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GENDER & WORK:

CHALLENGING CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

WORK/FAMILY

GENDER & WORK

“OPTING OUT”

Challenging Stereotypes and Creating Real Options for Women in the Professions

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“Opting out”? As we mark the 50th anniversary of the admission of women to Harvard Business School, it’s hard to believe that we’re talking about “opting out,” but we are. While women now make up the majority share of professional and managerial employment (51 percent), and have for some time, they remain underrepresented among leaders and top earners in these fields. In recent years, we’ve celebrated other anniversaries—anniversaries marking the passage of landmark legislation designed to promote gender equity and the larger goal of gender equality: the 40th anniversary of Title IX (passed in 1972), the 20th anniversary of the Family and Medical Leave Act (passed in 1993), and soon to come, the 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act (Title VII, passed in 1964). Yet decades later, women make up only 14 percent of executive officers and 8 percent of top earners at Fortune 500 firms. In medicine, they comprise just 20 percent of full professors and in law, 21 percent of law school deans and 15 percent of equity partners. Moreover, progress in closing the gender gap appears to have stalled on a number of fronts since the 1990s (Cotter et al., 2007).

A variety of factors account for the persistent gender gap in the upper reaches of the professions. One is career interruption, which is especially costly in these high-knowledge fields characterized by step-like promotion trajectories. Women in the professions, including mothers, have very high rates of labor force participation (Percheski, 2008), but some portion of this group does take time out. Recently, from a cross-sectional or snapshot view, about 20 percent of white, non-Hispanic college-educated married mothers report being home taking care of family as their primary activity (Reimers & Stone, 2008). From a longer or longitudinal perspective, twice as many—approximately 40 percent—have ever taken a career break for family-related reasons. For example, a study, published in the *Harvard Business Review*, of highly qualified professionals ages 28-55 found that 43 percent of mothers reported having had a break in their career, typically for family (Hewlett & Luce, 2005).

Women with impressive training and credentials do interrupt their careers in significant numbers, but we do not know, beyond the shorthand of “family,” what accounts for these voluntary—and costly—workforce exits. Over the last decade, an explanation known as “opting out” has gained particular traction and prominence. Under this scenario, women are said to be embracing so-called neo-traditional values and to prefer—and choose—family over professional accomplishment. In the past, women, especially educated women, were home by default; today, with lots of options, women are said to be affirmatively and proactively favoring family over career.

“Opting out” has been widely disseminated in the popular media, in mainstream and high-profile publications that reach a broad audience (Kuperberg & Stone, 2008). As analysis of this content makes clear, the media identify “opting out” with white professional women—elites, not Everywoman. Women who “opt out” have become a recognizable type or stereotype. As we learn from other papers presented at this conference, stereotypes are powerful in shaping attitudes and behaviors, and they are often misleading.

Think for a moment about your own perceptions of this group of women. My perception, or rather misperception, is what led me, in part, to do my research on the subject. It involved a woman I’ll call Ann, a fellow soccer mom, a “stay-at-home” mom to my “working” mom. In my town, as in many, it is customary at the end of the soccer (or any sport) season for parents to take up a collection, organized in this instance by Ann, to buy the volunteer coaches—fellow parents—a present. After the final game, Ann made a gracious speech expressing our appreciation. As she came off the field, parents complimented her on it. She paused, turned, and to no one in particular said “I guess a law degree from Yale is good for something.” Until that moment, I had no idea that Ann had a law degree from one of the finest schools in the country and while I thought highly of Ann, I had to admit that I was surprised by her announcement. It was a moment of cognitive dissonance for me. And from her comment, I think it was for Ann as well, who seemed puzzled and perhaps a little discontented.

It was to better understand women like Ann and the decisions they had made, and to link those decisions back to the larger issue of persistent gender inequality, that I designed my study. Briefly (for details, see Stone, 2007), I studied high-achieving women, recruited primarily from informal alumnae networks of four highly selective colleges and universities and their referrals. To be eligible for the study, women had to fit the “opt-out” scenario, which meant that they needed to be married, with children younger than 18 living at home, to have formerly worked in a professional or managerial job, and to be at home full-time at the time of the interview. Because I was interested in learning about these women’s complex work and family histories, as well as about their own understandings and motivations, I designed a qualitative study in which I conducted in-depth life history interviews that averaged two hours in length. I talked with 54 women who lived in cities across the United States. Almost all were white, with a few of Hispanic or Asian background. I made a point of talking with women who had worked in a variety of professions rather than focusing on only one. The majority of women in my sample, however, had worked in male-dominated fields such as business and law, reflecting the career paths chosen by women of their profile, 1980s and 1990s graduates of elite schools.

The question guiding my study was what drives these women’s decisions to quit? I wanted to look not only at the obvious—kids and family—but also at other family pulls and at workplace pushes. Full results are reported in Stone (2007), from which the results presented in this paper are taken unless otherwise indicated. Because this conference is about challenging conventional wisdom about gender and work, I want to frame my key findings around five of the most powerful myths and misconceptions surrounding women who “opt out.”

Myth #1: They’re traditional

Women who “opt out” are characterized as holding traditional gender values, for example valuing domesticity over professional accomplishment and aspiring to the traditional family form of male breadwinner and stay-at-home wife. The reality is that while the women in my study were at home and living in a traditional family, they were surprised to be there. Nine out of ten aspired to combine careers and family, as illustrated by Marina, 43, a former executive in the health care field who told me: “I always assumed that I was going to work when I had children and I didn’t understand why anyone wouldn’t.” Furthermore, as women talked about their decision to quit, typically a long and difficult one, they voiced decidedly unflattering perceptions of at-home moms, further underscoring the idea that they did not aspire to this role nor see women at home as role models. Meg, 41, a former trader, made this observation: “There’s this perception that women who stay at home are empty and all they do is country club and manicure and all that. That’s the image you have of at-home mothers when you’re a working woman.” Finally, once women had made the typically reluctant decision to quit their careers, their experiences transitioning home belie the idea that home was their preferred destination. While they were happy to be able to see and spend

more time with their children, as well as to have more time for themselves, far from feeling “at home” at last, they talked about feeling dislocated. Typical of this was Rachel, 40, a former trader, who said, “I find it extremely hard on my self-esteem and my ego. People ask you, ‘What do you do?’” Or Maeve, 52, a former lawyer, who told me, “It was like all of a sudden I didn’t exist. You know, six months ago I was working in the U.S. Attorney’s office and my name was in *The New York Times*. Now I’m nobody.” They also talked about their concern that they were not being the kind of role model—a working mom—that they wanted to be for their children, especially their daughters. Thus, while living a life that appeared traditional on the surface, these women were contemporary in their aspirations and preferences for a life that integrated work and family.

Myth #2: They’re not competent—or ambitious

As I listened to women’s life stories, starting in detail from college, what I heard were women with a strong goal orientation and, yes, that sometimes dirty word, ambition. They applied to the best schools and sought out fields where they felt opportunities were emerging for women, neither shying away from competition nor retreating into safe niches. Half obtained advanced degrees, typically from top schools in their fields, many in male-dominated fields—in which, as I reported earlier, two-thirds had formerly worked. With regard to their careers, women pursued them an average of 11 years before quitting. Their work histories showed steady upward, often rapid, ascent to positions of responsibility and authority. Their own lives of demonstrated achievement thus refute the notions that they either lacked ambition or were not competent and reveal instead that these were women on the fast track.

Myth #3: They quit because of family

This is perhaps the biggest myth, and women are somewhat complicit in perpetuating it. When I asked women in my study how they explained their decision to quit to their bosses and coworkers, most said that they gave family reasons. Typical was Trudy, 42, a former IT manager, who explained: “I lied! ‘Oh, I’m not unhappy with my job, it’s because of the baby.’” Telling a little white lie in favor of family was the expected, gender-consistent, and unquestioned rationale that provided safe cover, left the door open to future employment and/or favorable references, and maintained good relations with valued former colleagues.

In reality, women left their jobs because of their workplaces, not their families. Ninety percent cited workplace problems, chief among which was long hours. Thus Nathalie, 39, a former international marketing executive in the software industry, made the observation: “The high-tech work week is really 60 hours, not 40. Nobody works 9 to 5 anymore.” Related and also frequent were reports of rigid, inflexible workplaces where a common refrain was that jobs were “all or nothing.”

To cope with long hours and continue with their careers after having children, women sought reduced hours and most were successful in obtaining them (though a small fraction were denied). Two-thirds of the women in my study worked reduced hours, part-time or job-sharing, before quitting. But what they thought would be the solution became the problem. One-third of women reported what has been called “hours creep,” part-time arrangements that evolved into close to full time. Mirra, 37, a former engineer, turned down a part-time option because, as she observed based on experience in her firm: “There’s no overtime pay. I would have been in a position where I might be ‘working 20 hours,’ but really working 40.”

The bigger problem, cited by three-quarters of women, was shortcomings in their reduced-hours options (Stone and Hernandez, forthcoming). Women talked of a constellation of factors that involved marginalization, stigmatization, and career plateauing or mommy-tracking. Women

saw many of the significant responsibilities of their jobs taken away when they switched to shorter hours, and with them the parts of their jobs they enjoyed and which made full use of their skills and talents. They perceived themselves to be stigmatized, second-class citizens, not holding their weight. Blair, 56, a former lawyer, admitted that, “I didn’t have the guts to say ‘I’m working part time.’” She likened working part-time to illness: “It’s something like a cold. It’ll pass or you leave.” Finally, women who had heretofore enjoyed steady promotions throughout their careers suddenly found themselves stalled once they went to reduced hours. Patricia, a 44 year-old former lawyer, spoke for most of the women in my study when she reflected on her experience working part-time: “I just felt I would be a nobody if I quit. Well, I was sort of a nobody working [part time] too. So, it was sort of, ‘Which nobody do you want to be?’” Thus, companies granted reduced-hour options to women in order to retain them but designed these options in ways that had the opposite effect: actively disincentivizing women who wanted to continue with their careers.

Myth #4: They’ll only leave anyway

True, the women in my study did leave, but it is useful to look at the larger context in which their decisions to leave were being made. Throughout their narratives, at different points across their careers, women reported signals telling them that as women—and actual or potential mothers—they were flight risks. Holly, 39, a former publicist, put it succinctly: “On announcing I was pregnant, the expectation was ‘Baby—gone.’” Women frequently remarked of their male colleagues that they all had stay-at-home wives, further reinforcing the idea that mother’s place was at home, not the office. If motherhood was associated with quitting, it was also associated with reduced hours and flexible work options. As Christine, 40, a former marketing executive explained, “When you job share, you have MOMMY stamped in huge letters on your head.” The association between motherhood and flight on the one hand and between motherhood and flexible work on the other linked flexible work to flight and created a self-fulfilling prophecy. Signs of this can be seen in Nathalie’s (39-year old former marketing executive) recounting of what happened in her company after she announced she was pregnant: “I mean I started to hear through the rumor mill that they weren’t counting on me coming back. According to a friend of mine who was very connected, and she said to me, ‘You know, the management really doesn’t want to see you back.’”

Women persevered in their careers despite unsupportive circumstances. Sixty percent worked well past their second birth, until their youngest child was school-age, quitting on average, as noted earlier, after 11 years. And not to be overlooked are the considerable efforts these women made to continue working. Over two-thirds (including those whose requests were refused) were willing to be innovators and risk-takers, pioneers and tokens in working reduced hours or otherwise working flexibly, even if ultimately unsuccessful. Finally, and perhaps most profoundly, these women, by virtue of being married to other highly successful professionals, attempted to continue with their careers even though they did not “have to work” for financial reasons and could entertain an option—quitting work entirely—open to relatively few.

Myth #5: They work for bad companies

While we might like to believe that these women’s experiences reflect the practices of a few bad apples, the reality is that the women I studied worked for so-called “employers of choice,” the best companies, ones that routinely (as women frequently and rather cynically told me) won “best company” accolades from *Working Mother*, *Fortune*, and the like. The avowed goal of these companies is, indeed, to be the best places to work, including providing supportive environments for working mothers and employees in general. As has already been discussed, their efforts fell short with regard to the design of reduced-hour and flexible options. Features of the way in which companies implemented these options also contributed to their failure. First, flexible work op-

tions were almost universally granted at the discretion of managers, not as a right or according to uniform, company-wide policy. Managers changed their minds, turned over rapidly, and otherwise subverted larger company policy in favor of flexibility and reduced hours. Second, to the extent that these options were associated with motherhood, they incurred the well-documented stigma and devaluation that accompanies that role and status (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). Third, flexible options were dispensed as a privately-brokered special favor, often positioned as a reward, and often cloaked in implicit secrecy—“between you and me.” Being in the closet heightened the whiff of stigma attached to them. The failure to fully institutionalize flexible work options as part of company culture and organization meant that they were inherently fragile and unviable.

Myths in the Context of Real Lives

How did these findings, reflecting the collective experiences of many women in my study, play out in the lives of individual women? I identified five stages of career investment and disengagement. The first, during women’s early to mid-20s, is a period of seamless transition from elite colleges to elite jobs. The second, taking them from their late 20s to mid-30s, is an equally fluid period of career advancement. In both these stages, women are positively reinforced in their careers. It is in the third stage, as they undertake to combine motherhood with career (roughly in their late 20s to late 30s), that they begin to experience mixed messages—valued employees but potential flight risks, for example. By the time they move to the fourth stage, working reduced hours in order to maintain their careers, signals turn decidedly negative, and women exited mid-career, roughly in their late 30s to early 40s.

But there’s a next stage, and I am exploring it now in a follow-up study of this same sample of women, whom I am re-interviewing approximately 10 years later. This study is currently underway, and my results are preliminary, but those I have re-interviewed (60 percent of the original sample) match the original sample on key demographics. At the time of the first interview, I asked women about their plans to return to work. Two-thirds indicated that they planned to return. In the follow-up, two-thirds in fact have. Of those who are working, half are working full-time and half part-time. While there is some continuity from earlier intentions to present behavior, there is a marked change in what women are doing. In the first interview, 65 percent worked in prestigious male-dominated professions—business, law, medicine, engineering, and the like. Currently, only 25 percent do, the rest having moved into female-dominated fields and industries such as education and non-profit management. Typifying this shift is Amanda, who worked as a lawyer and is now teaching, and Meg, who worked as a trader and is now working as a development officer for a non-profit. None have returned to their former employer. After interruption, these results suggest, women attempt to resume and rebuild their careers, but do so by redirecting, with a large fraction effectively starting over.

Myths, Implications, and Recommendations

By taking a closer look, and not taking either their actions or their explanations at face value, my research sheds light on women who “opted out,” laying bare the myths and misconceptions surrounding them. These myths, with their focus on individual women and their presumed “choices” and preferences, obscure the more influential role played by inflexible, unresponsive workplaces that limit, rather than expand, women’s options. “Opting out” imagery also obscures and renders invisible the very real costs borne by women in deploying this strategy. The very language of “opting out” and associated strategies—sequencing (taking time out around childbearing; the old name for what’s now called “opting out”), off-ramping (a corporate synonym), and downshifting (a strategy for women who continue working, but move to less fast-paced jobs more accommodating of family)—all convey images of frictionless flow, facility, and optimization. Yet, as my research

reveals, the truth is the exact opposite. Women faced limited options at work. They failed to realize their aspirations for combining career and family. They suffered a profound loss of identity, not to mention earnings and economic independence. They resumed their careers, but often with considerable redirection to fields less prestigious and less lucrative than their former ones. Theirs were not stories of flow, but of dislocation and personal cost. Employers bore costs too: the loss of highly skilled professional talent, the loss of diverse voices and experiences, and, because women left mid-career just as they were poised for ascent, they loss of women’s leadership.

My research reveals a convergence of interests—women want to continue with their careers and have families; employers want to keep them. This convergence opens the possibility for forging a true win-win solution, but to do so we need policies that promote career continuity, not interruption. We need stay, not leave, policies that enable women to opt in, not out. By making it possible for women to realize their dreams, we also make it possible for we, as a society, to realize our dream of moving closer to gender parity.

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