn't want to push it" (Coolidge, 1997). More often reporters take masculine privilege for granted and treat it as uncontroversial. "I noticed my husband's schedule was very erratic," [Poonam Jhangiani] said. Anil Jhangiani would often be gone from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. during his residency...And, she remembered, 'we were moving all the time.' Three years in Chicago for a residency, then a two-year fellowship in Los Angeles, then one year for further specialization in San Francisco" (Lee, 2005).

A very rare exception to silence on this issue is in a piece by Jane Gross of *The New York Times*. "All but one [of the stay-at-home moms interviewed] said that while their husbands expressed willingness to help with the children and the house, the men rarely lifted a finger unless they were specifically asked and given detailed instructions about the task at hand," Gross observed (1998). Psychologists call that passive-aggressive; many journalists treat it as an uncontroversial fact of life.

The good news for men is that they can have two-person careers if they want them. The bad news is that many don't (Gerson, 2004), but once their wives have "opted out," they have little alternative. Men's working hours tend to rise when their wives leave the labor force, and 9 out of 10 men who work 50 or more hours a week say they wish they could work fewer hours (Gerson, 2004). If one searches for articles on Generation X and Y men, one finds quite a bit of information that younger men have little interest in a life consumed by work and distant from family life. Yet in Opt Out articles, fathers and their wishes tend to disappear. We found 315 mentions of mothers in the 119 stories we examined, but only 25 mentions of fathers. Less than one-quarter (21.8%) of the stories we found discussed fathers' desire for shorter hours.

In addition, few Opt Out articles discuss the anxiety and pressure men may feel when the family has all of its eggs in one basket — his job. Only 9% mention the stress placed on the breadwinner in this context. A rare example comes from one of

the relatively few articles that discuss working-class families. "He's under a tremendous amount of stress as the breadwinner. I really feel for him, but we both think it's worth it," said one mother of her husband, who had to work double time to support the family (Veciana-Suarez, 1994).

## Effects of Workplace Inflexibility on Working-Class Families

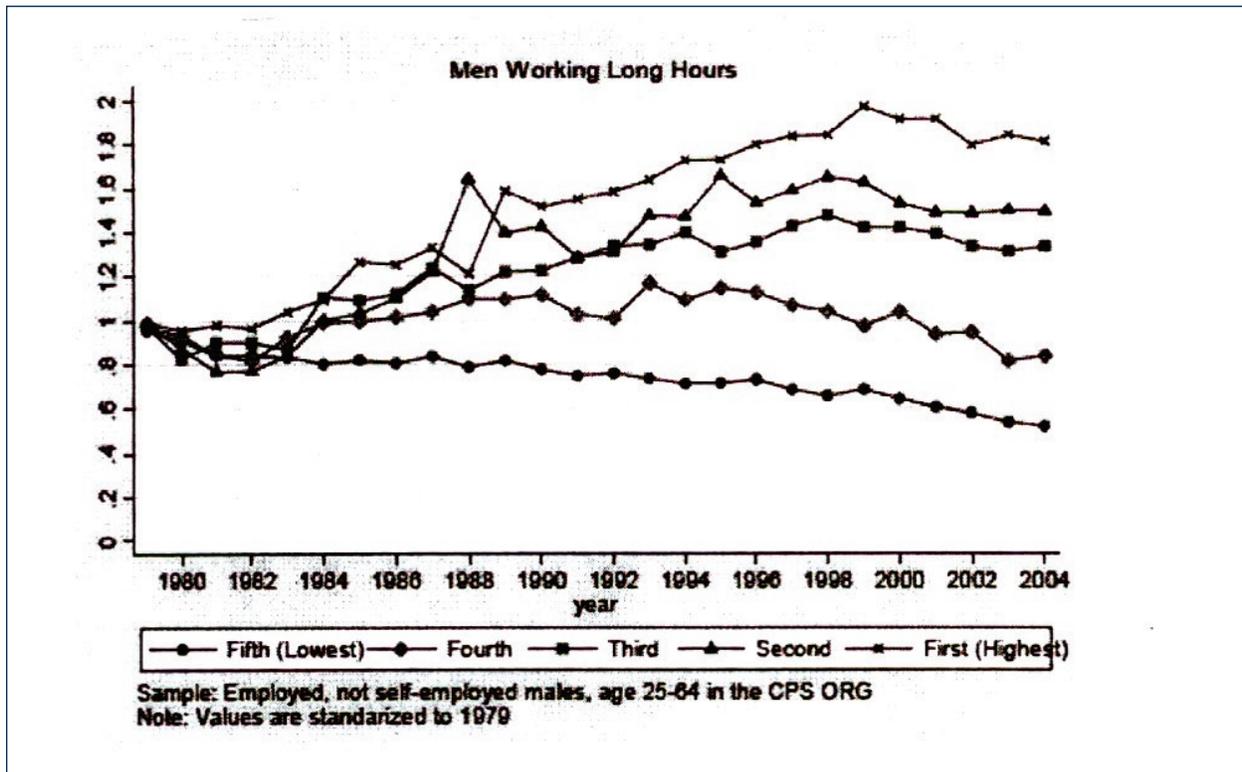
In a welcome development that occurred after our survey database was closed, Jodi Kantor published a front page story in *The New York Times* discussing the difficulties faced by low-income workers who need to nurse their babies at work (although the story failed to acknowledge that more privileged mothers also sometimes face insurmountable problems when they attempt to breastfeed) (Kantor, 2006). An earlier *Times* op-ed discussed the "other mothers": poor women who cannot opt out. (Gotbaum & Rankin, 2006) Yet attention to the class dimensions of work/family conflict is rare. When our Center released a report on work/family conflict among working-class families, Ruth Marcus of *The Washington Post* wrote about the report, acknowledging:

I've done my fair share of agonizing in print about the implacable tensions between work and family, but I'm moved this Mother's Day to feel rather sheepish about such laments. The reason for my embarrassment is...[the Center for WorkLife Law's Report] "One Sick Child Away From Being Fired: When Opting Out is Not an Option." With that stark title, the report punctures the entitled, self-referential perspective from which journalists tend to write about working mothers....Guilty as charged. (Marcus, 2006)

Evidence is finally emerging to explain how work/family conflict differs in different class contexts. We now know that, while more than one-third (37.2%) of professional men work fifty or more hours a week, only one-fifth (21.3%) of men in other occupations work such long hours (Selmi & Cahn, 2006, p. 12). The hours of salaried men (typically managers or

Nine out of 10 men who work 50-plus hours a week wish they could work less.

Figure 2



Source: Kuhn & Lozano, 2005

professionals) have increased much more sharply than those of hourly men; in fact, the hours of men with only high school educations did not increase at all during the same period when college educated men’s hours increased sharply. The frequency of working long hours increased over 14% among men whose earnings are in the top 20%, while the hours of men in the lowest 20% fell by nearly 7% (Kuhn & Lozano, 2005). These trends are shown in Figure 2.

Does this mean that work/family conflict is only a problem of professional/managerial class families? No. But work/family conflict differs in different types of families. Experts have just begun to document this in recent years, beginning with Lisa Dodson, Tiffany Manuel, and Ellen Bravo’s important study, “Keeping Jobs and Raising Families in Low-Income America: It Just Doesn’t Work” (2002), and Jody Heymann’s equally important book, *The Widening Gap* (2000).

Working-class and low-wage families are less likely to encounter long hours — although some do. Nurses and auto workers have gone on strike over excessive

overtime, which is particularly burdensome in “tag-team” families (where parents work alternate shifts to help cover child care needs). Yet even families where overtime is not an issue have to deal day-to-day with different kinds of inflexibility. Nonprofessionals often have highly supervised jobs where they clock in and out. Such workers can be fired for arriving even a few minutes late, and have limited or no ability to leave to take care of family emergencies or to work at home if the babysitter does not show up. Here are some examples of work/family conflict among such workers:

- A single mom who worked as a packer was fired when she left work in response to a phone call telling her that her four-year-old was in the emergency room with a head injury (*Knauf Fiber Glass*, 1983; Williams, 2006, p. 3).
- A single mom who worked as a bus driver was fired for arriving three minutes late because her severely asthmatic son

had an asthma attack (*Chicago Transit Authority*, 1999; Williams, 2006, p. 3).

- A tag-team dad factory worker was fired after he refused to work overtime because he had to get home to take care of his children so his wife could go to work (*U.S. Steel Corp.*, 1990; Williams, 2006, p. 4).
- A waitress was fired at the end of the day after her daughter had accompanied her to work and sat quietly at an empty table, because she had no school that day (Williams, 2006, p. 5).

There are many more of these stories, but one rarely finds them covered in the mainstream press (Williams, 2006). As Ruth Marcus noted, stories about work/family conflict tend to focus exclusively on professional/managerial families who face the type of work/family conflicts encountered by the reporters themselves (Marcus, 2006).

Workplace inflexibility often pushes professional/managerial families into neo-traditional patterns (Moen, 2003). The speed-up at work that often consigns men in these families to workaholic lives, with little involvement with family life, also leaves women with three unattractive choices: (1) have a great career and never see your children awake; (2) take a dead-end, underpaid part-time position; or (3) drop out and face economic vulnerability for your children and yourself. These are hardly choices to celebrate, yet only 30% of the articles we read acknowledge that women are being offered bad choices.

Fewer stories still have discussed the impact of workplace inflexibility on working-class and low-wage workers. This report is designed to point editors and reporters to new resources — notably the work of Jody Heymann (2000); Lisa Dodson, Tiffany Manuel, and Ellen Bravo (2002); and the “One Sick Child” report (Williams, 2006) — that provide the basis for new stories reporters can tell.

## THE FAILURE OF U.S. PUBLIC POLICY ON WORK/FAMILY ISSUES

**Americans often have poor choices because we lack the kinds of family supports available in many other industrialized countries.** Despite the widely abundant data on how the United States lags far behind other industrialized countries in helping families balance work and family, very few Opt Out articles highlight the failure of U.S. public policy and its role in creating the choices unavailable to mothers “opting out.” One notable quote from Robin Factor, a work-at-home publisher: “We’re the second generation of women juggling like this. I’d like to see people attacking this on a policy level” (Gross, 1998).

The role of public policy in shaping parents’ choices is highlighted by comparing the experience of a Swedish family and an American family after the birth of a new child.<sup>5</sup>

**Family 1:** A working couple in Sweden has a newborn child in January. Both parents stay home during the first two weeks of the child’s life because, since the 1970s, fathers have been granted 10 days of paid leave after childbirth (Crittenden, 2001). After that, the mother continues her paid leave and the father returns to work at 80% of his former schedule, taking advantage of the government’s policy that both parents can return to work on a reduced hours schedule until all their children are eight years old (Ibid.). In August, the father takes a full month off at 80% of his pay — Sweden has guaranteed fathers an extra month off at 80% of their pay during the first year of their children’s lives since 1984 (Ibid.). After much discussion of the Swedish policy that allows new parents to

share eighteen months of paid leave as they choose (Clearinghouse on International Developments in Child, Youth and Family Politics at Columbia University [Clearinghouse], 2002; Crittenden, 2001; European Union Online, n.d.), they decide to switch roles the following January: The mother returns to work at 80% of her former schedule, while the father stays home with the child for the next six months.

They decide not to use the additional leave available to them: three months at a flat rate and three months unpaid leave (Clearinghouse, 2002). Beginning in June, when the child turns one and one-half, both parents work an 80% schedule until their child turns eight. They stagger their schedules so each gets some one-on-one time with their child, and enroll the child in a child care center for the remaining hours. Public child care is available to children as young as one, and 64% of children aged one to five attend preschool; another 11% of children this age attend family day care homes (Skolverket, n.d.). While Sweden has not yet reached its goal of making quality day care available to every child in the country, it does ensure that lower-income families receive financial assistance for child care (Crittenden, 2001).

**Family 2:** A working couple in the United States has a first child. The father takes no leave, since he has no right to paid leave and they cannot afford to lose any of his salary now that they are supporting a child. They are fortunate: The mother’s employer is covered by the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), she meets the requirements, and they can afford to do without her salary during the 12 weeks of unpaid leave that law guarantees her. During her leave, she continues the hunt for quality affordable child care that she began during her pregnancy. Shortly

5. Scenarios adapted from those originally published in “The Public Policy of Motherhood,” by Joan C. Williams and Holly Cohen Cooper, *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 60, No. 4, 2004, pp. 849-865. Used with permission.

before the 12-week leave ends, they finally find a center that accepts infants and has an opening. It is not convenient to their home or to either office, and they do not know people who have used it, but at least it appears clean and has space for their child. Knowing that over half of all infant care is poor to fair (Gornick & Meyers, 2003), they are nervous, but the 12 weeks of leave is over. The mother returns to work full time. Including her commuting time (30 minutes each way) and lunch hour, she is away from her child for 50 hours per week. Since she does the day care drop off and pick up, the father has even less time with the child than she does. Every time the mother asks her employer for time off for pediatrician visits or other family-related reasons, she feels the backlash — her employer sees her as less committed to her job and her co-workers feel that she does not pull her weight any more.

After a year of this, feeling that her career is not advancing as she had hoped and worrying about the scarcity of time with her child, the mother decides to try working part-time. She finds she is given mommy track work, the stigma increases, her hourly pay decreases, and she loses many of the benefits and chances for promotion that her full-time colleagues have (Glass, 2004). Like many parents, she cannot find part-time child care; accordingly, she continues to pay for the expensive full-time care while working part-time.

After another year, this mother joins the one in four mothers aged 25 to 44 who are out of the paid labor force. She and her husband have decided that, given her low salary, lack of career prospects, and high child care costs, she does not earn

enough money to justify “consigning their child to strangers” any longer. With her salary gone, the husband feels increasing pressure to be the breadwinner and thus joins the ranks of the one-third of fathers who work 49 or more hours a week (Williams, 2000). Four or five years later, when the child starts school, the mother tries to find a more satisfying part-time job despite her now-stale job skills.

As this vignette shows, adequate policies for work/family reconciliation have five basic elements:

1. maternity, parental, and family sick leaves
2. high quality and affordable non-family child care options, including universal preschool, child care, and afterschool care
3. regulation of working time
4. universal health coverage, and

Single workers sometimes complain that they have to cover for workers who are out having children or caring for them. This problem stems from the lack of government-financed family leave, which leaves employers without funds to replace an absent worker.

5. a tax system that does not penalize two-job families.

## Maternity, Parental, and Family Sick Leaves

The United States is one of only four countries in the world that lack paid parental leave: the others are Lesotho, Papua New Guinea, and Swaziland (Heymann, 2006). The only national leave available to U.S. parents, under the Family and Medical Leave Act, is unpaid and does not cover roughly 40% of the workforce (National Partnership for Women and Families, n.d.).

The only family leave available in the U.S. is unpaid

Janet Gornick and Marcia Meyers’ study of twelve industrialized countries<sup>6</sup> analyzed three types of leave (Gornick & Meyers, 2003): (a) paid maternity leave; (b) parental leave (typically unpaid) that can be taken by either parent, and; (c) paid family leave to enable parents to care for ill children. All European paid leaves are financed through social insurance. This leaves European employers more competitive than U.S. employers, for two reasons. First, European businesses do not have to pay the steep 30% “benefits load” — the cost of a benefits package as a percentage of a worker’s salary — that many U.S. businesses pay. Second, because European employers are not responsible for covering the cost of paid leaves themselves, they can afford to replace the absent worker, instead of loading that worker’s responsibilities onto co-workers, as is often the case in the United States.

High benefits loads erode the competitiveness of U.S. businesses. They also set up a pernicious dynamic in many American workplaces: Because U.S. employers continue to pay the wages of worker on leave, often they require the remaining employees (many of them already overworked) to cover for workers on leave without additional pay — a practice that fuels resentments.

All European countries offer paid leave for family reasons such as to care for a sick child (Ibid., p. 130-32). Gornick and Meyers’ 12-country study found that the paid maternity leave available to mothers in 2000 ranged from five to 42 weeks, with the United States as an outlier at zero weeks of paid leave (Ibid., p. 128, Figure 5.2). In addition to maternity leave, the European Union requires members to provide a minimum of three months of (paid or unpaid) leave available to either parent up to when the child turns eight. In the Nordic countries, most employed parents have between one and three years of paid leave financed through social insurance, during which period they received roughly two-thirds of their wages, with wages of high earners subject to caps.

The design of paid leaves in Nordic countries gives families many choices about how to reconcile work and family life. In Denmark and Sweden, leave can be taken in increments until the child is eight years old. Norway and Sweden also allow parents to combine leave with part-time work. Finland and Norway allow parents to use some of their leave benefits to pay for alternative child care (Ibid., pp.127-30).

Some American states, notably California, offer intriguing models that have functioned well in the American context. California workers have the right to use up to half of their accrued sick leave per year to

“The fact that I could take the new six-week paid leave made it a lot easier for my wife to go back to work full time,”

care for an ill child, parent, spouse, or domestic partner (Cal. Labor Code §233). This eliminates one of the forces that drives women out. “The worst thing in the world was waking up

in the morning and having a sick child. My husband and I would look at each other and ask, ‘Who’s going to stay home?’” said one mom, explaining her decision to stay home full time (Stocker, 1991). California statutes also give workers 40 hours a year of unpaid leave to take part in activities at their children’s school (Cal. Labor Code §§ 230.7, 230.8). In addition, California provides a paid family leave insurance program — the only comprehensive paid leave law in the United States to date — that gives most workers six weeks of partial pay during unpaid leave to care for a newborn or newly adopted child or an ill child, parent, spouse, or domestic partner (Calif. Senate Bill No. 1661, 2002; Employment Development Department, State of California, 2006b). (California’s State Disability Insurance program provides

Nearly one quarter of the articles mentions that the high costs and/or low quality of child care had driven some mothers out of work.

additional partial pay benefits for unpaid time off due to one’s own illness or pregnancy disability [Employment Development Department, State of California, 2006a].)

6. The U.S., the U.K., Canada, Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, France, Finland, Denmark, Sweden, and Norway.

The inadequacy of U.S. policy often leaves mothers with the sense that they have little choice but to quit. Recall Elizabeth Drew Scholl, who “could not imagine a life without paid work” and secured a master’s degree and a “plum job,” and was “extremely career-oriented,” only to find that her employer would give her only six weeks’ maternity leave. “Babies don’t even lift their heads up at six weeks on their own,” Scholl [said], indignation still rising in her voice at the thought of such a short leave” (Gardner, 2001). She quit.

Studies confirm that the absence of paid leave drives women out of the workforce. “The evidence is clear that paid leave of several months’ to about a year’s duration strengthen women’s labor market attachment” (Gornick & Meyers, 2003, p. 239). One reason that American women take such long leaves is that American men take very little leave. “The fact that I could take the new six-week paid leave made it a lot easier for my wife to go back to work full time,” said Stephen Brand, a professor after his employer, University of Rhode Island, implemented a new policy that gave six weeks of paid parental leave (Stephen Brand, personal communication, September 12, 2006). The most effective way to ensure that men have cultural permission to take parental leave is to provide that some portion of leave (“daddy days”) must be taken by the father rather than the mother. When Norway instituted daddy days, men’s usage of leave rose from less than 5% to more than 70% (Gornick & Meyers 2003, p. 242).

### High Quality and Affordable Non-Family Child Care Options

Nearly one-quarter of the articles (23%) mention that the high costs and/or low quality of child care drives mothers out of work. Yet only one of these articles mentions that this is a very short-term way of looking at a mother’s economic prospects. It quotes Sheila Kamerman, a well-known expert:

It’s true that in the short run, for a few years, you might not keep much of your earnings.

But continuing to work is an investment in your future earnings, and there does come a time when the child-care costs diminish, the wife’s salary will probably go up, and there is a clear financial benefit. Meanwhile, women who take a long time out of the workforce are likely to find that they cannot command the same kind of salary when they are ready to go back in. (as quoted in Lewin, 1991)

This point, crucial for young women to hear, was made in a 1991 article and has not been repeated. The examples below depict a far more common interpretation:

- “By the time I paid the sitter, there was hardly anything left.” (Mary Beth Larscheidt, nurse) (Kissinger, 1998)
- “[Kristin] Fitzgerald, who has two children, said it makes no sense to return to a desk job because ‘the money I’d be paying in day care is far more than I’d be making.’” (left a bank job) (Azzara, 2004)
- “It wasn’t worth the small amount I was making, with the day care and everything.” (Lori Frasure, cook) (Juell, 1996)
- “A Detroit-area [lawyer]...said about 90% of her income goes to pay for day care and other costs related to her children.” (Joyner, 1994)
- “Nicole Nicely...an assistant buyer for Robinson’s department store... [realized that] child care costs cut her salary in half. ‘I decided that for \$15,000 my job was too stressful and it wasn’t worth it.’” (Osborn, 1991)

- “I did the math, subtracted all my expenses — including takeout, gas, taxes, day care and on and on. I found out I was clearing only \$39 a week.” (Cheryl Gochnauer, secretary) (Rosen, 2003)
- “As people examine some of the day care that is out there, they are saying, Maybe it's better if I do this myself.” (Ann Arnesen, director of the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families) (Kissinger, 1998)

Is this a story about women getting what they want, or a story about the systematic deskilling of American women (many of them educated at public expense) due to lack of family supports? Lack of adequate non-family child care clearly plays a central role in driving women out of the workforce and into economic vulnerability. That’s why many other industrialized countries have been so attentive to creating a good system to provide families with good options for non-family care.

In countries with adequate paid leave and high-quality part-time work, few infants are in child care.

Contrary to popular belief, adequate care for children does not require a system of vast, impersonal child care centers.

Centers in countries where they are common typically are small and neighborhood based — think public library rather than public high school. And child care centers (typically for children 3 to 5) are a small part of the overall system of non-family caregiving options. An effective system would include: universal preschool, afterschool programs, and child care.

**Universal pre-kindergarten.** Georgia, Florida, and Oklahoma all have state-financed universal pre-kindergarten for all four year-olds, and West Virginia and New York have established timelines for implementing such programs (Pre-K Now, n.d.). So do Belgium and France, beginning at ages two-and-a-half or three (Gornick & Meyers, 2003). The movement for universal pre-kindergarten is growing in the United States and is of vital importance.

**Afterschool programs.** Child care programs end when children enter school at age five or six, but children still get out of school long before parents get out of work. One estimate is that the gap between work schedules and school schedules averages 20 to 25 hours a week (Gornick & Meyers, 2003, p. 196). An estimated 39 million children between the ages of five and fourteen participate in no organized system of supervised activities after school — many of them home alone (Ibid). In the summer, the number of hours children spend home alone increases sharply, by an estimated six hours a week (Ibid., p. 197). Many parents consider part-time work, to match the workday of one parent (not necessarily the same parent every day) to be an ideal that is unavailable to them. The alternative is afterschool programs, which are severely underfunded in the United States. Currently, 6.5 million children in grades K through 12 participate in afterschool programs — just 11% of all children in this age range; an additional 15 million children would be likely to participate if a quality program were available in their community (Afterschool Alliance, 2004).

The quality of child care is much poorer in the U.S. than in Europe.

**Child care.** In countries with adequate paid leave and high-quality part-time work, few infants are in child care (Gornick & Meyers, 2003). Scandinavian families are entitled to child care by the time of children’s first birthday (although their mothers tend also to be working only part time). In other Western European countries, children are entitled to child care by the time they are between 30 months and four years (Ibid., Table 7.1). Parents bear only a portion of the costs, typically on a sliding scale: For example, in France, parents typically pay only 17-25% of child care costs, with the remainder split between employers and the government (Ibid., pp. 206-18).

By comparison, all but a tiny percentage of the lowest-income U.S. families bear the full costs of child care. Low-income families pay an average of 22% of their total household income for child care; middle income families pay an average 9%; high income families pay an average 6% (Ibid., pp. 214-15, Table 7.4). In

The current definition of “full time” evolved when workers were assumed to be males who were supported by a wife at home full time. Many families feel that the “full time” workweek is not the ideal time period for children to be cared for outside the home.

Europe, low-income families pay much less (8%), middle-income families pay a little less (8%), and high-income families pay a little more (7%) (Ibid.).

European systems typically require high levels of training and a high quality of care, typically in neighborhood-based programs. Child care in the U.S. suffers both from lack of funding, given the limited amounts parents can afford, and lack of quality control. Staff turnover in some centers is in excess of 100% per year, due in significant part to very low staff salaries (Ibid., p. 226). Child care staff in Europe tend to earn close to, or more than, the average wage for women; staff in the United States average between \$13,125 and \$18,988 annually, only about half of women’s average wage (preschool teachers, who have more education, earn about two-thirds) (Ibid., p. 196, 227). Observational studies of child care centers rate only about 15% as “good”; 50-69% of unregulated family care (in the sitter’s home) is rated as “inadequate” (Ibid., p. 195). Care for children under three is rated even lower: 61% of all forms of care are rated as “poor” or “fair” (Ibid., p. 196).

No wonder women quit. As the quotes cited above show so eloquently, many quit not because they cease to be interested in employment but because they cannot find high-quality, affordable child care.

The European Union prohibits discrimination against part-time workers, and requires proportional pay for proportional work. All ten Western European countries have passed implementing legislation.

## Regulation of Working Time

The current definition of “full time” evolved when

workers were assumed to be males who were supported by a wife at home full time. Many families feel that the “full time” workweek is not the ideal time period for children to be cared for outside the home; even fewer want to raise children in households where both parents have jobs that require the 50- to 60-hour workweeks typically required in fast-track jobs.

Even were the United States to have the best child care system in the world, workplace flexibility would be required. European countries have recognized this through the implementation of working time regulation, aimed both at decreasing unemployment by spreading the work around, and at effecting work/family reconciliation.

The U.S. is also virtually alone among industrialized nations in lacking universal health coverage. This fuels long hours in two distinct ways.

In most European countries, full-time hours are set below the 40-hour week that is standard in the United States, ranging from 35 to 39 hours a week (Gornick & Meyers, 2003, p. 157). An E.U. directive, which caps the workweek at 48 hours, sets the standard for all European countries except the U.K. (Ibid.).

In sharp contrast, the United States has virtually no working time regulation. The only relevant statute is the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), which does not cap work hours. In fact, in conjunction with the lack of universal health coverage, the FLSA encourages employers to require overtime work, for reasons that will be explained below.

Some countries, notably the Netherlands, Germany, and Sweden, also give workers the right to part-time work, with certain exceptions (Ibid., p. 162-71). In the Netherlands, any worker can request more or fewer hours in his or her same job, and the employer must grant the request absent business necessity, which is very narrowly defined (Hegewisch, 2005). The United States is also very unusual in lacking a minimum number of mandated vacation days. European countries have a minimum of four weeks; Canada has two weeks

(Gornick & Meyers, 2003, p. 180).

The lack of working time regulation in the U.S. makes for long working hours, poor quality part-time jobs, and lack of vacation time. These, in turn, can make work demands on family life seem unrelenting. Given the poor quality and relative unavailability of part-time jobs, many families see no alternative but to have one partner, typically the woman, sharply cut back or quit.

### Lack of Universal Health Coverage

The United States is also virtually alone among industrialized countries in lacking universal health coverage, and what coverage exists typically is linked with employment in a full-time job. For nonexempt hourly workers, the delivery of health care through a job-link fuels long hours by driving up the cost of employers' benefits. High benefits loads mean that it is often cheaper for an employer to pay the time-and-a-half wages the FLSA requires than to hire a new employee whose hire will trigger additional health insurance and other benefits.

For different reasons, the lack of universal health coverage fuels long hours for exempt professional workers. In a system where jobs with health insurance often require 50- or 60-hour workweek, and where anything under that level of work commitment is classified as “part time” without benefits, even couples who would prefer to work two 35-hour jobs rather than one 50-hour job and one 20-job may well find it impossible to do so. If they did, the family would lack health insurance.

### Design of the U.S. Tax System

Five of the opt-out articles mention that one factor in convincing the mother to stay home was that her wages would increase taxes by pushing the family into a higher tax bracket. “Let’s say the first spouse makes \$50,000 per year and the second spouse makes \$20,000 per year. That second income then bumps you up into the higher tax bracket,” said Bob

Warwick of RSM McGladrey, Inc. (Lisk, 2002). He used the example of a couple filing jointly jumping from the 15% to the 27% tax bracket (Ibid.).

This effect would be eliminated if couples filed individual rather than joint tax returns, as is the case most other industrialized countries (Crittenden, 2001).

## MATERNAL WALL BIAS AND WORKPLACE DISCRIMINATION

*“Even now, I have several women who say to me, ‘My boss does not believe I am coming back.’ ‘They are changing my responsibilities where I’m working, taking the responsibilities away.’ ‘They’re preparing to do without me, to replace me.’” (Vesperi, 1987)*

*“[Elena] Robinson believes discrimination against women and mothers certainly played a role in her getting laid off...After a while, women are asking: if you don’t have to do it, why bother? Why should I continue to go to work and fight this battle?” (C. Reed, 2004)*

**Opt Out stories rarely discuss the bias and discrimination that drives many women out of good jobs.** Perhaps the most damaging part of the Opt-Out story line is that it excuses gender discrimination under the rubric of “choice.” There is another story to be told, far different from that of educated women blithely “choosing” to stay home: that women are not *pulled out* of the workforce by their biological need to care for their children but are often *pushed out* by maternal wall bias and discrimination against mothers at work. The Center for WorkLife Law has taken the lead in documenting both the social science describing the maternal wall and the lawsuits challenging it.

## Maternal Wall Lawsuits Offer Vivid Alternative Stories

Lawsuits brought by women who hit the maternal wall offer vivid, compelling stories that the Opt Out story line completely overlooks. Here are a few examples from the hundreds of maternal wall lawsuits:

**Open discrimination.** Joann Trezza, an attorney and mother of two, had consistently excellent job evaluations and was consistently promoted — until she had children. Thereafter, the higher position was offered to less qualified men with children and women without children. Once Trezza was told that she was not considered for promotion because the new management position required travel; the assumption was that she would not be interested because of her family — although she was never asked, and in fact was interested. The senior vice-president of her company complained to her about the “incompetence and laziness of women who are also working mothers,” and observed that “women are not good planners, especially women with kids” (p. 5). The head of her department opined that working mothers cannot be both good mothers and good workers, saying, “I don’t see how you can do either job well” (p. 5). Finally, the senior vice-president also commented to her that if her husband, also an attorney, won another big verdict, she’d be “sitting at home eating bon bons” (p. 5-6). Not one of the 46 Managing Attorneys was the mother of school age children. Trezza won an undisclosed amount in a confidential settlement. (*Trezza v. Hartford, Inc.*, 1998)

**Hostile work environment.** Shireen Walsh, a top salesperson with outstanding reviews found the atmosphere at work changed sharply when she returned from maternity leave. While she was showing co-workers her baby pictures, she was told to stop distracting others from their work. Other employees were allowed to go to a crafts fair, but she was told to stay behind to make up for the inconvenience she had put them to while on maternity leave. Her hours were closely scrutinized, although (as is common in off-site sales jobs like hers) other employees’ were not. When Walsh

had to leave to take her son, who had persistent ear infections, to the doctor, she was required to sign in and out and to make up every minute of work she missed, despite a policy allowing for unlimited sick leave. Her supervisor finally threw a phone book at her, telling her to find a pediatrician open after business hours. When Walsh fainted from the stress of the mistreatment, the supervisor remarked, “You better not be pregnant again” (giving rise to an argument, accepted by the court, that in addition to the hostile work environment, Walsh was discriminated against based on her potential to become pregnant) (p. 1155). A federal court upheld a jury verdict of \$625,000. (*Walsh v. National Computer Systems, Inc.*, 2003)

**Retaliation.** A female manager complained of race discrimination. For years she had worked a flex schedule, from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m., so that she could get home to care for her son, who had Down’s Syndrome. In retaliation for her complaint, her employer took away her flex schedule, and insisted she work from 9 to 5. The Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals held that making this particular worker work 9-to-5 instead of 7-to-3 amounted to an adverse employment action that could sustain a claim of retaliation (*Washington v. Illinois Department of Revenue*, 2005). The U.S. Supreme Court agreed with this standard, adopting it in a later case, stating: “Context matters...A schedule change in an employee’s work schedule may make little difference to many workers, but may matter enormously to a young mother with school age children” (*Burlington Northern & Santa Fe Railway v. White*, 2006, p. 2416).

These stories tell a very different tale about women and work. Many women do not choose to leave the workforce, but are forced out of their jobs once they have children because of stereotypes. Social scientists have documented common patterns of gender stereotyping that comprise the maternal wall at work.

## Recognizing Maternal Wall Stereotypes

Recent studies suggest that motherhood is a key trigger for gender stereotyping. This literature was jumpstarted by a 2004 special issue of a well-respected social science

journal, *Journal of Social Issues*, “The Maternal Wall” (Biernat, Crosby & Williams, 2004).

**Hostile sexism.** Comments that women are “dumb broads” are now recognized as inappropriate gender stereotypes. Comments that working moms are lazy, incompetent, and not good planners also are inappropriate gender stereotypes. Hostile sexism expresses hostility towards women who do not conform to the mandates of traditional femininity — in this case, staying home once children are born. Sometimes women are fired or demoted outright on the grounds that mothers belong at home. In a Virginia case, a woman who worked in a company that leases and sells construction equipment phoned her boss to find out when to return from maternity leave. She was told that women belong at home with their children and was fired (*Bailey v. Scott-Gallagher, Inc.*, 1997). In a Minnesota case, a car saleswoman was told she should “do the right thing” and stay home with her children and that, as a woman with a family, she would always be at a disadvantage (*Plaetzer v. Borton Automotive, Inc.*, 2004).

**Benevolent sexism.** Recall that Joann Trezza, whose discrimination case is described above, was not considered for a promotion because her employer assumed that she would not want to travel once she had children (*Trezza v. Hartford, Inc.*, 1998). This is an example of benevolent sexism. The effect is the same as hostile sexism: Women are policed into traditional roles — in this case, that mothers (but not fathers) should always be available to her children (Kobryniewicz & Biernat, 1997). Yet the tone of voice is very different: Benevolent sexism may reflect good intentions, but they are misplaced. The simple solution is for an employer to offer the mother the promotion if she is qualified for it, and let her decide whether she will take it.

**Role incongruity.** Joann Trezza was told that working mothers could not “do either job well” (*Trezza v. Hartford, Inc.*, 1998, p. 5). Social psychologists call this role incongruity: the assumption that women cannot be both good mothers and good workers. Role incongruity, too, polices a particular vision of motherhood — again, that the good mother is always

available to her children. Some families reject this vision; in their view, it is quite possible to be both a good mother and a good worker. An employer cannot act on stereotypes to police women into traditional roles.

**Negative competence assumptions.** Again *Trezza*: Working mothers rarely are called lazy and incompetent to their faces, but they often face negative competence assumptions. The clearest example is of a Boston attorney who said, “When I returned from maternity leave, I was given the work of a paralegal, and I wanted to say, ‘Look, I had a baby, not a lobotomy’” (Rhode, 1996). Social psychologists have documented that “businesswomen” are considered highly competent, similar to businessmen. “Housewives,” on the other hand, are lumped with stigmatized groups such as (to use the researcher’s words) the elderly, blind, “retarded,” and disabled (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick & Xu, 2002; Eckes, 2002). Thus the Boston attorney left a high-competence businesswoman, and returned a low-competence housewife.

Studies of the perceived competence of mothers are startling: In a recent Cornell University study, mothers were rated as less competent, less committed, less suitable for higher promotion and management training, and deserving of lower salaries when compared to other applicants (Correll & Benard, 2005). When presented with two identical job applicant resumés — one of a woman without children and the other of a woman with children — 84% of the study’s participants said they would hire the woman without children, but only 47% would hire the mother (Ibid.). The study also found that mothers were offered \$11,000 less in starting salary and were held to higher performance and attendance standards than women without children; fathers were actually held to *lower* standards of attendance and performance than non-fathers (Ibid.). These findings suggest that gender bias against mothers in the workplace may be common.

**Attribution and leniency bias.** Attribution bias occurs when people’s assumptions about causation track gender stereotypes. A common example of attribution bias is when a working mother who is away from her desk is assumed to be doing something related to her children, while a working man is assumed to be doing

something related to work — at a business meeting, for example. Leniency bias occurs when objective rules are applied rigidly to out-groups but lenient to in-groups. The supervisor of Shireen Walsh, whose hostile work environment case is described above, scrutinized Walsh’s schedule, but not her co-workers’ (*Walsh v. National Computer Systems*, 2003). When men and women encounter similar situations, men often are given the benefit of the doubt while mothers are forced to continuously prove their competence. The Cornell study found that mothers were held to longer hours and higher performance and punctuality standards than non-mothers, while the standards applied to fathers were lower (Correll & Benard, 2005).

**Gender wars.** Maternal wall stereotyping often pits women against women — working women with children against those without, working moms against stay-at-home moms, or even Ideal-Worker women against women experiencing family care responsibilities who are open about them at work. Again, *Walsh*: The supervisor who created the hostile work environment was a mother who (like Walsh) had a child whose persistent ear infections ultimately led her child to experience some hearing loss (Kaster, 2003). Why was this particular supervisor so harsh? We cannot know, but sometimes mothers who have played by the old rules feel sentiments such as: “Hey, I had this problem and I didn’t inconvenience anybody” or “Why should she have it all when I didn’t?” or “These moms are just reinforcing negative stereotypes about all women at work.” Could this supervisor have felt guilty about her child’s hearing loss? When all women are subject to gender stereotypes at work, the maternal wall often pits women against each other.

The popular lexicon of the “mommy wars” seems to caricature as catfights workplace interactions that can rise to the level of employment discrimination by women against other women. Struggles among women about gender (specifically, about the proper relationship of motherhood and employment) are rife with potential for gender discrimination. They are not, as is sometimes said, proof that “even the women don’t agree, so this can’t be about gender.”

## New Legal Trend: Lawsuits Challenging Family Responsibilities Discrimination (FRD)

Many women, rather than demurely opting out of the paid workforce, are challenging employers whom they feel have driven them out. In a recent study, the Center for WorkLife Law analyzed over 600 cases of family responsibilities discrimination (FRD) filed through 2005 (Still, 2006). (To date, the Center’s research has identified over 800 FRD cases.) The study showed that, while some cases involved male plaintiffs, 93% involved female plaintiffs, and while some involved elder care or care for ill family members, most involve caring for one’s children (Ibid.). FRD lawsuits have increased by roughly 400% in the last ten years, as compared with the prior ten — during a period when employment discrimination lawsuits in general fell by 23% (Ibid.). FRD plaintiffs are more likely to win than other employment discrimination plaintiffs, and potential liability is substantial: Of the over 600 cases the Center examined through the end of 2005, the mean award of damages was \$768,976 and the median just over \$100,000 (Ibid.), with the highest individual verdict standing at \$11.65 million and the highest class verdict standing at \$25 million (Ibid; Cynthia Calvert, personal communication, January 6, 2006).

Every federal circuit has heard FRD lawsuits, as have courts in 48 states and the District of Columbia (Still, 2006). One reason behind this strong legal trend may well be that FRD cases involve family values that appeal to judges across the political spectrum. One landmark opinion was written by the liberal Second Circuit judge Guido Calibresi, former dean of the Yale Law School (*Back v. Hastings on Hudson Union Free School Dist.*, 2004). Other important opinions were written by conservative Seventh Circuit judges Richard Posner and Richard Easterbrook (*Lust v. Sealy Inc.*, 2004; *Washington v. Illinois Dept. of Revenue*, 2005). The conservative U.S. Supreme Court has twice surprised commentators by issuing very pro-plaintiff opinions in cases most legal commentators were convinced the plaintiffs would lose. One was an FRD cases involving a man caring for his severely injured wife (*Nevada Department of Human Resources*

*v. Hibbs*, 2003); the other was a retaliation case that adopted the holding of *Washington v. Illinois*, the case involving the flex schedule of the mother with a Down’s Syndrome son (*Burlington Northern & Santa Fe Railway v. White*, 2006).

Of the 618 cases examined, about two-thirds (62%) of those bringing the cases were nonprofessionals, while about one-third were professionals (Still, 2006). The wide range of plaintiffs suggests that mothers at every income level hit the maternal wall. Cases involve mothers at every segment of the income distribution:

- low-wage workers such as grocery clerks and nurses aides;
- lower-wage pink-collar workers such as administrative assistants, customer service representatives, and saleswomen;
- blue-collar jobs such as police officers, firefighters, sanitation workers, probation officers;
- mid-level positions such as computer sales, nurses, school psychologists; and
- professional/managerial workers such as accountants, chemists, lawyers and executives (Williams & Calvert, 2006).

Another important difference between the Opt Out story line and the maternal wall story is that the latter — ironically — includes men. The maternal wall affects any worker, male or female, who seeks to play an active role in family caregiving of children, elders, or ill family members. This is why the more formal name for the maternal wall is family responsibility discrimination.

For example, Kevin Knussman, a Maryland state trooper, asked for 30-days of paid leave to care for his wife and newborn when his wife became ill during pregnancy. The state allowed paid sick leave for state employees who were the primary caregiver of a newborn. Yet Knussman was denied leave by an official who said that, as a man, he could not qualify

for the leave unless his wife was “in a coma or dead,” and “God made women to have babies and, unless [he] could have a baby there is no way [he] could be primary care[giver]” (*Knussman v. Maryland*, 2001, p. 629-30). Knussman received \$650,000 in damages and attorneys fees (Ibid.). This is hostile prescriptive stereotyping of men: an attempt to police Knussman into a traditional hands-off breadwinner role. Men who are not openly denied leave to which they are entitled under the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) and other laws or employer policies are often discouraged from taking leave, with the clear message that such leaves are only available for women. This can constitute illegal interference with the right to take leave under the FMLA.

### Choice or Discrimination? They Are Not Mutually Exclusive

The argument that women are opting out typically rests on the assumption that motherhood involves “a mother’s choice,” not discrimination. Yet choice and discrimination are not mutually exclusive. People who experience discrimination must still make choices within the reality of their lives, but a choice by someone stuck between a rock and a hard place cannot be considered a free choice or a choice based solely on the desires of the chooser, with no regard to the context in which that choice is made.

Mothers’ choices often occur within the context of family responsibilities discrimination. This analysis sheds new light on the common complaint that mothers are asking for “special treatment.” Sometimes, far from asking for special treatment, mothers are simply asking to be treated the same as other similarly situated co-workers.

At other times, as in *Washington v. Illinois*, mothers are seeking to remind courts and employers that “[c]ontext matters” — that while a schedule change at work “may make little difference to many workers,” including Ideal-Worker men, it “may matter enormously to a young mother with school age children” (*Burlington Northern & Santa Fe Railway v. White*, 2006, p. 2416). Recent caselaw

from the U.S. Supreme Court arguably insists that the employer take the employee as it finds her — in her real-life situation as the mother of a Down’s syndrome son, for example — rather than holding her to the outdated standard of an Ideal Worker without family care responsibilities.

Mothers need neither special treatment nor accommodation. Now that women make up 46% of the paid

workforce (U.S. Department of Labor, 2005), and 82% of women have children (Downs, 2003), nearly 38% of the workforce (82% of that 46%) are mothers who have to balance both work and family responsibilities. Courts may be signaling that it is time for employers to change workplace expectations to the workforce that exists today — a workforce that includes not only mothers, but also many other adults with family care responsibilities, notable fathers, baby boomers caring for their elderly parents, and workers with ill family members who are being scuttled out of hospitals ever sooner in order to control health care costs.

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Stories about family responsibilities discrimination have spiked in the months since the Center for WorkLife law released its July 2006 report on FRD litigation (“Litigating the Maternal Wall,” by Mary C. Still) – which was after the end date of our survey database of news articles. Among these was an article by Lisa Belkin, who has played such a central role in framing the Opt Out debate. Following the report’s publication, Belkin immediately picked up on the new trend, linking it with the recent flap over the Nassau County District Attorney who “cleaned house” by firing all part-time attorneys. Belkin’s was one of about 15 stories on family responsibilities discrimination published subsequent to the release of Still’s report. The press’s receptiveness to the FRD story may well signal its openness to new story lines around women and employment, if only experts are willing to take the time to provide the press with the data to back them up.

## CONCLUSION

## NEW STORY LINES TO TELL

*“And employers will think, ‘Why hire young girls? They’re just going to drop out when they have kids, anyway.’” (Cummins, 2006, March 28)*

*“My boss is not interested in the problems of professional women.” –Capitol Hill staffer*

The “Opt Out” story line has, for the most part, taken serious hold of the press, as our survey of newspaper coverage of work/family conflict reveals. Unfortunately, by excusing serious barriers to mother’s participation in the U.S. workforce as mothers’ own choices to “opt out,” the narrative has had negative impacts on public policy, on employer behavior, and on younger women. Recent stories about women and work that do not track the Opt Out story line are encouraging and signal that perhaps, with more accessible information, the stories can change.

**Impact on public policy.** Why is the U.S. so out of the loop in terms of supports for working families? The reasons are complex, but the Opt Out story line is one reason protections for working families have proved so hard to enact. “My boss is not interested in the problem of professional women,” one Capitol Hill staffer told us in response to inquiries about supports for working families. In fact, work/family conflict affects families with modest incomes even more harshly than it does professional women, as is discussed in this report.

**Impact on employers.** The Opt Out story line

has economic as well as political consequences. First, it confuses employers: One law firm partner in California, when asked why 83% of law firm partners are still men, opined, “It’s nothing the law firms are doing. These women just want to stay home.” The Opt Out story line reassures employers, contrary to the evidence, that inflexible workplaces and family responsibilities discrimination do not play a role in women’s decisions to leave. The Opt Out story has macro- as well as micro-economic consequences. As *The Economist* has recognized, a country in which women experience systematic deskilling will have a harder row to hoe in today’s increasingly competitive global economy (“Women and the world economy,” 2006).

**Impact on younger women.** Finally, the Opt Out story line does a profound disservice to younger women. It downplays the economic penalties associated with “taking a few years off,” as well as the difficulties of opting back in. It is silent about the fact that opting out is a risky strategy in a country where 50% of marriages end in divorce, and where stay-at-home moms are at serious risk of impoverishing themselves and their children should their marriage, as so many in the United States do, end in divorce.

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Hopeful signs have begun to emerge. Recently, *The New York Times* printed an op-ed describing the “other mothers” who cannot opt out: high-school educated moms whose workforce participation has risen sharply (from 40% to 58%) since 1996 (Gotbaum & Rankin, 2006). Judith Warner had a guest spot on the op-ed page in July, and wrote intelligent articles critiquing the ideology of intensive mothering and our lack of public policy supports for mothers (Warner, 2006). Lisa Belkin, the *Times* work/life columnist who coined “The Opt-Out Revolution,” wrote a column covering the sharp rise in lawsuits by mothers protesting family responsibilities discrimination (or FRD, which she christened “Fred”), covering another report from the Center for WorkLife Law (Belkin,

2006). Most recently, Judi Kantor documented the difficulty mothers have when they attempt to continue breastfeeding after they return to work (Kantor, 2006).

These are hopeful signs that the persistence of the Opt Out story line reflects more the failure of experts to disseminate their findings, than of the press. This Report is designed to provide busy reporters and editors alternative ways to cover work/family issues and issues of women’s workforce participation, by providing the relevant demographic and other data needed to replace the the current norm: cheerful tales of sequencing women celebrating traditional values, yet unrealistic about their ability to “opt” back in. These alternatives story lines include:

- **Workplace/workforce mismatch story.** Today’s workplaces are designed for a workforce that no longer exists. The story of the workplace/workforce mismatch documents the disconnect between today’s workforce, where 70% of families have all adults in the labor force, and an economy that still enshrines as ideal the “zero drag” worker without family responsibilities.
- **Macroeconomic deskilling story.** This story explores the consequences for American competitiveness of an economy that pays large sums to educate the many women who then find themselves driven out of good jobs and into bad ones by inflexible workplaces and family responsibilities discrimination.
- **How the inflexible, all-or-nothing workplace forces women — and men — into neotraditional roles.** A third story line would stress the way today’s all or nothing workplace tends to pressure American families into neotraditional breadwinner/housewife roles, with fathers working longer hours than they would like,

and mothers working fewer hours than they would like.

- **How the lack of supports for working families impedes work/family reconciliation.** When women quit because they cannot find adequate child care, they are quitting not because their “brains light up differently,” but because of the lack of supports for working families. Reporters attuned to the lack in the United States of the kinds of supports that are commonplace in other industrialized countries will find it easier to ask whether a woman would be choosing to “opt out” if she had paid maternity leave, her husband had parental leave he was expected to take, and if the family had a certain number of paid sick days so that every sick child did not precipitate a crisis. What if she had access to affordable high-quality child care; pre-K and afterschool programs; a workplace that allowed both her and her husband to cut back to 30 to 40 hours per week for proportional pay and advancement for part-time work; the right to request a flexible schedule; and a tax system that did not penalize two-earner families? What would she “choose” then?
- **How stereotyping and discrimination drives men into breadwinner roles and women out of them.** The fact that women make choices does not preclude the existence of discrimination. When women quit because they encounter maternal wall bias and stereotyping, or because their husbands encounter the expectation that they should not take leave because “your wife should do it,” they are not freely opting out — they are being pushed out by gender discrimination.

*USA Today* has shown a willingness to look beyond the standard Opt Out story to paint a more complex picture of work/family conflict in America. Compared to overall newspaper coverage of women opting out, *USA Today* was more likely to acknowledge the role of employer inflexibility in women’s decisions to opt out (70% vs. 34%). Just half of the *USA Today* articles have a noticeable emphasis on “pull” factors, compared to three-fourths of all articles. *USA Today* is also more likely to discuss the issue in terms of both mothers and fathers (especially in Generation X), putting increased importance on family, rather than just mothers. Its articles are more likely to mention husbands in the context of their role as a parent, rather than just as a breadwinner (50% vs. 33%). When *USA Today* presents statistics in these articles, it is more likely to include analysis or discussion of the data (90% of *USA Today* articles vs. 44% of all opt-out articles).

Why does the Opt Out story line exercise such a firm grip on most newspaper coverage of women and work? It may ring true to editors and reporters. Reporting is a notoriously long-hours profession, and newsrooms — to put it mildly — have not been at the forefront of family friendly policies. It may therefore be more comforting to answer the question of why many women do not reach the top with the response that they choose not to. But, as much of this report has tried to show with demographic and economic data, we must begin to part with what is “comforting” and instead try to reach for what may be closer to the truth: that structural inflexibilities, outdated models of the “ideal worker” and unfair discrimination are impacting women’s abilities to remain in the workforce as mothers.

These alternative story lines are not rocket science.

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# APPENDIX

## METHODOLOGY

Our goal for this report was to examine how the media (specifically U.S. newspapers) cover work/life issues in the context of mothers “opting out” of the workforce.

### Article Search Process and Results

To obtain articles for this report, we conducted a search in LexisNexis Academic using the following search terms:

Women or mother (Headline, Lead paragraph(s), Terms)

Work or employment (Headline, Lead paragraph(s), Terms)

Stay home (Full text)

Child (within results)

These terms were selected because they provided results that were closest to the type of article we were looking for. We reviewed all search results and removed articles that did not fit into our criteria — namely, an overall focus on women leaving the workforce.

We searched major U.S. newspapers and regional papers (midwest, northeast, southeast, west) for the date range of January 1, 1980 through March 10, 2006.

### Articles Included

A complete list of the 119 articles selected for inclusion in our report is included at the end of this Appendix.

### Articles Not Included

As a result of the search criteria we established, the following articles are not included in our report: those printed after March 10, 2006; columns or other opinion pieces; and articles from sources other than the U.S. daily newspapers that are part of the LexisNexis database. (Full-text Wall Street Journal articles are not available from LexisNexis and therefore are not included.)

There are many columnists who write regularly on work/life balance issues, including Ellen Goodman (*The Boston Globe*), Sue Shellenbarger (*Wall Street Journal*), Carol Kleiman (*Chicago Tribune*), and Lisa Belkin (*The New York Times*) whose articles are not part of our analysis, which was limited to straight news stories.

Also, at times we refer to additional articles that were not found in our LexisNexis search (mainly because the date or publication fell outside our parameters) where they serve to illustrate an aspect of the Opt Out story line.

### Content Analysis of Articles

Analysis of the set of 119 articles was performed by Jessica Manvell, co-author of this report, and two UC Hastings law student research assistants, Matthew Melamed and Angela Perone. Ms. Manvell reviewed all coding done by research assistants to ensure consistency between coders. All articles were also read by lead author Joan Williams.

Coders were provided with a list of items to look for in each article, most of which were objective (e.g., section the article appeared in, mentions of husbands, references to inflexible employers). Some coding items were more subjective, such as

identifying whether the overall tone was one of “pulls” toward home, workplace “pushes,” or an even balance of the two. For this the coders were given guidance prior to and during coding.

Coders answered the same set of questions (included below) for each article. Results were then combined into one spreadsheet making it possible to calculate overall percentages for the articles as well as for subsets of articles from certain newspapers, regions, and so on.

To resolve questions that arose after the initial coding, researchers conducted keyword searches in a PDF document that contained the full text of all 119 articles.

## Coding Questions

### Newspaper section

Does the article appear in the Lifestyle/Features section?

Does the article appear in the Business/Finance section?

Does the article appear in the News section?

Does the article appear in the Sunday paper?

### Headline

Does the headline fit the “push” theme?

Does the headline fit the “pull” theme?

Is the headline neutral?

### First story featured in article

Is the first mother’s story told in the article a “push” story?

Is the first mother’s story told in the article a “pull” story?

### Use of data

Does the article cite statistics?  
*(i.e., from Census)*

In addition to mentioning statistics, does the article go further and discuss, analyze, or question the statistics?

Does the article include (direct quote or reference to) the opinions of economists?

### Representation of husbands

Does the article mention a husband in the context of his role as a breadwinner? *(makes it possible for the woman to stay home)*

Does the article mention a husband in the context of his role as a parent? *(doing parental/caregiving/household tasks)*

Does the article mention a husband as being involved in the wife’s decision to stay home?

Does the article not mention husbands at all?

### Representation of mothers

Is the article chiefly or exclusively about professional women?

Does the article mention single mothers or divorce?

Does the article appear to lump part-time or mommy track workers in with stay-at-home moms (SAHMs)?  
*(i.e., if you’re not a full-time ideal worker you’ve opted out)*

### Context of women’s decisions

Does the article imply that women are being realistic when they opt out? *(i.e., expressing the sentiment that women are getting real – the reality is that they can’t do both things, so have to opt out)*

Does the article refer to a betrayal or failure of feminism? *(i.e., article discusses the idea that feminism has failed or that SAHMs have betrayed feminist efforts)*

Does the article refer to a return to traditional roles? *(i.e., SAHMs more respected now, women deciding it is the right thing to do)*

Does the article refer to SAHMs as a class or status symbol?

### Returning to work

Is the article unrealistic about women’s return to work? *(i.e., mentions that those opting out plan to return to work without acknowledging barriers)*

Does the article mention the cost of opting out to women’s careers, future earnings, or savings?

Does the article mention the concept of “sequencing” or moving in and out of the workforce?

### The role of external factors

Does the article mention the gender wage gap?

Does the article mention discrimination?

Does the article mention employer inflexibility?

Does the article mention that a husband’s busy/demanding job makes it difficult for his wife to work?

### Overall tone

Is the overall tone of the article one of “pushes”?

Is the overall tone of the article one of “pulls”?

Are pushes and pulls evenly represented in the article?

## LIST OF OPT OUT NEWSPAPER ARTICLES (N=119)

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