

Professional women and the “stay in” or “opt out” decision

Glass Ceilings & 100-Hour Couples: What the Opt-Out Phenomenon Can Teach Us about Work and Family. By Karine Moe and Dianna Shandy. Athens, GA, The University of Georgia Press, 2010, \$20.95/paperback.

The decades-old conversation about women, work, and motherhood has evolved over the generations. This reviewer comes from a long line of working mothers; however, at twenty-something years old, I am the first to be college educated, focused on my career, and not married. These points inevitably prompt family to ask, “Have you met *him* yet?” and guys I date to inquire, “Will you be a stay-at-home mother?” In the wake of social pressures, I picked up *Glass Ceilings & 100-Hour Couples* hoping that it might provide insights into balancing my career goals and managing a household.

Authors Karine Moe and Dianna Shandy of Macalester College explore what post–civil-rights-era “college-educated mothers who leave their jobs can teach us about the intersection of gender, work, and identity in America.” To determine the answer, Moe, a professor of economics, and Shandy, an associate professor of anthropology, draw from their own original surveys, labor force statistics, and hundreds of interviews of married, professional women who fall into the category of the “100-hour couple,” defined as a professional couple “where the husband and wife work extremely long hours for a combined total of well over one hundred hours per week.” The results are truly remarkable.

Women’s labor force participation generally trended up over the 20th century. However, between 1997 and 2005, the participation rate of married mothers of infants fell 7 percentage points. The decision of so many to “opt out” of the labor force clearly represents not just a few isolated



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incidents, but rather a surprising trend: that “women who had invested, and in whom society had invested, so much in terms of their educational training could take an extended break or even walk away from careers in medicine, law, or other specialized professions.”

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Keeping in mind that “women experience the labor market differently from men,” Moe and Shandy explore the issues that influence a women’s decision to stay in the workforce or to opt out. When faced with gender discrimination, social pressures, limited childcare options, income needs, and the desire for personal fulfillment, a woman’s choice is not always clear cut (even though many fathers are more involved in child rearing today than they have been in the past). If a woman chooses to stay in the workforce, she must balance being a professional, a mother, and a wife. If a woman opts out, a benefit is that she can make life “less hectic” for her children, her husband, and herself. However, she may face social isolation in the years that she does not work and a diminished earning capacity if she decides to reenter the workforce once the children have grown up. The decision was not always easy, but each of the women interviewed was able to make an intelligent choice between being part of a 100-hour couple and opting out. The authors’ conclusion was that “women are resourceful, and whether they work full-time, part-time, or according to some other arrangement, they employ creative strategies to manage their situation.”

The authors also compare and contrast women’s evolving expectations with regard to being a professional, a mother, or both over the past 50 years. They find that some of the first generation of post–civil-rights-era, college-educated women were empowered by strong, beautiful, and smart 1970s role models, such as Wonder Woman and the Bionic Woman. Per Moe and Shandy, what resulted was a “generation of women who, in the 1980s and 1990s, bought jogging bras, and stride by steady stride, proceeded to keep pace with men, making significant inroads into the old boys’ network.” However, many of these first-generation “do-it-all” women simultaneously came to realize that their “smart, strong (not to mention gorgeous)” television superhero role models whom they worked so hard to emulate were also single and childless. These women expressed surprise at their strong desire both to be a mom and to care for their parents, in addition to pursuing a career. In contrast, second-generation post–civil-rights-era women (presently in their twenties and thirties) were found to be more pragmatic about the work–family balance, commonly choosing careers affording enough flexibility to address the demands of child rearing.

This reviewer appreciates that the authors do not dictate how educated women should manage their careers and households, but instead present the options, tradeoffs, realities, and ideals of their choices. The information presented in this book is by no means groundbreaking, but it does attempt to quantify the longstanding anecdotes that we have all heard from family, friends, and the media. Moreover, the authors examine only the choices of professional women with a husband and kids, leaving room for others to research the work and family dynamics of divorcées, single mothers, and women who are not mothers.

After reading this book, I better understand my choices for when I will face the “100-hour couple” reality. But a better understanding is not a guarantee of resolving the issue: I still wonder what my choice will be when the time comes. Will I strive to realize my full career potential, or will the nostalgia for motherhood sway me to opt out? Must these paths always be in opposition? And “Why is this question asked only of women and not of men?”

Perhaps I am getting ahead of myself. After all, I have not met *him* yet!