

Choice or Struggle?
Overcoming the Cult of Motherhood and the Cult of the Successful Worker

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Feminism's Remaining Hurdles

Belkin's Sunday Magazine article (10/26) generated a flurry of angry conversations in person and on email among my social and professional acquaintances. Why? Because there was much left unsaid about the true nature of these "choices" for many men and women struggling to create a meaningful life through balancing work and family. The stormy reactions to the article focus upon her sample. The real concern, however, is her choice of frame and written presentation of these women's life stories. Her framing hides the true nature of the dynamics. Yes, privileged, well-educated women with children and partners/spouses can choose to opt-out; they have the resources. But, is it really a "choice" for them or are they just tired of struggling to get spouses to do 50% at home, while also struggling to get resources and time in the workplace that will yield respect, success and adequate remuneration? Hints of these struggles are apparent in her text, but not fully developed. And how do we make sense of these struggles and choices and post-hoc rationalization on the part of these women?

Choose a different frame. Consider a frame that analyzes the cult of motherhood as it clashes with the cult of the successful professional worker. These two cultural tropes create significant identity struggles for all women and are daily reified in our lives at work, home, and civic society. This struggle and these two tropes are the legacy of last century's feminist movement.

This is how it is: most professional men in the workplace do not have a working spouse, while a vast majority of professional women in the workplace have a working spouse. Having the skills and the resources does not yield success or a better work life when the culture and structure of opportunities presumes few if any other responsibilities outside of work (women and men are now at parity in terms of professional, post-baccalaureate education and training). Even when spouses share 50% of home care in a truly equitable relationship, professional workplace conditions still require more than 50% availability and accessibility. Despite relatively less time availability, many of these workers continue to make vital and valuable contributions to their workplaces. Professional performance evaluations, however, are rarely based on efficiency.

What more do we need to know to really understand the phenomenon of opting out and whether there remain considerable gender inequities in the workplace and at home? The flurry of angry conversations post-Belkin's article mostly focused on those left out of her portrayal – men, women of color, women of lesser means, women without partners, and women of similar position who have not opted out. We cannot know the true nature of continued gender inequality in work and home until we systematically learn about all the participants in this choice or struggle.

Even without including these others in her portrayals, Belkin still leaves unsaid critical elements of these women's stories - she does not tell us about the home and

workplace struggles that lead to the “choice” to opt out. We might have gained some insights that mesh squarely with the vast empirical and sociological literature (read Suzanne Bianchi, Ann Crittendon, Kathleen Gerson, Evelyn Glenn Nakano, Arlie Hochschild, Myra Marx Ferree, Barbara Risman, Joan Williams, to name a few). In this literature, we know that men have not made up the difference at home and workplaces have been slow to restructure performance evaluations to account for familial demands on employees’ time. In addition, high quality, affordable childcare remains one of the most persistent challenges for working parents - an institutional problem that has been solved by many other countries around the world.

But neither Belkin nor the subsequent flurry of angry conversations addresses the cultural touchstones that mystify the true nature of the problem or the sources of social change. Two cultural tropes continue to limit our capacity to understand and change social structures: the culture of motherhood and the cultural definition of successful, professional workers. Each trope would likely have been revealed if Belkin’s portrayals had also focused upon the women’s spouses, their employers, and the struggle leading up to their decision to opt-out.

Cultural expectations about motherhood are alive and well in American discourse and reveal themselves acutely when school administrators call mothers first when children are ill, when media portrayals in advertising, film and television consistently portray women as primary care givers, when research about how fathers can be care givers is rarely considered or conducted, when child care institutions are vilified in the press, when kindergartens are half-day, and child-centered community activities are offered only during the day and during the work week. American women are frequently rewarded symbolically and emotionally for staying home and vilified if they do not, especially when their children come into harm’s way or their children cause harm. The culture of motherhood alongside limited institutional support makes it easier to opt out and very difficult to be a working parent when you cannot or do not opt out.

The other cultural trope that gets in the way of gender equity is the cultural expectation that successful professional workers make an all or nothing contribution, have tireless commitment, and emotionally participate in the daily lives of colleagues in order to be a team player. Rarely are professional performance evaluations based on actual productivity given hours contributed, but rather on the degree to which an individual demonstrates commitment to the cultural ideals of success in a particular profession. Ironically, the culture of motherhood and the successful worker interacts to generate a child care “choice” that has the highest price tag of all: the very large opportunity costs born by these women, their families, their employers, our communities and our tax base (to put it bluntly).

Why aren’t these privileged and well-endowed women motivated to change the social structures and cultures that limit or frustrate their attempts to have a meaningful life that includes both work and family? They have the resources, the coveted talents, and the freedom to walk if a workplace environment cannot accommodate their needs. Some theories of social change would predict that these women should be the source of

profound change to workplace structures, given their resources. Unfortunately, we cannot learn the answer from Belkin, she and those she portrayed have chosen to maintain the status quo by opting out. Deeper self reflection on the part of those privileged and those writing about them, might have generated a cultural reframing that might satisfy all of our yearnings for a meaningful balance between work, family, and civil society and reinvigorate a third wave feminist movement.

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