

Heading Home: Public discourse and women's experience of family and work

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The debate on gender equality in the workplace is based predominantly on evidence and anecdote related to the experience of women *in* the workplace. Dr Orgad's research highlights the importance of complementing this with (1) the experience of women who, more often than not, are of less interest to workplaces: those women who have *left* their workplaces, specifically after having children; (2) understanding the neglected aspect of husbands'/partners' influence on women's careers and family 'choices'; (3) examining what may be preventing women from returning to the workplace.

The study

The research looks at professional women who worked as lawyers, accountants, teachers, artists, designers, academics and managers and left paid employment. It includes statistical analysis of UK maternal employment, analysis of media and policy debates on the topic, and 40 in-depth interviews with women who live in London who formerly were professionals in a variety of sectors and at various levels of seniority, as well as some men who are partners/husbands of women who were formerly professionals. The interviewees include women who left paid employment between three and nineteen years ago, with children between the ages of four to twenty-two. The study explores women's experiences and how they connect and disconnect with media and policy constructions, by juxtaposing the first-hand accounts of educated mothers living in London, who left paid employment, and the accounts of their partners, against analysis of contemporary representations of gender, family, and work in U.K. and U.S. media and policy.

Women who 'choose' to leave their careers and not return to paid work after starting a family, are clearly a minority group: in the UK, approx. 320,000 women who were formerly professionals stay at home.¹ However, it is still a significant number and understanding why these women left the workplace and why they did 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 and not returning.

Key findings

1. Contra to the idea perpetuated in popular media representations that a woman's choice to leave the workplace is based on her preference for a 'home-centred' lifestyle, none of the women interviewed as part of this study 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.² Furthermore, 39 out of the 40 interviewees expressed a desire to return to paid work even after 16 years outside paid employment. However, a **constant message to women in many workplaces, especially in the financial and legal sectors, is that family and career are incompatible**, and that women who choose to leave the workplace quite evidently were not 'cut out' for work.
2. The accounts of the women interviewed for this study strongly **challenge the idea that is promoted in corporate and media discourses that becoming a mother is accompanied by loss of confidence and ambition, and loss of interest in and commitment to a career**. Most of the women 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.
3. Interviewees' accounts **challenge the myth that women's idea about what constitutes success substantially differs from that of men**.³ In fact, women expressed a very similar understanding to that of men of what success stands for in the context of their workplace and in society more generally.
4. A **combination of factors rather than a single factor had led to women's decision to leave their jobs and to not return to the workplace**. While some of these factors are personal and psychological (e.g. availability of extended family support and health-related issues), many are social, organizational, institutional and cultural, including 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, as well as why they do not return to paid work, often focus on women as individuals making choices based on *personal* preferences and *personal* strengths or weaknesses.

5. Consequently, 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 percent Club’s *Cracking the Code* report recommends).⁴ While the significance of developing strategies to support women as individuals should not be dismissed, **there is too great a tendency to focus on this type of targeted individualized strategies, at the expense of tackling structural and organizational aspects that crucially shape and constrain the choices women make.**

6. The women interviewed for this study often experienced role model figures of successful professional women who achieve the desired work-life balance (e.g. real women such as Chief Operating Officer of Facebook Sheryl Sandberg and UK business executive Helena Morrissey, or fictional women such as *The Good Wife*’s lead character, Alicia Florrick) as figures who highlighted their own ‘failure’. They represented a fantasy that failed to correspond to women’s lived realities, and often masked or marginalized the significance of factors such as childcare and the absence of their husbands which affected their professional lives in detrimental ways. Nevertheless, women kept judging themselves, often in painful ways, against these role-model women. Furthermore, although 39 out of the 40 interviewees expressed their genuine desire to return to some form of paid employment, they lacked concrete examples of women who returned and managed the return successfully. The popular image of the “mumpreneur” (the mother who establishes her own business from the kitchen table whilst looking after her children) is often cast as a solution to the problems of restrictive work and expensive childcare whilst also providing personal fulfilment. It offers a compelling fantasy, but fails to help women to concretely identify their interests and future aspirations, and how they can realize their desire to return to paid employment. **There is a need for a wider and far more diverse range of examples and voices of women and men relating their different experiences and ways of managing workplace, home and life, and crucially of women who took long career-breaks and successfully returned to paid employment (beyond the “mumpreneur”).**

7. A key factor pushing women out of and preventing them from returning to the workplace is work culture, but not necessarily the culture of the woman’s former workplace; but rather, her husband’s or partner’s. Almost all the women interviewed for this study have partners in high-powered, demanding, long-hours jobs, which enable the family to live on a single income. **The partners’ work conditions, and the workplace cultures they operate in, had a major impact on the woman’s so-called 'choice' to leave the workplace and to a large extent prevented the woman's return to work.**

8. Thus, for the women interviewed for this study, the issue 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**.⁵ This norm of extremely long working hours is part of what Anne- Marie Slaughter recently described as a "toxic work world".⁶ 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. Women who contemplated returning to paid employment after a long break, including some women who actually applied for jobs, failed to return to paid employment, partly because of their husband's work conditions.

Conclusions

Diversity and gender equality programmes are now a well-established feature of leading employers' human resources strategies. Supporting women to remain in and return to 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 on women *in* the workforce. While this focus is significant, **reaching out to women who have left the workplace** and discovering *why* they left and *what prevents them from returning*, could be extremely informative and valuable for capitalizing on female talent, and would improve workplaces' understanding of how they can better support women and men to advance gender equality.

One thing that could help women to remain and progress in the workplace and return to the workforce after a long career break would be to **challenge the long-hours work cultures which continue to characterize 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 increasingly adopted by some workplaces, 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. Investing in ways that would enable men to assume a fair share of the domestic workload on a continuous basis, not just during temporary periods of leave is crucial.

Finally, policy discourse and the media play an important role in representing and framing the debate on work, family and gender equality. Discussions in the media, including on social media, as well as fictional representations (e.g. film, drama) can contribute to a more informed understanding of the *variety* of factors influencing women's experience of work and family, beyond a focus on personal and psychological aspects concerning women's (supposed) 'mind-set', preferences for home-centred life, lack of confidence and poise, 'ambition gap' and different notion of success. In particular, **news and popular representations can help exposing and discussing the social, organizational, institutional and cultural factors influencing women's and men's experience of family and work**, for example, attitudes and social perceptions by which women are judged, or workplace factors such as pay gap and relocations.

Voicing women's accounts of their lived experience of work and family –both positive 'success' stories and more complex, ambivalent and difficult stories, will contribute to a more honest and informed debate about the factors shaping work, family, women and men and the solutions for promoting and enhancing gender equality. While images and stories of successful women who 'made it' are important and can be inspiring role models, they can be experienced by women as frustrating, alienating and intimidating, suggesting that if one did not 'make it' in the same way the role model did, she is a failure. Thus, **personal stories should represent a variety and diversity of experiences and of women, and representations of female role models should be substantially expanded.**

¹ Figures based on an analysis of the UK's Labour Force Survey show that professional women in the UK count for 36% of all women currently in, or who have been in, paid employment, and 42% of this group are mothers. Among the group who are professionals and mothers 14%, i.e. approx. 320,000, stay at home. This is 16% of the entire group of stay at home mothers in the UK, (there are just over 2 million stay-at-home mothers).

² As Pamela Stone puts it in her study 'Opting Out?': 'supermoms are made, not born' (2007, p. 220)

³ See, for example, Harvard Business School research showing that men are driven by power in the workplace, while women have a different idea of what makes for true success (*Guardian*, 28 October 2015).

⁴ http://30percentclub.org/assets/uploads/UK/30_Club_Reports/Cracking_the_Code.pdf

⁵ Department of Education January 2014 survey: Looking specifically at the reasons given by partnered mothers of their decision to go out to work or stay at home, a fifth (20%) reported that they were able to go to work because their childcare fitted with their partner's working hours, i.e. having a partner that could help with childcare (p. 221).

⁶ⁱ http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/20/opinion/sunday/a-toxic-work-world.html?_r=0