

Professional Women Opt Out: A Complicated Conundrum

Much appreciated Katie Johnson's insightful May 27 Boston Globe article ["Many Women With Top Degrees Stay Home."](#) It's about a Vanderbilt University study showing that married women with degrees from the most elite colleges and universities are likelier to opt out of professional careers than are women who attended the least selective schools—and that this differential has little to do with family income.

One analyst suggests that women with degrees from elite schools feel freer than others to opt out because they think their prestigious degrees will allow them to easily transition back into the workforce.

Mebbe so—although this implies that, given the choice, all women would rather leave their jobs to stay at home with children—which I don't for two seconds believe is true.

Based on my research for *Broken Patterns, Professional Women and the Quest for a New Feminine Identity*, I'll bet the explanation for opting out is a lot more complicated than that.

In my interviews, many women told me they chose male-dominated professions because they didn't want to live the sorts of lives their homemaker mothers led—but many had grandmothers who worked outside the home in the early 20th century. This—and the historical record—led me to posit a push=pull process in which, going back to the industrial revolution in the US, the more women left the home for paying work in one generation, the greater the pull to domesticity, in the next. That push-pull process—driven by social, technological, generational and psychological forces—is also reflected in women's personal development along their life cycles. I believe it helps account for some of the choices—such as

schools, spouses, and careers— that women make.

I'm not saying Johnson and her interviewees are wrong...Only that that women make life choices for a multitude of reasons. The Vanderbilt study points out that women who graduate from elite schools tend to marry men from similar schools. It strikes me that if both spouses pursue highly competitive careers that allow little time for family life, something's got to give when children come along. Most often, it's the woman.

Like Sheryl Sandberg, the Facebook COO and author of *Lean-In*, I am troubled by the conundrum this creates: talented women who opt out of careers, even for just a few years, may lose the opportunity to attain positions in which they can influence workplace culture—and enhance the lives of women and men of the future. On the other hand, perhaps it is not the privileged who are likeliest to push for equality—but, rather, those who have struggled to overcome barriers.

—Anita M. Harris

Anita Harris is the author of Broken Patterns, Professional Women and the Quest for a New Feminine Identity (Wayne State University Press, 1995), A new edition will soon be published; please comment below if you'd like to reserve a copy.

New Cambridge Observer is a publication of the [Harris Communications Group](#), an award-winning public relations and digital marketing firm based in Cambridge, MA.