

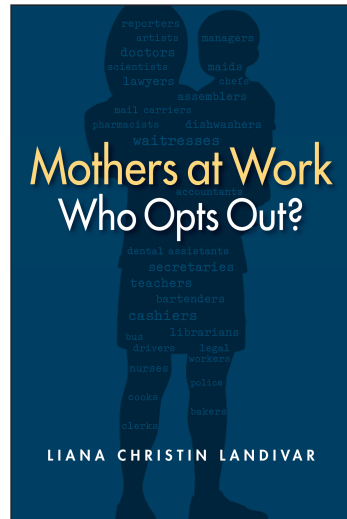
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Mothers at Work: Who Opts Out?

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1

The Opt-Out Narrative

On a Saturday morning in August, work-family researchers sat in a packed room in downtown San Francisco. We were at an Author Meets Critics session of the 2009 American Sociological Association meeting, waiting to hear leading scholars discuss Pamela Stone's (2007) award-winning book, *Opting Out? Why Women Really Quit Careers and Head Home*. In this book, Stone dissects the narratives of several dozen women who were in elite professional employment, but left the labor force some time after having children. All of the women interviewed for her book quit their jobs for a variety of reasons reflecting choice and constraint. Amid deserved glowing reviews, the critics and audience members had a few questions the book had not answered: "What were the differences between professional women who opted out and those who did not?" "Were black and Hispanic women more or less likely to opt out?" "Were women more likely to quit when their children were preschool- or school-aged?" Some in the audience reasoned that perhaps professional women would exit the labor force at higher rates when their children were school-aged because their child care providers could not deliver the higher-level socialization they would expect for their children.

I sat in the back taking notes. At the time, I was immersed in the work-family literature, but opting out was not my primary research focus. "Opting out" was coined in Lisa Belkin's 2003 *New York Times* article "The Opt-Out Revolution." Broadly defined as a "prolonged period of time out of the labor force to take care of children" (Stone and Hernandez 2012, 41), the media's focus on the issue has been, and remains, narrow. Joan C. Williams, Jessica Manvell, and Stephanie

Bornstein (2006) examined 119 print news stories published between 1980 and 2006 on women leaving the workplace. They found that the media overwhelmingly characterized opting out as a phenomenon affecting high-status well-educated women. In the book club where Belkin met some of the women she profiled, all of the women had graduated from Ivy League schools, many with graduate degrees. Only one worked full time and she had no children. Media coverage on opting out tends to focus on home pulls rather than workplace pushes, linking labor force exit to personal choices and preferences. In another article published by the *New York Times*, Louise Story (2005) claims that young educated women in the 2000s were more likely to expect to stay home than their mothers. “What seems to be changing is that while many women in college two or three decades ago expected to have full-time careers, their daughters, while still in college, say they have already decided to suspend or end their careers when they have children” (Story 2005).

None of this is new. As Williams, Manvell, and Bornstein (2006) point out, the *New York Times* has been running similar stories for decades. In 1961 it published “Career Women Discover Satisfaction in the Home” (Bender 1961), and in 1980 “Many Young Women Now Say They’d Pick Family over Career” (Kleiman 1980). Much of the reporting is anecdotal or based on convenience sampling. While these stories are not representative of the experiences of most women, they are popular, often making the front page or hitting the top of the rankings online. In 2012, Anne-Marie Slaughter, professor emerita at Princeton and former high-level executive in the US State Department, wrote a piece for *The Atlantic* entitled “Why Women Still Can’t Have It All.” The article was one of the most popular stories ever published by *The Atlantic*, garnering several million views. While the article acknowledges some of the structural barriers facing elite women at work (long hours and travel, in particular) and calls for increasing support for men’s involvement at home, it still assumes that women need and want to be the ones to compromise, choose, or cut back. It also claims that the employment situation of most women is professional high-status employment. “The minute that I found myself in a job that is typical for the vast majority of working women (and men), working long hours on someone else’s schedule, I could no longer be both the parent and the professional I wanted to be,” Slaughter writes about her former job as director of policy and planning at the State Department. Following the publication of her hit article, Slaughter acknowledged important experiences that were overlooked or misstated (most notably, those of work-

ing-class women and men), and has focused more on structural barriers to women's employment in her subsequent publications. Much to her credit, she has advocated for greater protections for low-wage domestic workers and has called for the normative involvement of men in caregiving (Slaughter 2016). She also included some of these neglected perspectives in her 2015 follow-up book *Unfinished Business: Women Men Work Family*. In her book, she candidly lets us in on the marketing of her original hit article with a title chosen by the publisher: "The article was called 'Why Women Still Can't Have It All,' a title I was soon to regret but that undoubtedly sold more magazines than the more accurate but decidedly less catchy 'Why Working Mothers Need Better Choices to Be Able to Stay in the Pool and Make It to the Top'" (Slaughter 2015). Tellingly, a subsequent article in *The Atlantic*, this time about a mother who remained happily employed at the State Department ("How to Have an Insanely Demanding Job and 2 Happy Children"), did not receive the same level of attention (D. S. Smith 2012). While it is refreshing to see an article about a woman in a high-level position who did remain employed and with kids acknowledged as happy, the article, like so many others, remains intensely focused on the role of personal choices. In spite of addressing at length the grueling hours she and her husband worked and how little time was left for personal interests (even to get a haircut!), the author argues that remaining employed came down to personal choices. Structural barriers, such as the long hours of work expected by employers of professional workers in the first place, were taken as a given. Structural barriers loom even larger among women in lower-level positions who may not have the bargaining power, tenure, or connections to obtain personal accommodations to work around them and who are also less likely to have access to formal work-life benefits.

The opt-out narrative presented in the media describes about 5 percent of US women (Cohn, Livingston, and Wang 2014). But the impression one gets while reading these stories is that their experiences are common, even normative. Opting out is framed as a personal choice, and the economic consequences of these choices are downplayed, partly because the women portrayed tend to be married to high-earning spouses. These articles highlight the short-term elimination of luxuries, but the economic implications of divorce, long-term earnings and skills loss, and decreased retirement pensions are not discussed. Williams, Manvell, and Bornstein's (2006) analysis of print news stories on the topic finds that only 2 of 119 articles included divorced women. Media coverage has consequences. By shifting the focus of the debate to elite

women grappling with having it all and minimizing its economic impact, businesses and government have largely excused themselves from providing adequate work-life benefits to employees, even with widespread popular support for these programs (Glass 2009).

The Academic Literature on Opting Out

Counter to the impression left behind by the media coverage on opting out, Heather Boushey (2008a) finds no significant reduction in labor force participation among highly educated women in recent years. Although there was a slight dip in employment in the early 2000s, Boushey (2008a) and Christine Percheski (2008) show that the leveling off in women's employment in recent years affected men and childless women as well. Among professional and managerial women, Percheski (2008) finds rising labor force participation rates and full-time year-round employment among younger cohorts. Neither Boushey nor Percheski found evidence supporting an opt-out revolution of highly educated, professional women. Among all women, there was an increase in the percentage of women staying at home from 23 percent in 1999 to 29 percent in 2012 (Cohn, Livingston, and Wang 2014). However, women staying at home were more likely to be young, foreign-born, less educated, and living in poverty, with a growing share reporting being at home because they could not find a job. These reflect structural barriers to employment among less privileged women. Among those with a college degree, the share staying at home grew from 20 percent to 21 percent between 2000 and 2012 (Cohn, Livingston, and Wang 2014).

Several recent studies examine opting out within selected industries or occupations. Some of the best examples include Stone's book on managerial and professional women (*Opting Out? Why Women Really Quit Careers and Head Home*) and Mary Blair-Loy's book on women in the financial industry (*Competing Devotions: Career and Family Among Women Executives*). Both use qualitative interviews with a small sample of women to illustrate work-family dynamics. Stone conducted intensive life history interviews with 54 married highly educated mothers who had left elite careers. Through their narratives Stone illustrates the "choice gap" women perceive, quitting as a last resort after unsuccessful attempts at combining demanding careers with parenthood. Neither husbands nor employers were accommodating to work-family dual demands and the occupations' long hours were seen as a "fundamental obstacle" to their employment (2007, 222). Because high-earning

women tend to be married to high-earning men, husbands' income is usually sufficient to provide a choice for wives to stay home. Men in these high-earning occupations are also particularly likely to work long hours; for example, Youngjoo Cha (2010) shows that 29 percent of men in professional occupations worked 50 or more hours per week. Among Stone's sample of women, most felt that their incomes were not necessary and by staying home they could make greater contributions to their time-starved families. Blair-Loy finds similar themes among the 81 female finance and business executives in her study. About one-third had left their jobs while two-thirds remained employed after having children. While some women had been able to negotiate part-time arrangements, they typically worked long part-time hours and felt resistance from coworkers and employers for "violating the work devotion ethos" common in high-level professional employment (2003, 23).

These studies illustrate that women with children find work-life balance elusive. The lack of flexibility among employers, the long-hour demands of the job, the lack of cooperation of partners, the absence of work-life policies, the stigma for using available workplace benefits, and, among many, the unaffordability of reducing hours all contribute to the imbalance. While these studies provide excellent in-depth analyses, they lack a comparative approach. It is unclear whether women in all occupations experience these barriers or if these differ by occupation and, given these constraints, how women in different occupations respond based on availability of resources and options. While women in managerial and professional occupations may be primarily concerned with long hours and inflexibility, women in service occupations cited concerns with unpredictable schedules and lack of income to provide viable choices (Enchautegui-de-Jesus 2009).

While focusing far more on workplace pushes that contribute to women's labor force exit than does the media, much of the academic research still falls short of offering a nationally representative account of opting out. Some research decisions have been reactive to media framing. Some researchers justify their narrow samples on account that this is the group that the media characterizes as opting out. While true, this does not fundamentally question the limited characterization nor does it correct the skewed image of women's employment. It implies that it is a narrow issue affecting few women (Williams and Dolkas 2012); namely, those who have been so successful that they have made it to the top of their fields. Joan Williams (2010) critiques the absence of research on the working class and the disproportionate focus on managerial and professional workers. Williams claims that working-class

families have less employment flexibility, are at increased risk of mandatory overtime, lack employment benefits, and are more likely to have to work on-site. These structural employment differences merit expanding the opt-out discussion to a more diverse demographic to have a fuller grasp of the work-family challenges and potential solutions. Given the disproportionate attention on managerial and professional women, we run the risk of marginalizing or overlooking the experiences of lower-income women, failing to provide them viable solutions, and rendering them invisible.

Key Contributions

As I took notes in that Author Meets Critics session, I realized I had the data to explore some of the issues that the attendees were raising. This book consolidates the information I have gleaned from original analyses of multiple US Census Bureau confidential datasets. I set out to answer the question of who exits the labor force when they have children and who does not, and what differentiates these women. The use of occupation is central to the analyses in this book. A person's occupation is correlated with earnings, workplace benefits and flexibility, and other important characteristics that facilitate or impede continued work participation. Using an occupational framework, I could compare and make relative statements on women's labor supply across the full spectrum of occupations, rather than focusing on a select few. Comparing across all occupations, I was able to examine who is more likely to be able to scale back on work hours, perhaps, instead of quitting. Is it predominantly managerial and professional women who opt out because of a lack of workplace flexibility? What do work patterns look like for Asian, black, and Hispanic women when they have children and how is this affected by the occupations they are in? Are mothers in all occupations subject to an earnings penalty, contributing to their labor force exit?

In this book, I used nationally representative samples large enough to examine the effects of detailed occupation, work hours, earnings, race, ethnicity, educational attainment, and children's ages. We thus can compare the employment patterns of doctors with sales clerks when they are mothers of young children. We can see how opt-out rates vary by race and ethnicity based on responses from hundreds of thousands of women. I used four decades of the decennial census (1970–2000) to examine historical trends in women's work hours, employment rates,

and occupational concentration (see Appendix F for a complete description). To examine current trends in mothers' employment, I used the 2010 and 2013 American Community Survey (ACS), the largest household survey in the United States. I supplemented the ACS with Current Population Survey (CPS) topical modules on work schedules and contingent workers to examine the effect of workplace benefits and characteristics such as schedule flexibility, remote work, union membership, and healthcare coverage. I also used the Fertility History Topical Module in the longitudinal Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) to validate my findings from the cross-sectional ACS.

Most of the survey data I used are cross-sectional. As such, I could not measure whether women are exiting the labor force or scaling back in direct response to recent childbearing. Instead, I measured the association between labor force participation, work hours, and the presence of children. Mothers are characterized as opting out if they had a job within the past five years, but were not currently in the labor force. As an additional check, I controlled for having a birth in the past 12 months. I operationalized scaling back as the work-hour gap between mothers and nonmothers within the same occupation and with similar demographic and economic characteristics. Using cross-sectional data is the only way to have a large enough sample to measure occupation and race and ethnicity in detail and with precision. This is a worthy trade-off, and is backed by multiple robustness checks (for more details, see Chapters 4 and 5).

In this book, I offer three key contributions. First, I show that it is women in higher-earning managerial and professional occupations who are most likely to remain employed when they have young children. The occupation with the lowest opt-out rate was physicians and surgeons. This is inextricably connected to their ability to reduce their work hours when they have young children. Women in managerial and professional occupations were the most likely to scale back on work hours when they had young children, with physicians and surgeons scaling back the largest number of hours. Second, I show that there is a critical distinction between working part-time hours and working reduced hours. Among mothers who scale back on work hours, the vast majority reduce their labor supply by a few hours per week and do not cross the critical full-time/part-time threshold. Women who were in occupations with normative full-time hours retained full-time hours, but cut back by a few hours per week (e.g., worked 36 hours instead of 38 hours per week). This is practically important because it maintains their workplace benefits and small reductions in work hours likely result in fewer

workplace penalties. It is also methodologically important because most studies on women's labor supply dichotomize work hours into part-time and full-time hours, missing a common mechanism mothers employ to reduce their work hours because the work-hour reduction would be indistinguishably captured as full-time work. Women who were in occupations with normative part-time hours retained part-time hours, and these part-time hours may partly be a condition of employment rather than a result of having children. More broadly, women's work-hour reductions have been occurring in a context of growing part-time employment and declining work hours across all occupations since the early 2000s among both men and women, even in high-level managerial and professional occupations. Third, I show that the motherhood wage gap is not equal across occupations. Mothers in managerial and professional occupations experienced both the largest earnings penalties and the largest bonuses based on timing of their children. Young mothers in managerial and professional occupations experienced the largest penalties whereas mothers who delayed fertility experienced earnings bonuses compared with nonmothers in these occupations. There was little financial advantage to delaying fertility in other occupations. This indicates that older mothers in managerial and professional occupations have the strongest financial incentives to remain employed, in addition to having more flexibility and workplace benefits, and as I show in this book they are the least likely to leave the labor force.

Plan of the Book

To set the context for women's current opt-out and scale-back patterns, I start out by discussing important legal and cultural changes affecting women's employment in Chapter 2. Changes in employment discrimination laws and the introduction of the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) have enabled women to access a wider range of occupations and have increased their job attachment following childbirth. Cultural attitudes toward women's employment, particularly when they have young children, have also become more positive over time. I show how these attitudes have shifted since the 1970s along with changes in women's employment. Men's roles within the family are very important to women's ability to combine full-time employment with parenthood, and these have also changed over time. I discuss views toward men's involvement at home and their use of parental leave, and how these contribute to women's progress at work.

In Chapter 3 I review women's historical employment trajectory, focusing specifically on labor force participation rates and work hours, which provides the necessary historical perspective to proceed to an analysis of the current statistics on opting out and scaling back. I show the change in women's employment over time with increasing full-time year-round employment since the 1970s, especially among mothers of young children. Employment became the norm for mothers of young children in the 1980s. Because work hours are of such importance to understanding conflicting work-family roles and gender inequality at home and in the labor market, I explore how work hours have changed over time and show which occupations are particularly likely to experience overwork. I show that work hours peaked around the year 2000 and have been on the decline, even prior to the Great Recession. While overwork remains prevalent in some occupations, this too has been declining since the early 2000s. Importantly, work hours have declined for men and women, and across the occupational spectrum. Mothers' employment today is occurring in a context in which it has become the norm and in which work hours are on the decline, making the combination of work and family responsibilities more compatible.

Starting in Chapter 4, I turn to a detailed examination of opting out. Using 55 occupational categories, I compare the opt-out rates in a wide diversity of occupations. While mothers were nearly twice as likely to be out of the labor force compared with nonmothers, exit rates varied significantly by occupation. Contrary to media portrayals of opting out, mothers in professional occupations were the least likely to opt out, especially among women in the highest-paying occupations such as executives, doctors, and lawyers (the more commonly used term *doctor* is used interchangeably with the phrase *physicians and surgeons* throughout this book). Women in several service and sales occupations experienced relatively high rates of labor force exit, though these occupations had relatively high exit rates overall, even among nonmothers. This highlights an important point that I make in this chapter: the parenthood gap in labor force exit shrinks in occupations with low retention because mothers and nonmothers are both more likely to exit employment. It is critical to establish the correct baseline for labor force participation instead of attributing high levels of labor force exit solely to parenthood. Women in managerial and professional occupations, most with low labor force exit rates, tend to have more work schedule flexibility and benefits encouraging and enabling them to remain continuously employed. Women in these occupations are more likely to remain employed in spite of the long work hours, which is the focus of Chapter 5.

Women in managerial and professional occupations make use of schedule flexibility to modestly scale back on work hours when they have young children. This schedule flexibility may provide them with greater freedom to accommodate work-family demands. Although leading work-family researchers (e.g., Stone 2007; Epstein et al. 1999) might contend that management demands and inflexibility, along with long hours of work required in professional occupations, prompt women to exit the labor force, in Chapter 5 I show that mothers in these occupations are not more likely to be out of the labor force. Rather, women in occupations with long weekly work hours are less likely to exit employment. Instead, they marginally reduce their work hours while remaining full-time workers. Because managerial and professional work tends to be salaried and flexible schedules are more common, women in these occupations may be able to exchange hours of work with increased productivity and intensity in the hours worked. They may also be more likely to be able to sustain a reduction in wages, particularly in the higher-paid subset of managerial and professional occupations. These occupational characteristics help explain why we see different employment patterns and work-life strategies across occupations. While women in managerial and professional employment tend to stay in the labor force, they scale back more than twice as much as women in any other occupation group.

In Chapter 6 I explore whether mothers of older children are more likely to leave the labor force than mothers of younger children, and whether these patterns are similar across occupations. Some recent research indicates that women with older children may be more likely to opt out because older children impose greater time demands (Stone 2007). With more scheduled activities, homework, and pressures for intensive parenting, women with older children may be less able to accommodate competing demands from work and family. By comparing the labor force participation of mothers of children younger than six and six and older, I show here how age of children affects women's work hours and employment status. I show that mothers of school-age children are more likely to be employed, but more likely to work reduced schedules compared with mothers of preschoolers. Mothers of school-age children were particularly likely to scale back on work hours if they were older mothers and they worked in managerial and professional occupations, a pattern that could be consistent with "concerted cultivation" parenting and having highly scheduled children (Lareau 2003). Mothers of preschoolers, especially multiple preschool-age children, were the most likely to exit the labor force whether they were younger or older mothers.

In Chapter 7 I turn to the earnings penalty mothers experience after having children. While mothers earn less, on average, than nonmothers, the earnings gap varies significantly by occupation. This may be a factor in why we see different rates of opting out based on employment contexts. Women in managerial and professional occupations who delay having children until their thirties experience an earnings bonus, not penalty, when they have children, providing a larger financial incentive to remain employed. Across all managerial and professional occupations, mothers of preschoolers earned \$11,000 more per year than nonmothers of the same age if they had children at older ages. Women in these occupations also experienced the largest penalty for early childbearing: women in managerial and professional occupations who had school-age children when they were under 30 years old earned \$9,000 less than nonmothers of the same age. However, fertility delay did not translate into an earnings premium for women in construction, production, agriculture, healthcare support, cleaning and maintenance, and other lower-paying occupations. In these occupations, mothers earned less than nonmothers or there was no statistical difference in their earnings. While delaying fertility may be particularly important for women in occupations requiring advanced degrees or longer tenure for career advancement, women in low-wage occupations with short career ladders and high turnover experience little economic benefit from older motherhood. A temporary labor force exit may be a more common strategy in low-wage occupations because they lack paid family leave enabling continued participation following childbirth and their employment trajectory and wage growth are less likely to be disrupted upon exit. Women exiting from low-wage high-turnover occupations are likely to return to a job with fewer barriers to entry (e.g., no extensive training requirements, lower stigma for time out of the labor force) and lower wages.

I conclude by summarizing in Chapter 8 who is most likely to opt out, along with major barriers to women's full participation in the labor force. While I do not propose specific work-life policies to address these disparities, I show where there are significant differences between groups of mothers. We need to understand how groups are similar and how they are different to create effective policy interventions. This is a first step toward that goal.