

Educated American Women: Career Paths to Motherhood?

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The press is misrepresenting the choices that college-educated women are making. There are many articles these days about the “best and the brightest” American women choosing their “career paths to motherhood”¹, choosing their home and family over their careers. College-educated women in the 70s and 80s wanted to mix career and family, so they eagerly became “superwomen”². They worked 2 shifts- one at work and then one at home³. In the early 90s, the feminist surge died down. Women are now in somewhat of a “stalled revolution”, stalled at the point of progress they made in the 70s and 80s⁴. Perhaps these days, as *New York Times* articles suggest, college-educated women would prefer to “opt-out”- quit their jobs after they have kids. However, despite what the press suggests, college-educated women are still doing double shifts, and they are still moving forward- they are just moving forward very slowly compared to the 70s and 80s.

During the 1970s, the feminist movement opened up many opportunities for college-educated women in the workplace. New laws made it possible for them to enter the labor force. Because they were excited about “that kingdom that was previously denied” to them, women aspired to combine kids, marriage, and work⁵. One article describes a “typical” woman in 1976 as an “overachiever... intent on pursuing a professional career”⁶. According to a 1977 survey of American women, 52% of female students said that they wanted to combine marriage, kids, and career⁷. In a survey of Brown students conducted in the late 1970s, 2/3 of the women said that they wanted full-time careers⁸. In 1975, 62.7% of American women with 4 yrs of college or more were employed (full-time or part-time)⁹. Thus, although there was a gap between college-educated women’s aspirations and reality (66% of Brown

women wanted to have *full-time* careers), more women than ever entered the workplace.

A survey of approximately 200,000 collegiate women found that between 1970 and 1973, the percentage of women who thought that “activities of married women were best confined to the home and family” dropped from 35% to 18%. Between 1973 and 1986, even more progress was made; 15% of the collegiate women in 1986 thought that married women should limit their activities to the domestic sphere¹⁰.

This trend of collegiate women’s larger conception of a woman’s “proper” sphere continued in the 1980s, when college-educated women’s career goals became progressively ambitious. Although the traditional family model, in which the woman worked in the home and the man worked outside the home, still existed, there was more social approval than ever before for college-educated women in the workplace¹¹. 63% of American women surveyed in a national poll in 1987 wanted to combine marriage, career, and kids (an 11% increase from the late 70s). Furthermore, there was a 12% decrease between 1977 and 1987 in the fraction of women who wanted to avoid a career by getting married and having kids (from 38% to 26%)¹². In a 1984 survey of Phillips Academy, 88% of women said that career achievement was very important to them¹³. The majority of the women claimed that they would choose having a career even if they could manage without one¹⁴.

However, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, according to the press, educated women began to change their minds. Articles in the *New York Times* stressed that professional women were “dead of stress [and] exhaustion” from all of the work in the labor force. According to the press, college-educated women decided that their

“careers [were] cheating [them] out of forming and enjoying the most important relationships” and that “work wasn’t worth sacrificing personal life”¹⁵. Careers didn’t leave time for leisure or family time¹⁶. Educated women wanted to “have it all- at separate times”, meaning that they wanted to work once they got out of college and then stop once they had kids¹⁷.

The press argues that women today *still* want to have family and leisure time over careers. An article in 2002 talks about high-powered, highly educated women “trickling out” of the workplace. The article claims that women’s career satisfaction negatively affected their leisure time- the women with careers didn’t “have a life”¹⁸. Articles assert that “less women (today) want power and money”¹⁹ and that “women have different priorities [than making money]”²⁰, implying that women don’t care about having careers to provide them with power and money. Another article in 2003 discusses college-educated women “opting out” of the workplace- using kids as an excuse to cut back their work time or quit work altogether²¹. Maureen Dowd writes in her fiction, Are Men Necessary, that women today “want to *be* that Wife” who does “the shopping, cooking, and carpooling” while leaving others (men) to “focus on work”²².

It is clear that the women’s movement made a lot of progress from the early 70s until the late 80s in terms of career aspirations and family goals. However, from an outsider’s perspective, it seems as though since the late 80s, the trends that were evident from 1970 until the late 80s have reversed. It seems as though college-educated women were so sick of working hard in the 80s that they began staying at home more and more to take care of the house and the kids.

However, data suggests that this isn't the case. The articles that suggest that more and more women are staying at home to take care of the domestic sphere are merely "trend stories". Journalist Susan Faluti describes these stories as claiming "to divine sweeping shifts in female social behavior while providing little in the way of evidence to support their generalizations"²³. A *New York Times* article from 1988 said that "few educated Americans... would choose to reverse this social revolution [of women's career and family aspirations] even if they could"²⁴. Perhaps this statement continues to be true today- perhaps Americans do not want to "reverse this social revolution".

Although college-educated women claim that they would like to work less, they are not dropping out of the labor force as they claim they want to. Some of the trends that were evident from the 1970s until the late 1980s have stabilized. Most of the trends, however, are continuing; they are simply continuing at a much slower pace than in the 80s.

More collegiate women than ever say that raising a family is a "highly important objective". In 1970, 71.6% of collegiate freshmen women said that raising a family was "highly important"; in 1986, 68.3% of the freshmen women agreed. By 1992, the percentage rose to 72.1%, and in 2001, the percentage reached an all-time high of 72.4%²⁵. It's clear from these percentages that raising a family has always been important to women. Today, however, it is more important than ever. But that still doesn't stop women from having a career. Just look at the facts.

Many articles claim that the college-educated women are the ones dropping out of the workplace. However, according to The Current Population Survey, the

percentage of college-educated women who work has been about 80% since the early 1990s (much higher, by the way, than the national percentage of working women, about 60%). The percentage dropped a little bit (from 81.3% in 1990) in the early 90s, but so did the percentage of college-educated men who work²⁶. Furthermore, according to a mid-1990 survey of 10,000 women from 34 selective colleges and universities, 58% of the women were not out of the job market for more than six months total in the “15 or so years that followed college or more advanced schooling”²⁷.

New York Times articles also claim that married women want to have kids and then stop or lessen their work outside of the home. Perhaps women *want* to do that, but they are not doing that. The percentage of married women with kids in the labor force went from 39.7% in 1970, to 54.1% in 1980, to 66.3% in 1990, to 68.2% in 2004²⁸. Although the rate of increase went down in the early 90s, the percentage of working married moms is still increasing.

Most working women don't opt out of work because of a child. The survey of women from the 34 highly selective colleges and universities found that, in the mid-1990s, women with at least one child spent about 2.1 years on average out of the labor force. Although that percentage is more than the average woman in the survey (who spent about 1.6 years out of the labor force), it is still only 14% of their potential time²⁹. 50% of the women who had kids never spent more than 6 months unemployed³⁰. Another survey, which studied all American women, found that the percentage of women who were married with kids under the age of six and working

was about 30% in 1970, 58.9% in 1990, and 59.3% in 2004³¹. Thus, once again, the increase in the percentage of mom workers since 1990 is slight, yet visible.

Some articles have argued that highly educated women are opting out of the labor force in more subtle ways by choosing less-demanding careers. However, not only is there an increased interest among women in obtaining graduate degrees, but there are also more women than ever entering traditional male careers. In 1970, about 3% of collegiate freshmen women planned on earning an MD, DDS, DVM, or DO degree. This percentage increased to 8.3% by 1985, 9.3% by 1991, and 10.5% in 2001³². Thus, more and more collegiate women are choosing the traditional male professions of physicians or dentists, even though the rate of increase in the number of women choosing these professions has lessened since the early 90s. In fact, so many women are choosing to go into the medical field, a field that is typically thought of as masculine, that 3.8% more women than men want to be physicians or dentists³³.

More and more collegiate women are also getting involved in the typically masculine field of business. The percentage of collegiate freshmen women aspiring to have a business career rose from 2.6% in 1966 to 10.8% in 1988. In 2001, 11.1% of collegiate freshmen women planned on having a business career³⁴. More and more collegiate women are also choosing to be lawyers. The percentage of collegiate freshmen women aspiring to be lawyers rose from .8% in 1966, to 4% in 1996, to 4.1% in 2001³⁵. Thus, as in the medical field, the percentage of women entering the traditionally male fields of business and law continues to increase, even though the rate of increase since the late 80s/early 90s has lessened.

Because more and more women are diving into traditionally male careers, fewer and fewer women are choosing traditionally female careers. For example, the percentage of college freshmen women who wanted to be secondary school teachers went from 20.5% in 1966, to 4.5% in 1990, to 4.4% in 2001³⁶. Thus, that percentage dropped greatly in the last 40 years, and has been relatively consistent since the early 1990s. The percentage of college freshmen women who wanted to be nurses went from 8.2% in 1976, to 4.1% in 1990, to 3.6% in 2001³⁷. Thus, that percentage, too, dropped in the last 40 years, and has been dropping (though at a slower rate) since the early 90s.

With all of these facts to support otherwise, why, then, is there “so much focus on women leaving the work force?”³⁸ Why does one author write that “educated women were supposed to achieve”³⁹, implying that they are not “achieving” today? A female Ph. D. economist and medical school professor with two kids proposes an explanation, saying that “people have difficulty believing that women can actually contribute professionally and participate meaningfully in the raising of a family”⁴⁰.

Why does it seem like, according to the “trend stories”, all women want to and *are* dropping out of the labor force? Maybe the authors are biased- they interview their friends. They concentrate on those who are opting out instead of all those who aren't. But maybe women really *are* sick of all this work and are complaining because they *are* tired. As one journalist writes, “the few women who advance seek to prove that they aren't so interested in advancement after all”⁴¹. Maybe women want men to think of them as weak and unable to survive in the workplace. Or maybe women, through complaining that they are too tired to do work and raise a family, are

hinting to men that they should help out more around the house. Maybe women only work because they feel a sense of obligation to continue the movement from the 80s. Maybe women are just frustrated because they expected that they would be on an equal level as men by now, so they began in the 1990s making up excuses explaining why they couldn't be- "the home was too important".

Whatever the reason for focusing on women's desire to leave the work force, and despite what women claim to want in the articles, it's important to remember that the trend stories claim "to mirror public sentiment," yet their "reflections of the human landscapes are strangely depopulated"⁴². In other words, the trend stories provide little factual evidence to support their claims. Faludi reminds us that the "female burn-out" crisis has its "origins not in the actual conditions of women's lives but rather in a closed system that starts and ends in the media...- an endless feedback loop that perpetuates and exaggerates its own false images of womanhood"⁴³.

Not everything is perfect. There are still about 1.33 businessmen to businesswomen⁴⁴. An average college-educated woman has a significantly lower salary than an average college-educated man⁴⁵. Women work around the house much more than men do, spending about twice as much time on housework than men⁴⁶. Given these facts, it isn't surprising that some women *do* opt-out. But the fact is, most highly educated women are avoiding a "career path to motherhood". More highly educated women than ever are progressively advancing their positions in the work force *while* raising a family, juggling their roles as moms, wives, and professional workers.

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