

## **Beyond "Opting Out:" Dissecting the Barriers Affecting Women's Entrance and Success in Business**

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### **Abstract**

The premise of opting out has long been used as an explanation for the unemployment or underemployment of women in the workplace, yet research shows that opting out—voluntarily leaving the workforce due to a desire to become a stay-at-home mother—is only applicable for a minority of cases. It is clear that female-related challenges such as childcare, eldercare, spousal career demands, inflexible or masculine work environments, and even discrimination or bias, have a greater influence in causing women's fragmented or non-linear career paths. These findings then pose some questions; 1) how aware are organizations or governmental institutions of the challenges faced by women in the workplace, and 2) if aware, what are they doing or what are they willing to do. In order to fully recognize the value of female human capital, it is imperative that organizations work to find solutions for breaking down the barriers by creating more flexible or female-friendly work environments.

### **Introduction**

Women have increasingly made a significant impact on the paid workforce over the past 70 years. But even with increasing female participation rates, the workplace poses distinct challenges for women in remaining permanently employed and maneuvering through corporate ranks. The popular media has presented "opting out" as a rationale for women's unstructured career paths. The popular press has made the case that women, in great numbers and in high level careers, make the choice to leave the workforce because of a strong desire to raise their children. However, studies have shown that most newspaper stories only relate the experiences or opinions of a few select women. Most reports have failed to relate the truth about the female majority and have neglected the real experiences of most American families and working women.<sup>1</sup> While it is true that women make life choices based on the strong pull from their personal lives—children, eldercare, spousal career demands, and even family relocation—it is not clear if "opting out" is a matter of necessity or choice; are there possibly more push factors than pull factors involved when making these critical decisions.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the issue is, if given

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance: E. J. Graff, "The Opt Out Myth: Most moms have to work to make ends meet. So why does the press write only about the elite few who don't?" *Columbia Journalism Review* 45, no. 6 (2007, March/April): 53; Joan Williams, Jessica Manvell, and Stephanie Bornstein, "'Opt Out' or Pushed Out? How the Press Covers Work/Family Conflict," *Center for WorkLife Law*, University of California College of Law, (2006, October).

<sup>2</sup> See for instance: Vanessa Gash, "Sacrificing Their Careers for Their Families: An Analysis of the Penalty to Motherhood in Europe," *Science + Business Media*, Cathie March Centre for Census and Research; University of Manchester 93 (2009, January 17): 583; Susan Corby and Celia Stanworth, "A Price Worth Paying: Women and work - choice, constraint or satisficing,"



better options or solutions, would women more readily choose to remain in the workforce and choose career goals over unemployment or underemployment? And what are employers willing to do or doing, if anything, to assist women faced with these challenges? A possible solution that would be available to employers is presented.

### **Background**

Women's participation in the United States workforce has steadily increased from 43% in 1970 to 59.5% in 2008.<sup>3</sup> Statistics also show that 66% of all American households with children under 18 have all adults working as do 51% of households with women living without a husband.<sup>4</sup> In 2008, 51% of women with children under the age of 18 worked full-time, whereas 16.4% worked part-time, 4% were unemployed and 28.6% were not in the workforce.<sup>5</sup> According to the US Census Bureau, "60% of women earn half or more of their families' income."<sup>6</sup> The current data implies that it is imperative for most women to work—either to provide two parent households with dual income or to provide the sole income to account for the increased number of single female households. Basic economic factors for family survival seem to refute the belief that most women can voluntarily choose to leave the workforce.

Although the evidence shows that women either want to or need to work, many women still leave the workforce at some point in their career. Nearly four in ten highly qualified women (37%) reported that they left work voluntarily at some point in their careers and among women who had children, that statistic rose to 43%.<sup>7</sup> These figures indicate that many women make a choice to leave the workforce and having children has an increased impact on this decision. However, these figures do not provide the specific reasons behind the premise of "opting out." While "opting out" is an easy explanation for women's non-linear career paths, it is not so simple. Studies have shown that of highly qualified women "only 16% always intended to quit when they had children" and of the 43 women surveyed, only 5 had a "stable preference to be a

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*Equal Opportunity International*, Emerald Group Publishing, 28, no. 2 (2009); E. J. Graff, "The Opt Out Myth: Most moms have to work to make ends meet. So why does the press write only about the elite few who don't?" *Columbia Journalism Review* 45, no. 6 (2007, March/April): 53; Elizabeth Cabrera, "Opting Out and Opting In: Understanding the complexities of women's career transitions," *Career Development International*, Emerald Group Publishing Limited 12, no. 3 (2007).

<sup>3</sup> US Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Table 6. Employment status of mothers with own children under 3 years old by single year of age of youngest child, and marital status, 2007-2009 annual averages," *US Bureau of Labor Statistics Current Population Survey*, Washington, DC. (2009). [http://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/american\\_community\\_survey\\_acs/cb09-cn28.html](http://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/american_community_survey_acs/cb09-cn28.html) (accessed January 8, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Rose Kreider and Diana Elliott, "America's Families and Living Arrangements: 2007, Current Population Reports," *U.S. Census Bureau*, U.S. Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration. (2009, September): 14. <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam/p20-561.pdf> (accessed November 20, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> US Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Employed and unemployed full- and part-time workers by age, sex, race, and Hispanic or Latino ethnicity 2008," *US Bureau of Labor Statistics Current Population Survey*, Washington, DC. (2009). <http://www.catalyst.org/publication/249/women-leaving-re-entering-the-work-force> (accessed January 8, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Kreider and Elliott, 14.

<sup>7</sup> Sylvia Hewlett and Carolyn Luce, "Off-Ramps and On-Ramps: Keeping Talented Women on the Road to Success," *Harvard Business Review Online* (2005, March). <http://hbr.org/2005/03/off-ramps-and-on-ramps/ar/1> (accessed February 3, 2010).



stay-at-home mom."<sup>8</sup> Cleary, while a minority of women will choose to be stay-at-home mothers out of pure preference, most women, especially educated women, prefer to maintain a working status. The theory of "opting out" continues to lack validity for providing a basis for why many women become unemployed or underemployed.

The demographics of stay-at-home mothers is yet another facet in further weakening the "opting out" premise. In the United States, the number of households with children under 18 has consistently decreased and only 8% of professional women (born since 1956) have left the workforce for childbearing.<sup>9</sup> In 2007, the U.S. Census reported that one quarter of stay-at-home mothers were Hispanic and one third were foreign born. These studies also showed that 24% of married-couple families included a stay-at-home mother. Of these stay-at-home mothers, they tended to be younger with 44% under the age of 35 and were found to be less educated. 32% of stay at home mothers had bachelor's degrees while another 38% of mothers had bachelors and worked.<sup>10</sup> These statistics solidify the assumption that factors other than "opting out" play a larger role and have more impact in the explanation for female unemployment.

### **Reasons for Leaving the Workforce**

A comparison of career paths for men and women illustrates that women's career paths tend to be disjointed, broken, or nonlinear, whereas men's career paths are more direct and linear.<sup>11</sup> So what are some of the variables that create these nonlinear paths for women? While it is clear that many women leave the workforce at various points in their career,<sup>12</sup> the question becomes whether a woman's decision to leave the workforce is based on a psychological choice to maintain traditional family values or are most decisions to leave the workforce based on an entirely different set of factors. Since it is proposed that pure "opting out" can only be used to explain a small minority of decisions to leave the workforce, it appears that push factors must be considered to have a greater impact on women's nonlinear careers than pull factors.<sup>13</sup>

Conflicting professional and societal roles placed on women can have a direct impact on employment decisions. Many women find themselves caught between the role of domestic caretaker and female professional.<sup>14</sup> Women are caught in the struggle between economic and personal expectations and many times cultural expectations can further increase the pressure to assume a role that is deemed appropriate for women. Yet providing household financial support as a single parent or as a dual income provider is essential for many women in today's economy,

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<sup>8</sup> Pamela Stone and Meg Lovejoy, "Fast-track Women and the 'Choice' to Stay Home," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 596 (2006). <http://proquest.umi.com> (accessed January 14, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> Christine Percheski, "Opting Out? Cohort Differences in Professional Women's Employment Rates from 1960 to 2005," *American Sociological Review* 73, no. 3 (2008). <http://proquest.umi.com> (accessed November 4, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Kreider and Elliott, 12.

<sup>11</sup> Lisa Mainiero and Sherry Sullivan, "Kaleidoscope Careers: An alternative explanation for the opt-out revolution," *Academy of Management Executive* 1,9 no. 5(2005). <http://proquest.umi.com> (accessed January 14, 2010).

<sup>12</sup> See for instance: Hewlett and Luce; Stone and Lovejoy.

<sup>13</sup> See for instance: Hewlett and Luce; Graff.

<sup>14</sup> Karla Damiano-Teixeira, "Managing conflicting roles: A qualitative study with female faculty members," *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, 27, no.2 (2006). <http://proquest.umi.com> (accessed January 4, 2010).



necessitating that women maintain some type of employment. And for many women the desire to work or have a career goes beyond the simple financial rewards or demands. College enrollment for females increased 29% from 1997 to 2007 as compared to only a 22% increase for males in the same time period.<sup>15</sup> The desire to further education to enhance career options is a clear message that women are planning for fulfilling or challenging careers and leaning towards the role of working woman. However, women must still address the fact that the role of domestic caretaker may be directly opposed to their desire for employment. Whether real or perceived, this dissonance leads to stress and imbalance between work and personal life. Women feel guilty for choosing work over motherhood and society further adds to this stress by reinforcing gender stereotypes.<sup>16</sup> Regardless of the advances made by women in the workforce, much of society still associates women with the role of childrearing.

The pressures of child rearing and child care have a pronounced impact on a women's role in the workplace,<sup>17</sup> with the dropout trend being most pronounced for women with children under one year old. 60.4% of women with children under three years old were in the labor force in 2008 while only 56.4% of women with children under one were in the workforce in 2008.<sup>18</sup> The challenges of day care, in reference to both availability and quality, can further influence a woman's decision to drop out of the workforce. Studies have also suggested that several women may simply opt out because their income is too low to cover the costs of childcare.<sup>19</sup> In addition to child care, parental care is another issue for many baby boomers. The responsibilities of childrearing combined with care for elder parents have lead to a sandwiched generation.<sup>20</sup> Studies estimate that between 9% and 13% of dual earning families care for frail or disabled parents with up to 35% of the employed public providing some type of elder care in the past year.<sup>21</sup> Caring for elder parents while still providing for their own children has forced some adults out of the workplace or at least driven them to part-time employment.

Dual careers and the demands of spousal careers is another factor in female employment. A recent study showed that in mobile dual-career marriages, 82% of the accompanying spouses in relocations were women.<sup>22</sup> Many women also opted to alter their employment by cutting back

<sup>15</sup> U.S. Department of Education, "Digest of Education Statistics, 2008 (NCES 2009-020), Chapter 3, " *National Center for Education Statistics* (2009). <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d08/> (accessed February 20, 2010).

<sup>16</sup> Graff, 53.

<sup>17</sup> Daniela Del Boca and Cecile Wetzels, "Social Policies, Labour Markets and Motherhood," *Cambridge University Press*. Cambridge University Press Online, (2007). <http://proquest.umi.com> (accessed January 16, 2010).

<sup>18</sup> US Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Table 6."

<sup>19</sup> J.C. Day and B. Downs, "Opting-Out: An Exploration of Labor Force Participation of New Mothers," Paper presented at the *Population Association of America*, 2009 Annual Meeting, Detroit, Michigan (2009).

<sup>20</sup> Rose Rubin and Shelley White-Means, "Informal Caregiving: Dilemmas of Sandwiched Caregivers," *Journal of Family and Economic Issues* 30, no. 3(2009). <http://proquest.umi.com> (accessed February 14, 2010).

<sup>21</sup> See for instance: M. Neal and L. Hammer, "Dual-Earner Couples in the Sandwiched Generation: Effects of Coping Strategies Over Time," *The Psychological Manager Journal* 12, no. 4 ( 2009, October) . <http://proquest.umi.com> (accessed November 4, 2009); J. T. Bond, T. Thompson, E. Galinsky, and D. Prottsas, *The 2002 National Study of the Changing Workforce*, New York: *Families and Work Institute* (2003).

<sup>22</sup> Lillian Eby, "The Boundaryless Career Experiences of Mobile Spouses in Dual-Earner Marriages," *Group & Organization Management* 26, no. 3 (2001): 351. <http://gom.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/26/3/343> (accessed February 22, 2010).



on hours, dropping down to lower level positions, or even quitting as a result of their husbands' high powered careers or time intensive schedules. Two-thirds of women's decisions to leave the workplace were also highly influenced by the husbands input.<sup>23</sup> Yet many women fail to realize the potential impact taking a back seat to the husband's career can have on their own employment track. When a woman fails to consider her career goals when moving or making the decision on where to live, the result can have a dramatic impact; leading to a loss of career choice, skill development, and potential advancements. Accommodating to the husbands career can be costly to a woman in not only salary, but future opportunities.<sup>24</sup>

All of the factors identified here combine to hamper women's ability to maintain a consistent level of employment. The demands of female's domestic roles are further compounded by the traditional workforce with its inflexible standards and demands. According to a study conducted by the Center for Work-life Policy, almost all the women surveyed who left senior positions planned to return to work, however only 5% of respondents said they would return to the same employer. In the general business sector, one study found that 100% of the women surveyed said they would not return to their former employer.<sup>25</sup> These women felt that their employers failed to create a flexible or female friendly environment. They perceived their work environment to be focused around a single-minded competitive structure that created self destructive circumstances which forced women to have to make a choice between work life or family life.<sup>26</sup>

These rigid work structures continue to provide additional push factors for women. Women perceive many work environments as having "a lack of opportunity for female career advancement, replete with discriminative practices, elements of harassment; all leading to disdain of the corporate culture even though most organizations claim to encourage diversity."<sup>27</sup> Professional women who have left high level careers have described their former employers as having "inflexible and masculine environments characterized by competitiveness, extreme rationality, orderliness and conformity, and a focus on central power."<sup>28</sup> The mere nature of these rigid environments may encourage incidents of sexual discrimination. If women feel uncomfortable in environments that tend to contradict their personal styles or values and may exhibit high or extreme levels of self-monitoring; causing them to either adopt acceptable behaviors or leave the position or avoid seeking advancement opportunities.<sup>29</sup> Additionally,

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<sup>23</sup> Stone and Lovejoy.

<sup>24</sup> Marianne Ferber and Carole Green, "Career or Family: What Choices Do College Women Have?" *Journal of Labor Research* 24, no. 1 (2003, Winter):149. <http://proquest.umi.com> (accessed January 14, 2010).

<sup>25</sup> Joan Williams, Jessica Manvell, and Stephanie Bornstein, "'Opt Out' or Pushed Out? How the Press Covers Work/Family Conflict," *Center for WorkLife Law*, University of California College of Law, (2006, October). [http://www.uchastings.edu/site\\_files/WLL/OptOutPushedOut.pdf](http://www.uchastings.edu/site_files/WLL/OptOutPushedOut.pdf) (accessed December 12, 2009).

<sup>26</sup> Hewlett and Luce.

<sup>27</sup> Mainiero and Sullivan.

<sup>28</sup> Elizabeth Cabrera, "Opting Out and Opting In: Understanding the complexities of women's career transition," *Career Development International*, Emerald Group Publishing Limited 12, no. 3 (2007): 218-237. <http://proquest.umi.com> (accessed January 28, 2010).

<sup>29</sup> A. van Vianen and A. Fischer, "Illuminating the Glass Ceiling: the role of organizational culture preferences," *Journal of Occupational Psychology* 75, (2002). <http://proquest.umi.com> (accessed February 14, 2010).



women may face discrimination and bias if stereotyped as having soft values, and therefore deemed incapable to handle positions which require more rigid or masculine values. The perpetuation of female stereotypes will continue to limit advancement opportunities. On an even more critical note, these environments could result in sexual harassment issues. In 2009, 12,696 sexual harassment cases were filed with the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity with 84% of cases filed by women.<sup>30</sup> As sexual harassment is a lose-lose for everyone involved, it is imperative that organizations recognize the need to adjust these inflexible environments.

Another concern related to rigid work environments is often a lack of female role models or mentors holding top positions.<sup>31</sup> This creates limited access to male networks, excluding women from opportunities, limiting the social capital available to women, and therefore resulting in limits to advancement opportunities for women.<sup>32</sup> It appears that many women are pushed out of the workforce by inflexible organizations that have failed to adjust to the needs of the female worker. This topic tends to resurface not because women want to leave, but rather they feel like they have to leave. The push factor that evolves from a rigid work environment with few women in senior management positions is often unnoticed by business firms as will be shown in the research findings that are presented in the following sections of this paper. Women appear to develop a subtle awareness of the negative consequences to their careers, but usually years later after the reality of their career choice of selecting the firm versus family life becomes evident when trying to re-enter or advance in the workforce. Even with an increased awareness that women face unique challenges in the workforce, there still seems to be little understanding of the need for a balanced work life in some business organizations.

### **Returning to the Workforce: Horizontal Integration**

Once women leave the workforce, the next hurdle is overcoming barriers to re-entry. It tends to be more difficult for women in higher positions to re enter the workforce, forcing these women to take part-time positions or lower level jobs with lower pay and lower occupational worth.<sup>33</sup> The UK Equal Opportunities Commission published a report in 2007 showing—"just a third of managers and senior officials in the private and public sectors are female" and the problem is that two thirds of women work in just 12 occupational areas and, even within those areas, they don't have leadership and management roles. A lot has to be done."<sup>34</sup> Women in these positions tend to be undervalued in the role they play and in the pay they receive for these lower level positions. According to research by the Sector Skills Development Agency, the occupations

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<sup>30</sup> U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, "Sexual Harassment Charges EEOC & FEPAs Combined: FY 1997-Fy2009," *EEOC* (2009). [http://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/statistics/enforcement/sexual\\_harassment.cfm](http://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/statistics/enforcement/sexual_harassment.cfm).

<sup>31</sup> Val Singh, Susan Vinnicombe, and Kim James, "Constructing a Professional Identity: how young female managers use role models," *Women in Management Review* 2, no. 1(2006): 67. <http://dspace.lib.cranfield.ac.uk:8080/bitstream> (accessed on January 20, 2010).

<sup>32</sup> Christine Cross and Margaret Linehan, "Barriers to advancing female careers in the high-tech sector: empirical evidence from Ireland," *Women in Management Review* 21, no 1(2006). <http://proquest.umi.com> (accessed January 18, 2010).

<sup>33</sup> Sara Connolly and Mary Gregory, "Moving Down: Women's part-time work and occupational change in Britain,1991-2001," *Economic Journal* 118, no. 526 (2008) . <http://proquest.umi.com> (accessed January 28, 2010).

<sup>34</sup> Equal Opportunity Commission, "Annual Report & Accounts 2006-2007," *UK Equal Opportunities Commission* (2007). [www.official-documents.gov.uk/document/hc0607/hc07/0784/0784.asp](http://www.official-documents.gov.uk/document/hc0607/hc07/0784/0784.asp) (accessed January 18, 2010).



which most women fill are mainly within cleaning, catering, clerical, retail, caring and first-level management.<sup>35</sup> While women will find more fluidity in moving in and out of the workforce in these lower positions, the pay and ability to progress their careers will also be greatly diminished. This finding is further confirmed in the research conducted later in this paper.

For women who have exited from higher level jobs, the news is even direr. Women reentering the workforce or moving from part time to full time earn 21% less than continuously employed females; taking pay cuts as well as a reduction in responsibility. These women are incurring the "mommy tax" and are losing more than \$1 million over their career or up to 37% of income by taking off three or more years.<sup>36</sup> Research shows that mothers earn less than non-mothers, especially in countries with minimal formalized policies (i.e. US, UK and German). The study also showed that having children had less of a financial impact when examined in countries that have some type of formalized policy.<sup>37</sup> However, even women who once held upper level positions tend to fall back on part time positions or remain underemployed because these jobs are more flexible and allow them to attend the demands of their personal life.<sup>38</sup>

The bias against women reentering the workforce is symptomatic of the overall bias towards women in the workforce. Statistics show that 60% of women respondents returning to the workforce reported that their first job was at an entry level position, as opposed to 46% of male respondents in the same situation. Women also earned an average of \$4,600 less than men in their first job, even if they had the same amount of previous work experience.<sup>39</sup> Yet, women tend to be more willing to accept this inequity and sacrifice or compromise by taking a lower level position or a part time position. They take these positions to accommodate their desired work/life balance and to overcome the inflexibility of higher level positions.<sup>40</sup> Even though women make these decisions for convenience, it does not mean that they like it, but they do tend to be more reluctant to complain.<sup>41</sup>

### **Returning to the Workforce: Vertical Integration**

Another challenge for women is in moving through organizational ranks and furthering careers. According to the most recent data from the US Census Bureau, women earned only 77 cents for every \$1 their male counterparts earned.<sup>42</sup> It is surmised that part of the reason for this disparity

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<sup>35</sup> Elizabeth Eyre, "Stepping up to the challenge," *Training Journal*, Ely 7, no. 1 (2007, September). <http://proquest.umi.com> (accessed January 26, 2010).

<sup>36</sup> Mainiero and Sullivan.

<sup>37</sup> Gash.

<sup>38</sup> Catherine Hakim, "Sex Differences in Work-life Balance Roles," *Work Life Balance in the 21st Century*, Macmillan, Basingstoke (2005). <http://proquest.umi.com> (accessed January 14, 2010).

<sup>39</sup> Diana Middleton, "Women M.B.A.s Continue to Lag in Pay, Promotions," *Wall Street Journal Online* (2010, February 22). <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703787304575075222408999244.html>. (accessed February 24, 2010).

<sup>40</sup> Sally Walters, "Making the Best of a Bad Job? Female part-timers' orientations and attitudes to work," *Gender, Work and Organizations* 12, no. 3(2005). <http://proquest.umi.com> (accessed January 14, 2010).

<sup>41</sup> Susan Corby and Celia Stanworth, "A Price Worth Paying: Women and work - choice, constraint or satisficing," *Equal Opportunity International*, Emerald Group Publishing 28, no. 2 (2009). <http://proquest.umi.com> (accessed January 28, 2010).

<sup>42</sup> US Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Women in the Labor Force: a databook," *US Census Bureau*, Washington, DC. . (2005) [www.bls.gov/cps/htm](http://www.bls.gov/cps/htm) (accessed February 24, 2010).



is that women remain clustered in lower-paying occupations. With only 11% of senior executives at fortune 500 companies being women and only 8 serving as CEO<sup>43</sup> it is clear that women have not made marked progress in securing higher level positions. Studies of professional women, found that 42 percent of corporate women are childless by age 40, but only 14 percent planned to be.<sup>44</sup> Women also believe that senior jobs are only available to those willing to work full-time with long hours.<sup>45</sup> Women are paying the price of furthering their careers in order to balance out the demands of home life. It is clear that many women must make the choice between high level career or family—combining the two is a limited option.

Masculine or male-dominated organizations themselves cause barriers for female advancement. These masculine cultures stress competitiveness, conformity, and power which tend to be contrary to female values.<sup>46</sup> Women will not pursue these career tracks or even drop out of these positions if the corporate culture or environment is opposed to their personal values. Even though many women who are seeking management careers are "equally or better" qualified in education, the issue of subjectivity and gender stereotypes limits female advancement.<sup>47</sup> Even when women are considered to be competent as strong leaders, being directive or autocratic by portraying more masculine behaviors, tends to make them more highly disliked, whereas men being evaluated on the same behaviors are considered to be strong leaders.<sup>48</sup> This bias, as a result of stereotyping, can lead to gender bias in evaluations and promotions.<sup>49</sup>

Society based gender roles also play a part in a female's ability to achieve leadership positions. Society still associates women with the role of care-giver which is not congruent with the role of leadership.<sup>50</sup> Extensive studies by Schein found that societal stereotypes are highly problematic for female leaders. The research showed two key factors: 1) qualities that society associates with females are directly opposed to those associated with leaders, and 2) the qualities they associate with leaders are consistent with the characteristics of men. This holds with Schein's reference of "think manager, think male" phenomenon. Her research also shows that gender stereotyping by males has remained relatively unchanged for the past 30 years.<sup>51</sup> While this does not mean it will always lead to bias or discrimination, research shows a clear disadvantage for objective evaluations and female career advancement. However, it is important to note that gender bias is not only perpetuated by men. Studies have found that females are equally critical of women portraying masculine behaviors or powerful leadership roles. Women can be even more biased

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<sup>43</sup> Hewlett and Luce.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Corby and Stanworth, 164.

<sup>46</sup> Cabrera.

<sup>47</sup> Ulma Jogulu and Glenice Wood, "A Cross-cultural Study into Peer Evaluations of Women's Leadership Effectiveness," *Leadership & Organization Development Journal* 29, no. 7 (2008): 600. <http://proquest.umi.com> (accessed January 28, 2010).

<sup>48</sup> A. Eagly, "Female Leadership Advantage and Disadvantage: Resolving the contradictions," *Psychological of Women Quarterly* 31 (2007). <http://proquest.umi.com> (accessed January 28, 2010).

<sup>49</sup> Jogulu and Wood, 600.

<sup>50</sup> Eagly, 8.

<sup>51</sup> V. Schein, "A Global Look at Psychological Barriers to Women's Progress in Management," *Journal of Social Issues* 57, no. 4 (2001). <http://proquest.umi.com> (accessed January 28, 2010).



than men when evaluating other females.<sup>52</sup> Due to accepted role behaviors or experiences related to sexism, women also have a skewed view of female leadership.

Women also continue to experience the glass ceiling affect, whether due to societal, cultural, or organizational elements. Opting out of work for a period of time can have an impact on a women's ability to advance her career. Bias associated with male-oriented careers or lack of consistent experience will also impose the glass ceiling. The fact that many women tend to direct their education or experience in the fringe or service areas of an organization rather than in the mainstream functional areas also limits promotion for women and adds to the glass ceiling affect.<sup>53</sup>

It is clear that there are many factors beyond the opting out premise affecting women's entrance and success in organizations. Some of these variables, while controllable by the individual, can be difficult to manage. Many other factors are environmental making it imperative that business organizations are aware of the negative push they can have on women's careers and the possible ramifications this can have on their own operations due to this loss of female capital.

### **The Message to Employers**

The array of problems facing women in the workforce, as developed to this point, are well known in the industrial world, at least in the United States.<sup>54</sup> Much of the literature reviewed in this document is readily available to human resource professionals. Yet a question remained in the development of this research—to gauge and understand human resource professionals' true level of awareness regarding the challenges women face in the workplace in the United States. Seventeen senior human resource executives or small business owners were interviewed in order to gain an understanding of their views related to women opting out and opting in to the workforce. (see Appendix A)

The interviewees were senior Human Resource officers of major corporations in the banking, textile, and retail sectors along with owners performing the human resource function from a cross section of small business firms. Each was asked a series of questions designed to determine women-specific strategies in the recruitment, retention, development, and promotional

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<sup>52</sup> Jeanine Prime, Karsten Jonsen, Nancy Carter, and Martha Maznevski, "Manager's Perceptions of Women and Men Leaders: A Cross Cultural Comparison," *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management* 8, no. 2 (2008). <http://proquest.umi.com> (accessed February 14, 2010).

<sup>53</sup> L. Still, "Breaking the Glass Ceiling: Another Perspective," *Women in Management Review* 7, no. 2 (1992): 3. <http://proquest.umi.com> (accessed January 14, 2010).

<sup>54</sup> Mary Shapiro, Cynthia Ingols, and Stacy Blake-Beard, "Canaries in the Mine Shaft: Women Signaling a New Career Model," *People and Strategy* 32, no. 3 (2009): 53. <http://proquest.umi.com> (accessed January 14, 2010).



activities of the several firms. Additionally, these executives were asked to identify workforce issues that might limit women's entrance, retention, and promotion, as well as those factors that might lead a woman to opt out of the corporate structure. Lastly, the researchers asked for the identification of strategies firms use to encourage women to stay or opt in to the workforce.

The findings confirm an across-the-board grasp by these executives of the reality of women opting out of the workforce for a variety of reasons. Each executive had slightly different views regarding the problem of opting out or opting in. Only one of the executives interviewed had little (or no) conception of these issues. Depending on the industry, the opting out/opting in problem was addressed differently. To illustrate this difference, each industry will be addressed separately.

**Banking** (retail banking) was represented by three executives, one from one of the three largest banks in America, one from a major regional bank, and one from a small local bank. There was commonality among these bank executives on the following issues: approximately three quarters of the employees of a bank are females; lower level employees such as tellers opt out and opt in frequently and with little loss of pay, benefits, or job responsibilities. In the large national bank, women that seek professional banking careers and opt out have a difficult time opting in and return to the workforce at reduced pay and responsibility levels. This appears to be a smaller issue at the regional and local bank. These banks appear to have significantly lower numbers of female career employees. The regional bank had several professional women employees and had experienced a very small number of female professionals opting out but none had ever attempted to opt in. The local bank had never had a senior female career employee.

The strategy employed by the major bank follows:

- 1) Make certain that policies and procedures are female sensitive including such features as the option of working from home, staggered work hours, reduced work days, and pregnancy leave policies for men and women.
- 2) For those who opt out a clear message must be sent that there will be the opportunity to stay on track upon return along with a message that opting out does not mean that you will be forgotten
- 3) Succession planning must be done that builds females into the C suite. (This bank used dashboards that measure such things as exit interviews and opt out requests to be sure that this information is measurable)

From this research it appears that major banks (at least this one) have addressed the issue of professional women opting out and put in place a strategy to attempt to keep those that choose to opt out. The success of this strategy has not been measured and the executive interviewed indicated that he was aware that those returning after opting out made up a very small number of the bank's career executives. The strategy was designed to encourage the return of those that opted out but little information was available as to the success of this program. He was aware that many of the professionals that chose to opt out never came back to the bank.



Banks that are significantly smaller apparently are not as concerned about the loss of female executive talent to opting out since they had little or no experience with the opting back phenomenon. These banks did not have specific strategies designed to encourage professional females in the opt out, opt in decision. The small local bank did not have any females in professional positions.

**Textiles** (including fabric manufacturing, fabric finishing, and cut and sew operations) was represented by the senior HR officer of one of the world's largest firms, the HR officer for a large national retail brand firm and the owner of a small cut and sew plant. There was significant diversity of opinions between these organizations regarding the appropriate strategy to pursue in the employment of females. Because of the divergence of views, each sub set is separately identified:

- 1) The HR executive of the **global firm** had a good grasp of the issues involved in the employment of females and indicated that at least eighty percent of the firm's employees were females. Strong policies were in place to assure fairness in recruiting, hiring, development, evaluation, and promotion. Opting out and opting in at lower levels did not present problems since the general mechanics of operating a sewing or knitting machine changes little over time. The occasional technological change (from mechanical sewing arms to pneumatic stitching can be taught relatively quickly, for instance). Low level women employees opt out frequently and the length of stay varies from a few months to a number of years. These employees opt back to their old jobs with little loss of pay or benefits. Some recognize that the potential for promotion to supervisory level positions may be delayed, but it does not appear to be a significant issue to these employees.

The professional track for women in global textiles is quite different and presents a serious set of problems. Top management in this large textile firm is mostly male and has been in place for many years. There is a strong sense at the top that the firm has been very successful for many years and the need to change is not strongly felt. This is interesting since a large percentage of the firm's manufactured goods are purchased by women. (This study examines only one major textile firm. One of the authors has extensive experience in working with textile firms and observes this attitude to be prevalent across several of the world's largest textile organizations)

More and more women are being employed in professional jobs in this industry (and in the firm being studied) and the work/life trade-off is becoming an issue of significant proportion. The HR manager interviewed for this study reported that her firm is finding that the newer female (and some male) professionals are not nearly as dedicated to the work ethic that is pervasive at the top of the firm as are the senior managers. This has created what she calls a "two tiered" system where mostly women openly talk about opting out when the time is right, with the assumption that they will



be able to opt back at the appropriate time. Unfortunately, once these women leave the firm, they are rarely interested in returning to the long-hours model currently found in the C suite. The corporation has not developed a successful strategy aimed at retaining, developing, or promoting these newer professional employees. The research shows the following issues in this firm (reflecting the global textile industry):

- a. Global markets change quickly, tastes and design parameters change quickly, retail strategies and technologies change quickly and dramatically (bricks and mortar stores to online marketing, for instance)
- b. Materials, branding, and pricing strategies change quickly
- c. Top management focus on long hours and frequent travel makes female employment difficult if the female has family responsibility<sup>55</sup>
- d. Opting out makes opting back very difficult and less than 5% of those that opt out want to return to this industry<sup>56</sup>
- e. Exit interviews with opting out females found many soon-to-be ex-employees angry that the firm did not recognize the importance of family responsibilities and seemed to be unaware of the concept of work/life balance.

- 2) The HR Director of the **large national textile firm** is involved in the manufacture of greige cloth and fabric used for interior decorating and the upholstery of furniture. Almost thirty years ago management of this firm recognized the preponderance of female purchasers of its goods and began hiring female employees at the professional level. Opting out and opting in were well known concepts thirty years ago at the lower level where employees were mostly female. The firm had no specific guidelines or strategies to guide this process; women employees at lower levels quit when they wanted to and came back to very similar jobs with little change in pay or benefits. As more professional women came into the management team, stressors became apparent. These women could not opt out with the same expectations of opting in as was found at lower levels. For many of the same reasons enumerated for global firms above, the opting in exercise became a daunting challenge. The rapidly changing nature of the industry made an opted out employee quickly out of touch. Additionally, this firm began to experience women executives that were interested in better work-life combinations.

Approximately ten years ago the work/life issue became a serious retention problem for the firm and its female executives. At this point some movement was made to shorten the work week, flex hours were discussed, and child care at work was investigated. Movement was slow in these areas because of the impact it could have on the entire workforce. The increased labor costs across the board associated with

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<sup>55</sup> Similar findings as Hewlett and Luce.

<sup>56</sup> Similar findings as Williams.



these several moves made top management reluctant to institute these changes. A pair of major events moved top management to rethink their employment strategy where women were concerned.

The executive vice president for marketing and brand sales resigned because of work-life issues. She immediately went to a key competitor who had gotten out of the manufacturing business several years earlier. Several promising candidates were interviewed to take her place, but no one was willing to take on the long-hours the marketing job required in this firm. Other exit interviews of professional women had brought the seeds of discontent among female professionals to the attention of the executive vice president of human resources. She designed a strategy to retain and promote females and presented it to top management. Included in her plan were concepts such as job sharing, flex hours, pregnancy leave for females and males, and shortened work weeks. There was great reluctance at the top to incorporate these ideas and the executive vice president for human resources resigned and was immediately employed by the same firm that had hired the vice president for marketing and brand sales.

Shortly thereafter, top management made the decision to revamp the human resource policies that had been in place for so many years. A human resources professional was found who agreed to design a whole new set of policies focused on the retention, development, and promotion of all employees, incorporating the concepts favorable to a balanced work-life combination. This was recognition by top management that there was a problem faced by many of the firm's employees related to the firm's culture of long hours and rigidity that made the balance between work life and family life a difficult choice. The research findings do not address the level of success in bringing back professional employees that have opted out.

3. The director of human resources (and production manager) for a **small textile firm** that makes handbags and cloth bags for groceries was interviewed and he had no idea that there was such a thing as opting out or opting in. His firm has about 35 employees, all women except for he and his brother and uncle who owns the firm. As he looked over the questionnaire, he was amazed that anyone would be interested in these topics. The employees at this firm work standard 40 hour weeks that often extend beyond 60 hours. When an employee leaves, she is immediately replaced by another eager-to-work woman. All of the female employees speak Spanish as their native language. This human resources executive stated that an employee rarely returns to the company and that the average length of stay is about five years. Perhaps this example exists because of the recession, although the source of the employee base may have something to do with these details. There is little hope that this firm will make changes to accommodate the issues facing female employees.



**Retail** (women's ready to wear) was represented by the senior human resource officer of this major international chain of women's stores. Employees are predominantly female and the firm operates on the assumption that no one knows the wants and needs of women better than women. The firm uses SAS in Cary, NC as a role model firm, employing the strategy of creating a "family" sense to relieve the stress of daily retail sales. They use fitness centers, daycare, on-site fitness centers, and spas to improve the atmospheres and work situation. The HR strategy does not focus on females; it is designed for all employees of which women are by far the largest majority.

The number one issue facing this firm is work-life balance. Even with their focus on making the work place pleasant, they cannot get away from the reality that the corporate focus demands long hours and profitability demands the doing of more with less. The result is little time for families in the managerial ranks and frequent opting out for a less stressful way of life. Technology has contributed to this stress in a meaningful way with cell phones, blackberries, computers and e-commerce creating a 24-7 environment that won't go away for the professional employees. The primary factor in opting out in this retail firm is to have more family time. Employees that opt out rarely want to return and the firm is struggling to find a solution.

One of the Brand Presidents made the decision to opt out to have more time with her children, with a willingness to live with less in hopes of finding a happy home life. Even with a well focused strategy to reduce the stress of retail sales, the nature of this business lends itself to frequent turn-over and frequent opting out by employees at all levels. Opting in has only occurred at the sales floor and stock room employee level. In this industry, styles change but sales techniques for on-the-floor sales apparently do not change leading to an easy transition from opting out to opting in at this level. No professional employees have ever returned from opting out.

**Small Business** was represented by the owners of five firms in diverse industries. The businesses represented in this survey are a funeral home with 6 locations and 47 employees, a meat processing and distribution firm with 237 employees, a chip maker with 43 employees, a boutique hotel with 62 employees and an antiques dealer specializing in fine china, glass, and silver flatware with 75 employees. The owners of each of these firms were very aware of the challenges facing professional women in the workplace. Because of the similarity of their responses the findings were analyzed together.

Each firm has been in business more than 20 years and a family atmosphere was evident at each location. All of these firms have lower level employees that have been opting out for as long as the owners can remember. These same lower level employees opt in with little loss in pay or responsibility. For career employees in the managerial ranks these firms have the following policies in place:

1. Short work weeks; full pay for 37.5 hours



2. Flexible work hours; employees typically cover for one another and the opportunity to come in “late” or leave “early” as long as the job gets done is pervasive
3. Job sharing is available and this seems to be very popular with those with very small children
4. On site professional baby-sitting (or nursery) is available at 4 of the firms
5. Work at home options are available

None of these firms has recently lost a professional employee because of work-life imbalance problems (two of the firms experienced the loss of professional employees because of prior rigid employment policies) and there does not appear to be employee discontent because of corporate employment policies. The major employment problems identified in this research was that of 3 of the firms that are experiencing loss of sales due to the recession. These owners are struggling with fewer hours for employees and other problems associated with reduced sales. None of these firms has laid off employees yet, and the owners seem to be thinking in terms of reduced work hours across the board. Employee feedback was not available on this issue from these research findings.

### **Recommendations**

So why is it imperative that countries and companies take action? First is basic economics. The value lost in female human capital is critical for households and nations. According to the US Census, "It is imperative that women work and that households have dual income— 60 percent of working women earn half or more of their families' incomes".<sup>57</sup> A study by *The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific* showed that restricting women's job opportunities as a result of discrimination, cost the region between \$42 and \$47 billion. The study also found that the lack of proper education, discrimination in wages and promotions, cultural attitudes, harassment at work, and difficulties in reconciling work/life balance (child-rearing) were the key factors in the disparities of female participation and success in the workforce. The findings stressed the lack of access to resources as well as political power—illustrated by the lack of political representation—as a deterrent to women in succeeding in business.<sup>58</sup> Yet men still dominate the world's governments and legislatures along with the boardrooms. According to a Goldman Sach's economist, if America could raise women's employment rate to that of men's then the GDP would raise proportionately or be 9% higher.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, even from a national standpoint, governments should be working with organizations to reduce these disparities.

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<sup>57</sup> Kreider and Elliott, 14.

<sup>58</sup> United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, "Economic and Social Survey of Asia and the Pacific 2007," *Poverty and Development Division* (2007, April). [http://www.unescap.org/pdd/publications/survey2007/01\\_Survey\\_2007.pdf](http://www.unescap.org/pdd/publications/survey2007/01_Survey_2007.pdf). (accessed on January 28, 2010).

<sup>59</sup> "Finance and Economics: Womenomics revisited; Economics focus." Quoting Kevin Daly, Goldman Sach's economist, *The Economist*, London 383, no. 8525 (April 21, 2007): 102. <http://proquest.umi.com> (accessed November 4, 2009).



Another concern for some countries is the trend towards declining birth rates. Governments in some developed countries such as Japan, Australia, and Canada with currently declining birth rates are blaming the lack of female-friendly work environments and access to quality child care as a primary factor. With women facing increased levels of stress from work overload and lack of work/life balance, the costs associated with having and raising children outweigh the perceived benefits of being employed.<sup>60</sup> It is feared that Australia will lose female workers to countries that accommodate working mothers if conditions do not change. These studies imply that it is an economic advantage for both companies and governments to work together to design work programs that recognize the importance of family life and ensure a more female-friendly environment.

Some research suggests that creating and supporting female networks will help organizations overcome many of the challenges faced by women in the workplace. These networks will help women:<sup>61</sup>

- 1) Survive—to provide a female driven network where women will be able to connect with one another to address female related organizational issues helping them to adjust to the organizational culture,
- 2) thrive—to provide trusted feedback for personal development and competencies allowing them to attain their personal career goals and,
- 3) drive—to help women participate at their full potential to help the organization attain its goals and objectives.

Although these networks will require some investment by the company, the personal success of the women will translate into stronger and more resilient organizations.

Other studies suggest that the workforce must change to accommodate evolving workplace demands. One solution is the use of Flexible Work Arrangements (FWAs)—which can include measures such as telecommuting, work-sharing, or flextime, as an innovative strategy that recognizes the changes that are impacting family work/life balance.<sup>62</sup> In this study, researchers found that employees using flexible work arrangements still earned about the same as those on regular work schedules. According to this research, some women are increasingly becoming career "self agents," setting their own terms of employment, allowing them to balance work and home life. Considering the possible workforce shortage that is predicted in the future, flexible work arrangements may provide a strategic advantage in the coming years to attract and retain both male and female professionals. While some believe that flexible work arrangement may lead to substantial penalties possibly through reduced earnings or disparities in advancement or

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<sup>60</sup> See for instance: Dewi Cooke, "Family Juggle Too Hard, Say Working Women; Survey links jobs to low fertility rate," Study conducted by Beaton Consulting, *The Age*, First Edition, (2008, April 9) 9. <http://proquest.umi.com> (accessed January 28, 2010); "Work-life balance essential for future." *The Nikkei Weekly Online*. (Japan) (February 2, 2009). [www.nni.nikkei.co.jp/e/fr/tnw](http://www.nni.nikkei.co.jp/e/fr/tnw) (accessed January 28, 2010).

<sup>61</sup> Anne Donnellon and Nan Langowitz, "Leveraging Women's Networks for Strategic Value," *Strategy & Leadership* 37, no. 3 (2009): 29. <http://proquest.umi.com> (accessed January 14, 2010).

<sup>62</sup> Shapiro, Ingols, and Blake-Beard, (2009): 53.



in reentry,<sup>63</sup> many women are using flexible work hours to recreate a career model allowing them to meet their career goals while managing the complexity of their lives.<sup>64</sup>

Since women make up more than half of the workforce, it is clear that women will be a key component in economic recovery. Some researchers recommend that women need to become active in pushing the creation of legislation by the US Congress that will:<sup>65</sup>

- Actively provide opportunities for women to train for traditionally “male” occupations that typically offer wages that are 20 to 30 percent higher than traditionally “female” jobs.
- Ensure that all job seekers have access to child care, transportation, and other support services that help workers complete training and obtain and retain jobs.
- Comprehensive Pay Equity legislation in conjunction with legislation that provides support for working family’s day care, and family/medical leave, along with government sponsored access to postsecondary education and training.

Whether these changes are initiated by governments or organizations, there is a critical need for programs that support women's non-linear career paths and that create "on ramps" to help women easily reenter the workforce if they have opted out for a period of time. Some universities, such as Harvard, Wharton, Babson, Dartmouth and Pepperdine, are taking initiatives to address the challenges by offering on-ramping courses.<sup>66</sup> These courses are designed to help women regain necessary skills or even obtain a degree with a program specifically designed for women with children. It is important to note that even if on-ramp programs are developed, women still need to take the initiative use the programs and prove the value of supporting such efforts.

A final recommendation comes from a review of the information gathered during the interviews of corporate executives. A major impediment in opting in is the obsolescence of the opted out employee. A vehicle could be developed that can accomplish the following:

1. Provide a regular review of the firm’s activity during the past six months to all professional employees. This might take the form of a day in which the key activities of the firm are reviewed with the objective being that all professional personnel are brought up to speed on the issues the firm faced in the last six months. This assures that no employee is left behind as the firm evolves.

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<sup>63</sup> Hewlett and Luce.

<sup>64</sup> Mary Shapiro, Cynthia Ingols, and Stacy Blake-Beard, "Optioning in versus "Opting Out": Women Using Flexible Work Arrangements for Career Success," *CGO Insights* 25, Center for Gender in Organizations: Simmons School of Management. (2007, January): 2. Boston, MA. <http://proquest.umi.com> (accessed January 14, 2010).

<sup>65</sup> The National Network for Women's Employment, "Public Policy Priorities 2009," *Women Work!*, (2009). <http://www.womenwork.org/policy/policyagenda0607.htm> (accessed February 18, 2010).

<sup>66</sup> Daniel McGinn, "Getting Back on Track: Women who take career 'off-ramps' to raise children often have trouble finding 'on ramps' when they are ready to work again," *Newsweek* 148, no. 11 (2006, September 25): 62. <http://proquest.umi.com> (accessed November 4, 2009).



2. Make this review available to all professional employees that have opted out so that they are kept in the loop of information and activity. This is also an activity that will make those that have opted out feel that the firm is concerned about their absence and is providing a vehicle to assure they are not being left behind.
3. Design work that can be accomplished at home in a non threatening way (perhaps the absence of immediate deadlines) to keep the opted out employee involved. These can be simple tasks that need doing such as reviewing contracts or new legislation.
4. This activity could be managed and presented by a third party outsourcing firm so no additional full time employment is necessary and 100% of the cost of the effort can be written off.

### **Conclusion**

It is apparent that the concept of opting out and opting in for professional employees is a very complex issue. We have attempted to place the issues in a context where both the employee involved and the employing firm can grasp the parameters of this topic. The issues and the recommendations presented in this research are USA centric and may not apply in context to those in other nations. However, there may be enough continuity in both the problem and the recommendations to make these findings helpful to employees and employers in many nations. There is also the need for further exploration of these issues.

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## Appendix A

A questionnaire was designed to use in interviews with senior human resource executives or the owners of the firms selected as examples for this research. A copy of the questionnaire follows:

### Research Questions

1. What is the strategy (the corporation) uses to recruit females?
2. What is the strategy (the corporation) uses to retain females?
3. What is the strategy (the corporation) uses to develop females?
4. What is the strategy (the corporation) uses to promote females?
5. What are the work-force issues that limit women's entrance, retention, and promotion in the corporate structure?
6. In your experience, what are the factors that lead to women making the decision to opt-out of the work force?
7. What are the strategies your firm uses to encourage these women to stay?

The firms selected as samples for this research follow:

1. Wachovia a Wells Fargo Company
2. Hanes Mills
3. VF Corporation
4. Chico's
5. A North Carolina career placement firm
6. Duro Bags Inc.
7. Sara Lee Branded Apparel
8. Novant Health
9. Piedmont Federal
10. Inmar Corporation
11. Carolina Bank
12. Unifi
13. Forbis and Dick Funeral Homes
14. Southern Foods
15. SAR Industries
16. O'Henry Hotel
17. Replacements Ltd.

NOTE: Ms. Alyson Francisco who served with the same company as a management executive and was recently terminated because of the recession, collected a significant amount of data for this research. With her help, and that of two other research assistants who are still fully employed by regional corporations, the views of 11 individuals that have opted out of the workforce were incorporated as a part of the research. Their views confirmed some of the earlier research findings that suggested child bearing was not the only reason for women to opt out of the workforce.