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Relaunching through The Returnship Model
A Study of Return-to-Work Programs

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INTRODUCTION

Betty Freidan examined the lives of her Smith classmates and published *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, the first year Harvard Business School conferred MBA degrees on a group of women. Although much progress has been made thanks to feminism and the advancement of female leaders, ongoing sociological inquiry continues to track women, work, and family and attempts to reconcile advances in female education with the relatively slow rate of female progress in the corporate world, starkly summarized by 37 female CEOs at the Fortune 500 level – a meager 7.4%. (Byham, 2020).

In 2003, theories about work-family conflict, gendered divisions of labor, differences in leadership styles and the growing wealth gap combusted in Lisa Belkin's seminal cover piece for *The New York Times Magazine* titled "The Opt-Out Revolution" which coined the term "opting out" (2003). A few years later in 2007, sociologist Pamela Stone examined a similar phenomenon and published *Opting Out? Why Women Really Quit Careers and Head Home*. Stone determined that the accomplished women she interviewed were pushed out of the workplace (2007).

In her newest book Stone and Lovejoy revisit the women Stone interviewed in her first study who now, after launching their children, are returning to the labor force -- opting back in. Through an examination of the challenges the women face upon reentry, Stone and Lovejoy conclude that most of the highly educated and previously ambitious women shift direction and weigh flexible arrangements over full-time positions. They claim most succeed not by returning to former high-paying, inflexible jobs but by charting a new path in personally gratifying yet lower-paying positions, often in the gig economy or nonprofit sector (2021).

This current project concentrates on a new initiative started in 2008 by the investment bank Goldman Sachs. Their Returnship© model is now being replicated by more than 100 companies nationwide to attract, train, and retain talented women who took a career break. The Returnship, or more generically called a return-to-work program, is an evolving model for re-entering the corporate sphere, or relaunching, after significant time out. At the same time, a new service industry has popped up to help women who opted out of the labor force build their confidence and address their resume gaps so they can relaunch their business careers. Some of these programs have been featured in the popular and business press (Cohen, 2012, 2019, Boe, 2020) but the corporate returnship model has yet to be studied in a critical, interdisciplinary way. These re-entry initiatives, primarily in banking, consulting, technology, and large retail companies exist in workplaces that Stone and Lovejoy would consider lucrative but family-inhospitable and the programs present a counter argument to their recent analysis of opting back in.

The question my research seeks to answer is “How are corporate return-to-work programs encouraging highly educated women to opt back into the paid work force after taking time off to raise children?” This qualitative study examines textual data from the websites of fifteen corporate return-to-work programs and the transcripts of nine interviews with relaunchers conducted through iRelaunch, which advises firms as they begin to design and implement return-to-work program and works to inspire and support women as they begin the process of re-entering the paid work force after a substantial break.

An assessment of the details and characteristics of corporate return-to-work programs and the goals of firms that establish the programs along with the experiences of women who have participated in these programs expands and refutes earlier findings about opting back in. Through an analysis of return-to-work programs and the words of recent participants, this paper considers the implications of this new model on diversity in the workplace, as well as possible broader effects on employment and

wage disparities, the gendered division of labor, an aging population, the life course, and corporate citizenship. This study considers the potential and profound impact of corporate return-to-work programs on women's career trajectories, a subject of significant economic and sociological inquiry, and sets the stage for further research.

ECONOMIC CONTEXT

The government takes great interest in employment and family formation and the US Department of Labor and Census Bureau analyze occupational patterns by age and gender. Statistics describing women in the work force are not straightforward, but the re-entry phenomenon is captured by several trends: older women comprise an increasing share of the labor force, are participating at increasing rates, and are part of the work force segment predicted to grow faster than any other age group.

Women's participation in the labor force grew precipitously throughout the four decades leading up to the new millennium and peaked at 60% in 1999. Currently, the participation rate of women in the labor force hovers around 56% and is projected to be at 56.1% in 2026. As the number of women in the labor force continues to increase, more than 77 million women will account for more than 47% of the total labor force in the next five years, further narrowing the gender gap in the labor market (Toossi and Morisi, 2017).

The trends differ by age. Younger women are participating in the labor force at declining rates due to rising rates of school enrollment. Women ages 24-55 account for more than 60% the female labor force due to stronger ties to the labor market and cumulative experience. The nation's 35.5 million older workers make up 23.1% percent of the U.S. workforce and groups of workers aged 65 to 74 and 75 and older are predicted to grow faster than any other age segments (Emling, 2018). Most of the

increases in the labor force participation of the population ages 55 and older will come from women (BLS, Dubina, 2020).

Over the course of their working lives, women in each age range at every educational level spend more weeks out of the labor force than their male counterparts (BLS, Aug 2019). Most women in the US work after taking time off for the birth of a child, but a woman's level of education and earnings impacts her decision to opt out of the labor force (Census, 2009). Recently, the number of stay-at-home mothers rose to 29% after a thirty-year decline from 49% in 1967 to 23% in 1999. According to the government, stay-at-home mothers tend to be younger, less educated, and more likely to be living in poverty compared to working mothers (BLS, 2014). This study tracks an opposite profile: older, highly educated and financially secure women.

Given that women are more likely than men to leave and re-enter the workforce and because of the wage gap throughout their lifetimes, women have significantly less income. Once an older woman becomes unemployed, she will have greater difficulty finding new employment and when she does, it often pays less and has less desirable working conditions. Women are more likely than men to report having insufficient savings for retirement (BLS, Dubina, 2020). The 2008 Recession diminished retirement savings for many Americans, leading some to delay retirement and others to return to the labor market from retirement. The current unemployment rate for those 55 and older is 5.0%, more than a full point lower than the overall 6.1% rate for the entire United States (BLS, May 2021).

Governments also undertake extensive work to gather and track birth rate data and fertility trends. Fertility rates are falling steadily across the industrialized world. In the United States, the current total fertility rate of 1.7 is well below the 3.7 peak of the late 1950s and the recommended 2.1 replacement level. The dynamics between fertility and work have been characterized historically by waves starting with separate spheres for working women and stay at home mothers in the 1950s, more

integrated roles of mother and worker in the 1970s, and now a third wave of women's increasing, continuous labor force participation (Brewster and Rindfuss, 2000). The negative association between fertility and labor force participation at the individual level can be generalized by saying working women have fewer children and/or women with children work less. Even though an "incompatible" relationship between fertility and women's employment seems well established, the direction remains elusive; do women limit fertility to work or does working limit fertility? The conflict between employment and fertility has evolved into irreconcilable differences and a competition between work and family (Blair-Loy, 2003).

Labor market data suggests women continue to work and have children, so fertility and labor force participation take on a multi-dimensionality that prevents generalization but merits further study of multiple processes at the individual and structural level. Arguably, the government has difficulty following the work and home lives of women, especially mothers. A mother who is home with her children is classified as "not in the labor force"; as a homemaker she is excluded from being counted as "employed" along with other "people whose only activity consisted of work around their own house ...or volunteer work for religious, charitable, or other organizations." A stay-at-home mother is not classified as "unemployed" because she does not make "specific efforts to find employment." Homemakers join retirees and full-time students without a specific number on the Census Occupation Code list. However, a woman who takes care of her children full time performs the duties of many codified occupations including "home health aide", "chef and head cook", "laundry and dry cleaning worker", and "shuttle driver and chauffeur" (Census, 2018).

The economist Barbara Bergmann described the economic risk of being a housewife "very high relative to those of other occupations" and asked why so many women "chose" it over other occupations. She felt encouraged by the decreasing "number and lengths of women's spells in the housewife occupation" (1981). Another economist asked if homemakers would become an endangered

species and wondered “would the world be a better or worse place if there were no full-time homemakers?” Given the durability of family and the increasing employment of women, she predicted adaptations to both work and homemaking that favored flexibility (Sawhill, 1977). When Sawhill and Bergmann were writing on the topic forty years ago, 40 percent of all American women over the age of 16 were keeping house full time; to be a housewife was to be a member of the largest single occupation in the U.S. economy.

The Census Bureau’s American Community Survey provides a more current picture of the composition and living arrangements of families and U.S. households. Before the recession began in 2007, 24 percent of married mothers with children under 15 were stay-at-home parents. The percentage of married fathers who were stay-at-home parents remained unchanged between 2006 and 2010, then rose slightly in 2012. Nonetheless, the percentage remains below 1 percent (Census, 2013). Another US Census Bureau report analyzed new mothers opting out of the labor force by mining a 3-year American Community Survey with 3 million household addresses and 500 reported occupation classifications to “study in fine detail occupational differences and life choices for women” (Cheeseman Day and Downs, 2009). The findings suggested that most women in the US work, even after taking time off for the birth of a child, and that a woman’s level of education and earnings impacted her decision to opt out of the labor force. Their conclusions did not mirror media reports of professional women opting out.

Anne Elizabeth Kaduk studied women exiting and re-entering the workforce by analyzing 2012 data from the 1979 cohort of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY79). This large data set allowed her to focus on women’s reasons for leaving and reentering the labor force over various stages of the life course and provided better insight on the middle, which supplements existing return-to-work research that usually looks at the very top or bottom of the income and education distributions. Her study “provides a window into social change in the United States, including effects of the decline in job

security and the increasing expectation as well as need for women's employment since the 1970s." (2017).

According to last month's BLS report on the employment characteristics of families, two-fifths of all families, 33 million in 2020, included children under age 18. Among married couple families with children, 95.3 percent had at least one employed parent and 59.8 percent had both parents employed. The labor force participation rate for all women with children under age 18 was 71.2 percent, down from 72.3 percent and the participation rate for fathers also declined from 2019. This decline in labor force participation among parents, especially mothers, reflects pandemic-related job losses as many schools shifted to distance learning and childcare facilities closed. In 2020, married mothers remained less likely to participate in the labor force while 93.3 percent of married fathers worked. Mothers of older children are more likely to be in the labor force than mothers with younger children. The participation rate for mothers with children under age 6, at 65.8 percent, was lower than that of mothers whose youngest child was between the age of 6 to 17, at 75.4 percent. (BLS, April 2021).

As more women work outside the home, numerous factors must be analyzed to better understand opting out and back into the work force. In addition to the larger economic and social context, a woman's age, education, attitudes toward home and work roles, marital status, work experience, salary, number of births, and the availability of childcare may each influence her decision-making around family formation, child rearing and employment. This study, by no means representative, focuses on highly educated, career credentialed, primarily white women whose positionality affords them financial flexibility to focus on family and at the same time emphasizes self-reliance and success in multiple domains over the life course.

BROADER SOCIOLOGICAL CONTEXT

Even if unsupported by underlying labor market data, the opt-out revolution as described by journalist Lisa Belkin in 2003 led to a deeper examination of the dynamics between motherhood and work. Sociologists Stone and Kuperberg criticized the focus on motherhood framed by the rhetoric of choice rather than the constraints of the workplace (2008). Arguably, the “‘choice’ to stay at home with children is one that is often made within a limited framework, and one made in a society in which women learn at a young age to prioritize caregiving” (Damaske & Frech, 2016). The “choice” to leave the workplace turned into an opt out “myth” with unintended consequences that furthered gender discrimination. Experts began to call for more focus on barriers to female advancement like workplace inflexibility, unaffordable childcare and negative stereotypes that were “pushing” women out (Jones, 2011).

Economist Sylvia Ann Hewlett pressed the opt out conversation further by demonstrating that “talented women are indeed the proverbial canaries in the mine: harbingers of a better world who expire before their time, poignant victims whose tragic fates point to malfunction and dysfunction in the system.” She called for alternative models of work so women and men could succeed in the workplace without failing their families and asked, “what are the prospects for messing with the male competitive model in the larger labor market – over the long haul?” (2007).

Meanwhile journalists, economists and academics continue to recycle and reevaluate Belkin’s initial claims. A columnist wrote “It’s amusing to see the ‘opting out’ trend treated as news, considering that the story has been around for the last 25 years or so -- that is, for as long as women have been on the career track in significant numbers” (Young, 2004). A follow-up piece to Belkin’s, penned a decade later in 2013, had dueling titles: “The Opt-Out Generation Wants Back In” and “Ready to Rejoin the Rat

Race?” (Warner, 2013). An Atlantic piece shifted the focus to the toxicity of work and claimed “the people who can compete and succeed in this culture are an ever-narrower slice of American society: largely young people who are healthy, and wealthy enough not to have to care for family members” (Slaughter, 2015). Belkin acknowledged that her original article “caused a nasty and noisy debate” and began to investigate “opting back in”, a movement “still in its infancy” yet transformative if the corporate workplace would grow to accept nonlinear careers (2007).

Psychologists Zimmerman and Clark consider published works from 1986 through 2015 in the fields of psychology, management, sociology, and economics to synthesize the theoretical and empirical work on women’s opting out and opting back in experiences. Their framework integrates existing research with the kaleidoscope career model to explain the complexities of women’s careers. Their agenda for further research includes a closer look at the experiences of men, especially those who diverge from a traditional linear career model, an examination of non-work outcomes after opting out and opting back in, namely measuring work-family conflict qualitatively and quantitatively, as well as an understanding of effective individual and organizational level strategies that assist women re-entering the workforce (2016). Demographers also analyzed opting out and leaning in by classifying women into four ideal-types associated by three traits and acknowledged “a high degree of complexity in women’s lifetime working patterns” and a “need to understand women’s labor supply as a fluid process” (Garcia-Manglano, 2015).

For the moment, scholars of work/family conflict, a burgeoning field, continue to face the ongoing “fact” that caregivers do not advance in the labor market as well as those without caregiving responsibilities (Glass and Estes, 1997). Many highly educated women start out in demanding professions on par with men they are likely to marry, but dual professional career couples often find gender equity out of reach. Opting out is interpreted as a violation of ideal worker norms and mothers and fathers who do not fully prioritize work are penalized (Weisshaar, 2018). A new Swiss study

measured the effects of a long-term career interruption on wages after re-employment and found significant penalties which according to their results hit men even harder (Speiser, 2020).

The gender wage gap persists in 27 European countries but men and women weigh job quality components differently. In countries like Denmark, generous family leave policies provide women more work flexibility for raising a family (Leschke, 2014). The study of substantial size-of-establishment effects (Stolzenberg 1978) calls for broader inquiry around the ways organizations contribute to, intervene in, and perpetuate gender inequality. In this study sample, it is notable that large bureaucratic firms are constructing alternative career paths focused on hiring, retaining, and promoting mothers.

Companies dictate workforce policy and evidence suggests they are “taking action to lure mature job seekers with a variety of innovative programs” (Emling) including return-to-work programs. Some employers may hire older women for executive experience they otherwise could not afford and to add diversity to their senior ranks (Pasquarelli, 2017). Financially speaking, workers over 65 could be particularly attractive to businesses if their health insurance costs are already covered through Medicare. At the same time, for many individuals without ample savings, the new emphasis on hiring older workers may mean more Americans will postpone retirement so that they can work longer to cover their expenses (Emling, Kiger, 2019).

Now with an eye specifically on women re-entering the work force, a recent sociological study suggested “higher levels of spousal wages were associated with an increased likelihood to engage in a re-entry pathway, supporting the idea that the workforce re-entry pathway is associated with economic advantages in the home” (Damaske & Frech, 2016). Earlier work in the UK demonstrated that “older women are perceived as more successful and advantaged in the labor market in comparison to older men, although ‘success’ as it is defined in this sense is questionable as it relies on the premise that older women are prepared to accept poorer working conditions, lower rates of pay and lower status jobs”

(Moore, 2009). The fundamental challenge remains outstanding: someone must take care of the children. Companies benefit from always-on workers and change is unlikely to happen unless workers start to demand it (Miller, 2019).

METHODOLOGY

This project focuses on a subset of the 100+ companies that have implemented return-to-work programs. I drew my sample from the article “15 Companies Offering ‘Returnship’ or Return-to-Work Programs” (Boe, 2020) which included a link to each company’s dedicated webpage for the program. For each of the fifteen programs, I copied text that described details of the return-to-work program as well as case studies or stories that featured participants into a word document for content analysis. In addition, I transcribed nine conversations from the universe of 180+ podcasts recorded by iRelaunch. I selected five interviews with individuals who returned to the same company or industry after a career break through a formal program and/or who now champion their firm’s return-to-work program. Three interviews highlighted broader economic and semantic approaches to evaluating opting out and returning back into the work force. I used MaxQDA for multiple layers of coding including descriptive, process, and emotion coding for supplementary qualitative data analysis. The charts below summarize the sample frame.

Corporate Return-to-work Programs

Company/Program Name	Weeks	Industry	Location	Stories
Accenture Return-to-work	16	Professional Services	Minneapolis	Annette
Amazon Web Services Returners		IT Service Management	Multiple	
Bandwidth		API, Enterprise Comm	Raleigh, NC	Christine
General Motors Take 2	12	Auto Manufacturer	Detroit, MI	
Goldman Sachs Returnship	8	Investment Banking	New York	Anecdotes
Hewlett Packard Enterprise Career Reboot	16	Information Technology	Multiple	
HubSpot Returners	20	Software Development	Cambridge, MA	Jill
IBM Tech Re-entry		Computer Hardware	Multiple	Jill, Priyanka
Intuit Again returnship	16	Software Development	Mountain View, CA	Arti, Shikha
JPMorgan Chase ReEntry	14	Financial Services	Multiple	
Microsoft Engineering Acceleration	16	Technology	Redmond, WA	Melissa

Morgan Stanley Return-to-work	12	Investment Banking	New York	7 profiles – Barbara, Catherine, Ivy, Kavery, Michele, Saloni and Suzanne
NBC Universal Act Two Returnship	26	Media	New York, LA	
PayPal Recharge	16	Online Payment system	San Francisco	Mimi
Walmart Labs Returnship	16	Internet Retail	Silicon Valley, CA	

iRelaunch Podcasts

Podcast #	Individual Name	Company / Industry	Role	Notes
42	Jane Pastoor	Raytheon	Senior Manager for Systems Engineers	Relaunched twice
48	Shanda Hinton	United Technologies	Global Diversity Talent Leader	
58	Monica Marquez	Goldman now Google	D&I Hiring Manager	
60	Michael Madowitz	Center for American Progress	Economist	Designed calculator to estimate cost of a career break
77	Carol Fishman Cohen	iRelaunch	Founder	Disrupternship
93	Cheryl Payne	Healthcare sales	SVP	9 year break, rejected from GS returnship
126	Shannon Amspacher	iRelaunch Millennial	Manager of Strategic Initiates	Pre-launcher, ManPower study
128	Cathy Duffy	AIG Insurance	Manager	8 yrs out
180	Gabriella Bean and SueSpillane	Northrup Grumman	mangers	Initial cohort

Source: <https://www.irelaunch.com/pod>

DATA, DISCOVERY & CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

COMPANY PROGRAMS

The landing pages for the return-to-work program on most of the corporate websites specify the length, location, business unit and criteria for participation. Many firms describe how the return-to-work program prepares and positions candidates to continue working with the firm. Often the companies include language about their culture and how the program fits into and advances overall strategic and workforce goals. For example, with Goldman Sachs, the first company on Wall Street to start a return-to-work program, a relauncher can “...transition back into work with professional skill-sharpening and an exploration of new opportunities” through the Returnship© program designed “for talented professionals looking to restart their careers after an extended absence from the workforce.” The paid, 12-week program offers positions in a variety of divisions to strengthen technical skills, explore

new career paths, and experience the firm's vast network of resources. Eligible candidates must be "previously employed professionals who have been out of the workforce for two or more years and are looking to return." The investment bank Morgan Stanley "offers 12-week paid internships to experienced men and women who have been away from their profession for more than two years" and who may receive an offer of employment upon completion of the program. At JP Morgan, ReEntry fellows are paired with a mentor who provides the support and guidance needed to relaunch a career.

For most of the technology firms, prior industry experience is a prerequisite for the return-to-work programs. Candidates who had 5 or more years of experience before opting out for at least a year are eligible for Hewlett Packard's Career Reboot program, and IBM's global Tech Re-Entry Program is "for talented technical professionals who took a break from the workforce and are looking to restart their careers." At Microsoft, successful candidates in the Leap program "will have at least 6 months of professional project management experience or professional software development experience."

NBC Universal's Act Two program and Walmart Labs Returnship targets experienced professionals looking to return to the workforce after taking at least two years off for caregiving. Through Walmart's program, candidates re-activate skills, build new experience, and take their career further and those who succeed are "considered for available full-time opportunities."

Without specifying what diversity really means or would look like at the firm level, most of the return-to-work programs underscore and foster a more diverse and inclusive corporate culture. For example, JP Morgan says it values "the diversity, fresh perspective and wealth of experience that returning professionals can bring." HubSpot's Returners Program, committed to building a company that future generation will be proud of, starts with "diversity, inclusion and belonging." Walmart professes:

"the communities we serve live better when we really know them. That means understanding, respecting, and valuing diversity—unique styles, experiences, identities, ideas, and opinions—

while being inclusive of all people. Inclusion is the key to growing our business. By fostering a workplace culture where everyone is—and feels—included, everyone wins.”

Intuit describes its diverse and inclusive culture as “the foundation of a dynamic and collaborative company where everyone is empowered to do the best work of their careers” and notes its recognition from Fortune Magazine as one of the “100 Best Workplaces for Diversity.”

PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS/RELAUNCHERS

On their return-to-work program websites, many companies include case studies or personal stories told by program participants about opting out and getting back to work. Morgan Stanley’s Return-to-work Program features several women who left financial services and recently returned; three personal accounts highlight recurring themes about opting out and getting back on a demanding career track. The topics these accounts draw attention to include taking a career break that extended longer than originally anticipated, deflecting the tension between continuing a challenging career and raising children, feeling intimidated by the re-entry process, and easing the transition back in through a return-to-work program.

Barbara, an alum of Morgan Stanley’s 2014 program, “turned a career break into 12 years away from the workforce” to raise her children and care for her ailing mother. Prior to her break, she worked in a technology project management role at a financial services company and even though she began to think about going back to work after a few years out, the financial industry collapsed in 2008 and managing her mother’s deteriorating health became “a fulltime job.” Catherine attended a seminar focused on women in finance and work-life balance when she was an MBA student at Harvard in the early 2000s and recalls the bottom-line message: “if you care about your career, then just don’t take any time off, because it’s nearly impossible to get back on track.” Despite the warning about how daunting opting back in might be, she left her investment banking career to focus on her children for six years. She started planning a return once her youngest started nursery school and claims “long hours aside, I

really liked my work in banking. Although the job was demanding, it was also very stimulating. On top of that, I wanted to be around adults again, to have adult conversations and do adult things. I absolutely cherish my children but making up new verses to “The Wheels on the Bus” does not really utilize your entire skill set.” Catherine says Morgan Stanley’s Return-to-work initiative opened “doors that would otherwise be closed” and provided advantages beyond trying to “simply network your way back.” Although she “doubted she could return to the kind of advisory roles she used to have and still have some control over her work hours”, after completing the program she started in a business-development role that keeps her involved in deals, and the more reasonable hours give her weekends to spend time with her family. Suzanne Lindquist represents “proof there is a path back to the top.” In 2008, in the wake of the banking crisis, her 20 years of working hard, being “a competitor”, and tending to “do everything 120%”, “ended with an exclamation point” so she “took the opportunity to take a breather”; she got married, enjoyed quality time with her family and did not rush back. In 2014, she felt “ready for a new challenge and chapter” and after participating in Morgan Stanley’s first Return-to-work cohort in 2014 she received a full-time offer in Wealth Management. She says she took to it right away; “once I got a taste of it, I wanted to get back to where I was.” Nearly five years to the day later, she was named a Managing Director, the first Return-to-work participant to rise to the firm’s highest ranks.

HubSpot Returner’s Program features Jill, now a General Manager in Receivables, who stepped away for eight years to focus on raising her family. She thought of herself as a career woman “focused on high performance, rising to management, seeking promotion after promotion” but after returning to work 12 weeks after the birth of her second child and travelling weekly she found herself feeling “defeated” and “trapped” when she tried to pump breast milk while sitting on the floor of the handicap stall in a public restroom at O’Hare. A month later, after detailed conversations with her husband, she stepped away from the career she spent “so many years trying to build” and became “unemployed, and a stay-at-home mom.” She knows that returning to work after a break “can be very scary” and adds “it

can be hard to put yourself out there, overwhelming to think about what you've missed, challenging to convince yourself you have relevant skills...so you start to wonder, why would any company want to hire you?" She describes her time at home as lonely; some days were dark and most days her "biggest win was simply taking a shower." Over time she became "more grateful for the opportunity to be at home" and "started to let the guilt go and feel stronger" about her decision. Once both of her children were in school full time, she knew it was time to return-to-work. However, she says "I won't sugar coat it - returning to work was challenging." She wondered if her skills were still relevant after stepping away for eight years, especially in technology. For her, the hardest part was feeling confident that her family would adjust and not feeling "guilty as a mom and woman." At times she thought she "was abandoning [her] duties as a mom." She credits her "amazing husband" for supporting her aspirations and making "the entire family operating system successful."

Bandwidth highlights Christine's story to demonstrate how to get back in through a returnship and become a full-time employee. Christine needed to overcome "the stigma sometimes attached to being a stay-at-home parent" and even though she thought having an MBA would help, she faced challenges trying to return to her career after ten years out in the Raleigh, NC area, "one of the highest concentrations of advanced degrees in the country." She believes that her ten-year resume gap overshadowed twelve years of sales, marketing, and business development experience and prevented her from advancing through applicant tracking software. After so much time with her children, she felt hesitant about working at a company she "wasn't 100% sold on", so the returnship model offered a "test run" before she made a long-term commitment. She became the first candidate for Bandwidth's pilot program and liked their Whole Person Promise —a comprehensive "approach towards helping employees find meaning and balance between work and life." She credits her co-workers for her success; "they were all extremely generous with their time and made returning to work less daunting" by helping her learn telecom, not an easy industry, full of "acronyms for acronyms" and new technology

that did not exist when she left the workforce. Her work on a returnship project became the foundation for a permanent position and now that she has been with Bandwith more than two years she says “taking a chance on the returnship was one of the smartest career moves I could have made” and she feels excited to see how the company will expand the program.

Like the women featured by Morgan Stanley, these additional accounts condense decades of preparation and early work experience and give the impression that a return-to-work program simplifies the process of returning to work after a significant career break. Jill’s eight years out reveals little about the emotional and physical labor required to manage children, a marriage, and home life. Christine’s story consolidates two decades – one in a sales career, the other at home - and reveals additional layers of meaning in the return-to-work process through terms like “test run”, “whole person”, “balance” and “taking a chance.”

The women interviewed by Carol Cohen, the founder of iRelaunch, share similar stories about opting out to focus on family and returning to the same field. When Jane first left Raytheon, she thought it would mean the end of her technical career, but after 11 years away she returned to Raytheon and “moved into a lead role, within a year.” Four years into her first relaunch she decided she needed another break and wanted to spend more time with her third child, who was “still quite young.” She took another 4 ½ years out and when she decided she was ready to re-enter she reached out to her contacts at Raytheon, which had been bought by Hughes, and she applied, interviewed, and was selected for a senior position. Now that she has been with the company for fourteen years she says, “I really have a career... not just part time positions pieced together.” She serves as an ambassador to Raytheon's "ReLaunch" program begun in September 2018.

Cheryl left her sales position with a large lab after “a caregiving incident” and decided to document her return-to-work on iRelaunch’s private Facebook page and her post became one of the

most popular to date. Getting back in after a nine-year break felt “discouraging” and “shocking.” Cheryl kept getting rejected and was not prepared when an interviewer told her she was overqualified. She brushed up on answering awkward interview questions and listened to podcasts on ageism. She took a part time job at her church as she kept looking and even applied to and was rejected from a returnship in financial services. She was determined to return to a position like the one she left which she loved, felt passionate about, and was good at. Her resilience, practice, and persistence eventually lead to an offer for a sales position with a healthcare firm that she says blew her away; the compensation was “very, very strong” at a “fair market” level and “so good I did not think about asking for more because it was way over what I thought it would be.”

Gabriella Bean and Sue Spillane took breaks of 22 and 19 years, respectively, and relaunched their engineering careers through Northrop Grumman’s inaugural return-to-work program, iReturn, in the fall of 2017. Sue remembers feeling nervous and worried if she would be “proficient” and “fit in to a corporate environment,” but realized her communication and interpersonal skills had really improved and at the same time felt “privileged” to be a part of the program and grateful that they “took a chance” on her. Gabriella also appreciated getting “a shot” during the program and wondered if she would be offered a permanent position. She said everyone who wanted to stay found a role, and for her, it “felt like coming home.” Both now manage large teams in technical areas and even though they agree that they will always feel like relaunchers, they also feel confident about their contributions and enjoy the challenges and successes of being back at work.

Opting Out

For most of these women the reason for opting out of their professional career is generalized by phrases like “family priorities”, “kids at home”, “kids needed me”, “wanted to spend quality time with my kids”, “needed a break”, “focus on family” and “stayed home”. Several recount the time with their

children as a source of deep satisfaction. For example, after the birth of her son, Cathy says she “fell in love with him, myself, life, and the simple things”; at the same time, she “became like a hippie, natural, a completely different person.” Arti thinks she made the right decision by opting out and believes that for her children her “presence made a difference and made them successful and confident.” Shikha remembers thinking at the time “I can always go back to work, but I’ll miss this time with my kids.” She coached her twin girl’s robotics team and said when she took the team to the world championships representing northern California, “it was the most rewarding experience I’ve had until now.” No one dwells on the past prior work environment that Stone (2007) would claim pushed them out.

The only mention of the financial implications of opting out came from Jill who described talking with her husband for weeks “about whether or not we could survive on one income so I could stay home with our children. We went through our budget in detail, talked about the sacrifices we would have to make (no eating out, no vacations,) and realized we could do it.”

For most of these women, when they stepped away from the paid work force managing family life became their primary or first shift, yet no one discussed the day-to-day drudgery of laundry, cooking, carpooling, or cleaning up after people in their household. Many refer to additional, rich experiences that kept them active and engaged during their time at home including volunteering, continuing education, reading, managing estates, writing a book, starting new hobbies, and refreshing technical skills through certificate programs. Even though one website features a picture of a relauncher with her family, none of the women offered the names, ages, interests, or personalities of their children.

Perhaps the mundaneness and messiness of home must be de-emphasized when looking back on time out of the work force, but questions remain about how to explain a significant gap on a resume. Cheryl describes multiple rejections while trying to get back to work after nine years out and decided to remove “home educator” from her resume to better underscore what she did prior to opting out. When

asked in an interview about her time away she would keep the career break commentary very short and focus on her skills.

Monica Marquez, a founder of Goldman's Returnship© program, remembers being awed by the talented women she would interview; they stayed up to date, maintained their skills and had legitimate reasons for taking a break, which was definitely not a "forever vacation." Monica balks when firm representatives generalize that women who opt out, mainly mothers, have brains that turn to "mush"; her observations suggest that "returners are active and current."

Gabriella, who spent 22 years out, the longest career break of the sample, encourages woman to "own the break" and Monica advises "embrace that gap, use it to your advantage, share it, how you have grown, and how much value you can add to the company." Jill advises women to "make the decisions that are right for you and be confident in those decisions...no explanation or apology is needed." Kavery, with Morgan Stanley India, believes years away from the corporate world can provide unique insight on how to navigate responsibilities at work. She says "I now see that the skills I developed while I was away and raising my children have helped me so much. I am an expert in multitasking, and I'm far better at handling pressure than I was before. I'm a much more mature person than I was 10 years ago."

Despite these examples and words of encouragement, turning a significant break into a career advantage becomes a stretch. The most recent comprehensive study on opting out starkly demonstrates in statistical terms what Cathy nonchalantly termed going "backwards to go forwards." Through a large-scale audit study, Weisshaar (2018) found that mothers and fathers who temporarily opted out of work to care for family fared significantly worse in terms of hiring prospects relative to unemployed and continuously employed applicants.

Diversity & Inclusion

Diversity and inclusion initiatives attempt to dismantle persistent institutional processes reflected in the hiring practices of “greedy institutions” (Coser, 1974). Amazon says it is committed to diversity and inclusion and that the company’s “diverse perspectives come from many sources including gender, race, age, national origin, sexual orientation, culture, education and experience.” HubSpot claims it is “committed to building a company future generations will be proud of. That starts with diversity, inclusion, and belonging.” For IBM, “inclusion in the workplace ensures out-of-the-box thinking and makes sure that talent is respected.” According to Monica, who is now at Google, diversity and inclusion initiatives still lack “cultural competency” and more people who reflect the stated goals must be hired.

Older women who return-to-work after a significant break may face multiple layers of discrimination and unconscious bias. In addition, they may doubt themselves if they have internalized cultural norms. Ivy was the only returner who referred to her age by declaring “Oh my gosh, I’m too old for an internship.” Cathy, who set her sights on being an insurance executive at an early age, denied her femininity; she claims she never thought of herself as a woman because she did not want to be limited in a career where there were so few female executives. She felt surprised when she got pregnant at 35, a “geriatric” age in her mind, and admits that she also felt terrified. Her long-term male colleagues were also shocked; when one heard the news, he exclaimed “Oh my god, you’re a woman!”

JP Morgan is one of the only firms to address motherhood directly; their program page states “For women who leave jobs to have children, reentering the workforce years later can seem impossible. JPMorgan Chase wants to help remove the stigma and get mothers back to work.” Acknowledging the role and using the word mother, however, will not be enough to explain and eradicate the persistent motherhood penalty (Blau and Kahn, 2017).

Competing Devotions

When Mary Blair-Loy interviewed 56 “career committed” executive women, several in the other set of 25 “family committed” women who left full-time business careers when they had children said they “hoped to rebuild full-time careers someday.” At the time of her study, however, only one respondent was “attempting to do so.” Blair-Loy speculated “whether she can engineer a new turning point out of homemaking and back to the business career of her early adulthood remains to be seen” (2003).

The possibility of relaunching a professional career can no longer be viewed so skeptically. Return-to-work programs expand the analysis of work-family conflict Blair-Loy explored but, arguably, these programs reinforce structural norms -- the patriarchal power of the husband over the wife and the power of the capitalist employer over the family. When women step out of the paid work force to raise children, they reproduce Acker’s theory (1990) that a job assumes a particular gendered organization of domestic life and social production as well as a separation between the public and private sphere. According to Sheryl Sandberg (2013) the exodus of highly educated women is a major contributor to the leadership gap and MBA women who give up working to raise children and manage households perpetuate the more traditional gender construct dominant in our privileged, conservative society. Distinctions between males and females exist through labor processes and family life so, arguably, organizations that implement returnships perpetuate Acker’s critique of the formal workplace. Acker reasons that “the closest the disembodied worker doing the abstract job comes to a real worker is the male worker whose life centers on his full-time, life-long job, while his wife or another woman takes care of his personal needs and his children...The woman worker does not fit with the abstract job.”

A company’s return-to-work program may now assume and accept a woman’s different role, yet the time it takes her to birth and care for children seems to evaporate; the complexities of her maternity

and her personal life is brushed aside in order to center her return to full-time work outside the home and her leaning into leadership.

Work Life Balance

In the words of our nation's largest retailers "flexibility is key in maintaining work-life harmony" (Amazon) and "we realize life is flexible and changes happen" (Walmart). When the women in this study stepped out of the paid work force and took an extended career break, they eschewed flexibility at work in favor of dedication to home. Upon re-entry, however, flexibility becomes a prerequisite for most of these women. Michelle, an alumna of Morgan Stanley's inaugural Return-to-work class in India and a self-described former workaholic "accustomed to 16- to 18-hour days at her previous role with another global bank, made a promise to herself and to her daughter: This time around, a healthy work-life balance was a priority... to strike that balance it comes down to work flexibility." Shikha claims Intuit is "very flexible" and says "I've been able to integrate my work and life together." Under a dedicated section on Morgan Stanley's program webpage titled "Focus on Flexibility and Support", a manager of human resources says "flexibility makes a huge difference and is an integral part of how we make people feel comfortable with the decision to return-to-work." Catherine's story, which features a photograph of her with her three children, says she "was keen to explore opportunities in banking, but was wary of the work-life balance and the getting back on track challenges that she'd heard about" and what she discovered at Morgan Stanley was "that times have changed, at least to some degree."

Walmart defines its corporate culture as "our values in action" and "the foundation of everything we do." The culture helps the company achieve its "common purpose of saving people money so they can live better." Walmart encourages returners by saying "bring your whole self to work...the place where your passions meet purpose." For Christine, Bandwidth's "Whole Person Promise

was the icing on the cake of the corporate culture.” The idea of being “whole” appears to be the new code to help women integrate the competing cultural schemas of work and family life.

Transformation & Terminology

Carol Fishman Cohen, in an interview with author Ginny Brzezinski (2020) claims return-to-work programs are disrupting career norms. Even though structured like internships, returnships are not entry level experiences for students, they target and train older, experienced hires who have taken a career break. This model disrupts the linear career model and broadens the corporate hiring pool to include non-traditional candidates.

The trademarking of the word “Returnship” by Goldman Sachs in 2008 seems curious however; a paper published in 2004 in the Journal for Nurses in Staff Development is titled “Teaching Old Dogs New Tricks: RN “Returnship” Program.” Noting the “untapped market of experienced RNs” the authors say the program was created to “entice experienced RNs to return to the acute care setting.” A detailed curriculum combined with a detailed daily and weekly schedule refreshed nurses’ skills and exposed them to changes in acute care as well as developments in computer technology. Ongoing support from assigned preceptors helped nurse trainees manage their feelings of being overwhelmed and facilitated “a smooth transition from orientee to productive staff.” Even though the development of and management of the program seemed labor intensive and “costly”, the returning RNs contributed levels of maturity, loyalty, and patient skills that exceeded those found in newer employees (Bouwman and Kruithof, 2004). It is also worth noting that the word “intern” originated in the medical community before its adoption by business. Several studies also analyze internships as a socialization mechanism reserved for the privileged (Dailey, 2016; Steffen, 2012) Does the expansion from medicine to the corporate environment say more about the social process? A twist on internship, the word and the

structure of the Returnship© model obviously derives from a more storied and evolving work arrangement that Goldman Sachs now takes credit for branding.

Echoing Carol's concept of career disruption, Walmart asks "what does it mean to disrupt?" and then states "to others, innovation looks like an app, service or some code – but Walmart has always been about people. People are why we innovate, and people power our innovations; being human-led is our true disruption...We're powering the next great retail disruption – join our team and make your mark." Many women reference change and emphasize the role of technology, a fast moving industry in which devices and programs can become obsolete very quickly. Accenture offers returners the chance to "transform the world around you using the newest technologies and methodologies, such as, Cloud, AI, Intelligent Automation, DevOps, and Agile." Sue described feeling "really nervous" about not being proficient in the newer technologies but realized as much as the tools had evolved the "people had not changed." During her experience at Goldman and Google, Monica confronted many managers who "think it is impossible to manage a gap" and admits the real challenge is "how to change mind sets."

A conversation between Carol Fishman Cohen and her youngest employee reveals the evolution of relaunching as a concept within the context of historical and complex work and gender processes. Prior to joining iRelaunch, Shannon worked in an employee benefits consulting firm and took particular interest in policies for more flexible work environments. Shannon is married, with "no children or elder care issues yet" but says she wonders what it may mean "to take a career break in the future." She says, although "I don't know what kind of mother I will be...my career is important to me now. I don't know what the future holds, but I want the choice to take a career break and respond to those life circumstances in a thoughtful way." Shannon believes men and women both wrestle with challenges around work, family, and home life, which she views as "a human issue." She discusses the division of labor topic with her husband and suggests that perhaps he will take the career break. In their home they

split certain chores and responsibilities and they also play a card game designed by *Fair Play* author Eve Rodsky (2019).

Carol, who is now 60, remembers reading *The Second Shift* (Hochschild and Machung, 1989) and references a landmark study that showed MBA couples ten years after graduation in very traditional gender roles (Bertrand, Goldin, and Katz, 2010). She marvels at the evolution of the conversation between couples and within companies as she sees more representation and role models of a successful relaunch, the proliferation of corporate return-to-work programs and personal stories about the “integration between work and home.” Carol mentions a recent study that claims “Millennials expect to work harder and longer than previous generations, so they already anticipate more variety and more times when they will take their foot off the gas. Eighty-four percent foresee significant breaks along the way, reinforcing that Career Waves are replacing the Career Ladder of earlier generations” (Manpower Group, 2016). Carol stresses that relaunch programs are becoming a signal to young employees that demonstrate a corporate commitment to attracting and retaining top talent. Millennials like Shannon are what Carol now calls “pre-launchers.” Surely these “conversations” represents a crucial step, yet how they transform the largely invisible, mental load of the second shift remains to be seen.

Carol interviewed Michael Madowitz, an economist at the Center for American Progress and the only man captured in this project. When Michael became a father, he and his mathematician wife searched for quantitative answers to their questions about the long-term financial consequences of a decision to leave the workforce. Michael said he conceptualized a career break and looked for tools to calculate the anticipated costs like saving for retirement. When he couldn’t find anything to help him do the calculations before the birth of his second child, he decided to create what is now a simple, customizable interactive tool on the Center for American Progress website that he says helps “families calculate the financial costs of interrupting a career so a parent can become a full-time caregiver...The single most important contribution this tool makes, and the most important lesson for families using the

tool, is placing these financial tradeoffs in the economic framework of opportunity costs, or costs people incur when they lose out on potential gains” (Madowitz et al, 2016). After inputting a person’s age, gender, salary, age at start of full-time work, age at planned break and the anticipated length of the break in years, the calculator will determine the lifetime cost of taking that break in terms of lost salary, lost earnings growth, and lost retirement savings. When Michael first calculated the impact on his own and his wife’s career, he found the numbers “depressing.” He claims even though he “knew there was a cost” he “didn’t want to put a number on it” and felt shocked by a number that was more like the cost of “a house, not a car.” By quantifying these large—and largely hidden—opportunity costs, Michael hopes policymakers will begin to understand the importance of affordable, high-quality childcare for raising family incomes and growing the economy. Carol says the cost of her own eleven-year break according to the calculator stunned her and had she known the all-in costs her decision making process might have been different. She emphasizes how important it is for women to take what used to be hidden and make it more transparent. Much like motherhood, the cost of opting out must be seen with “eyes wide open.”

We must ask how this new re-entry route in high status occupations challenges the hegemony of the male career model and the nation’s embrace of a winner-take-all-economy (Stone 2007, Miller 2019). Return-to-work programs have been criticized because they “exploit the low confidence of returning women” and allow employers to “evaluate prospective candidates risk-free” (Wingard, 2019). For women who may feel less empowered after a break from the workforce, their confidence can take a further blow if an offer is not extended at the end of a highly competitive program. For this review, many of the program websites said “the application window has closed.” At the same time, for many women whose children have grown and flown, a sense of accomplishment for a job well done at home allows them to dedicate renewed energy and focus on demanding work in an office setting.

The creation of corporate return-to-work programs primarily focused on women must be evaluated as an outgrowth of broader historical transformations over the past century in women's education and professionalization. In the more "feminized" careers like nursing and teaching family can take priority; nursing's flexible shifts allowed married women to continue working and once prohibitions against married women lifted, many teachers returned to the field after having children. However, law, medicine, and university teaching remained male bastions that limited female career longevity (Michinson, 1996). From the 1970s onward, the granting of Ph.D.'s and professional degrees to women grew rapidly and schools saw an increase in enrollment due to the women's movement, government affirmative action rules, and corporations beginning to hire more women. In her paper examining the trends in women's attendance at business schools, Francesca Cancian focuses on expected costs and rewards to explain rapid social change. The consequences of admitting more women, more women choosing to attend, and more corporations hiring women from business school led business schools to adopt a pro-woman image and agenda with the expectation that it would pay off for everyone (1982).

Commensurate with women's entry into the corporate workplace, organizations adopted more family focused policies including flexible work arrangements, flexible spending accounts, childcare initiatives, and paternity leave. A study published in *The Journal of Vocational Behavior* asked whether the opt-out revolution also applied to highly educated men given that "new labor force entrants of both sexes are increasingly expressing a desire for work-family balance" (Powell and Butterfield, 2013). The proportion of men who take parental leave from work remains extremely small compared to women, however, so the low uptake of parental leave by fathers must also be addressed on a micro, meso and macro level. (Vandeweyer and Glorieux 2008, Gillis 2015, and Duffy et al 2020).

A study of age, period and cohort effects may illuminate different "processes" occurring across the life course for women born in different decades and circumstances. Recent studies present a feminist framework and an analysis of master narratives about gender and the life course (Pickard, 2019

and McLean et al 2020). Resilience is another concept used repeatedly in the relaunching process which leads to the importance of narrative in constructing a story for life's transitions. Cohort analyses and life course studies are the sociological compliments to this psychological concept. Carol Cohen emphasizes the power of the cohort for professionals returning to work. (2015). Ideally, the cohort bonds and participants continue to support each other through a significant personal and professional transition.

Many of the studies of opting out and opting in, along with analyses of wage gaps across the life course, take clues from status attainment research to look more closely at race, socioeconomic status, and education level and quality to further separate factors that influence outcomes in the social process. In 1970, life expectancy averaged 71.4 years, 67.7 for men and 75.4 for women; today, the average is 79.1 years, 81.7 for women and 76.6 for men. Perhaps returnships are simply inevitable given an aging workforce that now requires managers and organizations to support men and women through the reshaping and pacing of careers that stretch over fifty years (Wittenberg-Cox, 2020).

CONCLUSION

This study did not adequately address the financial circumstances or motivations of relaunchers. Beyond Michael's advice to consider the comprehensive costs of a career break, money was rarely mentioned and when it was, terms like "breadwinner", "remuneration" and "fair market rate" shrouded the actual salary amount or level of household income. It is not clear where this group sits on the income distribution and whether relaunching will help "power prosperity around the world" (Intuit) or simply augment the economic status of these women and their families. Whether they are currently in the top fifty, twenty-five, or ten percentiles of the income distribution, "marrying a man with good income prospects is a woman's main route to the one percent." (Yavorsky et al., 2019).

The growth of corporate return-to-work programs appears to be new ground for analysis as more companies design and implement re-entry initiatives and more participants find success after relaunching. As described by Shanda Hinton, a global diversity talent attraction leader at United Technologies, “success is conversion into full-time employment.” Goldman’s initial model, scaled and repeated for multiple years in financial service companies and now gaining traction in a broad range of firms and industries demonstrates proof of concept. iRelaunch tracks the universe of more than 100 return-to-work programs and, says, on average, 85% of participants are hired into full time roles. For the women in this sample, success through a returnship can be generalized as the ability to “prove myself and my capabilities in such a short amount of time” and reach a “leadership level” (PayPal).

Surely the story of professional women, workplace flexibility and home production is evolving from the earlier opt-out era to opting back in today, but larger questions remain. Economist Madowitz believes in efficient markets but an analysis of the supply of formerly professional women who opted out to spend time at home and the demand for skilled and talented workers in today’s technologically driven economy merits more precision. Weisshaar calls for more qualitative interviews with employers about their perceptions of former stay-at-home parents and to somehow test from where parenting penalties originate (2018). Organizational sociologists Padavic, Ely and Reid criticize the “hegemonic work-family narrative” that underlies broader problems in a 24/7 work culture that sustains workplace inequality (2020).

Return-to-work programs could be an extension of “the mommy track” (Kingson, 1988) or an alternative path to female empowerment. It is not clear from this sample what motivates these women to re-enter fields and jobs they once left. For some, stepping back in might include a desire to re-engage at an intellectual level, a yearning to give back, or an aspiration to change the system; for many, relaunching after a career break may simply reflect economic anxieties.

A paper by Ann Rippin (2013) explores the idea of “silver-handedness” as a metaphor for giving up basic human touch, relatedness, and immediacy for a way of dealing with the world. Through this powerful visualization of capitalism as “service at arm’s length” void of direct engagement and “mediated through cold, hard, impersonal metal” she wonders when institutions became so bleached of nurturing, mothering, and human touch. She would not fault mothers who reject the sterile hands of an organization in order to regrow their own hands at home so they can touch the physical world with all its unpredictability and feel human connection, or “full humanity”, in the messiness of life. She might vindicate women who relaunch their careers but relinquish their own hands for silver ones as the “price of admission to the management cadre.” Her request for more attention on the haptic and less on artificial touch in the material world raises a different consciousness about how women express their full, multiple, authentic, intellectual, and physical selves. My naive hope is that women’s return to demanding careers and larger presence in corporate settings will help shift capitalist culture away from cold detachment to an environment rooted in care as envisioned by feminist economists like Nancy Folbre (2001).

Think tank researchers are taking note of the rising labor force participation of older workers and urge policymakers to address and support labor force exits and reentry. Even though the health of older Americans has improved over time, these improvements are being driven by middle- and higher-income people while low-income people of all ages have experienced deteriorating health, so policies must address growing health and care-related disparities across gender, race, class, ability, and citizenship (Bauer, 2019). The pandemic exposed the precarity of women’s progress in the workforce as well as pressure points in the broad social system, particularly inequities in health.

Even though many companies are allowing alternative career paths and offering return-to-work programs, the corporate workplace still struggles with female fertility and society at large suffers from the persistent motherhood penalty. What Stone characterized as a paradox of privilege for highly

educated career women who can afford to opt out becomes a constructed, contradictory narrative that continues to honor career success over care. As more women have entered the paid labor force and are now returning to work after a pause, as more dual-career couples navigate the demands of work and home, and as men begin to increase their contributions at home, changes in the gendered division of labor will require ongoing inquiry. The recent phenomenon of older women returning to the corporate workplace after time out necessitates a deeper understanding of multiple social mechanisms. How economists, sociologists, psychologists, politicians, and journalists conceptualize and critique this developing movement in the labor market merits ongoing imagination. Is it possible that America's decline in fertility could be curtailed by companies who assure woman they can return to good jobs after taking time out to raise children? Conceptualizing feminism's fourth wave has already begun with an emphasis on equal pay, intersectionality, and internet hash tags. Defining and isolating specific processes and solving problems that hinder women, workers, and children, will remain unfinished business until we break new ground.

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