

Women who quit their careers: a group rarely investigated

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Diversity and gender equality programmes are now a well-established feature of leading employers' human resources strategies. Supporting women to remain in the workplace and achieve senior leadership positions is regarded increasingly as not just 'right' but also profitable – there is a business case for creating and maintaining a diverse workforce.

However, the focus in these discussions and strategies is predominantly, if not exclusively, on women *in* the workplace. My [research](#) highlights the importance of complementing this with the experience of women who, more often than not, are of less interest to workplaces: that is, those women who have *left* their jobs, and specifically after having children.

For these women, having children was not “a pit stop in a grand prix” which is how the 30% Club's [Cracking the Code](#) report describes the effect of having a family on women leaders' careers. Rather than refuelling to achieve more rapid progress in their professional life, these women dropped out of the race.

True, women who 'choose' (in inverted commas) to leave their careers and not return to paid work after starting a family are clearly a minority group. An analysis of the Labour Force Survey shows that professional (in distinction from low-skilled) women in the UK count for 36 per cent of all women currently in, or who have been in, paid employment, and 42 per cent of this group are mothers. Among the group who are professionals *and* mothers 14 per cent, i.e. approx. 320,000, stay at home. However, this is still a significant number. Understanding why these women left the workplace and why they chose not to return to it, reveals some important aspects which may apply to women who remain or return to the workplace, and can inform how to help prevent other women from leaving.

My research focuses on professional women who worked as lawyers, accountants, teachers, artists, designers, academics and managers although we should not forget *that* other group, of so-called 'unprofessional' women, who constitute the bulk of the workforce in many low-pay, [low-skilled sectors](#). It involves statistical analysis of UK maternal employment, analysis of media and policy debates on the topic, and in-depth interviews with stay-at-home

mothers who formerly were professionals in a variety of sectors and at various levels of seniority. I also interviewed some partners of women who left paid employment.

My findings contrast with several popular ideas and myths that are perpetuated by media and policy about women and the workplace. The first is that a woman's choice to leave the workplace is based on her preference for a 'home-centred' lifestyle. Catherine Hakim's [preference theory](#) is a potent example of this argument. None of the women I interviewed are what some call the 'new traditionalist' – the professional woman who throws over her career for family and homemaking. The women rejected this image, frequently stressing that they were *not* the 'maternal type', the 'cupcake mum' or the 'HOME CEO', and that if anything, they had been forced into this position rather than choosing it willingly.

And yet the image of the 'homemaker' whose lifestyle and preferences are incompatible with work is not only a popular cultural image, it is also a stubborn stereotype that continues to be reproduced implicitly and sometimes explicitly, *in the workplace*.

Evidence presented to [LSE's Commission on Gender Inequality and Power](#) shows that a constant message to women in many financial and legal workplaces is that family and career are incompatible, and that women who choose to leave the workplace quite evidently were not 'cut out' for work. Of course there are other workplaces that challenge these stubborn and sexist stereotypes. But it is important to recognise that this view is still far too widespread in many workplaces today.

The second idea that the accounts of the women I interviewed strongly challenge is that becoming a mother is accompanied by loss of confidence and ambition, and loss of interest in and commitment to a career, and that women's idea about what constitutes success substantially differs from that of men. Most of the women I interviewed had great professional ambition, and a strong sense of professional success. They took considerable pleasure and pride in their professional accomplishments, in making progress at work and in earning money. Some were earning more than their male partners when they left the workplace.

So why leave a successful career? None of the women I interviewed were able to identify a single factor explaining their exit from the workplace and career. It was rather a combination of factors that were specific to each individual, and which the women themselves often couldn't clearly account for, which had led to that momentous decision.

While some of these factors are personal and psychological, for example, the availability of extended family support and health-related issues many are *not*. Rather, they are social, organizational, institutional and cultural, for example, attitudes and social perceptions by which women are judged, by their family, friends, employers and co-workers, wider culture, and by which women often judge themselves; political and policy factors such as taxation; financial factors, and finally, workplace factors such as denials of requests to work part-time, pay gap, and relocations.

However, explanations for why women decide to leave work or, conversely, why they are successful, often focus on women as individuals making choices based on *personal* preferences and personal strengths. Rosalind Gill and I call it the '[confidence cult\(ure\)](#)': from bestsellers such as [Lean in](#) and [The Confidence Code](#), television shows such as [The Good Wife](#), to films, programs, diversity and equality initiatives in the workplace and even apps, the message is that women suffer from an internal defect of 'confidence gap'. Thus, the solutions proffered for enhancing gender equality at work are frequently about developing women as individuals, for example, by providing mentoring so that they learn to "lean in and look beyond the immediate challenges of combining parenthood and career" as the 30% Club report I mentioned earlier recommends.

I wouldn't dismiss the significance of developing strategies to support women as individuals, but I think that there is too great a tendency to focus on this type of targeted individualised strategies, at the expense of investigating other aspects that crucially shape and constrain the choices women make.

A major push for many of the women I interviewed to quit their job was *not* related either to *their workplace* or to some kind of ‘natural calling’ to be stay-at-home mothers, but rather to their husbands’ work conditions and long hours. It is not uncommon for the husbands of many of these women to not see their children awake during the week; they left home early and returned after the children were in bed. Maggie, formerly a senior media producer, whose husband is a lawyer, observed somewhat sarcastically that her husband spends more time sleeping in the house than he spends actually awake!

The issue for these women is *not* as often argued, one of lack of availability of high-quality affordable childcare: most women had used some forms of formal and informal childcare which they found satisfactory, and which they could afford. The issue is also not related to the women’s lack of confidence and determination. It is due partly, but significantly, to the fact that their partners’ working hours’ and workplace conditions’ are utterly **incompatible with family life**.

This norm of extremely long working hours is part of what Anne Marie Slaughter recently described as a **toxic work world**. Even in cases where the woman has a job with reasonable hours in a supportive and flexible workplace – which clearly is far from being the case for all – the workplace conditions of her partner can force her to make choices, which rather than challenging gender inequality, perpetuate and exacerbate it – both at home and in the workplace.

In this toxic overwork culture, where fathers barely or never engage with their children during the working week, the woman’s returning to work may be regarded as self-indulgent or “not making sense”, as several women told me. To be sure, the women I interviewed do not lack agency: they have made a choice, and were fully aware of the privilege of being able to make such a choice. However, they all doubted the extent to which this decision had been entirely their own; whether they would have made the same choice, to leave behind years of education, training and achievements, had their partners shared parenting and the management of the household more equally. If these privileged well-educated women find it so hard, arguably other women – who cannot afford not to be in paid employment, whose partners earn less, or who have no partner, and who did not enjoy higher education– are likely to find it harder still.

One thing that could help women to remain in and progress in the workplace would be to challenge the long-hours work cultures which continue to characterise many workplaces, and which make it extremely difficult or impossible, for women and – crucially – their partners, to participate in family life in a meaningful way.

Shifting the long hours and stress to the home – a solution adopted by some workplaces of the partners of the women I interviewed, has had little positive impact on *women’s* experience and their ability to return to work. Although their husbands were working from home more, they were still working long hours, and the contribution to childcare and housework was so limited as to have no effect on the women or the children.

Women’s equality in the workplace cannot be understood and treated in isolation from their equality in the home. We need to invest in ways that would enable men to assume a fair share of the domestic workload on a continuous basis. Creating a humane working-hours culture which is compatible with family life for both men and women is a good place to start.



Notes:

- *This post is based on the author’s study [Heading Home](#) on which she is currently completing a book, and her articles: [Incongruous encounters: media representations and lived experiences of stay-at-home mothers](#), (2016) *Feminist Media Studies*, 16 (3): 478-494; and [The cruel optimism of the good wife: the fantastic working mother on the fantastical treadmill](#), (2016), in *Television and New Media*.*
- *The post gives the views of the author, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of*

Economics.

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