The least worst choice: Why mothers “opt” out of the workforce

by Judith Stadtman Tucker, December 2003

Why don’t women get to the top? According to a recent cover story for the New York Times magazine, it’s because the bright young women who were poised to take over the world would rather be at home with their kids than climbing the corporate ladder (Lisa Belkin, The Opt Out Revolution, October 26, 2003).

The New York Times could have featured a serious investigation of systemic factors that limit the upward mobility of mothers in the workplace. Or a more philosophical piece about why our society is still locked into the idea that mothers, above all others, are responsible for caring for the nation’s children and how this attitude impacts women both in and outside the workplace. Even an in-depth commentary about how U.S. social policy lets down working families time and time again would be welcome. Instead, the Times gave pride of place to an article that resorts to pop science to make a case that mothers – even the really brainy ones – are biologically hard-wired to prioritize caregiving over competition.

Perhaps the editors were hungry for the controversy that followed the publication of Belkin’s story, or perhaps they were simply content to minimize the issue of women’s inequality in the professional arena by writing it off as a product of maternal behavior. Either way, The Opt Out Revolution fails to shed new light on the issue it purports to address: the scarcity of women in political, corporate and academic leadership. “Why don’t women run the world?” Belkin ponders. “Maybe it’s because they don’t want to.”

Or maybe it’s because the world doesn’t want women running things.

The Motherhood Factor

Belkin’s article — and other recent reports in the popular media — might have us convinced there is indeed an Alarming National Trend of educated, middle-class mothers abandoning professional careers to take over the messy business of raising their children at home. In fact, the probability a mother will participate in the paid labor force increases with her level of education — over 78 percent of mothers with a graduate or professional degree are in the paid workforce, and they are three times as likely to work full-time as to work part-time. So if the fundamental question about the future of women’s leadership is “What’s become of our best and brightest young women?” it appears that most of them are at the office, whether they happen to have had a baby or not.

However, as Joan Williams notes in her book Unbending Gender: Why Family and Work Conflict and What To Do About It, having all the right talent and training to excel in a career may not be enough to bring mothers into the mainstream of professional achievement. Success in today’s workplace depends on an employee’s capacity to meet her employer’s need for labor on demand – meaning that the most valued workers are those who can work long hours any day of the week, at any time of day or night, without interruption from personal responsibilities outside the job.

For mothers – who, by contemporary cultural standards, are still expected to carry the primary burden of family care – conforming to the uncompromising grind of the “ideal” worker is nearly impossible. According to Williams, mothers on the professional career track face “Three unattractive choices. They remain in a good job that keeps them away from home 10 to 12 hours a day, or they take a part-time [job] with depressed wages, few benefits and no advancement. Or they quit.”
Women continue to enter elite professions at a growing rate; a recent study on transitions in the U.S. workforce reports that women are now more likely than men to work at “professional or managerial” occupations. But only a fraction of women are reaching the upper ranks – partly due to garden-variety gender discrimination, but many also run into a barrier Williams describes as “the maternal wall”. Williams and other scholars studying work-life conflict are adamant that paid work and motherhood need not be inherently incompatible, and argue that cultural attitudes about women, work and family have generated workplace practices that consistently marginalize mothers and others with normal caregiving obligations.

Cultural resistance to mothers remaining in the paid workforce is less strident today than it was in the 1970s and ‘80s, but it hasn’t disappeared. A 2002 survey of wage and salaried workers found that two out of every five male employees — and almost as many female employees — agreed with the statement that “men should earn the money and women should stay at home minding the house and children” (in 1977, only 26 percent of men felt it was appropriate for women to work outside the home).

The same study found that women in dual-earner couples with children were considerably more likely than women in dual-earner couples without children to feel that mom should do the care work while dad handles the money work (48 percent versus 34 percent). The authors of the report duly noted that “the challenge or anticipated challenge of raising children apparently induces a change of attitude, if not employment behavior, in some people.”

“It is really about work.”

As one of the Ivy League educated mothers interviewed for The Opt Out Revolution observes, “The exodus of professional women from the workplace isn’t really about motherhood at all. It is really about work.” Several other women profiled in Belkin’s article openly admitted that their departure from the workforce was precipitated by an employer’s refusal to negotiate a more family-friendly schedule. Even for women contemplating an exit from less prestigious jobs, the inexorable pull of maternal love may only play a small role in the decision to leave the workforce.

As Americans advance into the 21st century, access to new technology lets us work smarter — but we are also working harder. Despite a consistent preference among employed adults for shorter working hours — most would like to spend around 35 hours a week on the job — hours of work continue to increase in the U.S. as companies trim down staffing (and payroll costs) in order to survive prevailing economic conditions. Dual-earner couples with children under 18 worked an average of 91 hours a week in 2002, up from 81 hours a week in 1977. Fathers in dual-earner couples spend an average of 51.3 hours a week of paid and unpaid time on work related to their jobs, and mothers’ weekly hours of job-related work increased from 37.8 in 1977 to 42.8 in 2002.

Not surprisingly, levels of stress from work/life conflict are also on the rise. Employees with families report significantly higher levels of interference between their jobs and family lives than they did 25 years ago (45 percent in 2002 versus 34 percent in 1977), and men with families report higher levels of interference between their jobs and their family lives than women.

It’s not only moms and dads who are feeling the pain of the American way of work. A September 2003 report from The Conference Board, an international organization tracking corporate and employment issues, found that less than half of all U.S. workers are happy with their jobs. Employees reported the least satisfaction with their employer’s promotion policy and bonus plan. But only one out of every three workers was satisfied with their company’s plans for health care coverage, pensions, flexible time or family leave.

While all groups of workers reported lower levels of job satisfaction in 2003 than they had previous years, the steepest decline occurred for those between the ages of 35 and 44 — job satisfaction for this
group slipped from 61 percent in 1995 to 47 percent in 2003. It may not be entirely coincidental that workers in this age range tend to be smack dab in the middle of their most active parenting years — and this is especially true for professional women, who are increasingly likely to delay child-bearing until their early or mid-30s.

Workers employed by businesses with more supportive work/life practices and cultures are more likely to be satisfied with their jobs and life in general, and express higher levels of commitment to their employers. However, the 2002 National Study of the Changing Workforce found that employer's progress in adopting family-friendly practices and attitudes has been steady over the last two decades, but slow. With the exception of additional services and programs to help workers balance their jobs with responsibilities for elder care the study found there has not been a significant increase in other types of employer-implemented programs to reduce work/family conflict in the last decade.

Even if work-life supports on the job are gradually improving, a recent news report in USA Today highlighted several new industry studies that suggest nearly one-third of U.S. companies are downsizing their family-friendly programs in response to high levels of unemployment. As the pressure to retain talent recedes, employers are scaling back options for telecommuting, flexible schedules and job sharing. According to the article, a group of industry experts concluded that, “with 9 million people out of work, companies no longer need to offer varied benefits to attract and retain workers.”

As work hours escalate and the number of family-friendly programs employers offer remain stagnant or decline, employed mothers often find themselves in an untenable situation. For married couples, men's commitment to longer hours of paid work — and their limited contribution to carework at home — is often justified by their higher earnings. But something's got to give, and it's usually mom — her time, long term economic security, physical and mental well-being, and aspirations for getting ahead on the job are all up for grabs in the dispiriting shuffle of priorities we call “balancing” work and family.

Cutting back to a part-time schedule may seem like an ideal solution for easing work/life stress in families who can still make ends meet with one or both wage-earners working less than full-time. A 2000 survey by the Alfred C. Sloan Center at the University of Chicago found that nearly two-thirds of mothers who worked full-time would have preferred to work part-time, and one-half of all mothers who were out of the paid labor force would have preferred part-time paid employment to staying at home full-time. But the part-time option is not without a downside. In 2002, three out of every five employees who worked for organizations that employ part-time workers reported that part-timers received less than pro rata pay and benefits compared to full-time employees in the same positions just because they work part-time.

When it comes to managing the conflicting demands of work and family, affluent married mothers who can afford to hop on and off the career track at will have a definite advantage — for most single-parent and dual-earner families, reducing or forgoing one parent's wages in the interest of “putting family first” is not a realistic option. As author and career coach Elizabeth Wilcox emphasizes in her 2003 book The Mom Economy, women with post-graduate education and advanced professional skills have considerably more bargaining power when it comes to negotiating family-friendly work arrangements with employers. However, she also notes that even the most qualified workers must be prepared to make substantial trade-offs in terms of wages, professional prestige and quality assignments in order to land a good part-time or flexible time position.

In other words: no matter what you bring to the table, if you want a good job with good pay and good opportunities for advancement — and you also want time to have a fully-developed family or personal life — you are pretty much out of luck. As Wilcox remarks, “I can’t tell you how many women I come across who are so disgruntled with the state of the workforce and the existing inequalities that it leaves them in a state of paralysis.”
The Other Big Picture

One major reason work and family conflict in America is because our social policies – which are a direct reflection of the national ethos — run contrary to having it any other way. Other than sustained efforts by feminist organizations to secure workers’ rights to parental and medical leave and expand access to affordable child care, easing the strain the system puts on working women with children has not been a matter of political urgency.

The peculiar reluctance to actively address the issue of working families in the United States results from a muddled confluence of ideology about women, work, family, children, personal responsibility and the power of the free market to serve the true needs of the people. According to Dr. Sheila Kamerman of the Clearinghouse on International Developments in Child, Youth & Family Policies at Columbia University, the U.S. sends “mixed messages about how to balance work and family life. We believe that it is in the best interest of our children to be with their mothers when they are very young, and more recently, have come to see the benefits of fathers spending time with their young children. We also believe that it is the responsibility of both parents to contribute to the economic well being of their families. Yet we continue to hold back from putting policies in place that will allow working mothers, and fathers, to succeed in both the workplace and at home.”

Although a 1998 survey found that 82 percent of women and 75 percent of men “favored the idea of developing a new insurance program that would give families some income when a worker takes a family or medical leave,” the U.S. remains one of only two wealthy nations that lack a national program to fund paid parental leave for working men and women. Australia, the other laggard in the paid leave department, offers working women up to 52 weeks of unpaid, job protected leave for the birth and care of a newborn. The 12 weeks of unpaid parental leave guaranteed to American workers who qualify under the provisions of the 1993 Family and Medical Leave Act seem downright skimpy compared to the benefits provided to working families in Western Europe.

31 states are currently studying the feasibility of implementing paid leave programs. In 2002, California became the first state in the nation to pass legislation providing up to 6 weeks of wage replacement benefits to workers who take time off work to care for a seriously ill child, spouse, parent, domestic partner, or to bond with a new child. However, the national campaign for paid leave – which is coordinated by the National Partnership for Women and Families, an organization that was instrumental in securing the passage of the FMLA — suffered a serious setback in October 2003 when President George W. Bush revoked the “Baby UI” rule – an experimental regulation that allowed states to tap into unemployment funds to cover wage replacement for leave takers who were caring for a newborn or newly adopted child.

The campaign for universal, affordable child care – which was a centerpiece of the feminist agenda in the 1960s – is now so politically untouchable that advocates have been forced to “reframe” the public debate to focus on universal access to “early childhood education.” Child care remains a problem issue, and not just because Americans remain uneasy about young children being cared for by someone other than their mothers (despite the regular bashing child care takes in the media, nearly every reliable study has shown that a moderate amount of high-quality non-parental care is, in many cases, beneficial to the academic readiness and social development of young children). A more immediate concern is the economic marginalization of low-income female workers – often mothers themselves — who typically provide child care for more affluent families. On the other hand, low-income families spend as much as 25 percent of their household earnings on childcare, and in some urban areas, low-income families spend more on center-based day care for their young children than they do on housing.
So far, the private sector has failed to produce an acceptable solution to address the fact that when parents must work, someone else has to take care of their children. But don’t expect the state to step in to pick up the slack any time soon. Lurking in the shadows of our national mentality is the unhealthy fiction that if we could just get every working mother happily married and send her back home to stay, some of our more pressing economic and social problems would magically evaporate. But the old “normal” – that idealized retroland of 1950s family life – is gone for good. We’re living in the new normal now, and it’s high time we figured out how to do a better job of it. Meanwhile, the pressures on working families are only getting worse, and mothers are especially likely to feel the squeeze.

**Push comes to shove**

There will always be women – and men – from all walks of American life who passionately believe that the only way to bring up happy, healthy children is to do it the “old fashioned” way: mom taking care of things at home, dad out bringing home the bacon. Couples who hold this view are not necessarily anti-feminist reactionaries longing for a bygone era where men were men and women were wives and mothers (although some of the most vocal proponents of traditional “family values” definitely fall into this camp).

Anecdotal accounts suggest that a number of single-earner couples with children share a more enlightened understanding that unpaid care work and wage-earning work contribute equally to the security and well-being of the family. Some mothers and fathers ultimately decide that the most realistic way to manage the range of responsibilities that come with the job-marriage-children package is for each parent to “specialize” in a different kind of work. While dual-earner families are by far the norm, the number of children being raised by full-time stay-at-home mothers in the U.S. rose 13 percent between 1994 and 2002. Analysts believe both economic and cultural factors fed into this trend.

In families with two married parents and children under 15, the parent that specializes in caregiving is predictably more likely to be the female one. In 2002, 5.2 million married mothers stayed at home to care for their families while their spouse was in the full-time labor force. Young children living in two parent households are 56 times more likely to live with a stay-at-home mother/employed father than they are to live with a stay-at-home dad.

While cultural attitudes about male and female roles contribute to this disparity, there are also economic considerations. Women’s earnings are, on average, 23 percent lower than those of men with the same qualifications in comparable jobs. Of married mothers who worked for pay in 2002, 46 percent of those with at least one child under 6 years old and one or more children aged 6 to 17 earned less than $5,000 in wages or salary; 80 percent earned less than $30,000 a year – in other words, less than the baseline living wage for a family of four in most U.S. communities.

When the cost of child care and the rate of taxation on the wages of secondary earners is factored in – not to mention the advantage of having one parent available to act as a buffer when the primary breadwinner brings home negative spillover from his or her paid work – some middle-class couples with children may conclude that it’s more cost effective and better for all concerned if mom quits her job.

Plenty of women who trade in fast-paced careers for a life lived on child time are extremely content with the outcome of their decision. They see the work of child rearing as personally rewarding and socially important, and they take enormous pride in the care work they provide for their families. However, not every mother who’s retreated from the paid labor force – temporarily or for the long haul – is prepared to describe the stay-at-home arrangement as her optimal choice.

Joan, a 38 year-old mother of one living in the Midwest, left her well-paid IT job four years ago when her son was born — not because she felt caregiving was a higher calling, but because she was convinced there were no other realistic alternatives. “In my utopia, benefits like health care and retirement
wouldn’t be attached to a particular job — they’d be available to all citizens. The workweek would be 30 hours and there would be state-funded child care. Part-time jobs employing high-education skills (with prorated advancement possibility) would be available,” she says. “If I lived in my utopia, I would not be a stay-at-home mom. But the way things are now, being the stay-at-home mom is simply the least worst choice for our family.”

Joan doesn’t know when she will return to paid work, or what kind of work she will be doing when she does. “After four years out of the IT workforce, my skills are obsolete. But I can’t see myself wasting my time working for a minimum wage at WalMart.”

Moms determined to stick it out in the paid labor force hold another piece of the motherhood-and-work puzzle. Julie, an architect living in Southern California, is expecting her second child. She works 32 hours a week in an office of 70 people. “Half of the employees are women. I am one of two women with children. My male co-workers who have children (about 20) have wives who stay home. Many of these men have said to me, ‘I wish my wife could work part-time so I could spend more time with my children, but as the single bread winner I cannot push for family-friendly work options for fear that I will be out of a job.’”

Julie worries that no one will be left to agitate for a change in the workplace if more high-powered women opt out. “What do I tell the younger women I work with now? ‘…Don’t focus on your work, honey, you better get yourself married to a guy who can provide’? Furthermore, what do I tell my daughter?” Julie says that she battles thoughts of leaving the workforce versus staying with it every day. But she adds, “It’s hard for me to see how the women who ‘opt-out’ will lead a revolution in the workplace when they are not there to push for things to be different. I think that everyone’s choice has a place, I just think a complete rejection of the system has the potential to create a different (perhaps parallel) system rather than changing the one we have.”

Back into the fray

What happens to women who gear down their commitment to paid employment when they are ready to pick up where they left off is another issue altogether, and so far the news on that front is not exactly encouraging. Some advisors warn it’s extremely unlikely that women who’ve been out of the workforce for three to five years will be hired for positions offering the level of responsibility or compensation they had in their previous occupations. Others feel the employment patterns of the downsizing culture – where most experienced workers have periods of unemployment, as well as several jobs listed on their resume – may be more favorable to women who have an extended gap in their employment record.

According to Ann Crittenden, author of The Price of Motherhood, a lot depends on the strength of the labor market, but it’s not impossible for moms re-entering the workforce to find the job they really want – if they persevere and are ready to do whatever it takes to prove they have the skills and experience to do the work. “Mothers returning to the workforce also face a tremendous cultural bias against women who stay at home,” says Crittenden, who is working on a new book about job skills and motherhood. “Employers are not immune to negative stereotyping that characterizes homemakers as incompetent individuals.”

Wilcox is cautiously optimistic that mothers who return to the workforce may have their best years ahead of them. “The highest proportion of overall work/life success – meaning success at home, at work, and with balancing the two — is reported by women ages 50 - 64 with no children at home. That is the only time that the rate of overall feelings of success of women with children exceeds that of men with children.” Wilcox notes that both men and women feel least successful when they’ve got preschoolers at home.
The trend that Wilcox finds the most promising, though, is the explosion of woman-owned businesses. “Women are starting businesses at twice the rate of men. And I’ll be very interested to see what sort of impact these businesses have in the future, particularly as women are more able to give their time and energy toward them.” Wilcox hopes that these new women-led businesses will provide a more accommodating and receptive conduit for women re-entering the workforce. “After all, as the Families and Work Institute has found, women in senior management can be an important indicator in determining the relative family-friendliness of an employer.”

Only time will tell if the resurgence of “sequencing” mothers into the marketplace will merit attention as another stage of the family and work “revolution”. But in so very many ways, the media-driven focus on the fate of well-to-do mothers who bag the 9-to-7 treadmill in favor of the joys of family life is utterly irrelevant. Of course, it’s a pot shot at feminism – a smug “we told you so” aimed at those of us who believe women should be able to combine public achievement and personal happiness without making inordinate compromises in any important area of their lives. It’s also a slight of hand, a misdirection of our cultural angst about the changing meaning of family, to deflect public attention away from truly serious social problems that put millions of mothers and fathers and kids at risk every single day – social problems that could be resolved if not for a pathetic shortage of political will.

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Notes

1. Perhaps the best outcome of the publication of Lisa Belkin’s The Opt Out Revolution is that it spawned a deluge of intelligent criticism discussing the realities of motherhood, work, and barriers to women’s leadership, including articles by Joan Walsh of Salon, Katha Pollitt of The Nation, Bee Lavender of HipMama, and Susan J. Douglas for In These Times. An online discussion board at nytimes.com also generated over 900 reader comments in the week following the publication of Belkin’s article.

Clueless in Manhattan by Joan Walsh

There They Go Again by Katha Pollitt
http://www.thenation.com/doc.mhtml?i=20031117&s=pollitt

Revolution or Regression by Bee Lavender
http://www.alternet.org/story.html?StoryID=17211

Mommas in the Marketplace by Susan J. Douglas
http://www.alternet.org/story.html?StoryID=17200

2. Reports about mothers leaving the professional workforce to focus on family crop up in work-life columns and lifestyle pages of major dailies, popular magazines and television news segments at regular intervals, but particularly in the weeks before Mother’s Day. More recently, the Washington Times ran a feature by Gabriella Boston, Home from the Office (November 16, 2003) and in early October 2003 Sue Shellenbarger, the work-life columnist for the Wall Street Journal, wrote an article about the stress on breadwinners in single-earner families. Also: Family Time: Why some women quit their coveted tenure-track jobs, Piper Fogg, The Chronicle of Higher Education, June 13, 2003; A Labor of Love, Star Tribune, May 9, 2003, Full-time moms trade careers for kids, Bill Torpy, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, April 8, 2003; What moms want now, Redbook Magazine, March 2003, which
reports on a survey that found “Sixty-five percent of stay-at-home moms are pleased with their choice, while a mere 27 percent of mothers who work full-time say they have jobs because they want them and find them fulfilling”; Mommy, Me and an Advanced Degree, Ann Marsh, The Los Angeles Times, January 6, 2002;

3. Data on mothers’ workforce participation is from the U.S Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, Fertility of American Women: June 2002, published October 2003. Overall, the number of mothers who return to paid employment within 12 months of a child’s birth has declined slightly since an all-time high of 59 percent in 1998. Today, 54 percent of mothers with infants and 72 percent of other mothers between the ages of 15 and 44 work for pay – rates of maternal employment that have been relatively stable since the early 1990s.


5. 2002 National Study of the Changing Workforce, The Families and Work Institute, 2003. The authors of the 2002 NSCW do note that jobs classified as “managerial” include “people who manage fast-food outlets and small retail stores as well as CEOs of major corporations”, and “professionals” include “high-earning physicians and lawyers as well as low-earning nurses and school teachers”. According to the study, two out of every three women work in “other” occupations – primarily in the service and manufacturing sectors.

6. For example, see Shared Work, Balanced Care: New Norms for Organizing Market Work and Unpaid Care Work by Eileen Appelbaum, Thomas Bailey, Peter Berg, and Arne L. Kalleberg, Economic Policy Institute, 2002

7. 2002 National Study of the Changing Workforce, The Families and Work Institute, 2003. One of the things that may change married women’s mind about the “fair” distribution of care work and paid work is that they are typically responsible for over two-thirds of the unpaid labor that goes into housekeeping and child-rearing, and the tasks they regularly do – such as the household shopping, preparing and serving food, and helping children with schoolwork – tend to be more time sensitive than the domestic tasks men take responsibility for.


10. ibid

11. The Conference Board, Executive Action Brief No. 69, September 2003, America’s Unhappy Workforce: Job Satisfaction Continues to Wither by Lynn Franco. The organization has been tracking the job satisfaction of U.S. workers since 1995.


14. More Companies Downsize Family Friendly Programs, Stephanie Armour, USA Today, October 19, 2003
15. Men are doing more around the house than they were 25 years ago, but in most dual-earners couples with children, dad is not carrying anywhere near half of the carework load. The 2002 National Study of the Changing Workforce (The Families and Work Institute, 2003) found that 77 percent of women in dual-earner families with children take greater responsibility for cooking, 78 percent take greater responsibility for cleaning and 70 percent take greater for routine childcare. The “second shift” lives, and the prospect of reducing the daily grind of double-duty may be enough to convince some mothers that it’s time to reassess their commitment to paid work.


23. 2 out of every 5 U.S. workers are not protected by the FMLA. U.S. Department of Labor, Family and Medical Leave Surveys 2000 Update


25. Susan Nall Bales, Early Childhood Education and the Framing Wars, 1998


31. Read the MMO commentary by Sara Eversden, Wake up call: Think family-friendly workplace policies are the new norm? Think again. www.mothersmovement.org

32. CNN.com, Tips for workforce re-entry, by Shelly K. Schwartz, May 11, 2001