

The Opt- OUT REVOLUTION

On October 26, 2003 a photograph of a sophisticated woman cradling a baby in her arms graced the cover of *The New York Times Magazine*. “Why Don’t More Women Get to the Top?” the headline splashing across the cover asked. The magazine’s answer: “They Choose Not To.”

The Pull of Motherhood Inside the magazine, journalist Lisa Belkin examined what she called the “Opt-Out Revolution,” or many women’s decision to “opt out”—choose to leave—the paid labor force to become stay-at-home parents. For her story, Belkin interviewed a dozen women, all high achievers. Eight were Princeton graduates and members of the same Atlanta book club. Belkin also interviewed four mothers from a San Francisco playgroup, three of whom had MBAs. All had “opted out” of successful careers to raise their children.

“There is nothing wrong with money or power,” Belkin argues, but for women “they come at a high price.” According to

Belkin, women are becoming more inclined to define success in terms of balance, satisfaction, and sanity. For this reason, she argues, some working mothers are making the choice to prioritize family over work.

“I don’t want to be on the fast track leading to a partnership at a prestigious law firm,” said one of Belkin’s interviewees, a lawyer who left her career to stay home with three children. “Some people define that as success. I don’t.” Another of Belkin’s interviewees, also a lawyer, stated “This is what I was meant to do . . . I like life’s rhythms when I’m nurturing a child.”

Belkin acknowledges that her pool of mothers is not representative. In her own words, she describes them as “elite, successful women who can afford real choice.” All had health insurance and husbands who earned substantial salaries. To be sure, this sample does not represent the majority of American mothers.

Still, “the Opt-Out Revolution” initiated a storm of news articles reinforcing the idea that women were increasingly choosing family over work. The articles left many people wondering if personal choice and the pull of family were enough to explain why some women decide to stay home.

Opting Out or Pushed Out? According to sociologist Pamela Stone, professional women who leave the workforce may have fewer options than it seems. Stone conducted in-depth interviews with 54 high-achieving women from a variety of professions—such as law, medicine, and publishing. She found that the reasons that women return home are far more complex than “the Opt-Out Revolution” suggests.

In addition to the pull of family, Stone found that mixed messages from husbands and employers often effectively pushed women from the workplace. For example, many women reported that their husbands

The vast majority of American women struggle to balance their life at home with the demands of work.



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offered emotional support but did not contribute equally to household chores. Nor did husbands scale back their own careers for the sake of family.

Likewise, many of Stone's interviewees reported that their workplaces claimed to be "family friendly" but were really "all or nothing" work environments. For example, many workplaces offered a variety of supports, such as flexible workweeks, but women felt that taking full advantage of such benefits carried significant penalties in career advancement. Moreover, all but seven of Stone's interviewees cited features of their jobs, such as long hours and travel, as major motivating factors for quitting. As one marketing executive put it, her full-time workweek was "really 60 hours, not 40. Nobody works nine-to-five anymore."

Balancing work and family is one of the most challenging aspects of being an adult in American society, for both men and women. In this chapter, you will learn more about how these and other major factors shape adult roles and experiences.

What do you think?

1. What are some of the reasons that mothers leave the workplace? Why do they stay?
2. In what ways do you think men and women might experience the struggle to balance work with family life differently?