

## The Media Depiction of Women Who Opt Out

By: [Arielle Kuperberg](#), Pamela Stone

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### Abstract:

Through a content analysis of print media and a comparison of media images with trends in women's behavior, the authors explore the rhetoric and reality surrounding the exit of college-educated women from the workforce to become full-time mothers, a phenomenon that has been dubbed "opting out." The major imagery surrounding opting out emphasizes motherhood and family, elites, and choice. A close reading reveals some inconsistencies that counter the prevailing positive depiction. The authors also find that media coverage of opting out appears in leading publications reaching large and diverse audiences. A comparison of articles' themes against actual trends in women's opting-out behavior shows that there is a disjuncture between the two. The authors discuss the implications of these results for the dissemination of a new feminine mystique.

**Keywords:** working mothers | mass media | women's roles | work and family | gender

### Article:

Women leaving careers to pursue full-time mothering have generated considerable media attention. Faludi (1991) was among the first to note the extensive coverage given to this group of women, whom she termed "new traditionalists." A stream of articles since the 1980s has kept alive the notion that heterosexual women are forsaking the contemporary role of working mother, which is associated with economic independence, self-reliance, and self-actualization, to return to the more traditional, economically dependent role of full-time stay-at-home mom. Shortly after the publication of Faludi's best-selling book, the influential business publication *Barron's* heralded "a women's revolution" and "exodus" of women from the workforce (Mahar 1992). A decade later, this exodus was given the label that stuck—the "opt-out revolution"—in a high-profile article by the work-life columnist of the *New York Times* (Belkin 2003). A year after that, major newsweekly *Time* published a cover story entitled "The Case for Staying Home: Why More Young Moms Are *Opting Out* [emphasis added] of the Rat Race" (Wallis 2004). Stay-at-home mothers have been deemed fashionable by *New York* magazine (Gardner 2002) and status symbols by *The Wall Street Journal* (Swasy 1993); they are the subject of hit television shows (e.g., *Desperate Housewives*) and best-selling books (e.g., *I Don't Know How She Does it*

[Pearson 2002]). Through these and other images, the professional woman who chooses family over career is fast becoming a recognizable cultural type, a development noted by several prominent feminist analysts (e.g., Barnett and Rivers 1996; Williams 2000). Despite this, the way the media portray the phenomenon of opting out has received little systematic scholarly attention.

In this article, we fill this research gap with a content analysis of articles on opting out that appeared in leading print media outlets over a recent 16-year period. We begin by reviewing previous research on the media depiction of women, especially mothers. Next, we present the results of our content analysis, identifying major themes in the imagery surrounding opting out and describing the types of publications and articles in which such imagery appeared. Finally, we further situate the coverage of this phenomenon by first reviewing related research on women's labor force participation trends and presenting new analyses of actual trends in women's opting-out behavior during the period covered by our content analysis.

## **THE DEPICTION OF WOMEN IN PRINT MEDIA**

While no previous research has focused specifically on women who opt out, there is a considerable body of literature on the more general representation of heterosexual women's work and family roles in print media. This research shows that prevailing media images of women often support adherence to patriarchal notions of femininity (Lowe 2003). One of the first studies, and arguably still the most influential, was Friedan's analysis in *The Feminine Mystique* (1983). She found that women with careers were virtually absent from the pages of women's magazines of the 1950s and 1960s and that women with jobs were frequently portrayed as giving them up. Media portrayals of women evolve but display a persistent emphasis on women's home roles. Brown (1978) found that depictions of working women increased during most of the twentieth century (1900–74) but lagged behind changes in women's labor force participation. Demarest and Garner (1992) found a decrease in the depiction of traditional roles in women's magazines between 1954 and 1982, a period that witnessed a particularly dramatic increase in women's labor force participation. Examining women's magazines from 1955 to 1975, Geise (1979, 55) found similarly that support for the traditional male-breadwinner/female-homemaker division of labor declined; however, "at no time" was a woman's career portrayed as more important to her than marriage and family.

In contrast, research on the depiction of motherhood, especially for working mothers, reflects what Hays (1996) has termed "cultural contradictions." Smith (2001), for example, noted a shift in ideology between 1987 and 1997, with women's magazines running an increasing number of negative articles about working mothers and child care options, including several day care horror stories. In a study that took an even longer view, looking at the depiction of mothers and work in women's magazines from the 1950s to 1980s, Keller (1994) found a persistently traditional depiction, with the dominant image of motherhood changing little from the traditionalist stay-at-home mother of the 1960s to the "neotraditionalist" of the 1980s. Consistent with this trend toward a greater focus on fulltime motherhood, Douglas and Michaels (2004) surveyed popular media (including but not limited to print media) from the 1970s to the present and identified an

emergence of “the new momism,” which was exemplified by increasing attention to intensive mothering (Hays 1996) and illustrated primarily by ubiquitous images of stay-at-home moms.

Attention to motherhood is identified with class and race privilege. Advertisements in women’s magazines in the late 1990s were dominated by images of white at-home mothers (Johnston and Swanson 2003). Smith (2001) found that the mass-market magazine portrayal of women between 1987 and 1997 perpetuated a view of white middle- and upper-class women as workers and especially mothers, while poor minority women were presented solely in their role as workers and not mothers. Studies also find that the messages conveyed in print media aimed at adolescent girls are traditional, emphasizing women’s subordination to men, the centrality of heterosexual relationships, and the reinforcement of gender-segregated occupational stereotypes (Massoni 2004; Milkie 1999; Peirce 1993, 1997).

Reviewing a broad range of media portrayals of women in the decade from the mid-1980s to mid-1990s, Walters identified the dominant ideology as “postfeminism” (1995, 117). Postfeminism encompasses the backlash phenomenon identified by Faludi (1991) as well as what Walters calls a “more complex phenomenon” of antifeminism. While couched in the language of liberation (“choice”), the media images that emerged during “an historical period marked by the rise of the New Right and by the governments of Reagan and Bush,” were, she argued, “clearly anti-feminist” (1995, 139). Williams (2000) also noted the ascendance of what she called the “rhetoric of choice” in the media depiction of women, as did Crittenden (2001, 234–35), who commented that today’s rhetoric about “choosing” motherhood resembles the 1950s’ feminine mystique about “happy women.”

During the past two decades, the media depiction of *women in general*, while in some ways reflecting the reality of changes in their labor force participation, continues to focus on traditional roles and is increasingly pervaded by an individualistic rhetoric of choice. The media depiction of *motherhood* remains highly traditional. It is against this backdrop that we explore images about women whose actions signify a return to the traditional family form of male breadwinner–stay-at-home mother.

Previous research is limited, however, in that its conclusions are based on publications (typically magazines) that are aimed specifically at a female audience, many of whom are stay-at-home mothers (MRI 2004). Although this provides an excellent understanding of the rhetoric and imagery reaching a predominately female readership, it raises the question of whether these images are reaching a broader, mixed readership. Insofar as women who opt out are, by their actions, reverting from a dual-earner to a male breadwinner family, it is important to study the reach of such imagery not only among women but also among men. To the extent that these images are “controlling images” (Collins 1991, 68), that is, images that are designed to reinforce sexism and make traditional gendered roles appear natural and normal, they reinforce the ideal of the male breadwinner model and put pressure on men as husbands and fathers to live up to its dictates. In the workplace, where men disproportionately occupy positions of leadership and authority, exposure to opting-out imagery may lead to the assumption that having children will end women’s commitment to their careers, which may in turn influence hiring and promotion decisions (Williams 2000, 69). For these reasons, we make a point of expanding our analysis

beyond women's magazines to also include a broader set of publications that are aimed at both men and women.

In this article, we fill a gap by providing a systematic assessment of opting-out imagery. Our study extends existing research on media depiction of women by focusing on the relatively new and heretofore unexamined imagery surrounding the subject of opting out as well as by looking at a range of publications that target a large and diverse audience, including women and men. We seek to answer two sets of questions. The first focuses on the *content* of coverage: Who is profiled in these stories, and what are the major themes? How are women in these stories described and characterized? How consistent is the imagery surrounding women who opt out? The second looks at the *context* of coverage by examining the types of media in which these articles appear to see if articles are “ghettoized” into historically female magazines or sections of newspapers aimed at women (style section, etc.) or purveyed to a larger and more diverse readership. We also examine the types of articles that are written about opting out, for example, straight reportage versus editorials. Finally, we further contextualize media imagery by examining actual trends in labor force participation and opting out among the kinds of women depicted in these articles.

## DATA AND METHOD

Our research addresses these questions primarily through a content analysis of articles specifically about heterosexual women who left the work force and became stay-at-home mothers. For the textual analysis, we used quantitative and qualitative techniques (viz. Massoni 2004), which allowed us to identify themes based both on their frequency and meaning. We examine the text of articles (omitting pictures but including their captions) published in the 16-year period between 1988 and 2003. We begin our analysis in 1988 because of the availability of easily searchable electronic databases from that year, which allowed us to systematically identify and sample articles for analysis. This time period is also of special historical interest, covering the end of the decade in which the “new traditionalists” were first identified (Faludi 1991) through the Belkin (2003) article that coined the term *opting out*.

Using the search engines LexisNexis, Readers' Guide, and Academic Premier, we searched a variety of publications using a strategy akin to purposive sampling. Because our primary goal was to understand the full array of imagery and themes being conveyed by opting-out coverage rather than to describe the frequency or characteristics of its distribution, we wanted to ensure that we searched publications across a large and diverse readership. We did not select a representative sample in the probabilistic sense but rather searched publications using criteria that would result in a cross section of publications with respect to two major criteria: type of publication (and implicitly, audience) and region of publication. Using the lists of publications in U.S. regions defined by LexisNexis, we selected newspapers in major metro areas with populations of one million or more in 2003. In addition, we included leading business publications such as *Business Week* and *Barron's*, as well as national newsweeklies such as *Time* and *Newsweek*. We made a point of searching special interest magazines such as those for women of color (e.g., *Essence*, which is aimed at Black women) and also searched major women's magazines including *Redbook*, *Working Woman*, and *Ladies Home Journal*. By design, because we wanted to examine imagery that was widely disseminated, our methods resulted in a

sample that favors publications with relatively large circulations (i.e., national or large urban markets) and underrepresents articles appearing in small-town outlets.

To identify relevant articles in these publications, we experimented with several keywords, finding that *stay-at-home mom* was most useful and efficient for our purposes (recall that *opting out* was not coined until 2003). We read brief summaries or, in some cases, the full text of articles identified using this keyword, and included only those that were clearly about women who had “opted out” as this characterization is typically understood, that is, women who had quit paid work and were now at-home mothers. We excluded articles that did not specifically address the issue of opting out. During the period covered by our study, two highly visible women, then–PepsiCo–North America CEO Brenda Barnes in 1998 and then–White House counselor Karen Hughes in 2002, quit to go home, each occasioning significant media coverage. We excluded from the study the many articles about them that were strictly news reportage of their resignations. Otherwise, our sample of articles would have been skewed toward these women’s experiences, potentially biasing our results. Using these procedures, we identified 51 articles in 30 publications, the list of which is given in Appendix A. The procedures used to select publications and articles within them result in a diverse representation of texts, which reflect a comprehensive spectrum of opting-out imagery, potentially reaching a variety of audiences.

Guided by the critique of leading media analysts, as well as by work-family literature, we carried out a pilot study on a subset of articles to identify recurring themes. On the basis of this pretest, we developed two coding guides, one for features of articles and the other for features of women depicted in them. Thus, we use two units of analysis in this article—articles and women. We coded 10 characteristics of articles ( $N=51$ ), including the section in which they appeared, the type of publication in which they were found, and aspects of their overall depiction of opting out. For women ( $N=98$ ), we coded the characteristics of those who were described in three or more sentences in an article. This criterion ensured that there was sufficient information on each woman to code her characteristics reliably, although not all characteristics could be coded for every woman. Coded for women were the reasons mentioned for opting out, demographic characteristics, former occupation, husband’s occupation, activities at home, and sentiments about quitting. Coding was carried out by three evaluators. To ensure high levels of intercoder agreement, a series of pretests was conducted, and code guide instructions (available from authors) were clarified to reduce inconsistencies (Altheide 1996), resulting in greater than 85 percent agreement among coders. On the basis of the frequencies of these coded characteristics, we identified several recurring themes. We then reanalyzed the articles to identify particular quotations related to the themes determined through quantitative coding.

## **RESULTS**

### **Imaging Opting Out: The Content of Opt-Out Imagery**

We discovered three broad themes in the opt-out texts, which we identify as (1) “Family First, Child-Centric,” (2) “The Mommy Elite,” and (3) “Making Choices.” Each is described below. In content, these themes are consistent with the feminist critique and past research in their emphasis on motherhood instead of wifehood and their focus on white, upper-middleclass women, as well as in their embodiment of postfeminist, so-called choice feminism. However, we also find

evidence of inconsistency in aspects of the portrayal of women who have opted out that paints a more complicated picture about the imagery surrounding these women.

*Family first, child-centric.* In line with prior research, which detects a shift in the portrayal of women to emphasize their role as mothers (Douglas and Michaels 2004), we find that imagery surrounding opting out focuses almost exclusively on women as mothers rather than wives, and on family rather than work. Although the decision to opt out involves consideration of both the work and family sides of the equation (see, e.g., Boushey 2005; Stone 2007), the overall message of the majority of articles (28 of 51) represents it as being primarily about family rather than work, with two articles focused exclusively on family and making no mention of work. These articles were dominated by family- and child-centric rhetoric. An article illustrative of this rhetoric featured a 48-year-old stay-at-home mom with four children who “wanted me to stay home. It meant security for them.” Another article featured a mother of children in the 8th and 10th grades who quit because she “and her husband thought their family needed more.”

When we turn to an examination of the 98 women depicted in these articles, we find more evidence of child-focused themes attached to opting out. Women had an average of 1.49 children when they left the workforce, with one-third reporting having had an additional child after they were home. At the time of quitting, 82 women had at least one preschooler; the remainder had school-age children. Consistent with this profile, taking care of children (rather than spouses or the house) was by far the most frequently given reason for going home, mentioned by 92 women, for most of whom it was also the most important reason.

Further demonstrating the ascendance of the motherhood role, husbands were a minor presence in these accounts. When husbands were mentioned, it was often to reinforce their support for their wives’ full-time motherhood role, as in the quote above. Coupled with the pervasive presence of children, the absence of husbands adds to accumulating evidence from the research reviewed earlier that the role of mother is displacing that of wife as women’s primary domestic role in media messages about heterosexual women. Only four of the 98 women mentioned husbands in connection with reasons for quitting paid work and for none was a husband the most important reason. Two women described husbands who *discouraged* them from quitting (one motivated by a concern for family finances; another because he wanted his wife to have a career). The decision to go home appears to be women’s alone to make, and it is a decision predicated largely on their parenting responsibilities rather than wifely or homemaking ones.

In media accounts, the specific reasons women gave for quitting work invariably focused on motherhood, rather than the constraints of the workplace. This contrasts with more academic research involving interviews with women themselves, which finds workplace obstacles, including long work hours and inflexible schedules, are central reasons for women opting out (Hewlett and Luce 2005; Stone 2007). The media focus on motherhood was linked to essentialist tastes and preferences often expressed in emotionally laden language. Typical was the woman who talked of “longing” and “regret:” “No one admits the longing for a newborn left behind every morning, or the regret at having to leave a child in the hands of a nanny or day care worker.” Another commented, “Before my daughter was born, I never had any doubt that I was going to be a working mom. Of course, my resolve weakened the first time I had to leave my baby in the arms of a babysitter.” As one woman explained, she “planned to go back to work

shortly after the baby was born,” but “the first time I held my daughter in my arms, my priorities completely changed: I knew I couldn’t put her in day care to go back to work.” Five women specifically cited the lack of high-quality and affordable child care as an important reason in their decision to opt out. Few women, however, offered work-related reasons for leaving. Only seven cited workplace constraints such as the pressures and demanding nature of professional jobs. Nine pointed to the difficulties of juggling work and family.

At home, women’s activities were portrayed as revolving almost exclusively around children. Child care was the most frequently mentioned activity, cited by almost all women. Other activities were mentioned much less often and included (in order of frequency) part-time employment (21 women), housekeeping (16 women), volunteer work (11 women), freelance and consulting work (eight women), and education (two women). The emphasis on child care rather than housekeeping, husband tending, or community involvement further underscores the increasing centrality of motherhood to the depiction of women who opt out and its ascendance over other aspects of the domestic role.

*The mommy elite.* In the media accounts we analyzed, women who opted out were highly educated and had worked in especially high-status professional jobs. One woman described her incredulity at being ignored during a dinner party, as she had been a magazine editor before deciding to stay at home. Another opened her article about why she quit with a discussion of winning the Pulitzer Prize. Many articles showcased stay-at-home moms’ impressive credentials. Three-quarters had completed a college degree, compared to only about one-quarter of all American women (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2005), and an additional one-quarter had gone to graduate or professional school. Only five women were identified as having completed less than a college education.

These women’s elite status was also demonstrated by their former careers and their husbands’ current ones. Of the 80 women whose prior jobs were identified, 16 had the words *manager*, *executive*, *director*, or *administrator* in their job titles; 11 had worked as lawyers; four as vice presidents of corporations; four were former journalists at major newspapers; one had been a corporate CEO; and another a member of the U.S. House of Representatives. Other professional jobs included economist, engineer, college lecturer, broker, magazine editor, network television producer, computer programmer, social worker, and technical writer. Conversely, nonprofessional jobs were sparsely represented and included only child care worker, retail worker, dental assistant, and hairdresser. Not surprisingly, given that opting out requires women to relinquish paid employment, the women featured in these articles were married to men who could support their stay-at-home lifestyle. Husbands’ jobs included such high-earning ones as lawyer, doctor, corporate executive, physicist, and U.S. Representative.

*Making choices.* Joan Williams (2000) was one of the first to single out and question the choice rhetoric that surrounds women’s decisions to quit jobs and head home. Other recent studies of the opt-out phenomenon also challenge the degree to which women’s decisions represent the element of discretion and preference that the word *choice* implies (Boushey 2005; Stone and Lovejoy 2004; Stone 2007). Our results make clear that the media frames the decision to opt out almost exclusively in terms of the rhetoric of choice, with virtually no mention of barriers, constraints, or lack of options. Belkin’s (2003) *New York Times Magazine* article is probably the

most explicit in its use of such imagery. The lead-in for the article asked: “Q: Why don’t more women get to the top?” and answered: “A: They *choose* not to” [emphasis added], thereby framing not only the decision to go home as a choice or preference but implicitly attributing women’s failure to get to the top to their own choices. In the articles we analyzed, choice imagery also appeared in titles such as “Why can’t you respect my *choice*?,” “More couples *choose* a one-job lifestyle: Mothers *trade* paycheck for time at home,” and “Top PepsiCo executive *picks* family over job” [emphasis added]. One woman profiled had worked as an economist before leaving her job to stay home with two children, age 18 months and five years at the time of interview. Her account of her decision emphasized the facility and agency associated with choice; for her, “it was an easy decision to become a stay-at-home-mom.”

The choice rhetoric in articles’ titles was amplified by women’s other comments. Most did not mention feminism or the women’s movement at all, but when they did, it was typically in the context of choice. This was the construction put forward by a former publisher: “Women today, if we think about feminism at all, we see it as a battle fought for ‘the choice.’ For us, the freedom to choose work if we want to work is the feminist strain in our lives.” A former teacher with two children under the age of three who had been out of the workforce for three years expressed her gratitude: “I considered myself to be a feminist . . . thanks to the women’s movement, I’m happy to have the choice.” Thus, consistent with the postfeminist account (Walters 1995), women articulated a view of feminism in which choice and the individualistic discretion it implies figured prominently. It should be noted that very few articles contained explicit antifeminist sentiments. One that did featured a woman who opined, “Feminists want us to believe that these ‘other women’ [stay-at-home moms] are an extinct species or that when they encounter them, their lives are being wasted,” reflecting her understanding of feminism as antifamily or antimotherhood.

*Challenges and inconsistencies.* In analyzing the major themes of these articles, we find that they paint a fairly monolithic portrait of women who opt out. However, a close reading of women’s comments hints at inconsistencies. While affirming that the decision to become at-home mothers was their choice, only half of the 98 women expressed exclusively positive sentiments about quitting work. The other half shared either exclusively negative or mixed sentiments about having given up jobs. A 29-year old mother of three young children quit her job as a dental assistant but remarked on feeling lonely with so many of her female friends continuing to work. She admitted that “I’m kind of jealous they get to work,” quickly offsetting this with “but they’re probably jealous of me getting to be here.” A former magazine journalist expressed her regrets: “I would think of the newsroom, crackling with gossip and inside jokes, and then Emma would start crying again: I traded that for *this*?”

With regard to their feelings about staying home, half (49) expressed only positive reactions, 34 had mixed sentiments, and 15 reported only negative reactions. Specific problems with staying home included isolation (mentioned by 24 women) and lack of respect, recognition, or low status (25 women). One woman “felt isolated, and found her new career choice did not earn as much respect in society.” Women struggled to reconcile the dissonance created by their own decision; on the one hand affirming their choice, on the other, recognizing that their decision put them in a culturally devalued role. A stay-at-home mother for three years reported a long period of acclimation to the perceived loss of status in being home: “It takes 2 1/2 years learning not to be



sensitive to people saying: ‘You don’t work?’” A 37-year-old mother of a 14-year-old daughter had recently decided to return to work because “I didn’t feel good about myself.” Complaints about the nature of household work were numerous, made by 27 women, and included the stress of taking care of children, boredom, and lack of structure. One woman, a former graphic designer with two children age three years and nine months, remarked, “Everything you do at home gets undone.” Perhaps not surprisingly, given their privileged background, very few women (12) mentioned financial problems as a downside to their having opted out.

Another area of inconsistency has to do with women’s paid work *at home*. Although women were repeatedly represented as stay-at-home mothers, more than one-third of them said they were engaged in some sort of paid work once they were home, such as part-time jobs, freelance consulting, or starting their own businesses. Work involvement, in fact, was much more common than volunteering, another traditional pursuit of at-home mothers. A magazine editor with a daughter, while identified as a stay-at-home mother, actually worked part-time from home. Another stay-at-home mom worked at home doing data entry four to eight hours a day, while two other women profiled created a Web-based business.

With regard to working in the future, although most women made no mention of it, 20 women planned to return to work, and only five women volunteered that they would definitely not. Thus, while these portrayals seem to cast women exclusively as stay-at-home mothers, a closer reading indicates that even these so-called at-home mothers have a more fluid relationship with work, with a significant number actually engaged in paid employment and others contemplating returning to it.

### **Opt-Out Imagery in Context**

We examine various characteristics of the publications in which articles on opting out appeared and of the articles themselves to contextualize our findings and suggest the nature and extent of the audiences reached by this imagery. An examination of the frequency of publication of articles during the 16-year study period finds considerable year-to-year variation in the number of articles on opting out, with a pronounced increase in frequency after 1993 (see Appendix B). Articles were fairly lengthy, averaging 950 words, indicating that they were not cursory treatments. In comparison, only 10.5 percent of articles in daily metro newspapers (the modal type in this study) have more than 750 words (Journalism.org 2006). Articles on opting out appear to reach a broad and diverse audience. The great majority of articles, 45 of 51, were found in general interest newspapers and magazines, which enjoy a large and mixed readership, as opposed to the relatively small, highly specialized, and single-sex audience of women’s magazines. Within the publications in which they appeared, and further reflective of a broad general readership, 23 articles were found in general interest/news sections, 18 articles in a lifestyle or living section (which are often targeted to a female audience), and four in business or financial sections (more likely to enjoy a predominately male readership).

When we examined articles by type, we found that just more than half the articles (29 of 51) were commentary in the form of editorials, opinion pieces, advice, and how-to’s, and first-person accounts with titles such as “Why I Quit,” “Survival Skills on One Salary,” and “Why Can’t You Respect My Choice?” The preponderance of commentary highlights how highly personalized

and contested the topic is, with the authors, typically stay-at-home moms, trying to justify their own decision, generate approval for it, or convince others to follow their lead. Authors of this type of article often set themselves up as authorities or role models, or are positioned as such by virtue of their name recognition or a record of prior accomplishment.

Twenty-two articles were general information or straight reportage with titles such as “More Couples Choose a One-Job Lifestyle.” Many of the articles, similar to “The Opt-Out Revolution,” use words such as *trend* or *revolution* to describe what they claim to be the increasing rate of opting out, but their claims are typically supported only by anecdotal evidence, for example, “Among her *friends* [emphasis added], more women from all professions are opting to stay home with their children.”

### **Situating Opting-Out Imagery against Actual Trends**

Several recent studies (e.g., Boushey 2005; Cohany and Sok 2007; Goldin 2006) present analyses of trends in women’s labor force participation that refute the notion that there has been a sustained and sizeable increase in opting out, much less a “revolution.” Cohany and Sok (2007) found that there was a decrease in the labor force participation of married mothers of infants in the late 1990s and that the trend was slightly more pronounced among college-educated women—a nine percent drop between 1997 and 2000 versus eight percent for those with less than a college degree. After 2000, however, labor force participation rates of these women showed little change. When these trends were adjusted for changes in demographic characteristics and labor market conditions from 1984 to 2004, Boushey (2005, 10) found them unchanged for highly educated women in their thirties. In fact, after adjustments, this group was “more likely than other educational groups to be in the labor force if they have children at home—even young children.” A longitudinal study by Goldin (2006, A27) further illustrates the disconnect between the rhetoric of opting out and the reality. Examining the work histories of women who graduated from highly selective colleges and universities during the early 1980s, she found that “fully 58 percent were never out of the job market for more than six months total” over a roughly 25-year period.

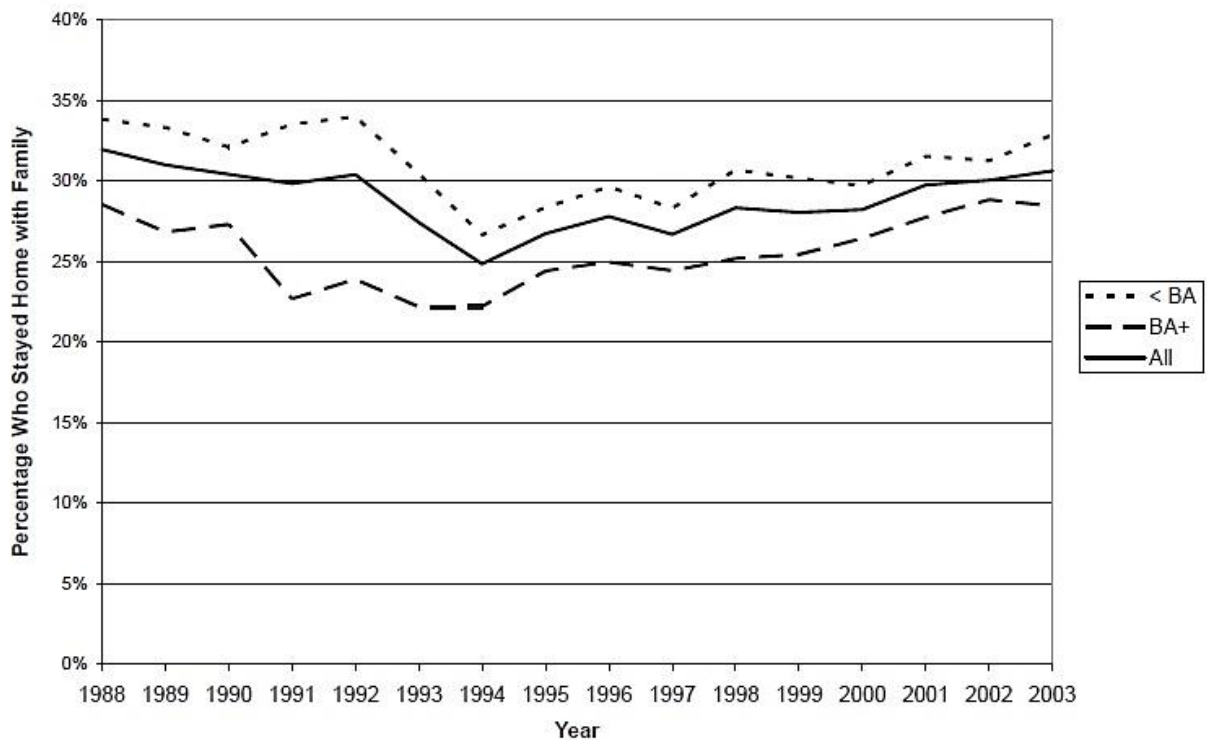
These studies raise questions about the existence of an actual trend in opting out, but to further situate these articles’ claims, in Figure 1 we present trends in what we believe is a more direct measure, whether or not a woman stayed home last year to take care of family, focusing specifically on the demographic profile in these articles, heterosexual married white, non-Hispanic women aged 30–45 who are mothers of young children.<sup>2</sup> Although the two rates (staying home and being in the labor force) track each other quite closely, they are not mirror images of one another, because women can be out of the labor force for other reasons, such as schooling or disability. As Figure 1 shows, despite the articles’ trumpeting of trends, even revolution, the rates at which mothers are staying at home (or opting out) remain fairly constant, showing a decrease across all women between 1988 and 2003. The trend, however, is not straightforward. After first decreasing from a high of 32 percent in 1988 to a low of 25 percent in 1994, rates of staying at home increased to 31 percent in 2003—an increase from the low mid-90s levels to be sure, but still lower than the level in 1988.

Turning to the highly educated mothers who are the focus of media coverage, rates of staying at home conform to the larger pattern, first decreasing and then increasing, with the result that the proportion at home in 2003, 28.4 percent, was virtually identical to the proportion in 1988, 28.5 percent. Throughout this period, only a distinct minority of mothers are home, with the remainder—approximately three-quarters—engaged in other activities, primarily paid employment. For less educated mothers, rates of staying home also decline before rising again, but do not quite reach their 1988 levels.

Thus, media claims of an upward trend in opting out receive mixed support, showing an increase in the short term but not in the long term. However, inconsistent with the media depiction, a close examination of the data shows that throughout the period studied, the large majority of women portrayed in these articles, that is, college-educated mothers of preschoolers, are working and opting out at levels consistently *lower* than those of their less-educated counterparts.

## CONCLUSION

Our systematic assessment of opting-out imagery adds to the considerable body of research on the media depiction of women and extends past findings. The sustained publication during a 16-year period of articles on opting out is consistent with prior research showing that the media promulgates traditional images of heterosexual women. The focus in these articles on motherhood as the primary counterpoint to, and reason for forsaking, careers continues the larger trend documented in past research on the media depiction of women, which emphasizes motherhood over other home roles. Further underscoring motherhood as women's defining role in these stories is the virtual absence of husbands. The omission of husbands is particularly notable since it is their earnings that make it possible for women to opt out by quitting their jobs (Stone 2007). Women in these articles are presented as mothers rather than wives or workers or individuals with their own interests and needs. These portrayals of motherhood are consistent with Hay's (1996) discussion of intensive mothering, in which she notes that contemporary ideologies of child rearing are increasingly child-centric rather than mother-centric. Lareau (2003) calls this form of intense parenting behavior "concerted cultivation," that is, a form of parenting that relies on organized activities and finds that this method of child rearing is more common among middle-class parents, like the women portrayed in these articles, than among parents of lower socioeconomic status.



**Figure 1: Rates of Opting Out among White Non-Hispanic Married Women Age 30–45 with Child Younger Than 6: 1988–2003**

NOTE: BA = bachelor's degree.

The characteristics of the women profiled, especially their high-status educational and occupational backgrounds, also illustrate another pattern documented in the research literature: the association of motherhood with class and race privilege. Although we were unable to identify the race of the women profiled in the articles, it seems fairly safe to conclude that the vast majority are white. In addition, all women identified were part of heterosexual couples, reinforcing a heteronormative conception of motherhood. We also find, confirming the feminist critique, that the articles position women's decision to quit careers as reflective of their exercise of choice, as well as exaggerate the extent of opting out. We further extend previous research by showing that such images are not confined to the pages of women's magazines but appear in a wide variety of publications reaching a large and diverse audience. Men as well as women may perceive opting out as a larger trend, which might affect their own conceptions of role-appropriate behavior, both for themselves and for their partners.

In its portrayal of professional women seemingly rejecting their careers in favor of a return to the traditional domestic role, elements of the depiction of opting out can be interpreted as signaling the emergence of a new feminine mystique, an updated version of what Betty Friedan first identified in 1963. According to the tenets of the feminine mystique (Friedan 1983, 43), women

“find fulfillment only in sexual passivity, male domination, and nurturing maternal love,” fulfillment realized in the 1950s and 1960s through the role of housewife. In this new mystique, as our results illustrate, the role of mother has displaced that of wife (Douglas and Michaels 2004), and the decision to stay at home is distinguished from the old version by being couched in a discourse of choice and feminism (Crittenden 2001; Williams 2000). The new mystique seems more progressive than the old one because, thanks to feminist gains, college-educated elite women today appear to have more options than women of earlier eras and are now able to *choose* to stay at home, free of overt patriarchal pressure and subjugation.

In portraying opting out as the province of the privileged, educated elite, the media confers status and legitimacy, even desirability, on the decision to stay home. By virtue of their own educational backgrounds and former professional status, the women who are depicted as opting out today are further reminiscent of the women Friedan portrayed and reinforce the idea that opting-out imagery is promulgating a new feminine mystique. The positioning of opting out as a trend, however, is a depiction that is at odds with the more complicated reality of the lives of the educated women who are portrayed as its messengers and are presumably its target. Although the college-educated professional women featured in these articles are, in fact, less likely than other women to opt out of the labor force, they are more likely than less-educated women to read newspapers and magazines in which these articles appear. This disconnect between rhetoric and reality generates new “cultural contradictions” (Hays 1996). Those least likely to opt out are more likely to read that women like themselves are doing so, which may in turn suggest to them that they are deviant for carrying on with their careers.<sup>3</sup> In its singular emphasis on individual choices, the opt-out narrative creates further contradictions in which the “choice” of these women to quit their careers is depicted as a victory of the feminist movement, thereby masking very real structural barriers professional women face in trying to combine work and family, such as the long hours and the lack of flexible options (e.g., part-time or job sharing) (Hewlett and Luce 2005; Stone 2007).

When Friedan wrote about educated women at home, the feminine mystique characterized a relatively large group of women and was a far better-fitting depiction of the women it portrayed than is the case today. In 1960, roughly two-thirds of married women with children under 18 were out of the labor force; in 2000, less than one-third were (Hesse-Biber and Carter 2005). Unlike the women Friedan studied, many stay-at-home mothers today have had careers, allowing them to look to that experience in assessing life at home, and identify more closely with working women as peers or role models. Women who opt out are a minority, albeit a significant minority; Friedan’s women were not. This disjuncture between the rhetoric of opting out and the reality of women’s lives allows for the possibility that the new feminine mystique will not be as powerful as the old.

## APPENDIX A

### List of Publications in Which Articles Appeared (*N* = 51)

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*The Associated Press State and Local Wire* (4)  
*The Atlanta Journal and Constitution* (1)  
*The Baltimore Sun* (1)  
*The Boston Globe* (3)  
*The Buffalo News* (2)  
*Business Week* (1)  
*Chicago Sun-Times* (1)  
*Chicago Tribune* (1)  
*The Courier-Journal* (2)  
*The Denver Post* (2)  
*Essence* (1)  
*The Indianapolis Star* (1)  
*The Kansas City Star* (1)  
*Ladies' Home Journal* (3)  
*The Los Angeles Times* (1)

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### APPENDIX A (continued)

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*Money* (1)  
*New York Times* (4)  
*New York Times Magazine* (2)  
*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* (1)  
*The Plain Dealer* (2)  
*Redbook* (1)  
*The San Francisco Chronicle* (1)  
*St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (2)  
*The Tampa Tribune* (1)  
*The Times-Picayune* (1)  
*The Toronto Sun* (1)  
*The Wall Street Journal* (2)  
*The Washington Post* (5)  
*Washington Post Magazine* (1)  
*Working Woman* (1)

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NOTE: The number of articles from each publication is indicated in parentheses.

## APPENDIX B

### Frequency of Articles by Year of Publication ( $N = 51$ )

<i>Year</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
1988	1
1989	1
1990	0
1991	0
1992	2
1993	0
1994	7
1995	6
1996	3
1997	5
1998	10
1999	1
2000	1
2001	4
2002	3
2003	7

## NOTES

1. What Belkin (2003) termed “opting out” is known by various names, such as Faludi’s (1991) “new traditionalists,” Keller’s (1994) “neotraditionalism,” and Douglas and Michaels’ (2004) “new momism,” but all refer to the movement of educated women from careers to family or from career combined with family to a family-only focus.

2. For this analysis, we use data from the March supplement of the Current Population Survey (CPS). Staying at home and opting out are used interchangeably. CPS data are cross-sectional and do not enable us to follow women across their lives, nor do they provide information on prior work histories for women who are currently out of the labor force. The results we present give a yearly assessment of the proportion of women fitting the media’s opt-out demographic who are at home, enabling us to assess trends thereof.

3. On the other hand, it is worth noting anecdotally that in response to Belkin’s (2003) article, the *New York Times* reported an unusually large volume of letters to the editor, many of which were highly negative and challenging of her interpretation.

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