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The Opt-Out Generation Wants Back In

By JUDITH WARNER

Sheilah O'Donnel tells herself that her new home, a townhouse in a development in Chevy Chase, Md., just a stone's throw from a Safeway, isn't really all that bad. Sure, it's near a gas station. And the front window, with its cheerily upholstered cushions, overlooks a dreary parking lot. And yes, it's kind of small — “an apartment,” O'Donnel, who is 44, sometimes says bitterly, when she's reminded of her former life with her ex-husband in their custom-built, six-bedroom home. But then again, it's perfectly maintained and impeccably furnished, and most important, it's rented with her own money, from the first real job she has had in almost a decade.

It's a midlevel sales job, a big step down from the senior position she held before she had children and quit work. When she was first hired, in May 2011, her salary was just a fifth of what she earned at her peak. But, she said, she wasn't complaining. All around her, she saw women her age scrambling to find work, some divorcing and losing their homes. She liked to help them, editing their résumés, polishing cover letters, pumping up tearful friends who forgot what they were worth after years without a paycheck.

After one emotional session with a friend, her 12-year-old daughter asked what all the fuss was about. O'Donnel told her: “This is the perfect reason why you need to work. You don't have to make a million dollars. You don't have to have a wealthy lifestyle. You just always have to be able to at least earn enough so you can support yourself.”

Nine years ago, O'Donnel was promoting a very different message. She was a spokeswoman of sorts for a group of women — highly educated, very accomplished, well-paid professionals with high-earning spouses — who in the early 2000s made headlines for leaving the work force just when they were hitting their stride. They were a small demographic to be sure (another, larger, group who left the work force at that time — poor mothers who couldn't afford child care — went without notice), but they garnered a great deal of media attention.

This magazine, [in a cover article by Lisa Belkin](#), called the phenomenon of their leaving work the “Opt-Out Revolution,” and other coverage followed: a Time magazine cover story on “The Case for Staying Home” and a “60 Minutes” segment devoted to a group of former mega-achievers who were, as the anchor Lesley Stahl put it, “giving up money, success and big futures” to be home with

their children.

O'Donnel, featured in the "60 Minutes" story pushing a stroller, was, in some ways, an unlikely voice of the opt-out revolution. She had been proudly working since she was 15, when she had a job as a coat-check girl. By 17, she was buying clothes and books and food — and sometimes even paying her family's electric bill — through jobs that included waitressing and pedaling tourists around downtown Columbus, Ohio, on a pedi-taxi.

She worked her way through Ohio State and, eager to pay off her college loans, got a job selling copiers. She eventually landed in a competitive training program at Oracle, the technology company, where she rose quickly through the ranks, ending up in the top 5 percent of the sales force. She also met the man who would become her husband, Mark Eisel — an up-and-comer in management. They worked hard and became well off. At her peak, O'Donnel was earning \$500,000 a year.

But after her first two children were born, O'Donnel's travel for work became more difficult. She gave up a quarter of her earnings in exchange for working three days a week, but felt marginalized, her best accounts given to others, meetings often scheduled on her days out of the office. "I felt like a second-class citizen," she said.

Even with the reduced schedule, the stresses of life in a two-career household put an overwhelming strain on her marriage. There were ugly fights with her husband about laundry and over who would step in when the nanny was out sick.

"'All this would be easier if you didn't work,'" O'Donnel recalled her husband saying. "I was so stressed," she told me. "I said, 'This is ridiculous.' We'd made plenty of money. We'd saved plenty of money." She quit her job, trading in a life of business meetings, client dinners and commissions for homework help, a "dream house" renovation and a third pregnancy. "I really thought it was what I had to do to save my marriage," she said.

But the tensions in her marriage didn't improve. The couple's long-term issues of anger, jealousy and control got worse as O'Donnel's dependency grew and a sense of personal dislocation set in. Without a salary or an independent work identity, her self-confidence plummeted.

"I felt like such a loser," she said. "I poured myself into the kids and soccer. I didn't know how to deal with the downtime. I did all the volunteering, ran the auctions. It was my way of coping."

Five years after leaving her Oracle job, O'Donnel began volunteering for Girls on the Run, a

nonprofit group devoted to girls' emotional empowerment and physical well-being, and was eventually hired part time, at low pay. She loved the work. The organization's message, about respecting yourself and surrounding yourself with people who appreciate you, resonated with her. "I started feeling very devalued when I was with him," O'Donnel said of her husband, "but when I was doing all this nonprofit stuff, I felt great."

O'Donnel and Eisel agree the job drove a destructive wedge between them. "I look back on it as the beginning of the end of our marriage," Eisel said when we talked by phone last month. "Once she started to work, she started to place more value in herself, and because she put more value in herself, she put herself in front of a lot of things — family, and ultimately, her marriage."

O'Donnel's family encouraged her to leave. But with three young children and no means of support, she couldn't see a way out. Eventually, after a particularly bad fight, she went to see a lawyer.

"He said, 'Before you do anything, you get a job,' " she recalled. "I said, 'Everyone I spoke with said you don't get a job because your spouse will have to pay less in alimony and child support.' He said, 'You have to look at the next 30 years of your life, and if you're in control of the situation, and you have a job that's paying you money, he's going to be far less powerful over you in the process.' "

A few weeks later, O'Donnel separated from her husband. She soon ran into an old Oracle colleague in a doctor's waiting room. The woman was working at Monster.com, the employment Web site, and encouraged O'Donnel to get in touch. One former Oracle connection led to another. O'Donnel found that her reputation — 11 years out — was still intact, and she was quickly offered a job. But while she waited for her first paycheck, she found herself with no access to cash. She took a big chunk out of her old 401(k) and borrowed money from her sister. It was "the scariest time in my entire life," she told me when we first spoke last summer.

What had been a nasty divorce was entering its end stages and the "60 Minutes" interview had come up. When O'Donnel saw the video again, the image of her younger self, giving up her job and proclaiming the benefits of staying at home haunted her. "I was this woman who made this great 'choice,' " she said, sadly. "It wasn't the perfect fairy-tale ending."

I reached out to O'Donnel — and nearly two dozen other women — because I was curious, after 10 years and many, many "why women still can't have it all" debates, to know what happened to the mothers who gave up promising careers in the late 1990s and early 2000s to be home with their children.

The economic landscape had changed greatly since these women — buoyed by their prestigious jobs and degrees, supported by their high-earning husbands, secure in their abilities to shape a new life worthy of their past successes — first decided to leave work and head home. In the years they were out of the work force, many of the professions they left contracted and changed; even once rock-solid fields like law were becoming insecure in ways that no one had previously thought possible.

The culture of motherhood, post-recession, had altered considerably, too. The women of the opt-out revolution left the work force at a time when the prevailing ideas about motherhood idealized full-time, round-the-clock, child-centered devotion. In 2000, for example, with the economy strong and books like “Surrendering to Motherhood,” a memoir about the “liberation” of giving up work to stay home, setting the tone for the aspirational mothering style of the day, almost 40 percent of respondents to the General Social Survey told researchers they believed a mother’s working was harmful to her children (an increase of eight percentage points since 1994). But by 2010, with recovery from the “mancession” slow and a record 40 percent of mothers functioning as family breadwinners, fully 75 percent of Americans agreed with the statement that “a working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work.” And after decades of well-publicized academic inquiry into the effects of maternal separation and the dangers of day care, a new generation of social scientists was publishing research on the negative effects of excessive mothering: more depression and worse general health among mothers, according to the American Psychological Association.

I wondered if these changes affected the women who opted out years ago. Had they found the “escape hatch” from the rat race that one of Belkin’s interviewees said she was after? Were they able, as a vast majority said they had planned, to transition back into the work force? Or had they, as the author Leslie Bennetts predicted in her 2007 book, “The Feminine Mistake,” come to see that, by making themselves financially dependent upon their men — particularly at a time when no man could depend upon his job — they had made a colossal error?

The 22 women I interviewed, for the most part, told me that the perils of leaving the work force were counterbalanced by the pleasures of being able to experience motherhood on their own terms. A certain number of these women — the superelite, you might say, the most well-off, with the highest-value name-brand educational credentials and powerful and well-connected social networks — found jobs easily after extended periods at home. These jobs generally paid less than their previous careers and were less prestigious. But the women found the work more interesting, socially conscious and family-friendly than their old high-powered positions.

Pamela Stone, a professor of sociology at Hunter College and the author of the 2007 book “Opting Out? Why Women Really Quit Careers and Head Home,” heard many similarly glowing stories. In the early 2000s, she spent considerable time interviewing 54 well-off married mothers drawn primarily from the alumnae networks of several highly selective colleges and universities “who had navigated elite environments with competitive entry requirements,” as she described them in her book. Now she’s updating her research and has reached about 60 percent of her interviewees, two-thirds of whom have returned to work — their decisions sometimes prompted by their husbands’ somewhat reduced earnings, post-recession. “What I heard repeatedly was ‘The job found me’ or ‘The job fell into my lap,’ ” she told me.

Among the women I spoke with, those who didn’t have the highest academic credentials or highest-powered social networks or who hadn’t been sufficiently “strategic” in their volunteering (fund-raising for a Manhattan private school could be a nice segue back into banking; running bake sales for the suburban swim team tended not to be a career-enhancer) or who had divorced, often struggled greatly.

When Lisa Belkin attempted to reach out this spring to the women she interviewed in 2003, she found a similar mixed picture. Many of the women declined to talk about their lives; a few would talk only if they were not identified. Among those willing to speak with her, she found one out-and-out success story — a woman who volunteered at high levels during her years at home and maintained her social network; she was now assistant dean for student affairs at the Emory University law school. There was one woman who didn’t need a high salary, which helped her as she re-entered the post-recessionary work force; she found a part-time job in TV — the field that she left more than a decade earlier, when she wasn’t able to work out a flexible schedule. “The world had changed in her favor; the part-time work they wouldn’t give her is now what they were willing to give,” Belkin told me. One woman was divorced and had scrambled to find her financial footing; two others were “trying to find their way,” Belkin said.

Sylvia Ann Hewlett, an economist and the founding president of the Center for Talent Innovation in New York, surveyed thousands of women in 2004 and after the financial crisis in 2009. She has found that roughly a third of “highly qualified women” leave their jobs to spend extended time at home. Though her subjects were all women with graduate degrees or bachelor’s degrees with honors, they didn’t necessarily have the elite credentials of the women in Stone’s research and many reported having a difficult time transitioning into the work force.

Most of the women, Hewlett found, stayed home longer than they had hoped. Eighty-nine percent of those who “off-ramped,” as she puts it, said they wanted to resume work; but only 73 percent of

these succeeded in getting back in, and only 40 percent got full-time jobs. “It was distressingly difficult to get back on track,” Hewlett told me. In addition, the women Hewlett surveyed came back to jobs that paid, on average, 16 percent less than those they had before. And about a quarter took jobs with lesser management responsibilities or had to accept a lower job title than the one they had when they left. The impact of those sacrifices, Hewlett noted, was in many cases amplified after the financial meltdown, when 28 percent more of the women she surveyed reported that they had a nonworking spouse at home.

But money was not the primary focus of the women I spoke with — whether they needed more of it or not. Rather, what haunted many of them, as they reckoned with the past 10 years of their lives, was a more unquantifiable sense of personal change. They had been supremely self-confident when they took the “plunge into full-time motherhood,” as a former high-level corporate lawyer put it to me. (Like a few of the other women I talked to, she didn’t want to be identified — she was newly re-employed and didn’t want attention brought to her years out of the work force.) Many even spoke of it as a unique post-feminist adventure — “Real women’s empowerment is being able to do what you want to when you want to,” Amy Cunningham Atkinson, a Yale graduate and former “60 Minutes” producer (and 2004 Lesley Stahl interviewee), told me. But now they were learning that some things were beyond even their prodigious powers of control.

I first met Carrie Chimerine Irvin in Washington in the early 2000s, when I was researching a book on the American culture of motherhood. A graduate of Brown University and the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, Carrie, who is 47, worked for the better part of a decade doing educational-policy research. She liked the work, but it wasn’t a real calling, and in 1998 she dropped out to take care of her two daughters.

Like most of the women I spoke with at the time, Carrie was totally absorbed by her children, tired, often frazzled and anxious about her worth as a mother. Yet, even among her cohort of devoted supermoms, she was a standout. She cooked healthful meals and concocted clever art projects, arranged play dates and drove to lessons, hosted creative birthday parties and planned inspired family vacations. She decorated her home for every holiday. She oversaw a large yet tastefully cozy house renovation. She did a turn in all the top parent leadership positions at her daughters’ prestigious preschool. And she made sure no grandparent went a year without an updated album of family photos.



Jeff Brown for The New York Times
Carrie Chimerine Irvin at home in Bethesda, Md.

She made the decision to leave work almost without a backward glance. It was what she wanted. It was what her husband, Stuart, a lawyer, wanted. “It didn’t feel like a sacrifice,” she told me last summer when we reconnected, after a gap of almost 10 years. “I wasn’t even sure what I wanted to be when I grew up. I knew I was a mom. In my family, even before we had kids, I was such a caretaker. I loved having a home. I really took care of Stuart. It felt like a natural extension of that.”

As the girls grew older, however, Carrie started to feel that the unstated bargain the couple had struck — her husband earning the money, Carrie keeping their home — was problematic. She had no issue doing full-time child care; that was a labor of love. But housekeeping? That was another matter. She resented that the couple’s mutual mess was now seen as *her* concern.

“I had the sense of being in an unequal marriage,” she told me. “I think he preferred the house to be ‘kept’ in a different kind of way than I was prepared to do it. If I had any angst about being an overeducated stay-at-home mom, it was not about raising the kids, but it was about sweeping.”

She came to think that returning to work would not only be good for her, but also healthy for her marriage. She chose her words carefully as she related this turning point in her life: “My husband was getting impatient,” she said. “I think he was worried I wasn’t yearning for a career again. He’d come home at night, and I’d want to talk about what was going on at school and with the other parents, and I’d get frustrated he was not finding it more engrossing. I think he felt even more than I did that it would be good for me to have something professional, that I’d be more fulfilled as a whole person if I was pursuing some career goals.”

With middle school on the horizon for her daughters, Carrie started working the contacts she made as a self-described “professional volunteer” operating among Washington’s most-powerful parents. Very quickly, the effort paid off. “Friends who were former colleagues said, ‘When you’re ready, come.’ So sight unseen, I got work. I didn’t have to do a résumé — nothing,” she said. She was first offered part-time consulting; then, eager to move on, she reached out to a contact at the Gates Foundation whom she met when she was chairwoman at her daughters’ preschool. The contact had become the founding board chairman of a charter school, and he invited Carrie to tour it. She and her husband, who had just joined the board of another charter, hit it off with another man they met on the tour. Conversations followed about the need for board members for Washington’s charter schools with the skills and knowledge to make them successful. They came up with an idea: Why not create a nonprofit organization to recruit people to serve on the school boards and train them to be good board members so they could support the charter-school effort in the most productive, results-oriented way? Irvin began running the company part time during school hours from her sunny, renovated kitchen, splitting the work with another well-pedigreed stay-at-home mother.

The seed money came in. Carrie's network of connections continued to build. And in two years she and her partner, Simmons Lettre, raised \$1.2 million, hired staff members and rented office space for their new nonprofit company, Charter Board Partners.

I visited Carrie there last summer, one evening when a work dinner kept her in the city unusually late in the day. White boards were marked with colorful, enthusiastic-looking flourishes, and the young, ethnically diverse, heavily female, earnest and friendly staff members were heading home for the night. Irvin, in a crisp summer dress, her light brown hair falling neatly at her shoulders, showed me around. She was excited, revitalized, virtually glowing, like a person in love. "I'm so energized by our success," she told me. "I feel like I'm fulfilling the professional potential that I never did before. I feel smart. I feel successful. I feel like I escaped a whole slog level of my career. I got to stay home with my kids and yet I got to come back to a leadership position. And I'm earning a living."

She was doing it all without dropping any of her maternal duties — not school pickup, not homework, not dinner, not party planning, not even those photo books for the grandparents. She had a housekeeper now for the heavy cleaning. But she still pushed herself to provide the special little touches at home, like making sure her kitchen counter always had a bowl of "seasonably appropriate" candy — even if that candy, to her great annoyance, was now perpetually buried under a pile of unsorted junk.

She acknowledged that what she was trying to do was impossible. "The pace at which I'm living right now is unsustainable," she told me. She tried her absolute best to cut things that weren't strictly essential. She almost never saw friends, rarely exercised and was trying to trick her body into running faster on fewer hours of sleep. Something had to give — and, unfortunately, that something was shaping up to be time with her husband.

When I visited her one morning this winter after her children and husband had left for the day, she told me that in their early years, she and Stuart traveled to Japan, shared books, interests and ideas. Even after their daughters came along, they had been sure to find ways to spend time together as a couple. They watched TV for a precious hour or so of decompression each night, after the girls went to bed. They talked together late, digesting their days. By this winter, however, they spent their evenings on separate floors, she downstairs in the kitchen, on her computer, catching up on the work she missed during her hours of caring for the children; he, upstairs, watching TV alone.

Carrie said the situation was in many ways unfair: she had been able, twice, to live her dreams,

with her husband's encouragement, first as an at-home mother, then as a start-up visionary, while Stuart's steady job made it all possible. And he had to adjust to the loss of her attention when she first shifted it to their daughters and then to her new job.

Their situation was common enough among middle-aged, overtaxed, professional working parents. Stuart was hardly the first man to find himself sidelined either by his wife's devotion to her children or her dedication to work or both. But knowing that their story was playing out in households all around them didn't make their readjustment to life as a working couple any easier. "I think a big issue is that we both want to be taken care of at the end of the day, and neither of us has any energy to take care of the other," Carrie said. "It's the proverbial 'meet me at the door with a martini and slippers.' Don't we all want that? A clean house and someone at the door? I think when I wasn't working I had some guilt that that wasn't me, but now I want to be that other person. . . . When you're absolutely exhausted, it's hard to be emotionally generous."

At a time when having a "good" job means working 50-plus hours a week, in addition to weekends and tech-tethered evenings, it's not surprising that, if both spouses work, it can often feel as if neither is ever truly home. And that desire to be emotionally present at home, Pamela Stone, the sociologist, told me, became more pressing over time for the women she interviewed, reshaping their ambitions when they decided to go back to work.

While two-thirds of the women she reinterviewed originally worked in male-dominated professions like banking or corporate law, now only a quarter are employed in traditionally masculine and hard-driving fields. The rest chose more female-dominated, and far less lucrative, "caring, nurturing occupations" like teaching or nonprofit work, Stone said. Only one of the women she interviewed had returned to her former employer (in a "vastly different capacity, much diminished," she said); and all have scaled down their ambitions.

"The longer they're home, the more they continue the trajectory toward something different," Stone told me. "They have greater appreciation of some of the values of home and connectivity, which were somewhat alien to them in their high-flying professions."

The women's husbands, Stone said, were often changed by their wives' years at home, too. In her first round of research, in the early 2000s, she said, the women she interviewed reported that their husbands were studiously neutral on whether they stayed in the work force or came home. "Almost to a woman, they said, 'My husband said, "Whatever you want to do," ' " she told me.

Ten years later, in her second round of research, things were different. While 23 percent of

Hewlett's women, post-recession, said their husbands were worried financially, and 30 percent said their husbands were "envious or angry" about their decision not to work, many of Stone's high-earning husbands came, over time, to want their wives to stay home. "This round, I'm hearing more, 'My husband really prefers that I be home,' " Stone said of her recent talks with those women. "They say, 'It's a big surprise: we've really gone to a very traditional household now.' "

Many of the women I spoke with were troubled by the gender-role traditionalism that crept into their marriages once they gave up work, transforming them from being their husbands' intellectual equals into the one member of their partnership uniquely endowed with gifts for laundry or cooking and cleaning; a junior member of the household, who sometimes had to "negotiate" with her husband to get money for child care.

The husbands hadn't turned into ogres. Their intent was not to make their wives feel lesser. But when traditional gender arrangements were put into place, there was a subtle slide into inequality. "The dynamic changes," said Hope Adler, a former manager at the professional-services firm KPMG who spent 10 years at home full time with her four children before starting work again and choosing to take a much-lower-paying job at a smaller consulting firm that allowed her to work some of the time from home. "When I worked at KPMG we did 50/50," she said. "We were making equal money. Then once I started staying home, I was doing laundry, dinner. . . ." But once she started working again, the expectations remained the same. "There just doesn't seem to be a way to go back," she said.

Kuae Kelch Mattox and her husband, Ted — she a former producer for NBC News, he a multimedia consultant — met 27 years ago when they were in their early 20s. She was home from Howard University for the summer in Philadelphia; he was working with some former Temple University football teammates as a bouncer at a private club. They were equally educated and equally ambitious.

Before they were married, they made a neatly egalitarian deal: whenever one of them got a really good job, the other one would move to follow. Ted followed Kuae, first to Miami, where she worked as a reporter for The Miami Herald. Then to Chicago, when she landed a spot in a producer-training program on "The Oprah Winfrey Show." Then he got a job with Sony outside New York City, and she followed him there, went to the Columbia University School of Journalism and eventually landed at NBC.

They shared the laundry, the cooking, the cleaning and, eventually, the care of their children. But as Ted climbed the business side in television and Kuae stayed in editorial, their professional

fortunes diverged. His salary took off as he surfed the wave of the online revolution, while hers stagnated in old-fashioned TV. His opportunities expanded, and hers shrank.

It wasn't hard for Kuae, who is 47, to leave her job and stay home after the Mattox's second child was born. Her mother died when their first child was just 9 months old — a loss that made Kuae feel the daily separation from her daughter all the more acutely. She came to resent the packed suitcase she kept in her office so she could jump on a plane on a moment's notice if a big story broke. The lure of travel wasn't exciting anymore; it just seemed like lost time.

Kuae's mother — like all the black mothers Kuae knew as a child — had worked. She was a high-school drama teacher and speech therapist and was home late afternoons and had vacations off with her children. But after her death, Kuae learned from her father that her mother had always wished she could have spent more time with her children. She didn't want to die with similar regrets. It was 2000, Ted, now 49, was heading up multimedia publishing and new-business development for Consumer Reports and earning a very good living. When they moved from the city to the suburbs, they took care to buy a house that they could pay for, if needed, on just one salary. She had the privilege — and she knew it was a privilege — to jump.

Friends and family were surprised: as an upper-middle-class African-American woman, didn't she have an obligation to climb the career ladder? She countered that being able to stay home was another stage in the evolution of the American dream in which each generation does better than its predecessor. Didn't she have a responsibility to her children to be as devoted to the emotional work of keeping a family thriving as the well-off white mothers in town?

"I was very conscious as an African-American mother that my children didn't fall into this achievement gap," she told me. "I wanted to physically be there for them and be a really strong advocate for them."

She became involved in Mocha Moms, a national nonprofit support group for stay-at-home mothers of color, and eventually became its president, a volunteer position. Over all, she says, her 13 years at home have been the most rich, meaningful and "transformative" period in her adulthood. But without question, she has paid a price along the way, in lost income most glaringly. The nonearning "season" in her life, as Mocha Mom members like to put it, was supposed to last just a few years. Getting back into journalism after more than a decade proved much harder than Kuae ever imagined; she started putting out feelers for work not long after exiting and had spent two years looking in earnest, without luck, when we first started talking last summer.

When I met with Kuae and Ted in their home just after Christmas, she had recently finished a short-term seasonal stint in the men's department at Macy's. Ted's consulting business was down almost 25 percent in the wake of the recession, and the Macy's job had helped buy Christmas presents.

"I lose sleep and have great anxiety over the thought that we have three kids who are three years apart in age and we'll be paying for 12 years of college," she said over bagels and cream cheese in the Mattox's sunny wood-paneled dining room. "Every time my daughter says, 'I'll be out of here in two years,' is every time I go to bed at night and say: 'Oh, my God. Can we sustain what we need for her and for the other one and for the other one and us and everything else?'"

The children needed braces, sports equipment, summer camps. The car needed work, and the house — a solid four-square fixer-upper in various stages of fixed-uppedness — needed repairs.

And Ted had kind of had it. Here he was, he said while coming and going from the kitchen where he was making French toast for the Mattox's youngest child, earning the household income, helping drive the kids around, pitching in on laundry, housekeeping and cooking, while Kuae, in his eyes, was blithely giving her time away — free — to a volunteer organization. He's a numbers guy, he said. From his perspective, the numbers pertaining to what he called her at-home "journey of self-discovery" just didn't add up to be a very good deal for him or any husband whose nonearning wife still expects to split household drudgery 50-50.

Ted's expectations were formed by his own mother, a stay-at-home mom in an age in which the identity had no such title, whose "whole goal her entire life," he said, "was to make sure her boys had a clean house, clean clothes and were well fed." Given this, it seemed natural to him that Kuae, as a self-proclaimed stay-at-home mother, might want to try putting some more time into their home. Into things like "the shuttling of kids, the picking up the house, the laundry, the shopping." Even, he ventured further, "balancing checkbooks, cleaning, setting up the home Wi-Fi, fixing an appliance or whatever." A hoot of laughter from Kuae greeted the end of this task list.

He continued: "Being the kind of person I am, Type A, wound, always going after something, I wonder what I could have done, having 12 years to sort of think about what I want to do. I sometimes think, Wow, I could have been an astronaut in 12 years, or I could have been something different that I'd really enjoy and that I never was afforded the financial opportunity or the time or the resources to enjoy. Maybe call it jealousy. Maybe envy. What could I have been in 12 years of self-discovery? I'll go out on a limb and say: 'I'd like to try it. It looks pretty good to me.'"

Kuae spoke carefully: “I don’t think Ted views me as a stay-at-home mom as he did before as a working mom — I think he has struggled with assigning value.” Her soft, open face was set like a stone.

“**When a mother** works, something is lost,” the author Caitlin Flanagan once wrote. But when a mother leaves the work force, a great deal is clearly lost, too. Beyond the personal losses — the changes in the dynamic of a marriage or the cumulative financial effects of many years of not working — there is the collective impact to consider. It’s hard not to be discouraged by the numbers. Over the last 10 years, the decades-long advancement of women to higher positions in business and politics seems to have stalled. According to the nonprofit research group Catalyst, women now account for just 4 percent of Fortune 500 chief executives, 17 percent of corporate board seats, 20 percent of law partners and 19 percent of Congress (thanks to a big bump in the 2012 elections). A younger generation of female high achievers, especially those who aren’t most highly privileged, aren’t getting a very hopeful message. And without women in powerful positions pushing for change, employers have less incentive to alter workplace practices that may encourage women to exit after they have children. “Once they leave the corporate workplace, their ability to imbue workplace culture with their values is gone,” Pamela Stone says of the women she has studied. “They leave, and the door closes behind them, and everything stays the same.”

But most people don’t make life decisions based on statistics or the collective good. And not a single woman I spoke with said she wished that she could return to her old, pre-opting-out job — no matter what price she paid for her decision to stop working. What I heard instead were some regrets for what, in an ideal world, might have been — more time with their children combined with some sort of intellectually stimulating, respectably paying, advancement-permitting part-time work — but none for the high-powered professional lives that these women had led.

Men, too, are feeling the crunch of excessively demanding work. They now report more work-life stress than women do, according to the Families and Work Institute. They also may be penalized more than women if they try to accommodate their work schedules to the needs of their children, as research appearing in the June issue of *The Journal of Social Issues* shows. It’s perhaps not surprising, then, that some husbands find themselves eyeing their wives’ lives at home with envy. “Men want to say we’re more than a paycheck,” Ted Mattox told me. “There has to be something more than going to work for 50 years and dying.”

To find time for that “something more,” husbands would need to join with their wives in rejecting nighttime networking sessions and 7 a.m. meetings. They would have to convey to employers that work-life accommodations like flexible hours or job sharing aren’t just for women and that part-

time jobs need to provide proportional pay and benefits. At a time when fewer families than ever can afford to live on less than two full-time salaries, achieving work-life balance may well be less a gender issue than an economic one.

In June, after 13 years, Kuae finally found a job. She was hired as a booking producer for a daily women's news show on Arise TV, a global network started by a Nigerian newspaper publisher that specializes in covering stories about people of color. Arise didn't have the prestige of NBC. And the pay was probably about half what Kuae, who would be doing her job from home, would have been earning had she stayed on her former, high-profile, pre-motherhood track. As a freelancer, paid a day rate, she didn't have benefits. And there were no formal guarantees as to the number of days she would work each year. Nonetheless, she was ecstatic. "I feel like I'm in my element," she said. "I'm doing all the stories that I always wanted to see on TV and never did."

But last month, Kuae's show was put on "indefinite hiatus." The businessman financing the network was going through a cash crunch and "deep cuts" were announced. Kuae e-mailed me to say that after just six weeks, she found herself out of a job. She was, she said, "back to Square 1."

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