

Life Sequencing: A Viable Solution to Work-Life  
Conflict for High-Achieving Women

by

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## INTRODUCTION

Ambitious professional women on track to success in their careers confront an enormous dilemma when they have children. These women lead lifestyles that make little to no room for the major commitment of motherhood. Thus, there are three commonly held political stances for how career women should deal with this conflict. The first is the traditional conservative opinion that women should leave the workforce and embark on the motherhood track. Within liberal feminism, there are two strands of opinion. Feminists focused on professional advancement, the most famous of which is Sheryl Sandberg, the author of the widely influential book *Lean In*, believe that women should stay in the workforce and remain fully committed to their careers. Work-life balance feminists, on the other hand, think that women should continue to work while they raise their kids and that in order to do both at the same time, a balance must be formed through strategies such as sharing household duties with a partner and flexible work arrangements.

There is a fourth option, life sequencing, that is possible to imagine but right now is not a viable choice. Life sequencing occurs when a woman exits the professional workforce to focus on childrearing and then returns at a later date. It is a pathway that is similar in certain ways to each of the life courses suggested by conservatives and liberal feminists. Sequencers “opt out”<sup>1</sup> in the traditional conservative sense, but then they opt back in. They can also “lean in”<sup>2</sup> at work before and after they leave. Lastly, sequencing allows individuals to have fulfilling

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<sup>1</sup> Lisa Belkin, “The Opt-Out Revolution,” *The New York Times*, October 26, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Sheryl Sandberg, *Lean In* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013).

professional and personal lives while avoiding the difficult task of trying to balance the two simultaneously.

The major problem faced by those who try to sequence their lives is that even for professional women who have been sufficiently educated, who are highly skilled, and who have achieved success in their careers, it is exceptionally difficult to re-enter the workforce. Scholars that think about work-life conflict issues fail to consider the reasons for why this is the case. Work-life conflict is a defining issue for women and for feminist thought. And yet, there is a deafening silence around sequencing. Since no one discusses sequencing as a viable option, important issues that affect women's advancement in the professional labor force are neglected.

### *Economic Context*

That the structure of our professional labor force does not welcome individuals coming back from a career break is a problem that does not only affect individual women, but that also has macro-economic consequences for our society. As sociologist C. Wright Mills famously argues, individuals “do not usually define the troubles they endure in terms of historical change and institutional contradiction.”<sup>3</sup> The challenge of re-entry into the workforce for those who left it to raise children is an issue that is considered to have consequences solely for the lives of individual women. It is a perfect example of the way in which people's lives appear to be only affected by their personal decisions, and not by social and institutional factors. And yet there are broader social, institutional, and economic

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<sup>3</sup> C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, [1959] 2000), 3.

contexts in which women's choices are made, which make them of interest to our society, our institutions, and our national economy.

In the past few decades, the number of women in the professional workforce has increased exponentially. In the United States, over fifty percent of bachelor's degrees are awarded to women and in many fields more women obtain graduate and professional degrees than do men.<sup>4</sup> Yet despite these facts, when high-potential career women become mothers, they are faced with the challenge of balancing work and life, which can affect their ability to participate and advance in the workforce. Labor force participation rate is "the labor force as a percent of the civilian noninstitutional population."<sup>5</sup> While the labor force participation rate of mothers in the U.S. rose from 17% in 1948 to 61% in 1985 and then to 70% by 1995, in recent years it has remained still.<sup>6</sup> As of 2008, the average labor force participation rate of mothers with children under eighteen was 71.2 %.<sup>7</sup>

Sharon R. Cohany and Emy Sok, economists at the Bureau of Labor Statistics, find that Current Population Survey data can support two explanations for the stagnation in labor force participation among college-educated mothers. The first is that married women with college degrees tend to have husbands that have received similar levels of education who are "likely to be relatively high earners, providing their wives with more financial resources to draw upon and more choice about

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<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department for Professional Employees, "Professional Women: Vital Statistics," United States Department for Professional Employee Research Department Fact Sheet, 2010, [http://dpeaflcio.org/programs/factsheets/fs\\_2010\\_Professional\\_Women.pdf](http://dpeaflcio.org/programs/factsheets/fs_2010_Professional_Women.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> "BLS Glossary," U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, last modified February 28, 2008, accessed February 10, 2015, <http://www.bls.gov/bls/glossary.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> Sharon R. Cohany and Emy Sok, "Trends in Labor Force Participation of Married Mothers with Infants," *Monthly Labor Review* 130, no. 2 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2007): 9, <http://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2007/02/art2full.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

whether to work after the birth of children.”<sup>8</sup> They find that married mothers of infants who have husbands with earnings in the top percentile have one of the lowest labor force participation rates (48% in 2005).<sup>9</sup> The second explanation is that college-educated women tend to hold jobs that are demanding in terms of time and effort, which might give them “an incentive to step back from the workforce” once they have children.<sup>10</sup>

Economist Joni Hersch finds that married mothers with degrees from elite institutions have a substantially lower labor market activity than do those with degrees from less selective institutions. She hypothesizes:

Spousal income may be related to institutional selectivity. Not only are women likely to marry men with similar levels of education (e.g., Schwartz and Mare 2005), but they are also likely to marry men with similar parental wealth (Charles et al. 2013) and who graduate from colleges of similar status (Arum et al. 2008). Such assortative marriages may decrease labor supply of women from more selective schools, as their spouses will bring to the marriage greater nonlabor assets as well as higher expected labor income.<sup>11</sup>

When married women with elite degrees do not have to work for financial reasons, some make the decision not to in order to have more time for parental duties.

However, their leaving the labor force, especially since it is so difficult to re-enter, is harmful for our economy. We are currently facing a shortage of skilled professional employees and our overall labor force participation is too low.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Cohany and Sok, *Trends in Labor Force Participation*, 12.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>11</sup> Joni Hersch, “Opting Out Among Women With Elite Education,” (research paper, Vanderbilt Law School, 2013), 473.

<sup>12</sup> Cathleen Benko and Anne Weisberg, *Mass Career Customization* (Cambridge: Harvard Business School Press, 2007), 27; Lawrence Summers, “Bold Reform is the Only Answer to Secular Stagnation,” *Financial Times*, September 7, 2014, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/4be87390-352a-11e4-aa47-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3WZ9VL6wg>.

A number of U.S. economists are paying attention to the recent decline in the percentage of women who are working or who are looking for work. Claire Cain Miller points out that while the drop is not huge, it “is contributing to a dip in overall labor force participation, which policy makers see as an impediment to economic recovery.”<sup>13</sup> Francine Blau and Lawrence M. Khan find while in 1990 the U.S. had the sixth highest female labor force participation rate amongst the twenty-two Western, economically advanced nations, by 2010, its ranking had fallen to seventeenth.<sup>14</sup> In a September 2014 *Financial Times* article, Lawrence Summers expresses concern about the declining labor force participation rate, which he says is due to “population aging and long-term structural trends, even as the unemployment rate has declined sharply.”<sup>15</sup> Part of the reason that the economy’s supply potential has fallen significantly since before the recession, he explains, is “the end of the trend towards increased women’s labour force participation.”<sup>16</sup> Summers argues that some of the necessary structural reform, “to increase the productivity of both workers and capital, and to increase growth in the number of people able and willing to work productively,” are policy imperatives that “promote family-friendly work.”<sup>17</sup> New policies and the social and cultural readjustment of attitudes and norms that will allow for professional women to successfully balance work and life so that they do not have to leave the workforce or to be able to re-enter the workforce after taking time off are essential to increasing our labor force participation rate.

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<sup>13</sup> Claire Cain Miller, “U.S. Finding Women Less Likely to Want to Work; Country Falls Behind in Measures to Prevent Labor Force Dropouts,” *International New York Times*, July 30, 2014, retrieved September 7, 2014 (Factiva, docID: INHT000020140729ea7u00030).

<sup>14</sup> Francine D. Blau and Lawrence M. Khan, “Female Labor Supply: Why is the US Falling Behind?” (working paper, National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge, 2013), 1.

<sup>15</sup> Summers, “Bold Reform is the Only Answer.”

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

In his book *Human Capital*, economist Gary Becker explains that schooling imbues an individual with skills and knowledge, which in effect produces human capital. Education and training, he argues, are the most significant investments one can make in their own human capital, for they greatly raise one's potential income.<sup>18</sup> The more formal education an individual receives, the larger their investment in human capital is. The longer an individual utilizes their human capital in the workforce, the greater the potential for return on their investment. When women accumulate mass amounts of human capital through the acquisition of advanced degrees but do not actually work for that long, the question of waste becomes important. How do they understand their return on investment given their high levels of investment and low levels of return?

Tereza Nemessanyi, an entrepreneur-in-residence at Microsoft, spoke to the importance of getting a return on the investments she made in her human capital. Tereza was admitted to Wharton, got her degree, and subsequently spent years paying off her student loans. She had done a lot of work with start-up companies and was on track to be a partner at the professional services network PricewaterhouseCoopers as a strategist when she needed to take time off to care for her sick mother. Eventually she was going to have to go back to work for financial reasons, but also, she had no intention of wasting her education. She is the daughter of Czechoslovakian immigrants and she explained, "for an immigrant kid to get into Wharton and to then

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<sup>18</sup> Gary Becker, *Human Capital* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, [1964] 1993), 17.

pay it off yourself... I didn't feel like I could give it up, too much of myself was invested in that.”<sup>19</sup>

Economic benefits are not the only reason for education. As Becker states, “nothing in the concept of human capital implies that monetary incentives need be more important than cultural and non-monetary ones.”<sup>20</sup> After all, schooling does not only raise potential earnings but also increases a person's appreciation of “literature, culture, and the good life.”<sup>21</sup> Therefore, educated and skilled women who opt out of the workforce might not have a reason to believe that their return on investment in human capital is low. However, women that have invested in training to possess specific professional skills might think differently.

Regardless of their rate of return on investment, these women do possess human capital that can be utilized in the workforce for the sake of economic growth. Because many ambitious professional women who want both to raise their children and achieve success in their careers choose to sequence their lives by opting out for a period of time over a work-life balance (part-time work, shared childcare responsibilities), there is a significant economic draw to bring them back into the workforce. In their book *Mass Career Customization*, Cathleen Benko and Anne Weisberg point out, “the knowledge economy demands employees who are well educated with competent communication and analytic skills” but “these employees are in short supply today—and this shortage will only get worse over the next ten

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<sup>19</sup> Tereza Nemessanyi (entrepreneur-in-residence, Microsoft) in discussion with the author, September 2014.

<sup>20</sup> Becker, *Human Capital*, 21.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

years.”<sup>22</sup> Women that have taken a career break could help fill the “skills gap” faced by a number of professional industries.<sup>23</sup> Yet as long as there are not clear ways for these women to re-enter the workforce, they will continue to represent valuable human capital that goes unused. One study finds that the “value lost in female human capital is critical for households and nations... According to a Goldman Sachs’ economist, if America could raise women’s employment rate to that of men’s then the GDP would raise proportionately to be 9% or higher.”<sup>24</sup>

Also, even though women enter the professional workforce at an equal rate to men, the gender gap in corporate leadership still persists.<sup>25</sup> Sociologist Pamela Stone states clearly, “even as women’s entry has persisted, their presence grown, and their time-in-rank lengthened, progress in closing the gender gap in earnings has slowed and the number of women at the top remains stubbornly and disproportionately few.”<sup>26</sup> Women make up 47% of the workforce, but only 6% of corporate CEOs and top executives are women.<sup>27</sup>

A number of scholars have looked into why this is the case. Psychologist Virginia E. Schein finds that the qualities society associates with leaders are consistent with the qualities it associates with men, but opposed to the qualities it

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<sup>22</sup> Benko and Weisberg, *Mass Career Customization*, 27.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas O. Jones and Beth Z. Schneider, “Beyond ‘Opting Out:’ Dissecting the Barriers Affecting Women’s Entrance and Success in Business,” *Forum on Public Policy* 2010, no. 2 (2010): 15, <http://forumonpublicpolicy.com/spring2010.vol2010/spring2010archive/jones.schneider.pdf>.

<sup>25</sup> Judith Warner, “The Women’s Leadership Gap: Women’s Leadership by the Numbers” (fact sheet, Center for American Progress, Washington D.C., 2014). <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/WomenLeadership.pdf>.

<sup>26</sup> Pamela Stone, *Opting Out? Why Women Really Quit Careers and Head Home* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007): 19-20.

<sup>27</sup> David A. Matsa and Amalia R. Miller, “Chipping Away at the Glass Ceiling: Gender Spillovers in Corporate Leadership,” *American Economic Review* 101, no. 3 (2011): 635, doi:10.1257/aer.101.3.635.

associates with women.<sup>28</sup> These associations, she argues, are psychological barriers to women's success in management. Stefania Albanesi, a research officer at the Federal Bank of New York, and her student María José Prados find a correlation between the sharp rise in salaries for top earners in the U.S., particularly men, and the decline in the number of well-educated, married women who are in the workforce. Finding that from 1993 to 2005, the skill premium rose 13% for male college graduates while it rose only 7% for female college graduates, they hypothesize that "the rise in the skill premium increases earnings for married skilled men and generates a negative wealth effect on participation and market hours for their wives."<sup>29</sup> They find that "the flattening of labor force participation starting in the early 1990s is limited to married women" since labor force participation of single women has remained "mostly stable" throughout their sample period.<sup>30</sup> Thus, well-educated married men are earning more while their just as well-educated wives are working less and leaving the labor force because they do not need to make money.

In a time when women's advancement in the workplace is on the agenda, childcare looms as the big unanswered question. Anyone thinking about women's labor force participation and leadership will ultimately arrive at the question of what it means for parenting. After all, professionals committed to career advancement are expected to work upwards of sixty hours a week around the same time in which they are most likely to have children. This conflict is particularly pressing for women who risk the possibility of infertility if they wait too long to get pregnant. Since mothers

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<sup>28</sup> Virginia E. Schein, "A Global Look at Psychological Barriers to Women's Progress in Management," *Journal of Social Issues* 57, no. 4 (2001): 684, doi:10.1111/0022-4537.00235.

<sup>29</sup> Stefania Albanesi and María José Prados, "Inequality and Household Labor Supply" (working paper, National Bureau of Economic Research, Columbia University, New York, 2013), 3.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

still perform the majority of childrearing work, regardless of their increased rates of labor force participation in the past few decades, the transformation of the professional workweek from a norm of forty hours to endless has had and will continue to have implications for women in particular.<sup>31</sup>

The Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) defines the length of the workweek as forty hours and requires employers to pay employees that work over that time “no less than time and one-half their regular rates of pay.”<sup>32</sup> However, FLSA only covers waged workers. Salaried, white-collar workers are exempt from the law. Therefore, in the professional middle class there is no such thing as a normal workweek and there is no such thing as overtime pay. Corporate culture thrives off the fact that there is no limit to the amount of work performed by professionals since employers pay no penalty for overworking their employees. Professionals looking to advance their careers are required to be on call and ready to work at all times.

There are two positions in regards to the question of how to get more women in the labor force and particularly in leadership positions. Sheryl Sandberg acknowledges that success in the corporate world requires professionals to be completely committed. Therefore, she argues, women must “lean in” at work no matter their parental status so that we can have the kind of leadership and advancement we need for women. Feminist scholars devoted to the project of work-life balance, on the other hand, believe that there is a necessity to alter the legal and

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<sup>31</sup> Robin J. Ely, Pamela Stone, and Colleen Ammerman, “Rethink What You ‘Know’ About High-Achieving Women,” *Harvard Business Review*, December 2014. <https://hbr.org/2014/12/rethink-what-you-know-about-high-achieving-women>.

<sup>32</sup> U.S. Department of Labor Wage and Hour Division, “Fact Sheet #8: Law Enforcement and Fire Protection Employees Under the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA),” United States Department of Labor Wage and Hour Division Fact Sheet, last modified March 2011, <http://www.dol.gov/whd/regs/compliance/whdfs8.pdf>.

cultural contexts of professional work to correlate with parental expectations and responsibilities.

There are stark limitations to each of these viewpoints. While Sandberg calls for a complete sacrifice of childcare duties, work-life balance scholars are holding out for massive transformations that are not likely to take place in the near future. Therefore, it is past time to start thinking seriously about sequencing as a viable option for women who could eventually hold leadership positions in corporate America.

### *Organization of the Thesis*

Chapter one examines the current political landscape for working professional mothers. It analyzes the different choices that a woman could make about motherhood combined with career and it critiques the liberal feminist politics of work-life balance and opting out. Chapter two considers the problems and possibilities that could arise with sequencing and the most prominent personal barriers and structural impediments that make up the obstacles to re-entry into the workforce. Chapter three studies the limited infrastructure that exists for helping individuals return to work in the form of network structures, corporate structures, and academic institutional structures. It evaluates various organizations and programs in terms of limitation and promise. Finally, the conclusion argues for a necessary change in the discourse of liberal feminist politics and considers where there is potential in emergent re-entry infrastructure.

In sum, an analysis of the debate around work-life issues for professional women with children, of the obstacles to re-entry into the workforce posed by our current corporate climate, and of the emergent social and structural re-entry infrastructure illustrates that the neglected life course of sequencing should be recognized as a path that is sometimes chosen by mothers and attended to by our society and our professional workforce so that more women can advance and succeed in their careers without having to sacrifice their priorities as parents.

## METHODOLOGY

The focus of this thesis is on the challenge of re-entry into the workforce faced by highly educated and skilled women with significant professional experience who leave it to raise children. Firstly, I reviewed and criticized current scholarship around the conflict of work and life for professional women that are mothers. I found that amongst this literature, there is a blank space around the pattern of sequencing, which is that mothers often choose to leave work for a period of time but then want to return. Since this topic is contemporary and underexplored, I chose to conduct interviews with women that have personal experience with the processes of off-ramping<sup>33</sup> and on-ramping.

I conducted phone interviews with twenty-six women, all of who have earned undergraduate degrees from elite institutions and most of who have obtained graduate degrees. Some of these women had left the formal workforce for anywhere from two to fourteen years and successfully returned, some were about to embark on a career break, and some were currently not working but trying to get back. In the interviews, I asked them to tell me about their experiences navigating in and out of the workforce. A snowball sample<sup>34</sup> was used to find subjects for interviews. The thesis refers to most of these women by their real names, although I changed the names of those who wished to remain anonymous. Depending on the interviewee, different initial questions were asked, and others came about over the course of the conversation. Some of the typical questions that were asked included the following:

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<sup>33</sup> Sylvia Ann Hewlett, et al., “The Hidden Brain Drain: Off-Ramps and On-Ramps in Women’s Careers” (research report, Harvard Business School, Cambridge, 2005), 14.

<sup>34</sup> Earl Babbie, *The Practice of Social Research* (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1998), 195-196.

“Why did you stop working? Did you experience more push factors from the workplace or more pull factors from home?”

“Did your job try to get you to stay, or was there any sort of understanding that you would at some point come back? Did they try to offer you any sort of part-time work?”

“Did you have a plan when you left? What did you think was going to happen?”

“How did you restart your career? Was it relatively easy for you to re-enter the labor force, or was it challenging? How so?”

“I’m interested in three networks and if/how any of them were of help to you in your process of re-entry: peer networks, old professional networks, and familial networks. Did each or every of these three networks help you to get back on track as a working woman, and if so, how?”

I also conducted an institutional analysis of the existing infrastructure around the issue of re-entry using written material, online websites, and interviews with institutional players. I asked individuals in charge of return-to-work platforms and organizations about the function of their programs and their opinions regarding the importance and the future development of re-entry infrastructure. I also spoke with headhunters and high-powered professionals to gather information about the ways in which the issue of re-entry for high-potential mothers is being considered and talked about in the corporate world.

In order to support my arguments, I chose to disperse my literature review along with quotations and anecdotes from the interviews I conducted throughout the work.

## CHAPTER 1 — How is the Debate Shaped?

### I. Current Landscape

There are five different situations that a professional woman could decide to orient her life around, some of which make it plausible to participate and advance in the labor force and others that make it difficult. They are as follows: childlessness, full-time help, work-life balance, opting out, and sequencing.

#### *Childlessness*

Childless women can be wholly committed to their careers unless they need at some point to work less or take time off in order to care for an ailing family member, such as a parent. Children are the major reason that high-achieving women feel the need or the desire to either scale back on work or exit the labor force completely. While there is a silence around childlessness amongst liberal feminists, conservatives tend to view it negatively.

In her book *The Price of Motherhood*, former *New York Times* economics reporter Ann Crittenden argues that a significant percentage of professional childless women are not content with their childlessness. Disappointment “in not having a child,” she claims, “is the ultimate price of the ‘be a man’ strategy that has been forced on working women.”<sup>35</sup> She notes the high degree (28%) of childless white female college graduates and then goes on to list a number of accomplished black

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<sup>35</sup> Ann Crittenden, *The Price of Motherhood: Why the Most Important Job in the World is Still the Least Valued* (New York: Picador, 2010), 108.

women, including Oprah Winfrey, in whom she says, “apparently discovered that the price of success included the lack of parental obligations.”<sup>36</sup> Crittenden comes to the conclusion that American women are faced with “‘choices’ between a career and a family” that are “much more limited than those of women in many European countries, where policies are much more favorable to mothers and children.”<sup>37</sup> She cites a study conducted by economist Claudia Goldin that finds that “almost half of the college-educated boomers who would remain childless had said that they did want children,” yet she has no interest in those who never wanted children.<sup>38</sup> All she wants to suggest is that childless women are regretful and that it is the fault of the structure of corporate America.

### *Full-Time Help*

Mothers that work full-time have the option of outsourcing the work of childcare to a third party. Full-time nannies, however, are not ideologically supported by left-wing feminists or right-wing anti-feminists. Also, powerful working mothers who speak publicly about work-life issues almost never acknowledge their obvious reliance on outside help. Today, almost no one speaks favorably about outsourcing the labor of child-rearing to the market.

Cultural conservatives do not like the idea of hiring a full-time nanny because they see it as an abandonment of motherhood. Crittenden has a chapter in her book titled “An Accident Waiting to Happen” where she emphasizes the dangers of leaving

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<sup>36</sup> Crittenden, *The Price of Motherhood*, 107-108.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 107

your child in the hands of a potentially unskilled and untrustworthy caretaker.<sup>39</sup> She scrutinizes the effects of the immigration bill passed by the United States Congress in 1990, which “drastically reduced the number of unskilled immigrants allowed to enter the United States,” including “trained nannies.”<sup>40</sup> The result, she claims, is that “working women face a terrible choice: they can go to work and risk leaving their children in unsafe hands, or stay at home and risk losing their livelihood and financial independence.”<sup>41</sup> She adds, “The official disregard for childcare affects every child’s safety and every mother’s peace of mind, regardless of income or class.”<sup>42</sup>

Liberal feminists are not so keen on the idea of full-time nannies either. Professor of law and distinguished feminist thinker Joan Williams argues, in her book *Unbending Gender*, for a shift from the “full-time commodification strategy” of Betty Friedan’s *Feminine Mystique* to a reconstructive feminism, which would require a new definition of “the norm of parental care.”<sup>43</sup> Freidan’s famous work exposed the “traditional feminist strategy for women’s equality,” that women should work full-time.<sup>44</sup> However, as Williams points out, Freidan “minimized the question of who would take care of the children,” rarely mentioning household help except for a mere reference to the necessity of a cleaning lady.<sup>45</sup> *Lean In* also fails to draw sufficient attention to the necessity of full-time help for ambitious professional women with children. While Sandberg briefly makes note of her own reliance on outsourced help, it is obvious considering her mentality about work, her high-up position at a powerful

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<sup>39</sup> Crittenden, *The Price of Motherhood*, 218-232.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 219

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Joan Williams, *Unbending Gender: Why Family and Work Conflict and What To Do About It* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 48.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 40

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 44

company, and the fact that her husband also works full-time that she does not even begin to address how much childcare is done by her nanny.<sup>46</sup>

Liberal feminist voices invested in matters of career advancement for women are extremely reluctant to be publicly transparent about who is actually performing the work of childrearing. Privately, however the matter gets addressed head on. Credit Suisse's Real Returns is a re-entry program that helps professionals restart their careers and gives them the potential to get hired for a full-time job at the company.<sup>47</sup> Regan Otto, a former legal recruiter who had been out of the workforce for nine years, participated in the program in 2013 and was told by a number of high-powered female bankers that in order to balance work and family "you have to hire really good help otherwise you can't do it... you can't have kids calling you at work, you need to have someone really good who can manage that."<sup>48</sup> Sally Jacobson, who formerly worked in fashion, acknowledged from her own observations that in order to "get back on the track" after having kids, you need to "ship in lots of help."<sup>49</sup> She added, "if you have really good help and a certain sense of order and calm in your relationship then you feel a little bit freer to go and do other things."<sup>50</sup> Leslie Bennetts is one liberal feminist who does acknowledge this matter of fact openly. In her book *The Feminine Mistake*, she devotes several paragraphs towards the praise of

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<sup>46</sup> Sandberg, *Lean In*, 106, 137.

<sup>47</sup> "Real Returns Program," *LinkedIn*. Accessed April 6, 2015.  
<https://www.linkedin.com/jobs2/view/12109680>.

<sup>48</sup> Regan Otto (litigator, Credit Suisse) in discussion with the author, October 2014.

<sup>49</sup> Sally Jacobson (stay-at-home mom) in discussion with the author, October 2014.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

her help, “the world’s best baby-sitter,” and insists that “quality child care” is available.<sup>51</sup>

Williams believes that children need sufficient parental care and that parents who rely on full-time help not only deprive and disregard their children, but also contribute to the prevention of a necessary re-assessment of unfair work and family norms. She argues, “having both parents working the ideal-worker schedule is inconsistent with the level and type of parental attention children need.”<sup>52</sup> However, she adds, our society lacks a “formal acknowledgement of the norm of parental care,” and therefore, “little consensus exists about how much child care is delegable.”<sup>53</sup> She maintains that fathers tend to “advocate higher levels of delegation than mothers consider appropriate,” and thus that the sense of how much childcare can be delegated is “gendered.”<sup>54</sup> For Williams, a re-evaluation of the over-demanding norms of market work and the unequal norms of family work, which include that mothers still tend to do the majority of it, is imperative. She argues that a norm of parental care can and should be established through “an assessment of children’s needs” and then a splitting of “the resulting possibilities down the middle.”<sup>55</sup>

It should also be mentioned that there is a huge literature on how complicated the political economy of domestic labor is.<sup>56</sup> The vast majority of paid caretakers

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<sup>51</sup> Leslie Bennetts, *The Feminine Mistake: Are We Giving Up Too Much?* (New York: Hyperion, 2007), 272-275.

<sup>52</sup> Williams, *Unbending Gender*, 51.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 53, 124.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>56</sup> Further reading on this topic includes the following books and articles: Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. “Women Workers and Capitalist Scripts: Ideologies of Domination, Common Interests, and the Politics of Solidarity.” In *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, edited by Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 1-29. New York: Routledge, 1997; Parreñas, Rhacel Salazar. *Servants of Globalization: Women, Migration, and Domestic Work*. Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2001; Nadasen, Premilla and Tiffany Williams. “Valuing Domestic Work.” *New Feminist Solutions* 5 (Barnard Center for Research on Women, n.d.): 1-31.

working in America are immigrants from Third World countries who have been displaced from their own families for the sake of their economic well-being. Thus, the American system of outsourcing care to a third party relies on severe economic inequality.

### *Work-Life Balance*

When a working mother has a partner, sharing the duties of work and caretaking equally becomes an option that she could strive towards. Liberal feminists perceive flexible work arrangements and part-time employment options as ways to help parents achieve balance in their work-lives and with their partners. Sharing is the necessary condition for the successful work-life balance of both parents, but men as partners tend not to put in as much work at home and employers tend not to encourage balance. There is abundant literature that advocates for this ideal, which will be addressed shortly.

### *Opting Out*

A more traditional approach would be that a parent stays at home. Historically, women who have been financially able to do so have chosen the path of stay-at-home motherhood. However, prior to the past couple of decades, traditional, stay-at-home mothers tended to marry young and either drop out of college or only complete an undergraduate degree. A large part of the reason that women even went to college was in order to find a husband that could support them. Nowadays, women in the U.S. earn 60% of all master's degrees, 47% of law degrees, 48% of medical

degrees, and 37% of MBAs.<sup>57</sup> Also, college-educated women make up 59% of our entry-level workforce.<sup>58</sup> And yet, well-educated women on track to professional success still sometimes choose to leave the workforce and head home. This phenomenon was recognized by journalist Lisa Belkin, who in 2003 coined the term “opting out” to define the conscious choice made by highly qualified women to be at home with their children despite the success that they have achieved and the increasing success that they are bound to reach in their careers.<sup>59</sup> As Pamela Stone points out, “it is a relatively elite group of couples that can entertain the notion of one partner (usually the wife) not working, even for a short period of time.”<sup>60</sup> More often than not, women that leave the workforce have partners that hold equally or more high-powered jobs than they do.

The difference between traditional stay-at-home mothers and the women that make up “the opt-out revolution”<sup>61</sup> is that the latter invested massively in their education and in their careers before they chose to devote their lives to parenting. Belkin’s article problematizes opting out from an early feminist standpoint. She writes:

Once the barriers came down, once the playing field was leveled, they were supposed to march toward the future and take rightful ownership of the universe, or at the very least, ownership of their half. The women's movement was largely about grabbing a fair share of power -- making equal money, standing at the helm in the macho realms of business and government and law. It was about running the world... Measured against the way things once were, this is certainly progress. But measured against the way things were expected to be, this is a revolution stalled.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Warner, “The Women’s Leadership Gap.”

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Belkin, “The Opt-Out Revolution.”

<sup>60</sup> Stone, *Opting Out?*, 13-14.

<sup>61</sup> Belkin, “The Opt-Out Revolution.”

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 1.

Belkin's concern lies in the fact that women who have the tools and the skills to maintain stimulating work lives and powerful careers still choose to stay at home with their kids. Yet she recognizes that for women to make up 50% of our professional workforce, there are a number of important contradictions between work and life that need to be worked out.

### *Sequencing*

To leave the workforce for a period of time and then re-enter at a later date is the situation that has been most neglected by feminists. Many fail to consider the fact that opting out does not have to mean staying out. Belkin found that opted out professional women insisted that their decision was "temporary," yet at the time in which she wrote the article, she was able to state that "it is unclear what women like these will be able to go back to" because "the challenge of returning workers... is barely even starting to be addressed."<sup>63</sup> She adds, "If that workplace can reabsorb those who left into a career they find fulfilling, then stepping out may in fact be the answer to the frustrations of this generation. If not, then their ability to balance life and work will be no different than their mothers', after all."<sup>64</sup> Since 2003, some institutional developments have been made to make it easier for women to take a career break and then re-enter once they are ready to do so. Yet still, sequencing is a work-life model that scholars have paid little attention to and thus our thinking around it is severely underdeveloped.

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<sup>63</sup> Belkin, "The Opt-Out Revolution," 6.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

Conservative anti-feminists continue to emphasize the importance of motherhood and thus their efforts for enacting change revolve around increasing its value in today's society. Liberal feminists, on the other hand, are focused on work-life balance strategies in order to actualize gender equality in the home and in the workplace. There are major holes in both of these standpoints, yet what is significant about conservatives and liberals alike is that neither speak much about childless women, neither favor the idea of full-time help, and most importantly, neither even consider sequencing as an option. Sequencing is on an entirely new conceptual ground politically.

While it is not a scenario that has been explored, there are a number of benefits to an opt out and opt back in approach to navigating the time period in which work and life collide. Sequencing is compatible with feminist politics, but since feminists are so focused on how to get out of motherhood and into the workforce, they do not see it as a possible way of structuring one's life that could help the project of women's equality and advancement in the workforce. What if women, and men too, could step out for a short period of time, when their caretaking responsibilities are most demanding, and then lean back in? Nannies make it easier for two partners to have equal work lives, but many parents want to be at least partially responsible for raising their children. Sharing is difficult and in most cases, impossible. While many feminists who advocate for work-life balance outline strategies for how to obtain it, there is no concrete way to ensure that a balance is formed and maintained. With sequencing, new problems arise that are different from those that come with the

simultaneous development of work and life, problems that cannot be solved if they are not even considered.

## II. The Liberal Feminist Politics of Work-Life Balance

Leslie Bennetts is one of few work-life scholars who argue that work-life balance is currently achievable. *The Feminine Mistake* has a chapter titled “Who Says It Doesn’t Work?” where Bennetts tells the stories of a number of women that have achieved professional success while also attending to the duties motherhood.<sup>65</sup> She emphasizes that the lives of these women, including herself, “are imperfect and often chaotic,” but that is a small price to pay for balance.<sup>66</sup> She claims, “The problem isn’t that we can’t manage both areas of our lives perfectly. The problem is that we ever expected perfection in the first place.”<sup>67</sup>

Most feminist scholars that focus on balance recognize that it is not happening yet, but are interested in it as an idea that can and should work. They are frustrated with the fact that the culture of corporate America remains intense and competitive and that the all-encompassing work that many smart, ambitious women find themselves in is too taxing to combine successfully with caretaking duties at home. In her essay “Why Women Still Can’t Have It All,” political scientist and former Director of Policy Planning for the U.S. State Department Anne-Marie Slaughter states:

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<sup>65</sup> Bennetts, *The Feminine Mistake*, 148-172.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

Women of my generation have clung to the feminist credo we were raised with, even as our ranks have been steadily thinned by unresolvable tensions between family and career, because we are determined not to drop the flag for the next generation. But when many members of the younger generation have stopped listening, on the grounds that glibly repeating ‘you can have it all’ is simply airbrushing reality, it is time to talk.<sup>68</sup>

She problematizes the fact that it is basically impossible for high achieving women to achieve a happy work-life balance and then envisions a complete restructuring of American work expectations, so that that women can actually “have it all” and “have it all at the same time.”<sup>69</sup>

Joan Williams and Pamela Stone are also dissatisfied with how little progress we have made in facilitating and accommodating work-life balance. In *Unbending Gender*, Williams argues for the elimination of the “ideal-worker norm” as “someone who works full time (and overtime) and who can move if the job ‘requires it,’” which she claims is gendered in that it “links the ability to be an ideal worker with the flow of family work and other privileges typically available only to men.”<sup>70</sup> For Williams, the result of this norm is that women who do the work of caretaking are marginalized. She maintains that work must be restructured “around the values people hold in family life, in particular around the norm of parental care.”<sup>71</sup> Similarly, in her book *Opting Out? Why Women Really Quit Careers and Head Home*, Pamela Stone argues that it is not the women who opt out that are “traditional,” but the workplace that “ignores the reality of the lives of high-achieving women.”<sup>72</sup> Thus, she makes a

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<sup>68</sup> Anne-Marie Slaughter, “Why Women Still Can’t Have it All,” *The Atlantic*, June 13, 2012. <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/07/why-women-still-cant-have-it-all/309020/>

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> Williams, *Unbending Gender*, 5.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>72</sup> Stone, *Opting Out?*, 31.

number of cultural and policy-based recommendations to help increase flexibility and eliminate stigma and bias towards women in our labor force

Sharing between partners, flexibility in the workplace, and part-time professional labor are the three main strategies and solutions thought by scholars for work-life balance. The main challenge for the wide-scale implementation of these practices is the rigidity of the norms and expectations of corporate culture. Granted, their realization has been made more plausible since the ways in which we work have changed due to technological advancements. In *Mass Career Customization*, Benko and Weisberg hold that broadband connectivity, e-mail, instant messaging, text messaging, cellular phones, virtual private networks, and videoconferencing all “support remote work.”<sup>73</sup> They argue, “Technology is paving the way for employers—and employees—to offer creative virtual workplace options.”<sup>74</sup> Not only do these technologies make the time and place of when and where work gets done more open-ended, but they also give “high performers more bargaining leverage.”<sup>75</sup> Thus, as Anne-Marie Slaughter argues, they are “allowing easier integration of work and family life.”<sup>76</sup> What is problematic for Slaughter is that even in light of these technological advancements, “our work culture still remains more office-centered than it needs to be.”<sup>77</sup>

These same developments, however, make it so that any given professional, regardless of their potential flexible or part-time status, can be accessible at all times. For some of Stone’s subjects, technology “contributed to the upward pressures on

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<sup>73</sup> Benko and Weisberg, *Mass Career Customization*, 51.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>76</sup> Slaughter, “Why Women Still Can’t Have it All.”

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

part-time hours... women reported being phoned, faxed, e-mailed, and paged on their days off, nights, and weekends.”<sup>78</sup> Stone claims, “Thus even when women were able to work part-time, they were unable to relieve the time bind that was the initial rationale for doing so.”<sup>79</sup> While face time has become less important for an employee’s performance, increased accessibility due to technology is problematic for those with flexible and part-time schedules. That we are plugged in at all times complicates work-life balance.

### *Sharing Household and Caretaking Duties*

Advocates for work-life balance believe that the sharing of household and caretaking duties between spouses is necessary. Yet for the most part, they know that fair sharing does not really exist. A 2009 study found that married mothers employed full-time do, on average, 11.7 more hours of unpaid work including housework, shopping/services, and child care than do married fathers employed full-time.<sup>80</sup> Robin J. Ely, Pamela Stone, and Colleen Ammerman from the Harvard Business Review have shown that couples that expect that they will share very rarely do so equally.<sup>81</sup> Still, it is an ideal that has not been given up on. Feminists continue to talk endlessly about how sharing can and should work.

Leslie Bennetts acknowledges that most high achieving women who are balancing work and life with “extraordinary competence... will readily admit that

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<sup>78</sup> Stone, *Opting Out?*, 145.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Melissa A. Milkie, Sara B. Raley, and Suzanne M. Bianchi, “Taking on the Second Shift: Time Allocations and Time Pressure of U.S. Parents with Preschoolers,” *Social Forces* 88, no. 2 (2009): 501.

<sup>81</sup> Ely, Stone, And Ammerman, “Rethink What You ‘Know’.”

their husbands don't do half of anything remotely domestic."<sup>82</sup> She also confesses that she and her husband have not achieved parity due to the fact that she is always the one who remembers what needs to be done. Still, she seems to think that since they have "come closer" to sharing equally "than many other couples," she is able to balance work and life in a fulfilling way.<sup>83</sup> Bennetts insists that wives must demand that their husbands do more at home so that they can be more freely able to focus on their careers, yet she never says that complete equality in the home is reachable. Sheryl Sandberg outlines a number of strategies for women to "Make Your Partner a Real Partner," and while she boasts about the relatively equal balance she and her husband have achieved, she admits to never being "fifty-fifty at any given moment."<sup>84</sup>

That advocates for sharing recognize that it is nearly impossible to achieve makes there little reason to believe that it can ever really work.

### *Flexible Work Arrangements*

Access to flexible work arrangements is considered an important factor for work-life balance. Large and small corporations are beginning to make flexibility increasingly available to those who are interested. However, FWAs do not line up with the assumption of corporate culture, which is that everyone is working endless hours. As Benko and Weisberg argue, "most FWAs do not address the structural conflict between the corporate ladder's rigid approach to building careers and the fluid needs of employees to create career paths that reflect the changing priorities in

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<sup>82</sup> Bennetts, *The Feminine Mistake*, 249-250.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

<sup>84</sup> Sandberg, *Lean In*, 112.

their lives.”<sup>85</sup> Professionals often do not take advantage of flexibility options because they fear that doing so will severely decrease their ability to advance their careers. Because corporate culture is structured around a survival of the fittest mentality, employees working on a flexible schedule are not only perceived as less dedicated, but in fact they are less dedicated, at least in terms of time. Benko and Weisberg add, “FWAs are positioned as compromises to the ideal of full-time employees who would traditionally do anything to climb the corporate ladder,” thus, they “actually reinforce the traditional structure of the linear, continuous career path because they are not perceived as realistic options for serious, career-minded employees.”<sup>86</sup> While flexibility at work might make it easier to balance a career and a family, those who utilize FWAs are not likely to achieve leadership positions.

Tereza Nemessanyi recognized the fact that big companies, like PwC and Microsoft, are “great” with policy regarding family-friendliness and flexibility in the workplace.<sup>87</sup> However, she explained, while “they really want to support women leaders,” at the end of the day, “businesses are in business to make money” and because “women don’t have time to come to the women’s circle, a lot of the policies don’t really get used.”<sup>88</sup>

Once a professional has successfully worked their way to the top, they are usually granted more flexibility in their schedules. Yet senior executives tend to be past their childbearing age. Professionals in their late twenties and thirties are the most likely to have young children. Annie Ostrager is a young lawyer in her early

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<sup>85</sup> Benko and Weisberg, *Mass Career Customization*, 63.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>87</sup> Nemessanyi, discussion.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

thirties with a newborn child. She left her job at a high-powered New York City law firm to work as a law clerk for a year in order to have more time to spend with her baby. She pointed out, “it’s a really big problem [that] the same years that you are typically having children really coincide with the years that you are establishing your career and need to be putting in extra hours at the office.”<sup>89</sup>

When life gets in the way, some professionals will choose to step off the fast track to partnerships and executive positions. Others, however, are afraid to jeopardize the advancement of their careers by decreasing their work intake. Overall, flexible work arrangements do not contribute to women’s professional advancement.

#### *Part-Time Professional Labor*

Part-time employment is another solution to work-life balance issues thought by liberal feminists. The U.S. Department of Labor’s website claims, “Whether an employee is considered full-time or part-time does not change the application of the FLSA.”<sup>90</sup> While part-time work does not have a legal category, it is still possible for waged workers since they are already paid by the hour. In accordance with the FLSA, part-time workers will be compensated for the hours that they work and if they do happen to work more than 40 hours, they will receive overtime pay. However, part-time work in the professional middle class, as Julie Waxman, a former retail consultant, put it: “kind of doesn’t really exist.”<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Annie Ostrager (law clerk and lawyer) in discussion with the author, September 2014.

<sup>90</sup> “Work Hours,” United States Department of Labor, accessed February 17, 2015, <http://www.dol.gov/dol/topic/workhours/parttimeemployment.htm>.

<sup>91</sup> Julie Waxman (stay-at-home mom and former retail consultant) in discussion with the author, October 2014.

Scholars interested in part-time work as a solution to work-life balance want to propose that fair standards can be established. Williams suggests that, “part-time workers should receive proportional rates of pay, benefits, and advancement.”<sup>92</sup> She explains, “If a lawyer would make partner in seven years of full-time work, she should be able to make partner in fourteen years of half-time work.”<sup>93</sup> This way, “if someone worked full-time for five years and then part time after the birth of children, her partnership track would be extended from seven years to nine years.”<sup>94</sup> Her concept of proportional rates, however, seems to assume a defined workweek as a certain number of hours. Proportional rates cannot be decided when no one is working a set number of hours nor performing at a set level.

While full-time work is calculated as forty hours, everyone knows that most salaried professional employees, particularly in certain industries, work closer to sixty or eighty hours a week. Thus, even if employers did stick to the idea that part-time meant a twenty-hour workweek, half the salary would not equal half the work. It does not make economic sense for employers to have on part-time workers because they will be asked to pay their premium for strictly delimited hours. Julie’s own experience demonstrated this truth. When she first had children, she was consulting part-time for Macy’s. She said, “I definitely would’ve stayed on,” but it made more sense for them to hire a new full-time employee since she was expensive as a consultant.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Williams, *Unbending Gender*, 99.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> Waxman, discussion.

The level of work performed by professionals often requires the kind of commitment that is all-consuming regardless of the number of hours they put in. Annie Ostrager admitted that law does not “really lend itself to part-time work.”<sup>96</sup> She explained, “even if part-time means instead of six cases at once I’m going to do three, on those three cases things can come up really at any time.”<sup>97</sup> Also, she added, it’s “not exactly part of the culture at a law firm where it’s like Annie leaves at this time, so we won’t bother her... I’ve been working [at my firm] for a number of years before my baby, and have developed relationships with my colleagues and clients, I can’t just not be available.”<sup>98</sup>

Part-time employees that work for half the pay often work for a lot more than half the time. Rebecca Turner, a former partner at a New York City law firm, had an experience that was demonstrative of this. She explained, “I had flexible work schedules at the law firm and I worked from home for a while, but one of the problems with private practice and especially in New York City is that it’s so intense... it really didn’t work, at the end of the day I had to take pay cuts and didn’t get full benefits.”<sup>99</sup> When she was thinking about returning to work, she said, “I wasn’t interested in trying to go part-time because I felt like you end up doing the same amount of work for less pay.”<sup>100</sup>

When professionals do truly work for half the pay and for half the time, it is likely because they receive low challenge jobs. Ely, Stone, and Ammerman find that part-time work is often unfulfilling for women because they get tracked into less

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<sup>96</sup> Ostrager, discussion.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Rebecca Turner (litigator, Goldman Sachs) in discussion with the author, October 2014.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

interesting projects.<sup>101</sup> In turn, their opportunities for advancement diminish. As Waxman put it, “it’s very hard to have a meaningful career part-time... you can do part-time work, but if you’re working for a big corporation, you’re not really a part of the whole team.”<sup>102</sup> Thus, the question for her became, “do you want to work full-time and have it be powerful and meaningful?”<sup>103</sup> She concluded that for her, “right now it’s really difficult with three young kids.”<sup>104</sup> A movement for less work would mean a movement for disengaging from work, yet these women want to lean in. You cannot lean in part-time because once you are engaged in the elite working world, the culture of work is cut throat until you have reached the top.

Many women find that the part-time options available to them allow them neither the level of commitment to work nor to family that they desire. Linda Lee, a former lawyer, did not try and get back into the labor force until she was ready to do so full-time because “there was really no part-time option where I felt that I could have it both ways upon entry into the job.”<sup>105</sup> Only once you have established your credibility at a company/firm does fulfilling part-time work become easier to achieve. Amy Atkinson was a VP in sales at Goldman Sachs, left for five years, came back through Goldman’s Returnship program, and is now a VP in Global Business Intelligence. She explained, “where [part-time] does work... is if someone is at a certain level [where] they’ve already built up their reputation and network.”<sup>106</sup> Since her work is project management, she is responsible for driving “momentum and

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<sup>101</sup> Stone, Ely, and Ammerman, “Rethink What You ‘Know’.”

<sup>102</sup> Waxman, discussion.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Linda Lee (corporate associate staffing manager at a law firm) in discussion with the author, October 2014.

<sup>106</sup> Amy Atkinson (VP in global business intelligence, Goldman Sachs) in discussion with the author, October 2014.

progress,” which means that she does not have to be present at all times.<sup>107</sup> She has other colleagues who are also higher up “that have been able to check out for one or two days.”<sup>108</sup>

Because fair part-time work is so difficult to achieve in the professional middle class, it is rarely satisfying for those that engage in it. Only at a later point in one’s career is an individual likely to benefit both personally and professionally from a part-time schedule.

### III. The Liberal Feminist Politics of Opting Out

Liberal feminist scholars frown upon opting out because it reinforces the traditional family dynamic where mothers stay at home and fathers work. They believe that women who leave the workforce to focus on their families are not only delaying the progress for gender equality, but also harming it. In *Lean In*, Sheryl Sandberg does not denounce mothers who decide to stay at home. In fact, she says, “Being a stay-at-home parent is a wonderful, and often necessary, choice for many people.”<sup>109</sup> However, her whole mantra directly opposes the choice to leave the workforce. She wants for women to “lean in,” not for them to lean out. In *Opting Out*, Pamela Stone emphasizes her subjects’ distaste for the notion that they had opted out. To Kate, who had been out of the corporate world for three years, opting out

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<sup>107</sup> Atkinson, discussion.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Sandberg, *Lean In*, 95.

“connoted complacency and dilettantism.”<sup>110</sup> Because the liberal feminist perspective is fundamentally against the notion of the patriarchal familial tradition, “opting out” is depicted negatively in their field.

In the article they wrote about their study, Robin Ely, Pamela Stone, and Colleen Ammerman took great strides to resist acknowledging that the trend of opting out is still happening amongst female graduates of Harvard Business School. They claim, “it simply isn’t true that a large proportion of HBS alumnae have ‘opted out’ to care for children... *Only 11% are out of the workforce to care for children full-time.*”<sup>111</sup> Yet considering that these are women with a degree in business from one of the most prestigious schools in the nation, 11% is notable. They also argue that even for those “who *are* currently out of the workforce to care for children, ‘opting out’ is not an accurate description of their experience.”<sup>112</sup> They state that “only a small number” of new mothers leave their jobs in order to devote themselves fully to motherhood and that “the vast majority leave reluctantly and as a last resort because they find themselves in unfulfilling roles with dim prospects for advancement... mommy-tracked [or] stigmatized for taking advantage of flex options or reduced schedules.”<sup>113</sup> Thus, they cannot even acknowledge that it is worth discussing the women who do opt out by choice.

Furthermore, they are reluctant to acknowledge that when high achieving women opt out it is because the work-life balance approach is not working. Their statements are couched in data that is not strong enough to cover the tracks of their

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<sup>110</sup> Stone, *Opting Out?*, 335.

<sup>111</sup> Ely, Stone, and Ammerman, “Rethink What You ‘Know’.”

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

politics, which is to help women avoid opting out. Since their focus is constantly on redressing the issues and frustrations of work-life balance they never get to the problems around sequencing. The reason that they do not consider the barriers to opting back in is because they do not consider sequencing as a viable option.

At the end of the article, Ely, Stone, and Ammerman make a point to claim that their findings “are not the final word on the subject.”<sup>114</sup> They explain that “we need much more nuanced data about how professional men and women navigate their family and career decisions and how their lives unfold if we are to understand the impact that family responsibilities have on both women’s and men’s careers.”<sup>115</sup> This makes it clear that their claims are not rooted in solid evidence, but are instead reflective of what they want to insist.

Consistent throughout the writing of liberal feminists is the blank space around sequencing issues. Most work-life scholars think that opting out means staying out. Leslie Bennetts takes care to notice that some women do eventually want to opt back in and try to do so but only in order to address the immense difficulties associated with it, and particularly when a lot of time has gone by.<sup>116</sup> She recognizes opting back in not to consider sequencing as a way in which women might intentionally structure their lives and thus as something we should think about attending to, but only to say that because it is so hard we need to focus on work-life balance so that women do not ever have to leave.

Yet sequencing is a model that can work to avoid a number of the issues in which these scholars are attempting to address. For example, Joan Williams is

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<sup>114</sup> Ely, Stone, and Ammerman, “Rethink What You ‘Know’.”

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Bennetts, *The Feminine Mistake*, 72-96.

concerned with the notions that mothers who opt out do not always want to stop working completely, but that they do so because they feel as if there are no good options for part-time or flexible work, that women who do family work are marginalized, cut off “from most of the social roles that offer responsibility and authority,” and that women who leave the workforce and become dependent on their husbands are often left in a state of financial distress in cases of divorce.<sup>117</sup> If a woman were to take a short career break to adhere to familial duties and then fully re-enter the workforce at an appropriate time, limited access to fulfilling part-time and flexible work, marginalization, and poverty as a result from divorce would not be such pressing matters.

Proponents for work-life balance also ignore the fact that some women cannot be assumed to want the development of their careers and of their new role as mothers to happen simultaneously. They insist that those who opt out are not doing it voluntarily, but are instead forced out of the labor force by inflexible workplaces and little to no prospects for advancement. Their argument, then, becomes that there are social, cultural, and economic changes that can be made so that no one ever has to opt out. Yet even if we could implement structural changes in our workforce that would make it easier for women to balance work and life at the same time, it would not mean that no women would opt out. For many women, there is a significant draw to stay home that has nothing to do with their situation at work. Thus, the emphasis that work-life scholars place on the factors that push women out of the workplace over the factors that pull women towards home cannot be relied on. When asked if they

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<sup>117</sup> Williams, *Unbending Gender*, 6.

experienced more push or pull factors, a number of well-educated, high achieving women responded in the following ways:

Amy Atkinson was a VP in sales at Goldman Sachs when she made a “personal” decision to take a break from her career to be at home while her children were young.<sup>118</sup> She said, “I felt like I needed to be home and I had the ability to do that and the timing just worked out.”<sup>119</sup>

Megan Scott worked in brand management at a large consumer packaged goods company up until the day her first child was born. Part of the reason she left, she explained, “was because in my position there they wouldn’t let me come back part-time, I would’ve had to come back full-time.”<sup>120</sup> She admitted that, “it was a really difficult decision to pull out completely rather than to find another opportunity that would allow me to stay in part-time.”<sup>121</sup> Ultimately, she decided to stay at home with her kids. She added, “I come from a family of four kids, our mom stayed home, and I just really valued that presence.”<sup>122</sup>

Linda Lee held a full-time position in legal marketing when she had her first child. She had every intention of going back after her maternity leave ended, but after only a few weeks of returning to work she realized “it really wasn’t the right case for our family.”<sup>123</sup> She explained, “I thought about the fact that... it was really just the midpoint of my career, I was just hitting my stride,” which made it “a hard time to leave,” but it “was more of an emotional decision” and “a very conscious

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<sup>118</sup> Atkinson, discussion.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Megan Scott (brand management consultant) in discussion with the author, November 2014.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Lee, discussion.

decision.”<sup>124</sup> More than anything, she explained, it was “the pull of being a mother and wanting to give that 100% and I felt that I probably wouldn’t be able to give 100% if I stayed at work.”<sup>125</sup> The timing was not ideal, but she thought that after a few years she would be able to come back “no problem.”<sup>126</sup>

For a few years, Mariquita Blumberg decided to completely stop working for herself as a business consultant in order to spend more time with her kids. She said, “in some ways the reason I decided to stay home for a little while is because my mom had always encouraged me to take a little bit of time but then to get back into it.”<sup>127</sup> Part of that decision, she recognized “was saying I do want to have a children, do I want to be in and out of the workforce or do I want to just stay in?”<sup>128</sup> She knew she “would have to rebuild consulting relationships every time [she] went back in,” but she decided that it was worth it to really be at home for a while.<sup>129</sup>

Shelley Gnall has yet to opt out, but she has scaled back on work since having children. She left “a very very intense job” at Goldman Sachs when her son was born to take a less demanding job at PricewaterhouseCoopers, her former employer and then joined a start-up medical device company.<sup>130</sup> She explained, “I always knew I’d be leaving Goldman” after having children because “while it was my dream job, working at Goldman was a lifestyle... you always had to be plugged in, able to drop plans at a moment’s notice.”<sup>131</sup> In order to have more time for her kids, for both of her recent positions she was able to negotiate a four day work week with the

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<sup>124</sup> Lee, discussion.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Mariquita Blumberg (business consultant) in discussion with the author, October 2014.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Shelley Gnall (director of finance, AposTherapy) in discussion with the author, October 2014.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

flexibility to work from home. Yet in a few years she wants to leave the workforce completely. She explained, “I want to always be there when my kids get home from school. I want to hear about their days and make them a healthy snack and meet their friends, [because now] since I’m not there, they’ll tell that to the nanny and by the time I get home they won’t remember.”<sup>132</sup> For now, however, she feels that “as a mom... it is my responsibility to keep on earning while I still have a high earning power.”<sup>133</sup> She added, “my choice to join a start-up with an equity position gives me the best chance of maximizing my earnings potential with the shortest possible timeline for meeting financial goals which would allow me to step down altogether.”<sup>134</sup>

Their fixation on coercion factors also blinds liberal feminists to a set of questions about how to facilitate getting back in. After all, many professional women leave with the intention of eventual re-entry. These are smart, ambitious, and talented women who are not giving up on their professional desires just because they feel that they need to spend some time at home. Several women spoke to this truth.

Jodi Balsam, a former lawyer and a current law professor, took a five-year break and when she re-entered the workforce she recognized a second wind of energy. She said, “when you hit your late forties and when your youngest is in high school... you feel an incredible burst of energy and ambition and you realize you have thirty years of quality that you can deliver to the universe.”<sup>135</sup> She thought, “I

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<sup>132</sup> Gnall, discussion.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Jodi Balsam (associate professor of clinical law, Brooklyn Law School) in discussion with the author, September 2014.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

have so much to give, how am I going to give? How am I going to be productive? I feel more ambitious now than when I was fresh out of law school.”<sup>136</sup>

Baat Enosh worked in technology before taking a year off and then transitioning into a few years of focusing on non-profit work. Her “wake up call” that helped her decide to on-ramp back into the technology sector, was when her work led her to meet a mother with “a zig-zaggy career, and including some time off.”<sup>137</sup> The woman was forty-five, with two teenagers, and she told Baat that all she cared about was “finding a job that pays really well, so she could feel free.”<sup>138</sup> Baat explained, “I looked at her and was like oh my god there’s life after this babyhood. Losing your earning power felt like cause for me to start making my way back.”<sup>139</sup>

Linda Lee felt the desire to return to work for two reasons. One was that her kids had gotten older and were growing more independent. She felt, “they probably didn’t need me to be physically around so much.”<sup>140</sup> The greater reason, she explained, was that:

I have two boys [and] I really felt that their sense of what a woman did or didn’t do was very skewed because I had always been home with them. I wanted to show them that women can have careers, that women can be more than just moms or PTA volunteers and that a woman could have a strong sense of ambition and a strong sense of professional identity.<sup>141</sup>

Many women choose to leave the workforce while others are indeed pushed out by inflexible workplaces and gender biases. Because of the latter, it is true that the values of workplaces must be re-organized in order to “institutionalize a level

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<sup>136</sup> Balsam, discussion.

<sup>137</sup> Baat Enosh (innovation driver, Intuit) in discussion with the author, October 2014.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Lee, discussion.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

playing field for all employees, regardless of gender or caregiver status.”<sup>142</sup>

However, regardless of what exactly it means to “opt out” and what causes women to do so, it is important to address head-on the fact that high-achieving women leave the workforce for family-related reasons, and probably still will for some time to come. One thing that Ely, Stone, and Ammerman point out, necessarily, is that “Companies need to provide adequate entry points to full-time work for women who have, for instance, recently been on a part-time schedule or taken a career break.”<sup>143</sup> After all, the majority of highly qualified women who opt out do eventually want to get back in.<sup>144</sup> It would be beneficial for us to accept the opt out trend and develop an infrastructure to make it easier and not stigmatized to leave and get back in.

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<sup>142</sup> Ely, Stone, and Ammerman, “Rethink What You ‘Know’.”

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Sylvia Ann Hewlett and Carolyn Buck Luce, “Off-Ramps and On-Ramps: Keeping Talented Women on the Road to Success,” *Harvard Business Review*, March 1, 2005.  
<https://hbr.org/2005/03/off-ramps-and-on-ramps-keeping-talented-women-on-the-road-to-success>.

## CHAPTER 2 – Sequencing as a Viable Option and Obstacles to Re-entry

### I. Problems and Possibilities with Sequencing

Sequencing is a choice made by many professional women, yet it is not recognized as a viable life path. This is because sequencing suffers from a lack of infrastructure. The issue of getting back is rarely considered by anyone other than women who encounter this barrier and only when they encounter it do they take it seriously. It is not taken seriously as a problem to think about as a society. Yet as Carol Fishman Cohen, the founder and CEO of iRelaunch, an organization that functions as a career re-entry resource for employers, institutions, and individuals, points out, “we estimate there are approximately two million women at any given moment who are in this pool of what we call relaunchers.”<sup>145</sup> If more infrastructure were available to those looking to return to work, the pool of talented and skilled women who have taken a career break could be extremely useful to our workforce.

If opting out was not so looked down upon by those interested in achieving gender equality, but instead, re-envisioned, we could develop ways to make it easy and common for women and men to have successful, nonlinear careers. After all, Benko and Weisberg argue that today’s typical career *is* nonlinear.<sup>146</sup> Women and men on the path towards becoming partners and executives could exit the workforce, somehow stay relevant and informed, and then re-enter in a similar position to the one in which they left. Women would not have to decide whether to prioritize work or

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<sup>145</sup> “iRelaunch Return to Work Conference,” YouTube video, 3:05, posted by “iRelaunch2,” April 1, 2012, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K7DL\\_874zCA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K7DL_874zCA).

<sup>146</sup> Benko and Weisberg, *Mass Career Customization*.

life, nor would they have to engage in less interesting, part-time work. We are involved in the struggle for gender equality in the workplace and in the home, but we cannot get there, and no one is talking about this innovative mode. Right now this possibility is unthinkable and unavailable, but it can evolve.

Most barriers to opting back in are employer-based and corporate-related. Some, however, have to do with policy. The alignment of school hours with work hours matters immensely for sequencers who intend get back to full-time work after their first few years of parenting. Once their children are old enough, parents transfer a lot of their childcare responsibilities to the school. In order for parents to go back to full-time work, their kids cannot be ready to go home at three pm every day. This does not mean that reform has to be a simple extension of the school day. Instead, after-school activities could be more widely standardized and institutionalized so that kids remain busy and under the supervision of adults other than their parents or their babysitters until at least five or six pm.

One drawback to sequencing is the same risk faced by women who opt out, which is dependence on a male breadwinner. Sequencing does assume that there is a partner that makes enough money to support the family. Thus, in the case of divorce, a sequencer could lose a lot. However, the risk is relatively contained due to the fact that sequencing only supposes a few years out of the workforce.

The Harvard Business Review study conducted by Ely, Stone, and Ammerman proves not just that high achieving women are against this option, but that they do not think through it. They are stuck in the second wave of feminism where the solutions that are presented for increased gender equality have not been

working quickly enough. Life sequencing is another way for women to achieve what they want in their careers and in their personal lives without having to give up a lot of both. Why are feminists pushing against it?

Professionals who have taken time off to devote themselves to caretaking responsibilities might even be better leaders. Both Anne-Marie Slaughter and Ann Crittenden speak to this theory. Slaughter asks, “Why should we want leaders who fall short on personal responsibilities?”<sup>147</sup> She suggests that “Perhaps leaders who invested time in their own families would be more keenly aware of the toll their public choices—on issues from war to welfare—take on private lives.”<sup>148</sup> Crittenden argues that parenting “ought to be seen as a credential,” and that “In a truly diverse world, people with direct child-rearing experience should be well represented in positions of power.”<sup>149</sup>

Women who earn degrees from elite institutions and who go on to perform challenging work at high powered companies are the most likely to obtain top executive positions. As Slaughter suggests, it is women like her, “highly educated, well-off women... who could be leading, and who should be equally represented in the leadership ranks.”<sup>150</sup> The “best hope for improving the lot of all women,” she claims, “is to close the leadership gap; to elect a woman president and 50 women senators; to ensure that women are equally represented in the ranks of corporate executives and judicial leaders.”<sup>151</sup> Thus, as Joni Hersch recognizes, “Regardless of the underlying mechanism, the greater rate of opting out or reduced labor market

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<sup>147</sup> Slaughter, “Why Women Still Can’t Have it All.”

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Crittenden, *The Price of Motherhood*, 274.

<sup>150</sup> Slaughter, “Why Women Still Can’t Have it All.”

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

activity among graduates of elite institutions, and particularly among MBAs, has implications for women's professional advancement."<sup>152</sup> While it is true that the most efficient and least stigmatized way to get to the top is to never leave, an advantage to sequencing is that when you are working, you are fully committed. As Sandberg makes clear, the corporate climate requires you to lean in to get ahead. Sequencers can participate in the culture that is the condition for the possibility of success both before and after they leave.

In order to reduce the gender gap in leadership, high-level management positions need to be increasingly accessible to high achieving women that want families. New mothers might not want an all-consuming job, but in a few years time they could. If sequencers in high up positions served as role models for women at lower ranks in their industries then over time more sequencers would strive to achieve executive roles upon returning to the workforce. Economist Fidan Kurtulus and sociologist Donald Tomaskovic-Devey find that an increase in the number of female top managers is associated with subsequent increases in the number of women in mid-level management positions in firms.<sup>153</sup> Economists David Matsa and Amalia Miller find a positive association between the share of females on corporate boards in one year and the share of female top executives in the subsequent year.<sup>154</sup> Therefore, if it were easier for talented, high-potential women faced with the conflict of work and life to choose one and then the other and still make it to the top, our labor force would see an increase in female executives.

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<sup>152</sup> Hersch, "Opting Out Among Women," 499.

<sup>153</sup> Fidan Kurtulus and Donald Tomaskovic-Devey, "Do Female Top Managers Help Women to Advance? A Panel Study Using EEO-1 Records," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political Science* 639, no. 1 (2012): 174-175, doi:10.1177/0002716211418445.

<sup>154</sup> Matsa and Miller, "Chipping Away at the Glass Ceiling," 635.

## II. Obstacles to Re-entry: Structural Impediments and Personal Barriers

Many women opt out with the mindset that they will get back in as soon as they are ready to do so. However, it is currently extremely difficult to re-enter the workforce. Economist Sylvia Ann Hewlett and investment analyst Carolyn Buck Luce find that 93% of highly qualified women who are “currently off-ramped... want to return to their careers” but only 74% are actually able to do so and only 40% of them “return to full-time, professional jobs.”<sup>155</sup> Depending on how long they are out and how up to date their skills and knowledge remain, where and how these women can re-enter the workforce will vary. Sequencers attempting to return to the labor force are faced with a number of structural impediments along with their own personal barriers contingent on whether they are trying to re-enter the industry that they left or the market as such. The lack of social infrastructure to think through the processes of exiting and re-entering the workforce, the blindness and bias of recruiting systems, the failure to maintain a network, and atrophy issues make up the central obstacles to re-entry.

### *Lack of Social Infrastructure*

One major obstacle to re-entry is the way that women exit. There is a silence around leaving the workforce not just in the liberal feminist world, but also socially. Well-educated women who strive for high levels of success in their careers do not

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<sup>155</sup> Hewlett and Luce, “Off-Ramps and On-Ramps.”

tend to shape their work lives around their desire to eventually have a family. While young women do often think about how having children might affect their careers, they are deprived of the ability to think strategically about their life course since no real social infrastructure has been implemented for individuals to think through the simultaneous advancement of their personal and professional lives. Thus, once they do have children, they are suddenly forced to re-envision their commitment to work in order to allow room for the new commitment of family. A problem exists regarding the failure of planning. This is a structural issue, because the way women leave matters for how they might be able to return. If pre-paved paths for leaving and returning existed and strategies for eventual re-entry were widely established, it would be easier to think through these situations and make important life decisions.

Sheryl Sandberg encourages women: “Don’t Leave Before You Leave.”<sup>156</sup>

She strongly believes that professional women should not scale down their work or be hesitant to take a promotion or a new job just because they have plans in the near or far future to start a family. But this might cause issues down the line, when family gets in the way at the same time that one’s career is skyrocketing. The clash of work and family is in many ways unavoidable, but it is a situation that can and should be much easier to navigate and to think about in advance.

Several professional women spoke to the thinking problems around having a family. The influence of her mother, who raised her during “the first real wave of

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<sup>156</sup> Sandberg, *Lean In*, 92.

feminism,” affected the ability that Jessica Garmise, a former lawyer, had to foresee the conflict between her professional ambition and motherhood.<sup>157</sup> She reflected:

The message that was instilled in me as a young girl is that you can do anything you want [and so]... I grew up thinking I’m just as good as the boys, and I was... I never thought my gender was anything that put me down or defined me. I went to an Ivy, then law school, got a great job at a firm... Then I had my kids and I looked at my mom and I said it wasn’t fair that you told me that... there’s a ‘but’ after that. I respect my mom for empowering me but I also think it wasn’t fair of her to tell me that that drive has limitations to it.<sup>158</sup>

Jessica understands that the generation that her mom was from “needed to say that, they needed to wave their flag and motivate young girls,” but it is not the message that she is going to impart to her own daughters “because they need to understand that those career decisions have certain ramifications once you have a family.”<sup>159</sup> The “most important thing,” she thinks, is that her daughters “understand what’s going to happen and start thinking about it early on,” so that unlike her, they will not be “so blindsided by... ambition and motivation.”<sup>160</sup>

Baat Enosh came to a point where she felt that she “had to choose the all or nothing” and she “was surrounded by women who did the same.”<sup>161</sup> She noted, “the realization that many of my friends who were all really successful just dropped their career drove me nuts,” which is why after a year out of the formal workforce she got involved in non-profit work revolved around creating equal opportunities for women in the technology sector.<sup>162</sup> She said, “I was just feeling like something needs to change. We were dropping out and there was no plan 10 years from now, no

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<sup>157</sup> Jessica Garmise (founder of arts and crafts start-up company) in discussion with the author, October 2014.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Enosh, discussion.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

discussion, no conversation, no nothing about what happens next.”<sup>163</sup> This notion that women drop out of the workforce knowing that they want to go back, but without a plan for how to do so is often true for high-achievers who embark on a career break.

Jodi Balsam had practiced law full-time as she brought up her children in New York City, but after 9/11 she found herself “reordering [her] values.”<sup>164</sup> She had been working in the legal department of the NFL when she realized that her oldest daughter was about to become a bat mitzvah and she “felt very under-schooled in [her] own religion” and that since her youngest kid was still in elementary school, it was her “last chance to really hang around at the playground.”<sup>165</sup> With the knowledge that her family could afford not to have her salary, she decided to leave the NFL and spend some time focused on her family and her own personal endeavors. She said, “I always envisioned myself as someone that has *always* worked.”<sup>166</sup> So she did not give herself enough time to be engulfed by the identity of stay-at-home mom. She self-imposed a five year limit on her career break and made it a point to return to work when that time was up. She explained, “at no point did I think this was forever... I felt from my own observations that women who took off more time than that found it very difficult to get back.”<sup>167</sup>

Since liberal feminists are concerned with coercion from the workplace and conservative feminists are focused on motherhood, there is a lack of attention towards women like Jodi, who are drawn home for reasons other than that they were pushed out by their employers and who leave the workforce with the intention of returning

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<sup>163</sup> Enosh, discussion.

<sup>164</sup> Balsam, discussion.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

after a short amount of time. It is unsurprising, therefore, that we do not have an infrastructure to respond to the desire to opt back in. However, our lack thereof makes it difficult for women to think about their path towards re-entry at the time in which they are about to embark on a break.

When asked if she had a plan when she left the workforce, Jodi said only that she intended to keep in touch with close colleagues and mentors. She was “extremely nervous” about whether or not she would be able to get back in and do something “meaningful,” which she felt “cast a shadow over those five years” in which she was out.<sup>168</sup> Luckily, her boss at the NFL asked her to continue to run one internal disciplinary process and she said “in retrospect, that was the best thing I did... I was in the workplace once a week, dressing professionally, interacting with adults, keeping my skillset fresh, staying in touch with people.”<sup>169</sup>

Rebecca Turner had a plan, but it was challenged by the financial crisis in 2008. She was a partner at a law firm in New York City when she moved her family to New Jersey and decided to take a year off to get acclimated to her new town and to her children’s new school. She felt that she “needed to know what was going on.”<sup>170</sup> However, that was in 2007 and in 2008, since “there were no good employment options,” she explained, “I ended up being home for longer than I planned.”<sup>171</sup> Eventually six years went by and she thought, “how am I ever going to get back on track?”<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Balsam, discussion.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Turner, discussion.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

Megan Scott created a mental system to make sure she knew she was making the right decisions. To help herself through her time out of the workforce, she explained:

I gave myself milestones and said ‘okay, you’re going to do this for a year and then check-in.’ After my first year I knew I was doing the right thing so I said, ‘okay, I’m going to check in again in two years.’ Then we had a second child and I felt even more strongly [that] staying home was the right choice and felt comfortable committing to that until my youngest was in kindergarten.<sup>173</sup>

In real time, Annie Ostrager does not have a plan. She said:

I already feel like I’ve sort of opted out in a sense, I left the firm, stepped off [the] partner-track... I’m not at home with the baby so I haven’t opted out in traditional way that the term is used in academic literature, but anything that I do after this would be a form of opting out, and would be wholly driven by wanting to be at home with the baby.<sup>174</sup>

Annie has not yet made the decision as to whether or not she will return to her old firm but she said, “I doubt I’ll go back because I think it would be too hard to give up having the whole weekend with the baby and having evenings with the baby.”<sup>175</sup>

For most young women, it is impossible to know the rates at which their careers and their personal lives will develop. Thus, as Carol Fishman Cohen noted, “you can’t necessarily talk to yourself now and think well this is how I’ll have it all figured out. There are too many unique factors.”<sup>176</sup> However, thinking problems around career breaks and re-entry can be decreased if we accept sequencing as a pattern and work towards its institution. As Fishman said, “we’ll know when this problem is solved if people can have a conversation when someone is pregnant like: ‘Are you taking maternity leave or are you taking an extended career break and then

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<sup>173</sup> Scott, discussion.

<sup>174</sup> Ostrager, discussion.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Carol Fishman Cohen (founder and CEO, iRelaunch) in discussion with the author, December 2014.

are going to get back later?’ We’ve made a lot of progress, [but we’re] not there yet.”<sup>177</sup>

If a larger social framework existed to help women think through these issues from an earlier age, work-life conflicts would not have to be so unique to each individual’s situation. Socially established strategies and pathways might help women to make thorough decisions about their life structure that are suited to their professional and personal interests.

### *Professional Recruitment*

The executive recruitment world makes it so that high-powered professionals do not have to find jobs. Recruiters utilize their rolodexes in order to poach employees from one company for the sake of another. This is a real bonus for professionals working at high levels, and especially for women, since so many companies are trying to diversify their workplace. Because the work of headhunters is to find talented professionals suited for specific positions, career women do not have to worry about or even think about potential opportunities for advancement outside the company that they work for.

Headhunters do not, however, look for professionals that are out of the workforce. They rely on systems that only make visible men and women who are currently employed. Executive recruitment has a blind spot due to its lack of a rolodex of people who have left the labor force. Their method of offering professional opportunities to those who are not necessarily looking for change, however, could easily work for high-potential women who are at home. These

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<sup>177</sup> Cohen, discussion.

women could and should be on the radar for recruiters. Yet until we can seriously problematize the amount of talent we are losing and will continue to lose due to our inability to locate these women, professional recruitment infrastructure will not evolve.

Another reason it is so difficult for these women to get hired is because there is a stigma attached to resume gaps. Regan Otto, who was offered a full-time position at Credit Suisse after completing their Real Returns program, worked in the legal industry before she took nine years off. The reason she had not gotten a job before getting into Real Returns, she said, was “because people really didn’t like seeing the gap in my resume.”<sup>178</sup> As a human resources representative from Goldman Sachs put it, “unfortunately, at the end of the day when people are submitting resumes to these online systems and people have a five, eight, ten year gap in their resume, they are definitely not top of mind for external recruiters.”<sup>179</sup> It would be considered unusual and questionable for a recruiter to find a professional on an extended career break and present that individual to a client as a prospective hire. Employers would be likely to have doubts. During her re-entry process Linda Lee found that “potential employers had a lot of questions about whether or not I was ready to go back, [they] kept asking if I had really thought through the decision and what the challenges would be; [they] wanted to make sure I was committed to coming back.”<sup>180</sup>

Working as a legal recruiter, Caren Stacy would occasionally come across a woman that was applying for a job who had taken a career break. Every time she

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<sup>178</sup> Otto, discussion.

<sup>179</sup> Jessica Ross (VP of global leadership and diversity, Goldman Sachs) in discussion with the author, November 2014.

<sup>180</sup> Lee, discussion.

presented these women to a boss they would always say, “there are a lot of other good candidates.”<sup>181</sup> She added, “always candidates were better because they didn’t have a gap.”<sup>182</sup> Companies are more willing to overlook a resume gap when women who have worked for them previously apply to be re-hired, because they can account for their work and their work ethic. While Linda Lee ended up getting re-hired to work at her old law firm, she noted, “I’m sure I didn’t get a lot of responses from the [other] jobs I applied to because I was out for about eleven years.”<sup>183</sup> After all, there is almost no existing infrastructure to assess the capability of professionals who have no fresh experience to account for.

Stacy felt that hiring women who had taken a career break could help solve the issue that there are not enough women in leadership positions in our workforce. Yet as she put it, “because of the structural impediments” women re-entering the workforce after taking time off are not “a viable source of talent.”<sup>184</sup> In order to tackle that fact, she founded the OnRamp Fellowship, a prestigious re-entry program for female lawyers. Stacy first developed her own rigorous screening process that evaluates for the ability to achieve success in the legal industry and then she formed a program around it. Since its advent, the OnRamp Fellowship has placed a significant number of returning women in internships and full-time positions at distinguished law firms around the country.

### *Networks*

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<sup>181</sup> Caren Stacy (founder, OnRamp Fellowship) in discussion with the author, November 2014.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> Lee, discussion.

<sup>184</sup> Stacy, discussion.

Networking is extremely important for the advancement of one's career, particularly if an individual is looking to get hired somewhere new. People often hear about job openings and get recommended for specific positions from friends, family, and people they used to work with or for. Sociologist Mark Granovetter argues that social networks have a significant impact not just on hiring, but also on productivity. He claims that since "prospective employers and employees prefer to learn about one another from personal sources whose information they trust... individuals [often] use social contacts and networks already in place" to find and fill positions.<sup>185</sup> He also finds that since "good relations with others are key, those entering a firm through personal contacts have a head start in appearing and being more productive and avoiding errors that might set back outsiders."<sup>186</sup>

Considering this, there is a substantial interest for women embarking on a career break to maintain professional and social relationships. Even more so, if women could make it a point to nurture their network while they are out of the workforce, they would likely have a much better chance of getting back in when and where they want to. A number of women who have successfully on-ramped attributed their ability to do so to their networking capabilities.

Lisa Mann joined Kraft Foods Group, Inc. right out of business school, but left five years later when her husband's job was relocated to Atlanta. After the move, she was more or less out of the workforce for the next fourteen years. She did do some part-time work but she was exclusively dependent on projects that came from

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<sup>185</sup> Mark Granovetter, "The Impact of Social Structure on Economic Outcomes," in *The Sociology of Economic Life*, ed. Mark Granovetter and Richard Swedberg (Boulder: Westview Press, 2011), 36.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

“ex-Kraft people,” because, as she explained, “that was my network.”<sup>187</sup> Seven years ago, when she wanted to get back in, she contacted Kraft for career advice and they offered her something much better, a VP position. Lisa justified the offer as a matter of “luck” and “serendipity,” since they happened to be looking for someone who had more of an outside view.<sup>188</sup> Still, if she had not stayed in touch with people she knew from her old days as a full-time employee, she would have never been presented with the job opportunity. She stressed the importance of “cultivating your old network,” because “in reality, who is going to trust you with a job? Most likely it’s someone who you worked for before.”<sup>189</sup> Lisa did not have lunches or meetings with her old professional contacts, but she did do things like send out Christmas cards, “to just not fade into nowhere.”<sup>190</sup>

Linda Lee also acknowledged “leveraging your network is really important when you’re trying to get back.”<sup>191</sup> She, too, had “made sure” to keep in touch with old bosses and co-workers while she was out.<sup>192</sup> When she was looking for jobs after almost eleven years of being out of the workforce, she knew that she did not want to go back to practicing law, which she explained was “partly lifestyle driven but also not where [she] wanted to go professionally, having tried it.”<sup>193</sup> One of the partners at her old firm that she had stayed in touch with introduced her to a new managerial position. That person was able to be Linda’s “internal reference” that could say she

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<sup>187</sup> Lisa Mann (executive VP, KIND Healthy Snacks) in discussion with the author, October 2014.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Lee, discussion.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

could be “trusted [and] relied upon.”<sup>194</sup> She was also offered a job in the legal department of another company, but she chose the position at her old firm partially because she knew that she “had built up a lot of credibility” there and “they knew [she] worked hard,” whereas at the other company she was an unknown entity, which caused the company to question “whether or not [she] could be fully dedicated.”<sup>195</sup>

From personal experience Baat Enosh felt able to claim that it is your “deep network” that matters the most for your on-ramp process.<sup>196</sup> While she had a “very large” network due to her past work in the technology sector and the nonprofit work around women in technology that she was doing at the time, it was an old boss that knew her work and her “value” that was most helpful for her in her re-entry process.<sup>197</sup> She explained, “when you’re trying to on-ramp you need someone that can vouch for you [and] the chances are lower that they would say they could vouch for you [if] they haven’t worked with you.”<sup>198</sup> As advice to others, she said, “If you do leave the workforce somehow stay in touch with the people who you did great work for because they will be the ones helping you the most.”<sup>199</sup>

In order to get back to work Megan Scott tapped into her former professional network for advice and guidance. She reached out to colleagues from past jobs, “even just to have conversations, even if [she] didn’t think anything would come of it from a true business development point.”<sup>200</sup> She said, “those are the people who know your work, who will be most likely to hire you if they can... [so] I relied

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<sup>194</sup> Lee, discussion.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> Enosh, discussion.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

<sup>200</sup> Scott, discussion.

heavily on that.”<sup>201</sup> In tandem, she announced her decision to re-enter to a group of women from her business school class during their annual get-together. By making it “publicly known” to her more personal network, she felt committed.<sup>202</sup> She explained, “these people are my friends but they’re also colleagues, they’re potential clients, all the rest of it. I made a commitment outside of just to myself and to my husband... I felt accountable. What’s more, sharing my plans with this group provided me with a tremendous amount of support, all these women were so supportive.”<sup>203</sup>

For Jodi Balsam, it was her mentor that was the key to her re-entry. When she graduated from NYU Law School she was selected to be the first law clerk for a judge who was “fresh on the bench.”<sup>204</sup> That position led towards the creation of “a special bond” and it also gave her “a special role in his work family,” which is made up of a “great network of lawyers” that have clerked for him throughout the twenty-two years that he has now been on the bench.<sup>205</sup> Jodi had given herself a five-year limit for being out, and as that limit was approaching, her mentor asked her to come clerk for him again. Not only did the position help her to refresh her skills, but it also led her towards her next job as a professor of law. As she put it, it’s “easier to get a job from a job.”<sup>206</sup> She added, “if I were to advise any young woman now on how to map out an off-ramp and on-ramp, [I would say,] ‘You have got to find somebody who is a real mentor, a sponsor, someone who really wants to see you succeed and

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<sup>201</sup> Scott, discussion.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

<sup>204</sup> Balsam, discussion.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

who will actively find opportunities for you.”<sup>207</sup> She thinks that women in their twenties should be “affirmatively strategic” in thinking about who could be their mentor.<sup>208</sup>

For these women, their old professional networks were the most useful in helping them to return to the workforce. It was not friends, nor family that were able to recommend them for available positions, nor was it what Granovetter calls “weak ties.”<sup>209</sup> He argues that acquaintances are more likely to be beneficial for individuals than their close friends, because they can provide them with “novel information,” and connect them to “a wider world.”<sup>210</sup> This argument does not seem to ring true for mothers coming back to the workforce off a career break.

The weak ties formed in the everyday lives of nonworking mothers tend to be with others in the domestic scene. Parents know other parents through their children’s schools and extracurricular activities, but can these acquaintances help each other professionally? Granovetter’s theory of weak ties in terms of job access assumes that some of those ties in your network are in the workplace. Thus, networks enclosed around the school and the home might not be a useful engine for on-ramping. Can women that are in the same boat help each other? This is an area of further research. These domestic networks exist, but it is unclear as to whether or not they could be valuable for matters of professional re-entry.

Strong ties seem to be the most helpful for women looking to re-enter the labor force. Former colleagues and bosses can account for these women’s skills and

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<sup>207</sup> Balsam, discussion.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> Granovetter, “The Impact of Social Structure,” 47.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid., 34.

talent and thus are often willing to recommend them for a position. Acquaintances and other personal contacts, however, might feel at a loss in terms of how to introduce a nonworking individual to a potential connection. Also, the weak ties of stay-at-home mothers may not be promising.

### *Atrophy*

It is important for sequencers to stay relevant and up to date with their industries if they hope to eventually re-enter the same fields. Some women are able to utilize their networks to keep themselves informed. Amy Atkinson was able to stay in the loop while she was out in a “natural and organic” way because a number of her close friends were still at Goldman Sachs and her husband also worked in the finance industry.<sup>211</sup> She said, “I always knew what was going on, I had that natural curiosity.”<sup>212</sup> Mariquita Blumberg stayed “very intentionally in touch with a variety of individual clients” in order to mollify her concern around “staying away for too long, especially given how rapidly the work environment is changing [due to] technology.”<sup>213</sup> She explained, “I wasn’t seeing clients everyday but I was going to a conference once a year or having lunch with a client I had worked with in the past... I had to keep myself fresh and so I was doing a variety of different little things to feed into what was going on and keep my head operating.”<sup>214</sup> However, it often takes more than networking to remedy atrophy issues.

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<sup>211</sup> Atkinson, discussion.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid.

<sup>213</sup> Blumberg, discussion.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

Valerie Biberaj, who worked in a number of legal departments before leaving the corporate workforce, was so aware of this that she did not take herself out completely because she was “scared of being disconnected for too long.”<sup>215</sup> For a while she did part-time consulting for nonprofits, so as to “ke[ep her] toe in the water.”<sup>216</sup> While her son was her “main focus,” she had seriously internalized “the fact that taking yourself out is not a good decision for career recognition and development,” so she found a way to keep her brainpower intact.<sup>217</sup> Because no real infrastructure has been developed for those who are out to keep their knowledge fresh and their skills up to date, women who want to take a break either do not let themselves do so completely, like Valerie, or they suffer the consequences of atrophy, the most severe of which can be extreme self-doubt.

For Megan Scott, getting back was mostly challenging “from a confidence standpoint.”<sup>218</sup> She explained, “I had to sit there and almost delude myself, continually give myself pep talks, telling myself I have what it takes, I’m still relevant.”<sup>219</sup> A lot of her re-entry process, she said, “was talking myself off the ledge, because... I never had so much self-doubt in my life as I did [then].”<sup>220</sup> She was terrified by the fact that there had been “a whole lot of change in the workplace” during the seven years she was out.<sup>221</sup>

For a similar reason, Sally Jacobson has never seriously tried to re-enter the workforce. While she has considered it, she admitted, “I’m really scared... so much

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<sup>215</sup> Valerie Biberaj (director, Foundation at Kate Spade & Co.) in discussion with the author, November 2014.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

<sup>218</sup> Scott, discussion.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

has changed.”<sup>222</sup> Even though she feels like she has “so much value,” part of the reason she has not been able to “find a way to channel it and find out where it could be useful and what could be interesting” is because she has not really maintained her network.<sup>223</sup> She acknowledged, “once you’re disconnected it’s hard to reconnect.”<sup>224</sup>

Women could easily avoid obsolescence and depleted levels of confidence if structural educational opportunities were available to them while they were out. Continuing professional education (CPE), which is required of practicing doctors and lawyers in order to ensure that they maintain their knowledge and skills, could be available to women who are on a career break from a number of different industries. Women in the technology industry, for example, could take tutorials on the latest programming software. Since CPE is structured in a way that it does not interfere with work, it already accommodates unusual schedules and so it would not get in the way of one’s caretaking duties.

Another, less formal way to keep one’s mind sharp would be to take on a mentee. As Hewlett and Luce state, there is “an urgent need to implement mentoring and networking programs that help women expand and sustain their professional aspirations.”<sup>225</sup> A mentorship with a younger professional in their industry would require those who are out of the workforce to utilize their knowledge. Also, it would work as a two-way exchange. Mentees would gain useful insight from someone with greater experience and expertise and they could also keep their mentor informed about happenings in the workplace.

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<sup>222</sup> Jacobson, discussion.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

<sup>225</sup> Hewlett and Luce, “Off-Ramps and On-Ramps.”

As Megan Scott said of her uneasiness about re-entry, “I didn’t give myself enough credit, because I had worked for a long time, I had a lot of experience, it’s not like all that knowledge disappears.”<sup>226</sup> She thought it might help if there was some way to help women “get over that hurdle of needing to know everything before they stick their neck out again... whether it’s crash courses, counseling.”<sup>227</sup> Women like Megan have achieved high levels of education and have impressive skills and experience to account for from their professional lives prior to their leave. Therefore, it would not take much to help keep them informed.

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<sup>226</sup> Scott, discussion.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER 3 – Emergent Infrastructure

### I. Network Structures

#### *iRelaunch*

iRelaunch is the premier organization that functions as a career re-entry resource for employers, institutions, and individuals. Vivian Stein Rabin and Carol Fishman Cohen, both relaunchers themselves, founded the business/consulting service in 2008 after they who wrote a book together called *Back on the Career Track*. With the information that they had gathered, they decided to start a conference. The conference runs annually and has been held in a number of different cities since its advent. It mainly attracts women who have taken time off to raise their children or for other family-related reasons and its general purpose is to “connect professionals returning to work after a career break with employers interested in hiring from this talent pool.”<sup>228</sup> iRelaunch also offers “small group coaching boot camps, webinars, inspiring role models, and [an] empowering newsletter.”<sup>229</sup>

iRelaunch teaches their participants return-to-work strategies, gives them the opportunity to converse with potential employers, and advertises available career re-entry programs. They keep track of existing programs, most of which they represent at the conference and all of which are listed on their website. Prestigious companies and firms run the most comprehensive and influential of such programs in-house. Universities offer shorter programs that cost money to enroll in and there are also a

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<sup>228</sup> “About the Conference,” iRelaunch’s website, accessed March 11, 2015, <http://www.irelaunch.com/rtwabout>.

<sup>229</sup> “Home,” iRelaunch’s website, accessed March 11, 2015, <http://www.irelaunch.com>.

few programs in which government agencies, non-profit foundations, and professional associations operate. iRelaunch also offers advice for employers on how to connect with their “talented and motivated membership of educated professionals seeking to return to the workforce”<sup>230</sup> and assistance to universities and groups looking to help their alumni and community members “get back on the career track.”<sup>231</sup>

The organization was founded in part due to the recognition that it is possible but extremely difficult to re-enter the workforce on your own. As Cohen put it, you will not have “that sort of institutional clout behind you.”<sup>232</sup> Tereza Nemessanyi did it, but she was “scrappy” and “relentless” and she acknowledged that while she “knew it was going to be hard to on-ramp, [she] never knew *how* hard it was going to be.”<sup>233</sup> She added, “it blew me away.”<sup>234</sup> Tereza knew that she wanted to do start-up work, so in order to get back she started going to events to network. However, she explained, “no one would talk to me, because at this point I’m a middle-aged person.”<sup>235</sup> Still, she kept going to events, “made a thousand comments online, got to know people.”<sup>236</sup> She said, “I would leave comments online while I was on the pick up and drop off line at preschool... it was not a pre-paved thing at all, it was insane.”<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> “Opportunities for Employers,” iRelaunch’s website, accessed March 11, 2015, [http://www.irelaunch.com/Employer\\_Connect](http://www.irelaunch.com/Employer_Connect).

<sup>231</sup> “Universities & Groups,” iRelaunch’s website, accessed March 11, 2015, <http://www.irelaunch.com/universities>.

<sup>232</sup> Cohen, discussion.

<sup>233</sup> Nemessanyi, discussion.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

Re-entry programs make this undertaking a whole lot easier. As Cohen explained, they “streamline the process for you” and “force you to keep your momentum.”<sup>238</sup> Thus, iRelaunch helps individuals find which programs are right for them. Their approach to the issue of re-entry is not just bottom-up, Cohen explained, because they are “having the discussion with all constituents, top-down as well.”<sup>239</sup> They are in contact with the companies that run return-to-work programs “all the time,” and with the universities they “really push for programming for alumni in terms of how [to] make this transition.”<sup>240</sup>

Caren Stacy’s OnRamp Fellowship program is interesting because it operates as its own entity outside of a specific company and works to place relaunchers in a number of different firms. When asked if she thought Stacy’s model was particularly important for the innovative development of re-entry platforms, Cohen responded that she does think that Stacy “has developed something very unique,” yet emphasized that the establishment of new structures “should be going on at the same time” as the continuous emergence of programs within specific organizations.<sup>241</sup> She said, “we should be pushing big companies who are in a position to create their own programs and we should be pushing efforts like Caren’s to operate programs that exist across firms.”<sup>242</sup> iRelaunch, therefore, is above all committed to encouraging the widespread development of re-entry programs, no matter their nature.

The homepage of iRelaunch’s website offers a number of individual accounts of successful relaunchers, which function to motivate visitors to tackle their own fears

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<sup>238</sup> Cohen, discussion.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid.

about returning to work. A range of professionals who have either attended or spoken at the conference tell stories that make it seem relatively easy and extraordinarily satisfying to re-enter the labor force. They acknowledge but downplay challenge and they laud iRelaunch as an extremely helpful and supportive organization. For example, Alicia Maciel, who took an eleven-year career break and now works as the Director of Strategic Initiatives at THINK Together, says, “I am absolutely thrilled to be back at work full-time and to be in a position where I can make a significant contribution to the organization and its mission.”<sup>243</sup> Allyson Bakewell, a nurse recruiter who was out of the workforce for seventeen years, says, “The Career Relaunch Forum and The Relaunch Circle were so valuable in helping me frame my thoughts and organize the whole idea into a process. Thank you for creating such unique programs and for all your support.”<sup>244</sup>

Sharon Gala, an Associate Director at MetLife and an iRelaunch conference speaker who spent six years out of the workforce at home with her kids details her re-entry process as follows:

I got in touch with former colleagues and contacts and asked them to send me research reports. I got back up to speed on developments in the bond market, my professional field of experience. I started applying for jobs on-line but got nowhere. Then I saw a job at MetLife that seemed absolutely perfect for me, plus it was nearby. I was able to network through an old colleague to get a personal reference to the hiring manager. After being offered the position, I later found out from my manager that not only did he not notice the gap on my resume at first reading, I was more up to date on the financial markets than some of the people working in his department!<sup>245</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> “Alicia Maciel,” iRelaunch’s website, accessed March 11, 2015, <https://www.irelaunch.com/node/552>.

<sup>244</sup> “Allyson Bakewell,” iRelaunch’s website, accessed March 11, 2015, <http://www.irelaunch.com/node/190>.

<sup>245</sup> “Sharon Gala,” iRelaunch’s website, accessed March 11, 2015, <https://www.irelaunch.com/node/239>.

Jody Dalton, another conference speaker, and a relauncher after a twelve-year career break, says of her current position as Project Engineer at Jacobsen Construction Company, “It is a very satisfying career.”<sup>246</sup>

These stories are optimistic and grateful in tone. They operate to encourage and inspire visitors to begin their own re-entry processes and to utilize iRelaunch in order to do so. In the “Success Stories” section of the website you can find these accounts plus a myriad of others, all of which you can locate by industry. As Cohen explained, “one of the most important things we do is to trumpet the success stories... it is so compelling to hear these stories of how people have returned to work and in all different ways... we want people to leave here with the beginnings of a personalized return to work plan... people leave with inspiration.”<sup>247</sup>

iRelaunch is aware of the fact that their participants are likely to have low confidence levels from being out of the workforce for an extended period of time and possibly from having tried to re-enter and failed. Therefore, they make an effort to define their space as welcoming and safe. The “About the Conference” page describes the conference as a “judgment-free zone.”<sup>248</sup>

Year to year, speakers and panel moderators come together from a number of different professional identities, which helps create a network of individuals that have a structural, institutional interest in doing something about the challenges faced by professionals returning to the workforce. Successful, mainly female, relaunchers talk about their own re-entry processes and give advice to participants on how to begin their return paths. For these speakers, the issue is personal. They are passionate

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<sup>246</sup> “Jody Dalton,” iRelaunch’s website, accessed March 11, 2015, <https://www.irelaunch.com/jdalton>.

<sup>247</sup> “iRelaunch Return to Work Conference,” YouTube video.

<sup>248</sup> “About the Conference,” iRelaunch.

about helping others to achieve what they have. Human resource officers and recruiters devoted to finding new and diverse talent are interested in this pool of women as potential employees. Thus, they help motivate participants to brush up their skills and get out there. Lastly, heads of return-to-work programs who have realized the significance of the issue and who have developed platforms to help solve it hope to convince potential relaunchers that institutional support is available and important. This cohort of people mobilizes around the issue of re-entry and supports iRelaunch as an organization that has influence.

iRelaunch also has a YouTube channel to help increase their visibility. The channel offers recorded snippets from participants and speakers at previous conferences as well as short, informational and instructional videos by Carol Fishman Cohen. Cohen speaks on confidence, updating skills, internships, LinkedIn profiles, and the importance of personal appearance.

Overall, iRelaunch functions to inspire and motivate professionals to restart their careers and provides them with the resources to do so. They invest time and effort into encouraging employers and universities to develop return-to-work programs so that there will be more pathways for re-entry and institutional support for relaunchers. However, they fail to address the root of the issue of re-entry, which is it affects the percentage of women in the professional workforce and specifically in corporate leadership positions.

The issue of re-entry into the workforce is gendered. iRelaunch acknowledges the fact that their participants are 93% women.<sup>249</sup> Also, their website describes a vast number of conference participants and speakers as having taken a career break to be

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<sup>249</sup> “About the Conference,” iRelaunch’s website.

at home with their children or to focus on family. Rabin and Cohen wrote *Back on the Career Track* with mothers in mind and on the webpage about the book they draw attention to the main subjects associated with the issue: “Women revolutionized the workforce by entering professions in record numbers, but many stepped off the career track to care for their families. Now, these same women are forging new career paths by proving that they can return to challenging, meaningful careers after a break, and so can you.”<sup>250</sup> However, iRelaunch distance themselves from how and why the challenge of re-entry is an issue that gender plays a major role in.

iRelaunch makes it a point to suggest that men, too, struggle with re-entry. In their YouTube video titled “iRelaunch Return to Work Conference,” a number of participants say a few words about their own personal situations. On screen first is a female lawyer who has been out of the job market for seven years, next is a woman who has been out for twelve years, and lastly is a man who is in the middle of a yearlong sabbatical.<sup>251</sup> This representation makes it obvious that the challenge of re-entry is an issue primarily and most extremely faced by women.

Nowhere on their website is there any consideration for the reasons why it is mainly mothers that exit the professional middle class. No attention is drawn to the work-life conflicts faced by mothers that cause them to leave the labor force in the first place, or of the necessity for women to have equal opportunity for career advancement to their male counterparts. iRelaunch’s conference and web presence functions first and foremost to put a spotlight on the challenge of re-entry, to raise awareness of an issue that is mostly neglected, and to provide resources for those

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<sup>250</sup> “Back on the Career Track,” iRelaunch’s website, accessed March 11, 2015, <https://www.irelaunch.com/book>.

<sup>251</sup> “iRelaunch Return to Work Conference,” YouTube video.

looking to get back to work. The “About the Conference” page explicitly states, “Why you took a break (or how long you’ve been out) doesn’t matter. What matters is finding practical, actionable and relevant guidance for returning to work with a purpose.”<sup>252</sup> This defensiveness about not caring why seems to strangely decenter the experience of women. iRelaunch’s presumed interest, therefore, takes a focus off women and the series of specific issues that they face when trying to return to work.

To seriously attend to the problem itself would be to not just consider its solutions, but to also recognize why it exists. If iRelaunch had a real interest in why mothers opt out of their professional lives and why at a later point they tend to want to return, they could advocate for a number of things. For example, an increased understanding in the workplace for mothers that need to take career breaks, a change in corporate hiring processes so that resume gaps do not reflect so poorly on individuals, and the necessity for employing relaunchers in order to decrease the gender gap in corporate leadership. Yet iRelaunch is not an activist organization, they do not campaign for any real political or social change.

iRelaunch also seems to have little interest in tackling these issues before they become so pressing. They pay no attention to young professional women, whom they could inform about the struggles that come with attempting re-entry prior to their opting out. iRelaunch could suggest strategies for young professional women planning a career break to utilize before and after they leave. Yet they do not function to make the challenge of re-entry easier for those who have yet to face it. They only raise the profile of those who are currently out of the workforce, desperately trying to return.

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<sup>252</sup> “About the Conference,” iRelaunch’s website.

### *LinkedIn*

LinkedIn is the highest profile online transformational networking operation. For women looking to re-enter the workforce, it can be useful. They can sign themselves up, curate their pages to demonstrate their prior work experience and skills, connect with people in their current and past personal and professional networks, and scour the website for potential job opportunities. For Linda Lee, it was a crucial resource when she was trying to get back. She said, “I got onto LinkedIn, which was something that I had never been on before, brushed up my profile, brushed up my resume, [and] circulated it to trusted friends and advisors [for advice on] how to craft it.”<sup>253</sup>

Recruiters can utilize LinkedIn to source candidates, target ideal employees, and showcase their company’s brand.<sup>254</sup> While professionals can find jobs to apply to, however, there is no way for them to flag themselves to potential employers. Members can join groups that are specific to their interests and that can provide them with information and help them to broaden their networks. Both iRelaunch and OnRamp Fellowship have group pages. However, no groups with expansive membership and resources exist for women attempting to tackle re-entry.

For Mark Granovetter, who argues for the strength of weak ties, LinkedIn is an ideal platform for networking. Users can invite individuals that they met just once, either socially or in a professional setting, to connect. Yet it is not clear that it works as an adequate measure to help off-ramped women restart their careers. LinkedIn

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<sup>253</sup> Lee, discussion.

<sup>254</sup> “Talent Solutions,” LinkedIn, accessed March 31, 2015, <https://business.linkedin.com/talent-solutions?src=li-nav&trk=>.

could function as the rolodex of talented, high-potential women looking to get back to the professional workforce, but as of now, it does not.

## II. Corporate Structures

### *Re-hiring and Extended Leave Programs*

Many companies and firms have to let go of talented employees when they become parents and decide to leave. Thus, as Hewlett and Luce argue, it would benefit companies to “understand the complexities of women’s nonlinear careers and be prepared to support rather than punish those who take alternative routes.”<sup>255</sup> They suggest that companies make sure that high-potential women know that “the door is open” when they leave, in order to “maintain a connection with off-ramped employees through a formal alumni program.”<sup>256</sup> Rebecca Turner considers it a major problem for companies that they let go of crucial talent who leave for family-related reasons and have no good systems in place to try to keep them or get them back. She noted, “when I left I was probably at a point where I was very productive and knowledgeable for the law firm.”<sup>257</sup> By letting her go so easily, the firm lost not only her expertise, but also time and effort that they spent on getting her to the level at which she was. As Benko and Weisberg point out, “when experienced managers

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<sup>255</sup> Hewlett and Luce, “Off-Ramps and On-Ramps.”

<sup>256</sup> Ibid.

<sup>257</sup> Turner, discussion.

move on, the intellectual and social capital they have accumulated within their organizations and across their industries' ecosystems leave with them."<sup>258</sup>

Rebecca believes that companies "should be courting women to come back [and] some firms could do that with alumni women that have left to be with their families."<sup>259</sup> She added, since "it is a very different situation than leaving to go to a competitor or to do something else, [they] should keep up [the] relationship, keep the door open."<sup>260</sup> The management consulting firm Booz Allen Hamilton is one company that does have a system for rehiring past employees. Booz Allen Hamilton invites former employees to apply for a job through their Comeback Kids program, which puts them through a "rigorous evaluation process in which the human resources, legal, and compliance teams determine whether or not a candidate will be effective when he or she returns."<sup>261</sup>

Chrysula Winegar, who founded her own communications consulting company after taking a few years off from marketing communications in the finance industry, thinks that companies should "cover a set of expectations" for employees leaving "on good terms" in order to keep talented women on their rosters.<sup>262</sup> She thought, "it would be really cool to say this is how you stay connected while you're doing what you need to do, we can give you some incentives."<sup>263</sup> She added, "companies can help subsidize women to keep them up to date, invite them to coffee, keep them on their mailing list, [for example] if [they are] buying a table at a network

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<sup>258</sup> Benko and Weisberg, *Mass Career Customization*, 28.

<sup>259</sup> Turner, discussion.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid.

<sup>261</sup> Issie Lapowsky, "How to Rehire Former Employees," *Inc.*, May 18, 2010, <http://www.inc.com/guides/2010/05/rehiring-former-employees.html>.

<sup>262</sup> Chrysula Winegar (founder, Wake Up World Communications) in discussion with the author, November 2014.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid.

event, leave a seat open for an alumni.”<sup>264</sup> Maintaining “knowledge and contacts,” she believes, will keep a lot of doors open for women who need to take time off.<sup>265</sup>

Some companies offer extended leave programs for employees who want to take a multi-year career break and then return. PricewaterhouseCoopers Full Circle Program allows for employees to take up to five years off while remaining connected to the firm and their colleagues. It is an unpaid, voluntary arrangement that is available to employees at the senior associate level or above and to alumni who are full-time caregivers.<sup>266</sup> Full Circle offers participants a mentor and some training to keep them up to date. Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom LLP’s Sidebar program allows attorneys in good standing to leave the firm for up to three years. Employees on leave are encouraged to participate in CLE seminars and networking events in order to stay connected.<sup>267</sup> However, companies that have these programs are few and far between.

### *“Returnship” Model*

The re-entry model pioneered by Goldman Sachs has been quite successful. Goldman’s Returnship program was launched in 2008 and since then it has expanded globally. It began with recognition of the trend of highly skilled and knowledgeable women stepping off the career track for family-related reasons. Goldman became aware of the fact that there was not a clear way back for those who had left the formal workforce and they realized that helping these women return to work was not only an

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<sup>264</sup> Winegar, discussion.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid.

<sup>266</sup> “Full Circle,” PricewaterhouseCoopers’s website, accessed February 24, 2015, [http://www.pwc.com/us/en/about-us/diversity/assets/full\\_circle.pdf](http://www.pwc.com/us/en/about-us/diversity/assets/full_circle.pdf).

<sup>267</sup> “Work/Life Resources and Benefits,” Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom LLP and Affiliates’ website, accessed February 24, 2015, <http://www.skadden.com/diversity/benefits>.

opportunity for social impact, but also a way for them to generate a new source of talented professionals to hire from.<sup>268</sup> They built a paid-ten week program that provides participants with an internship in a specific department supplemented by mentorship, the opportunity to network within the company, and the potential to get hired for a long-term position. Since its advent, the Returnship program has allowed Goldman to develop talented professionals and in turn “create diversity in a unique way.”<sup>269</sup> An overseer of the program noted, “these people make up part of our diverse workforce not just because they’re women but because they have this different life experience.”<sup>270</sup>

The Returnship program has influenced the creation of a number of similar programs in the past couple of years, such as Credit Suisse’s Real Returns, JPMorgan’s Re-entry Program, and Morgan Stanley’s Return to Work Program. This internship-based model, as Carol Fishman Cohen said, “can be a valuable way to reduce the risks, real or perceived, of hiring people who’ve chosen to take an extended break.”<sup>271</sup> Also, she added, “it’s a two-way street, both the relauncher and the employer can evaluate the working relationship to see if it’s something they want to continue on a permanent basis.”<sup>272</sup> Returnship-style programs allow companies to “hire people who have a level of maturity and experience not found in younger

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<sup>268</sup> Lisa Shalett (former partner, Goldman Sachs) in discussion with the author, October 2014.

<sup>269</sup> Ross, discussion.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid.

<sup>271</sup> Carol Fishman Cohen, “The 40-Year Old Intern,” *The Harvard Business Review*, November, 2012. <https://hbr.org/2012/11/the-40-year-old-intern/>.

<sup>272</sup> “Carol Cohen On Internships,” YouTube video, 0:39, posted by “iRelaunch2,” April 3, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NSWjUZAQ2Y>.

recruits and who are at a life stage where parental leaves and spousal job relocations are most likely behind them.”<sup>273</sup> In short, they “are an excellent investment.”<sup>274</sup>

Regan Otto, who participated in Credit Suisse’s Real Returns program and was then offered a full-time role, said that getting back to the workforce “was totally daunting.”<sup>275</sup> She added, “I’m not sure if I could’ve done if it I hadn’t been in a program like Credit Suisse’s because they really re-acclimate you to the workforce... if I didn’t get something there I could’ve interviewed and got something somewhere else, they really prepared you to get back out there.”<sup>276</sup> Without these Returnship-style programs, she believes, “it’s very hard” to get back into the labor force.<sup>277</sup>

Rebecca Turner had been networking and updating her resume when a neighbor told her about Goldman Sachs’ Returnship Program. While she found the re-entry process to be challenging, once she got into the program it was “easy-ish.”<sup>278</sup> She added, “I felt like it was an on-ramp to pick up maybe not exactly where I left but at least at a substantial place in an organization where there’s lots of room for advancement.”<sup>279</sup>

Yet these programs are only geared towards women who are well-educated and high-achieving, and on top of that, they are extremely selective. As Rebecca Turner noted, her ability to participate in Goldman Sachs’ Returnship program was due to the fact that she “went to NYU Law School and had a standout resume.”<sup>280</sup> She recognized that “it’s not so easy for someone that doesn’t have a stellar resume to

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<sup>273</sup> Cohen, “The 40-Year Old Intern.”

<sup>274</sup> Ibid.

<sup>275</sup> Otto, discussion.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid.

<sup>278</sup> Turner, discussion.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid.

do this.”<sup>281</sup> She added, because “these programs probably only take in or interview the top application pool, there’s still a lot of people out there that don’t have an on-ramp.”<sup>282</sup> In 2011, there were 450 candidates for Amy Atkinson’s Returnship class and only 15 people were admitted.<sup>283</sup> Every year, the number of applicants grows significantly and the number of admits grows minutely, if at all. When Rebecca Turner was accepted into the program in 2013, she was one of 21 applicants that were accepted out of about 600.<sup>284</sup> Regan Otto participated in Real Returns that same year and her class was made up of only 13 people.<sup>285</sup> When asked if Goldman Sachs’ Returnship program was ever going to expand, an overseer for the program explained that since participants are provided with the ability to develop “personal connections” with senior leaders and mentors, “keeping it small is wonderful because it [can have] the biggest impact for each participant.”<sup>286</sup>

Also, outside of the finance sector, this platform is extremely underdeveloped. As Lisa Mann, a global consumer goods leader, acknowledged, “banking is just one part of the world.”<sup>287</sup> Considering that the majority of talented professional women who are looking to return to work are not bankers or financial analysts, she thought, “what about the rest of the world?”<sup>288</sup> Opted out business women, as she once was, consider re-entry and feel as if they have no where to go. They do not even know where to look and “there’s no one looking” for them.<sup>289</sup> More industries, she

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<sup>281</sup> Turner, discussion.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid.

<sup>283</sup> Atkinson, discussion.

<sup>284</sup> Turner, discussion.

<sup>285</sup> Otto, discussion.

<sup>286</sup> Ross, discussion.

<sup>287</sup> Mann, discussion.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid.

believes, need to be thinking about ways to utilize the pool of women who are out of the workforce since after all, “it’s good for both” parties.<sup>290</sup>

What is significant about the success of the re-entry programs in financial services, as Carol Fishman Cohen put it, is that it is “an example of an industry embracing the concept.”<sup>291</sup> She noted that while “only a handful of companies have these programs,” those who do are “big [and] prestigious.”<sup>292</sup> Now that this model has been established and we can see that it works in one dominant industry, the next question becomes, “what are the other industry groups where we can start to introduce this concept?”<sup>293</sup>

Throughout other industries, there are a few return-to-work programs that operate via the Returnship model. Most of the successful employer programs that Fishman has seen have “revolved around” a combination of short-term work experience and mentorship.<sup>294</sup> The reason that internship-style programs work so well is because they are low-risk. As Fishman explained:

Employers are concerned about the rate of ramp-up, and it really comes down to the individual hiring manager — some are completely open to this population and sometimes it’s because someone who they know has gone through this process [or] they know someone who is a high performer who took a career break. A lot of people think why should I hire someone who took a career break? Why don’t I hire someone who didn’t? Skeptical hiring managers attach more risk.<sup>295</sup>

MetLife’s ACT 2 internship program hires professionals that have taken an extended career break of two years or more into roles that are open as full-time

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<sup>290</sup> Mann, discussion.

<sup>291</sup> Cohen, discussion.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid.

positions while providing them with manager coaching and mentors.<sup>296</sup> The program serves as a kind of trial, so that if a returnee succeeds as an intern, they might be offered to fill the position permanently.<sup>297</sup> Zillow, an online real estate database, offers a three-month long Returnship program for software engineers that provides participants with a mentor, “refresher training,” and the potential opportunity for a full-time job.<sup>298</sup> Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles developed a customized re-entry program for physicians that “provides hospital credentialing committees with a convenient pathway to help reinstate physicians who have been denied privileges” due to extended absences from practice that have left them without “evidence of current clinical competence.”<sup>299</sup> The program has a monthly tuition that depends on the extent of each individual physician’s needs. Hospitals can decide whether or not having completed the Cedars-Sinai Medical Center Re-entry Program will fulfill a returning physician’s necessary application requirements, but the program itself provides a supervisor, numerous evaluations, and an exit interview, all of which work towards helping returning physicians get appointed at Cedars-Sinai or another medical center.<sup>300</sup>

### *OnRamp Fellowship*

The OnRamp Fellowship is a unique, nationwide re-entry platform for lawyers that have taken a career break. In 2009 Caren Stacy left her position as

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<sup>296</sup> “Developing Talent,” MetLife’s website, accessed February 24, 2015, <https://www.metlife.com/about/corporate-responsibility/our-employees/developing-talent/index.html>.

<sup>297</sup> Cohen, discussion.

<sup>298</sup> “Career Opportunities,” Zillow’s website, accessed February 24, 2015, <http://www.zillow.com/jobs/openings?j=ourc0fwR>.

<sup>299</sup> “Reentry Program,” Cedars-Sinai’s website, accessed February 24, 2015, <http://www.cedars-sinai.edu/Medical-Professionals/Resources-for-Physicians/Reentry-Program.aspx>.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid.

Director of Professional Development at Arnold & Porter LLP, a Washington D.C. based law firm, in order to start Lawyer Metrics LLC, a research company that collects and analyzes data around issues affecting the legal industry. Stacy explained, “I was tired of not answering the question ‘well how do we know she’s going to be good?’”<sup>301</sup> As a legal recruiter, she recognized that “we were hiring lawyers and sometimes they worked out and sometimes they didn’t... there didn’t seem to be a pattern.”<sup>302</sup> There was a lack of data around what makes for a successful lawyer and so she decided to develop a company around the desire to attain that information. Lawyer Metrics now “provides law firms and law schools with a competitive advantage through the use of proven, evidence-based methods for identifying, selecting, and developing world-class lawyers.”<sup>303</sup> Once Stacy could “finally answer the question [of] are they good and can they hit the ground running,” she thought, “how can I help these women?”<sup>304</sup> She left Lawyer Metrics in order to develop what is now the OnRamp Fellowship.

The program was launched in May 2014 with the goal to increase the number of women in the legal industry, particularly in partner positions. Using the methods she established with Lawyer Metrics, Stacy developed a complex screening process that “looks for traits and skills that research has shown contributes to lawyers’ success at law firms such as presence, confidence, analytical skills, decision making,

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<sup>301</sup> Stacy, discussion.

<sup>302</sup> Ibid.

<sup>303</sup> “Caren Ulrich Stacy,” LinkedIn, accessed February 17, 2015, [https://www.linkedin.com/profile/view?id=5366161&authType=NAME\\_SEARCH&authToken=RRbr&locale=en\\_US&trk=tyah2&trkInfo=idx%3A1-1-1%2CtarId%3A1423770457029%2Ctas%3Acaren+stacy](https://www.linkedin.com/profile/view?id=5366161&authType=NAME_SEARCH&authToken=RRbr&locale=en_US&trk=tyah2&trkInfo=idx%3A1-1-1%2CtarId%3A1423770457029%2Ctas%3Acaren+stacy).

<sup>304</sup> Stacy, discussion.

relationship building, writing, oral advocacy, and eagerness to learn.”<sup>305</sup> The OnRamp Fellowship screens female lawyers looking to return to the workforce, provides them with a career counselor, and gives them the opportunity to land an internship at a law firm, which could hopefully lead to a full-time position. Fellows are hired by participating firms “at a reduced salary in exchange for a lower billable hour requirement for one-year,” Stacy explained, “so a fair amount of their time can be spent on training, feedback, shadowing and other apprenticeship activities.”<sup>306</sup> Applicants must have an active license, they must have practiced law for at least three years, and they have to have been out of the labor force for at least two. While the average time out of the workforce for most fellows is nine years, some have been on a hiatus for twenty.

In order to get her platform off the ground, Stacy first called every lawyer she knew to build up a network of consultants. Then, she called four law firms to ask if they wanted to pilot with her and all of them signed on. She had a hard time marketing the Fellowship because, as she explained, “these women are not on the grid,” but it helped that they got published in the *Wall St. Journal*.<sup>307</sup> She also called headhunters and said, “you’re not taking any of the women with gaps, so give them to me.”<sup>308</sup> Soon enough, 175 women had applied, 86 of them persevered through the rigorous screening process, 20 got interviews with participating law firms, and 9 got internship offers. After the first round, 30 law firms called Stacy and asked how they could participate. In September 2014, 11 more firms joined. Stacy explained, “I

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<sup>305</sup> Stacy, discussion.

<sup>306</sup> Ibid.

<sup>307</sup> Ibid.

<sup>308</sup> Ibid.

capped it at 15 because I wanted to make sure I could manage it.”<sup>309</sup> By the end of 2015, she expects to have placed another 50 returning lawyers in internships at law firms around the country.

The success that OnRamp Fellowship has seen thus far demonstrates a new possibility for dynamic re-entry platforms that operate as their own entities and place returning professionals at a number of different companies. The primary interest of this model is not what is best for a specific organization, instead, it works in favor of the returning lawyers and for the legal industry as a whole. The next step for Stacy is to expand the platform to encompass legal departments, since many returning lawyers are either not interested or not suited for getting back to big law. As of now, OnRamp Fellowship is one of a kind. Yet the program is one that Stacy says can be “absolutely” adapted by other industries.<sup>310</sup> She is extremely confident in the model and its adjustability. Already a number of legal recruiters from other countries have called her in hopes of replicating the model abroad, which she is going to help them do. In order for another industry to utilize this model, she said, “you have to have someone who is well-versed enough in their field, they have to know what success looks like in their industry [and] have data so they can screen for that.”<sup>311</sup> Also, that person, or group of people, would have to have “enough contacts with women and organizations that will test it.”<sup>312</sup> Then, “it’s just learning from things that go well and the missteps,” she explained, “there are going to be bumps in the road.”<sup>313</sup>

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<sup>309</sup> Stacy, discussion.

<sup>310</sup> Ibid.

<sup>311</sup> Ibid.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid.

The OnRamp Fellowship and platforms like it could have a big impact on re-entry infrastructure. After all, the real reason that companies are hesitant to hire returning women is because they are unsure about their capacity to succeed. This is due to the fact that companies are “not invested enough in screening well.”<sup>314</sup> If all applicants for a job were required to undergo a meticulous screening process, the playing field would be leveled for everyone. There would not have to be a higher risk attached to candidates coming off a career break simply because they lack recent work experience. Thus, Stacy thinks that all firms should work towards changing the way they screen potential employees. Her hope is that she will run the program for a few more years, that law firms will start to “see the benefit of hiring these women with gaps” and then they can use her structure to develop their own, similar screening processes.<sup>315</sup> For this to work without specific programs, she explained, “law firms would have to be willing to do it right, if they aren’t willing to change how they do things, these women will likely not be as successful, so the firm is going to have to decide if they’re willing to do it a little differently and the headhunters are going to have to be willing to do it a little differently too.”<sup>316</sup>

As more law firms and eventually legal departments are exposed to the OnRamp Fellowship and its advantages, this model will hopefully have considerable influence. Also, if companies and firms across multiple industries can realize the necessity for the restructuring of screening processes, they will benefit from more talented staffs and professionals everywhere will have an equal opportunity to get hired.

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<sup>314</sup> Stacy, discussion.

<sup>315</sup> Ibid.

<sup>316</sup> Ibid.

### III. Academic Institutional Structures

University-run programs tend to operate for a few days up to a few weeks and they cost anywhere from a couple hundred dollars to a couple thousand dollars. Harvard Business School's A New Path: Setting New Professional Directions is a six-day residential program that costs \$6,500.<sup>317</sup> MIT had a Career Reengineering Program that consisted of a four-day boot camp, a semester-long course, career coaching, and a ten-week internship for \$15,500, but they stopped running it in 2012.<sup>318</sup> All of these programs work to help participants brush up their professional skills in some way, shape, or form. None of them, however, function to get their participants hired. Thus, it is not obvious what the return on investment is for participants.

The webpage for Greater Returns, a program run by Columbia Business School and Merrill Lynch, states, "Research shows that many talented women take breaks during their careers (known as 'off-ramping'), and then find it difficult to return to the workplace ('on-ramping')." <sup>319</sup> The program is geared towards "women executives with significant business experience" and "offers strategies to keep [them] professionally connected, easing their transition back to work."<sup>320</sup> Greater Returns, therefore, is a three-day program that functions simply to *ease* the transition faced by

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<sup>317</sup> "Career Reentry Programs Worldwide," iRelaunch's website, accessed February 26, 2015, <https://www.irelaunch.com/CareerReentry>.

<sup>318</sup> Ibid.

<sup>319</sup> "Greater Returns," Columbia Business School's website, accessed February 26, 2015, [http://www8.gsb.columbia.edu/ipimages/cbs/execed/pdfs/greater\\_returns.pdf](http://www8.gsb.columbia.edu/ipimages/cbs/execed/pdfs/greater_returns.pdf).

<sup>320</sup> Ibid.

those returning to the workforce. Kellogg School of Management's Re-entering the Workforce program has a similar purpose. The wording on their webpage resembles that of Greater Return's. They state, "Whether you've been out of the formal work place for one year or ten, the idea of re-entering the workforce can be daunting."<sup>321</sup> Their program facilitators assist participants with interviewing skills, resumes, discovering their "interests, values and abilities," building and reconnecting with their networks, "creating a target list," and, lastly, "envisioning next steps: how to stay on track and monitor your progress."<sup>322</sup> Thus, they make it clear that once participants have completed both sessions, they are on their own.

Furthermore, neither of the schools still offers these programs. Re-entering the Workforce ran only in 2008 and Greater Returns ran in 2008 and 2009. Several other schools, such as Stanford Graduate School of Business and University of California Berkeley Haas School of Business ran short programs for a year or two from 2006 through 2008 that they no longer offer today.<sup>323</sup> This can be attributed to the financial crisis of 2007-2008. The Wharton School ran a three-day program called Career Comeback for Professional Women Re-entering the Workforce in conjunction with UBS that was cancelled after 2008 because UBS withdrew its funding for the program.<sup>324</sup> While most other university-run programs required participants to pay their own way, diminished resources in the wake of the economic calamity can explain their termination.

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<sup>321</sup> "Re-entering the Workforce: Finding Your Focus and Creating a Strategy," Kellogg School of Management's website, accessed February 26, 2015, <https://kellogg alumni.northwestern.edu/Events/EventView.asp?EventID=2642&headingid=&override>.

<sup>322</sup> Ibid.

<sup>323</sup> "Career Reentry Programs Worldwide," iRelaunch's website.

<sup>324</sup> Robin Salaman, e-mail message to the author, November, 12, 2014.

One university-run program that has been quite successful is Pace University's School of Law's New Directions for Attorneys. Returning lawyers have to pay \$6,500 to participate in the comprehensive five-and-a-half-month long program, which offers refresher courses, individual career counseling, enhancement of job-seeking skills, an unlimited number of CLE classes through Pace Law CCLE for a full year after registration, and the opportunity to acquire an externship.<sup>325</sup> The first two months are devoted to legal research and writing classes and extensive career counseling while the rest of the time is spent at an externship with some sort of legal organization that provides practice experience and mentoring. The program is open to anyone with a law degree, but it mainly attracts women who have taken a career break for childrearing.<sup>326</sup> The average participant has been out of the workplace for eight to twelve years, but the range is a few years to as many as thirty.

The director of the program, Amy Gerwitz, expressed that to her knowledge New Directions is the only program "at an educational institution that provides classroom work, career counseling and externship."<sup>327</sup> Of all university-run programs, it is apparent that New Directions is the most comprehensive and influential. It is different from employer-run re-entry programs in that its mission is not for all of its participants to graduate and get a job, but to help "retool and refresh their skills, [give them] a practical work experience, and rebuild [their] confidence."<sup>328</sup> Gerwitz explained, "what I think our program is designed to do and what I think it does achieve beautifully, is to serve as a launchpad, to help these

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<sup>325</sup> "Program Overview, New Directions for Attorneys" Pace Law's website, accessed February 26, 2015, <http://www.law.pace.edu/program-overview>.

<sup>326</sup> Amy Gerwitz (Director, New Directions for Attorneys) in discussion with the author, November 2014.

<sup>327</sup> Ibid.

<sup>328</sup> Ibid.

bright, accomplished professional men and women [re]gain their confidence.”<sup>329</sup> She added, “one of the reason our program is able to do that [is because] we have a class anywhere from thirteen to nineteen participants, so it’s relatively small... we like to keep it that way because we give a lot of individual attention in the career counseling aspect.”<sup>330</sup> New Directions was founded in 2007 and since then, about 220 men and women have graduated. While some graduates have pursued careers at large law firms, or as judicial clerks working with judges, more decide to work in-house at corporations or educational institutions or to go into non-profit work.

#### IV. Non-Corporate Re-entry

It should be mentioned that the shift from formal employment relations to the informal economy dominated by the startup world has created some opportunity for women looking to re-enter. The entrepreneurial-based market makes it easier for some women to build a business than to get a job. As the labor market becomes less dominated by salaried, full-time jobs and more so by consulting jobs, it could benefit these women, especially given the barriers to being hired. However, women are engaged in start-up work in different ways. Some start-ups are founded on hobby-centered work, which does not require the use of education and skills in the same way that the formal labor force does. Thus, the level of opting in depends on the type of entrepreneurial endeavor that a woman takes up.

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<sup>329</sup> Gerwitz, discussion.

<sup>330</sup> Ibid.

For example, Chrysula Winegar founded her own communications consulting firm, which she feels has been fulfilling both professionally and in the sense that it allows her to have control over her caretaking duties. Many of her peers have also formed their own consulting firms, agencies, and expert shops. This kind of work, she explained, involves “a complicated narrative of how big you want your business to be, how hard you want to work.”<sup>331</sup> Using the skills she acquired in graduate school and in the formal workforce, she currently works anywhere from sixty to eighty hours a week. She said, “I work harder than I’ve ever worked, but I have some control over it and I can go take out the kids if I feel like I need to and I can’t do that any other way except to work for myself.”<sup>332</sup>

Jessica Garmise, on the other hand, started her own business making personalized gifts half a year after she stopped practicing law in order to spend more time at home. She had “always been doing creative stuff as a hobby,” such as photography, graphic design, and crafting, so she decided to start her own business centered on that.<sup>333</sup> She explained, “that way I had professional motivation, I could keep myself engaged, have my own thing, and balance it all.”<sup>334</sup> While at times she does “yearn for having a more professional identity,” she said, “I love my business in a way I never loved being a lawyer.”<sup>335</sup> The biggest downside is that it is “no where nearly as lucrative,” but she recognized that she is “lucky” to have the financial flexibility to do this and that it’s “a privilege.”<sup>336</sup>

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<sup>331</sup> Winegar, discussion.

<sup>332</sup> Garmise, discussion.

<sup>333</sup> Ibid.

<sup>334</sup> Ibid.

<sup>335</sup> Ibid.

<sup>336</sup> Ibid.

While the informal economy can be useful for sequencers with entrepreneurial pursuits, to found a start-up company does not always require an individual to utilize their professional abilities to their maximum capacity.

## CONCLUSION

Liberal feminist scholarship focuses solely on how women can achieve work-life balance without ever having to leave the workforce. Thus, not only does it neglect the large group of talented women that chose to sequence their lives, but it also fails to consider an innovative mode of life structuring and its possibilities for the project of women's advancement in the workforce. As long as there is a blank space around life sequencing in our literature, the obstacles that sequencers face when trying to return to work will not be diminished and the infrastructure to help sequencers re-enter the professional labor force will remain underdeveloped.

Many highly educated and skilled women will at some point leave the workforce for personal reasons, regardless of their potential access to work-life balance strategies. We can no longer ignore this pool of individuals if we are committed to the project of getting more women into the professional workforce and particularly in positions of power. The project cannot truly advance if we do not consider the choices that are made by all high-potential professional women and if we do not acknowledge all of the social, cultural, and corporate impediments that prevent these women from achieving success in their careers.

There is some existing re-entry infrastructure that works to help women counter the barriers that they face when trying to return to work. LinkedIn is an emerging network that currently does little for women looking to get back into the labor force. However, it could develop as a space for women to identify themselves as individuals on their way out of a career break and for recruiters and companies to locate them as potential employees. iRelaunch is a network structure that provides

significant career re-entry resources for individuals, employers, and institutions, but its detachment from the reasons why women opt out and why re-entry is challenging make it an organization uninterested in real social and political change. Thus, its only function is to encourage the further development of re-entry infrastructure, some of which has potential and some of which does not. Employer-run Returnship-style programs have been helpful for returning women, but they tend to be highly exclusive and limited in the range of individuals that they accept. More women will benefit from these programs if more companies across more industries can develop them. It is not obvious that programs run by academic institutions, for the most part, have a significant impact on individuals that participate in them.

The broader executive recruitment model that the OnRamp Fellowship employs, though the most underdeveloped platform, will be the most useful for enacting change. The OnRamp Fellowship works not to benefit a specific company or firm but to help individual women looking to return and the legal industry as a whole by providing a new source of talent. Most significantly, it utilizes an innovative screening process that offers a solution to the fact that companies are skeptical about hiring returning women due to their inability to assess the capability of individuals without recent work experience. If companies everywhere could use a complex screening process to evaluate all of their potential employees that does not rely on latest professional participation, it would be much easier for competent women to re-enter the workforce. The greatest hope for emergent infrastructure thus lies in the development of innovative re-entry platforms that function outside of

specific companies to help women return through a number of different institutions and that address the larger issues around re-entry into the professional workforce.

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