

Introduction

MINDING THE GAP

It was another day in paradise in Silicon Valley—the perfect cloudless blue-sky weather matching the perfectly manicured Mediterranean landscaping of the upscale office park. But inside, there was no mistaking the sense of unease in the air, equal parts anticipation and anxiety. Dozens of women, most forty-somethings, some a bit younger, a few older, filled the large windowless meeting hall. They were here to attend a panel about resources for “career returners,” the organizers’ label for women like them who had stepped away or pulled back from careers and now wanted to return to the workforce. The event was exclusive: many women in attendance were graduates of top-tier graduate and professional schools such as Harvard, Stanford, the University of Chicago, or Cornell. This wasn’t their only similarity. Residents of the affluent communities nearby, most were white, with a sprinkling of Asian American women and Latinas, all dressed in a style that combined business casual with soccer mom.

An impressive and confident-looking bunch, they nonetheless had about them a kind of “first day of school” demeanor—eager, but with a trace of tentativeness and tempered expectations. They chatted as they

waited for the program to begin, exchanging alma maters, and sharing why they were here and where they were in their thinking about returning to work. They were open about their insecurities and about the challenges facing them (“I have to figure out what I want to do”), and welcomed the chance to compare notes with other women similarly situated.

Once the program began, women listened attentively and actively with many knowing nods of recognition as panelists offered advice and shared their own personal stories about returning to work or helping other women to do so. While speakers set an upbeat tone of support and encouragement, they were also cautionary. They warned, for example, of the very real specter of ageism, especially in the Bay Area, where, as one expert noted, only half-jokingly, “it starts not at forty or fifty, but over twenty-five.” The program was well received, but worries surfaced in the Q&A. One of the first questions from the floor, the one that had women sitting up straighter and leaning forward to hear the answer, was also the one that gave panelists their only pause: “What do I do about the gap in my résumé?”

RÉSUMÉ GAPS AND RESEARCH GAPS

This is a question to which there are no easy or ready answers. Historically, women have long taken time out from work, particularly during the childbearing years, but they didn’t have MBAs from the best schools or sterling prequit résumés chronicling their employment at the best firms. The problem these women are grappling with is of relatively recent vintage, born of the so-called opt-out revolution, identified and provocatively named by journalist Lisa Belkin in the early 2000s.¹ Belkin depicted this phenomenon as reflecting the emergence of a new traditionalism by which women chose domesticity out of preference, not constraint. This interpretation was challenged, by our own and others’ research.² However, there is no question that in identifying a group of highly qualified and credentialed women who had walked away from successful professional careers, she was on to something new and differ-

ent and resonant. Like the women at the seminar, some seek to find their way back—not just back to work or a job, as was the case for earlier generations of women, but to *professions*, occupations defined by continuity and commitment, against which résumé gaps are a glaring red flag.

Organizations like the one that sponsored this program are springing up to assist career returners, who've also caught the attention of the popular press,³ but most are in start-up mode themselves and, however well-meaning, have a shallow reservoir of experience on which to base their advice. Nor is there much research on the subject, either to provide how-to guidance to women as they navigate reentry or to address larger questions: What proportion of women who've "opted out" seek to return to work?⁴ What motivates them to do so? What are they looking for? What's the process of returning to work like? What kind of a reception will they receive from prospective employers? Will they be able to reenter and relaunch their career? Which strategies work, and which ones don't work?

In opting out (typically defined as a career break of at least six months, during which women are out of the paid labor force and primarily engaged in taking care of home and family), women knowingly risk their prospects for returning to the workforce, let alone their former jobs. Recent trends show that in any given year only about 20 percent of college-educated married moms with children younger than eighteen have opted out and are at home full-time. While a recent fine-grained analysis found that women graduates of elite schools were slightly more likely than those from less elite schools to opt out, both groups showed high rates of labor force participation—68 and 76 percent, respectively. However, mothers cycle in and out of work over the course of their childbearing years. Taking this into account, the fraction *ever taking a sustained break* is much larger than the cross-sectional statistics imply. Studies of women graduates of highly selective schools, comparable to the women we study, who are especially well positioned for successful careers, show that on the order of 30 to 40 percent report ever having taken time out from them. A recent study of Harvard Business School

alumnae, who one can safely assume are as ambitious and career focused as they come, revealed similarly that while 10 percent of those with kids were currently at home, 30 percent of mothers had at some time been home full-time.⁵

Taking a break or work hiatus is risky enough, and one of the reasons, no doubt, that the opting-out phenomenon has garnered so much attention, but for professionals the potential downsides of doing so are especially high given the lucrative and prestigious nature of their work. We can only gauge and fully appreciate the extent of that risk and the associated costs—whether they can find work at all and how far they might fall from the high-flying jobs they left—when we know what happens when they seek to opt in by returning to work. Their efforts, and the success or failure of these efforts, lay bare the potential riskiness of the opt-out strategy, as well as highlight the brave new world in which these women are pioneers or perhaps guinea pigs.

Has their gamble paid off? Can professional women return to work after time out for motherhood? Under what terms and with what consequences? Do they even want to return to the kinds of jobs from which they walked away and (as our earlier research showed) from which they often felt shut out? Does returning to work offer them a chance to rebound, if perhaps not catch up entirely with the men (and women) who've worked continuously? What losses, if any, do they incur in their restarted careers—and what possible gains?

We find that women successfully return to work, but they don't resume their former careers. Instead their reentry requires a protracted period of questing and career reinvention. With a premium placed on their roles as caregivers and status keepers in upper-middle-class families, women value flexibility and meaning and turn their backs on their former careers in order to fashion new solutions to the work-family bind: freelancing and radical redirection to jobs in female-dominated fields that they formerly eschewed. While these women, unlike most, are able and willing to bear the costs of these significant accommodations—notably, retraining, lower earnings, and loss of pathways to

leadership—we show that they in fact have limited options in returning to professional workplaces little changed from those they left behind. As a result, the very women who are best positioned (and indeed expected) to surmount barriers and close gender gaps instead pursue career-family strategies that work for them *individually*, but that ultimately exacerbate and increase gender inequality *overall*. This is the Catch-22 of opting out and opting back in. Women going it alone can't break this cycle. We advocate policies to change this dynamic and to support women's retention and reentry—policies that will help not only privileged professional women like the ones we study but all women (and men) trying to combine work and family.

BACK TO THE FUTURE

Our understanding of these issues requires that we take a long view on women's lives—a movie rather than a snapshot. In our earlier research on career interruption among highly qualified and experienced professional women (most of whom, like the women in Silicon Valley, were graduates of elite, highly selective schools), we challenged the prevailing understanding of opting out.⁶ Not only was it not as widespread as suggested by the popular media's hyperbolic headlines, but also it was not entirely optional or—as often depicted—about a return to traditional gender roles and values. For the vast majority of women who quit professional careers and were now “stay-at-home mothers,” the decision to leave their careers and head home was highly conflicted and constrained. It was a function less of choice or preference than of a long-hour work culture and husbands who were largely absent on the home front; this combination created a high-intensity double bind that made it impossible for women to work and parent. This same work culture stigmatized flexible work options that would enable women—especially women who could entertain the option to quit—to continue to do both.

Our previous research, in addition to revealing the real reasons women exchanged careers for motherhood (at least for some sustained

period), also shed light on their current lives at home and on their future plans. The large majority of these stay-at-home moms intended to return to work. A critical question, which our earlier study could not address, is whether these women—and highly qualified and credentialed women like them who opt out—are able to realize their intentions and transition back to work. By virtue of their human capital (e.g., credentials, work experience) and social capital (e.g., class privilege, good networks), some observers are optimistic about opt-out women's prospects for reentry.⁷ Others are less sanguine. Citing the rapid skill obsolescence inherent in high-knowledge professional fields as well as potential ageism, they predict that women will be disadvantaged by their time out of the labor force, their prior history in and of itself a possible red flag signaling shaky work commitment.⁸ That this fear is well founded is borne out by the results of a recent study of employers' evaluations of the résumés of prospective job applicants. Otherwise well- and equally qualified applicants for a professional job who had opted out of the labor force to take care of family fared significantly worse in their hiring prospects than did applicants whose employment break was occasioned by job loss or those who were continuously employed. Employers took opting out as a violation of ideal-worker norms and *prima facie* evidence of lower work commitment, deservingness, and reliability.⁹

The limited research on professional women's reentry finds that the majority want to resume careers (as we found), but, consistent with the second hypothesis, they have trouble doing so and often settle for jobs far below their qualifications and capabilities.¹⁰ These studies also find that women undergo a substantial shift in their work orientation after a break, often redirecting away from former employers and professions.¹¹ Together, these results suggest that reentry is a time of considerable and protracted turbulence and flux. Yet while past research begins to shed light on basic outcomes associated with reentry, it is silent about the *process*. So, too, is our previous study, which looked primarily backward to explore the anatomy of women's decision-making around exit-

ing careers. The study on which this book is based picks up where the last one left off, following the same group of women through the overlapping peak career and family-building years, taking them from their thirties and forties into their forties and fifties. This long-term longitudinal approach allows us to unspool women's lives from the fateful decision to opt out to understand not only its antecedents but the process and motivations underlying the challenging and complex decision to resume working (or not), which is often accompanied by the equally complicated and little-understood decision to change fields. Only by understanding the entire process—and its consequences—can we evaluate fully the privileges and perils of opting out.

WHY IT MATTERS

The women in that auditorium in Silicon Valley probably never thought they'd be there. Certainly, the women we studied never thought they'd be full-time, at-home moms. Their lives—up until the time they quit—were ones of achievement: they either had broken the glass ceiling or were poised to do so. Women like them, women of accomplishment and privilege, are “supposed” to be doing what their elite alma maters prepared them for—be leaders in their chosen fields.¹² Fifty years after the feminist revolution, we know how that's going for women, and the answer is “not well.” Women face a leadership gap and a more quantifiable earnings gap. It's increasingly clear that highly gendered and costly strategies to accommodate career and motherhood—such as the euphemistically dubbed opting out—which disproportionately penalize women play a central role in creating and maintaining pernicious and persistent gender gaps. Opting out is perhaps the most visible and extreme manifestation of the “leaky pipeline,” the metaphor for the process by which women go missing from the pool of talent earmarked for promotion and top leadership positions. Insights into the implications of career interruptions and discontinuous work histories are critical to understanding persistent gender gaps in leadership, authority,

and earnings in the professions in which women now make up the majority share—51 percent—of employment.¹³

THE LEADERSHIP GAP

High-profile women leaders like Sheryl Sandberg, COO of Facebook, and Anne-Marie Slaughter, former State Department policy chief and Woodrow Wilson School dean and current foundation head, have used the power of their platforms to bring the issue of women's leadership to the forefront of public attention. Indeed, for scholars like us who have worked on these and related issues for decades, women's leadership and gender inequality are enjoying an unprecedented moment. Their two best-selling and highly talked-about books—Sandberg's *Lean In* and Slaughter's *Unfinished Business*—draw attention to the paucity of women like themselves at the top and identify obstacles to women's ascension, key to which is career and family conflict.¹⁴ Sandberg adopts a motivational approach, drawing on personal experience to encourage women to build successful careers, to “lean in” rather than opt out, advising them not to quit before quitting, in a nod to the importance of ambition and career persistence. Slaughter, adopting a broader, more policy-oriented perspective, sees the gendered organization of paid work and unpaid caregiving, such as child care, as the root problem and argues for societal and policy solutions that more highly value caregiving work and better integrate it with paid employment.

Both books are by and large about high-achieving, college-educated professional women. Both have been critiqued for this focus, but they focus on these women for essentially the same reasons we do. First, women face a leadership crisis, or, more aptly, leadership faces a woman crisis. Second, while leadership is exercised across all levels of education, income, and class, it is still predominantly defined as residing in certain key positions that wield power and influence—CEO, judge, president, dean, manager, partner. There is a long history in the social sciences, particularly sociology, of studying privileged groups as a way

of understanding the topside dynamics of inequality. While arguably unfair (and we would argue that it is), in an unequal or stratified society like ours the route to leadership is remarkably narrow. It often requires traveling a well-defined path, starting with degrees from widely recognized academic institutions that feed into employment in equally prestigious organizations that are themselves feeders upward. Therefore, by virtue of their class backgrounds, elite educational credentials, and early employment histories, the women we study are well poised for these top-level positions. We focus on them, not despite their privilege, but because of their privilege, to understand why women aren't attaining positions of leadership more rapidly in core arenas of society. While these highly educated professional women represent a privileged minority, if even they are stymied in their leadership trajectories, what does this say about the limits to women's access to power and influence within our society in general?

To illustrate how high-level leadership is generally obtained in the US, Sheryl Sandberg's journey to Facebook COO is perhaps better known than most but otherwise typical: undergraduate degree from a highly selective college (Harvard) and professional degree from an equally selective business school (Harvard Business School), followed by jobs at prestigious employers like Google, from which she was recruited to the number two job at Facebook. Hers is a textbook case of ascension to leadership, unusual only because she's a woman.

Just how unusual is shown in figure 1. Fifty years after women began entering graduate and professional schools in large(ish) numbers, they have failed to make it to the top. Despite holding just over half of all professional and managerial jobs, women are still only 27 percent of executive officers, 11 percent of top earners, and 5 percent of Fortune 500 CEOs. In Sandberg's field, high tech, women hold 9 percent of management positions. They fare better in law, where they are 45 percent of associates, 25 percent of nonequity partners, and 18 percent of equity partners, and in medicine, where they constitute 34 percent of all physicians and surgeons though still only 22 percent of medical school full

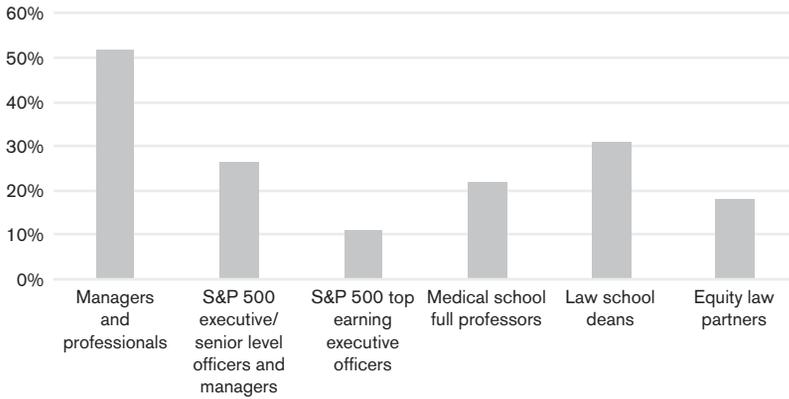


Figure 1. Women's representation in leadership positions. (Data from AAMC 2016; ABA 2017; Catalyst 2018; Warner 2014.)

professors and 16 percent of deans. Even in fields where women have long been active, such as health and social welfare, leadership is male. Women are 78 percent of the labor force in these fields but only 15 percent of top leadership. While these numbers are low, they used to be lower; however, at the current pace of change, it is estimated that women won't reach gender parity in leadership until 2085.¹⁵

STALLED PROGRESS ON THE ROAD TO PAY PARITY

Not only are women lagging on leadership, they are also hitting the wall when it comes to closing the pay gap. Current estimates suggest it won't close until 2058.¹⁶ The pay gap, typically reported as the ratio of female-to-male earnings, is probably the most commonly cited and extensively studied indicator of gender (in)equality. It also lends itself to measurement and parsing more readily than leadership, although the two go hand in hand—upward career mobility on the path to leadership is accompanied by earnings growth. Progress in closing the gap has slowed considerably since the 1980s, and especially since 2000—the dawn of a

new millennium, but not particularly auspicious for women. In 2010, various estimates show the ratio of women's to men's earnings (among prime-age, full-time, full-year workers) to be in the 80 percent range, little budged from where it stood in 2000.¹⁷ Recent research shows that career interruption is a big part of this story.

Harvard economist Claudia Goldin has extensively studied college-educated women's career and family behavior, focusing on women graduates, like ours, of elite graduate and professional schools. Her research and other studies of high-achieving, college-educated professional women repeatedly find that women start out and stay equal with their male counterparts through their twenties. Somewhat counterintuitively, "*The difference in earnings by sex greatly increases during the first several decades of working life.*"¹⁸ Thus, at the early and important career launch stage, the pay gap is almost nonexistent, at or near parity, typically showing women earning 90 percent or more of what men earn. But the gap widens considerably, to 70 percent and more, as women hit their thirties and forties—and motherhood.¹⁹ Not even taking into account the high-demand parenting in fashion today, just finding time to see your children is tough when you're working fifty-plus-hour weeks. This is when the so-called pipeline to advancement and pay raises starts leaking as women like those we study opt out by taking time out from employment altogether—or by deploying other strategies such as downshifting to a less demanding job—however reluctantly and last resort.

For graduates of an elite MBA program (University of Chicago's Booth School), Goldin reports that just under 20 percent of women graduates from 1990 to 2006 were not working and that about a quarter of those working were part-timers, both accommodations linked to motherhood. For graduates of a leading law school (University of Michigan), from 1982 to 1991, she also finds a motherhood effect on employment. Fifteen years out of law school, 21 percent of mothers were out of the labor force.

The penalty for taking time out of the labor market is especially high in the traditionally male-dominated professional and managerial fields

such as finance and law that women have been entering in relatively large numbers since the 1970s. Among Harvard College undergraduates of the 1990s, fifteen years after the degree, Goldin reports that an eighteen-month hiatus in employment “was associated with a decrease in earnings of 41 percent for those with an MBA, 29 percent for those with a JD or PhD, and 15 percent for those with an MD.”²⁰ In findings that echo our earlier study, she writes that “certain occupations impose heavy penalties on employees who want fewer hours and more flexible employment. The lower remuneration can result in shifts to an entirely different occupation or to a different position within an occupational hierarchy or *to being out of the labor force altogether*” (italics added).²¹

Time out of the labor force, occasioned by motherhood for women (but not fatherhood for men, most of whom work continuously without interruption) has played a bigger role in maintaining the still large, and seemingly persistent, gender earnings gap, eclipsing other factors—labor force participation, hours worked, education, and occupation—as women have increasingly started to look and act like men with regard to paid work. Goldin estimates, for example, that for the MBA graduates she studied, ten to sixteen years out, the earnings ratio is 55 percent: career interruptions and associated differences in job experience account for fully one-third of the gap, with two-thirds of this effect due to taking *any* time out, irrespective of length.

Research by another leading scholar of gender inequality, sociologist Paula England, further underscores that labor force experience or lack thereof plays an equally critical role in explaining the motherhood penalty, the difference between what mothers and otherwise similar women who are childless earn. The good news is that, to a greater extent than the gender wage gap, the motherhood penalty has declined. Among highly educated professionals like the ones we study, mothers earned 3 percent less than women without children in 2010, down from 19 percent in 1980.²² Comparing workers across different points in the skill-wage continuum, however, England finds that women in the highest skill-wage category, that is, professionals and managers, despite

having the most work experience (and least interruption), experience the highest penalty. This is because, as Goldin also found, returns to experience are so high in their fields that taking any time out is costly. For this group (and the others as well), “Half or more of the motherhood penalty results from losing experience or tenure.”²³

Long hours and overwork (paired with the ongoing expectation that women bear the brunt of family caregiving) also profoundly shape the gender wage gap. Looking at gender gap trends from 1979 to 2009, Cha and Weeden show that “the increasing prevalence of ‘overwork’ (defined as working 50 hours or more per week)” and the rising return to overwork, which favor men’s earnings, account for the slowdown over the 1990s and 2000s in closing the gender pay gap.²⁴ The effect of overwork was so large it offset other earnings-equalizing influences such as women’s increased education and labor force experience. It was also most pronounced among professionals and managers.

The foregoing research helps us quantify the sources and cost of career interruption as it affects women’s earnings and the pay gap. Our research, with its in-depth qualitative focus, sheds light on how women come to make decisions that have such profound implications for their own lives and for women’s status generally. Understanding career interruption—time out followed by reentry—is critical to understanding one of the key drivers of gender inequality and can suggest ways to mitigate it.

CORRECTING MEDIA NARRATIVES

As important as media coverage has been in bringing newfound visibility to gender inequality, the media portrayal of opting out is in need of correction. Opting out was largely a media creation, born as it was from a single highly influential article.²⁵ Our research and that of others have challenged the media characterization of women’s decisions to interrupt careers as reflecting preference, but books and articles continue to recycle this narrative, often trivializing the women portrayed (e.g., as Park Avenue primates or ten-year nappers).²⁶

Continuing media attention also has the effect of exaggerating the extent of opting out, giving the impression that every woman is doing it. While a significant share of college-educated women are—from 20 percent at any given time to 30 to 40 percent over the longer course of work lives—opting out is used by a minority of professional women, albeit with major implications. By hewing to a choice narrative and giving opting out outsized coverage, the media have the potential to reinforce damaging stereotypes. These ubiquitous stereotypes are throwbacks to the era of separate spheres and have the potential to normalize a strategy whose full implications—including downsides—are not yet fully understood.

While it's difficult to trace a direct connection between media coverage and behavior, it's noteworthy that millennials, the youngest generation of women now entering the workforce, who came of age in the opting-out era (after the 2003 coining of the term and subsequent attention to this phenomenon), appear to anticipate taking a career break in considerably greater numbers than gen Xers and baby boomers. A recent *New York Times* article ran under the headline “More Than Their Mothers, Young Women Plan Career Pauses,”²⁷ citing evidence from a number of studies. One, with which we were involved, was a survey of Harvard Business School alumni; it found that 37 percent of millennial women planned to interrupt their career for family, compared to 28 percent of gen X women and 17 percent of baby boomers.²⁸ While this trend might be seen to reflect a healthy shift in priorities and lessons learned from the struggles of earlier generations, not all millennials are sanguine about it. One of our twenty-something students reported that many of her friends were indeed planning to opt out, but she worried about the advisability of this strategy and bemoaned that something so potentially risky was now being seen “as a solution, not a problem.” We share her worries, which is another reason to learn more about the long-term consequences of taking a career break. Unless there are radical changes in work, this strategy seems certain to exact a toll in earnings

and advancement. Are there offsetting benefits? For young women who may be poised to adopt this strategy, our research can help them understand the trade-offs and make decisions with their eyes wide open.

Media characterizations also have the potential to, if not shape anew, reinforce existing stereotypes about professional women, work, and family. We've long known about gender bias in hiring, but a recent rigorously designed experimental study demonstrates that gender bias is more pronounced for upper-middle-class women than others.²⁹ Large law firms are less likely to hire women than men, and more likely to hire female applicants of lower class background rather than higher. Interestingly, while men get an extra (albeit unearned) boost from their elite class status, women do not, because, as the authors explain, "They face a competing, negative stereotype that portrays them as less committed to full-time, intensive careers."³⁰ Upper-middle-class women are not only seen as less career committed than their male counterparts but also rated as less committed than professional women from less affluent or educationally elite backgrounds. Media attention to an uncorrected, uncritical opting-out narrative—with its story line of women returning home to re-create the traditional male-breadwinner, 1950s-style family—perpetuates the stereotype that elite women are flight risks by choice when the reality is quite different. There is some evidence that married mothers from more elite academic backgrounds may be somewhat more likely to opt out,³¹ but their rates of labor force participation, high by absolute or relative standards, belie a lack of commitment. Moreover, our previous research shows that their decision to leave paid employment is less about commitment than about the long hours and intractable work demands they face as primary caregivers. A better understanding of the full truth about opting out, looking beyond the one-time act of quitting and exploring its aftermath, can shed light on the reality of women's work commitment and further undermine, if not shatter, the myths that undergird sexist bias in hiring and promotion.

ABOUT THIS STUDY

To explore these issues, we needed not only to understand why women opted out—the key research question of our previous study—but to find out what happened next. We knew from our earlier research, for example, that the majority of women wanted to return to work—a demonstration, it should be noted, of ongoing work commitment among women who have otherwise been characterized as lacking it. But did they follow through? And were they successful in their efforts? Our original study gave us the perfect springboard to address these questions, but could we locate the women who'd shared their life stories so generously years earlier? Fortunately, the answer is yes. The follow-up findings, coupled with the results from the original study, enable exploration of the full sweep of women's work and family lives over the course of their prime work and child-rearing years.

The fifty-four women we initially interviewed were a privileged group. Although the media portrayal of opting out is deficient in many respects, it is accurate in identifying it as a phenomenon of affluence.³² In fact, the typical stay-at-home mother is not a high-earning professional but a less well-educated and low-income woman.³³ She is home because of limited and precarious employment opportunities and inadequate and costly child care, in contrast to affluent women who are home because of long hours and because their husbands' earnings make quitting a viable solution to work-family conflict. As we use the term, therefore, *opting out* is not synonymous with being out of the labor force to take care of children or staying at home per se. Instead, along with leading work-family scholars Heather Boushey and Joan Williams, we distinguish opting out as a strategy to reduce work-family conflict that is used by the upper-middle class—typically construed as college educated and beyond, working in professional or managerial jobs. It is a specific response to the universal problem of work-family conflict that all women face—occasioned by the mismatch between the increasing presence of women in the workforce and the unchanging structure of