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Op-Ed Contributor

Working It Out

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HIGHLY educated women are getting a bum rap from the press. There has recently been a spate of news and opinion articles telling us that these women, especially graduates of the best universities and professional schools, are “opting out” in record numbers, choosing the comforts of home and family over careers.



And because there are now 1.33 women graduating from college for every man, the best and brightest women will either have to "marry down" or, more likely, we are told, remain single. Taken together, highly educated women will have either family or career. Half of it all, rather than “having it all.”

But the facts speak loudly and clearly against such suppositions. Women who graduated 25 years ago from the nation's top colleges did not "opt out" in large numbers, and today's graduates aren't likely to do so either.

To know whether a woman sacrificed career for her family, we need to know her employment status over many years. The Mellon Foundation did just that in the mid-1990's, collecting information on more than 10,000 women (and 10,000 men) who entered one of 34 highly selective colleges and universities in 1976 and graduated by 1981. We thus have detailed data about their educational, family and work histories when they were in their late 30's. That gives us enough information to figure out whether many women who graduated from top-ranked schools have left the work force.

Among these women fully 58 percent were never out of the job market for more than six months total in the 15 or so years that followed college or more advanced schooling. On average, the women in the survey spent a total of just 1.6 years out of the labor force, or 11 percent of their potential working years. Just 7 percent spent more than half of their available time away from employment.

These women were, moreover, committed not just to their careers. They were also wives and mothers — 87 percent of the sample had been married, 79 percent were still married 15 years after graduation and 69 percent had at least one child (statistics that are similar to national ones for this demographic group from the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey). Women with at least one child spent a total of 2.1 years on average out of the labor force, or 14 percent of their potential time. Fifty percent of those with children never had a non-employment (non-educational) spell lasting more than 6 months.

You could argue that they opted out of their careers in more subtle ways, say, by choosing less demanding careers than those for which they had trained. But the occupation data for these women suggest otherwise. Women in these graduating classes stuck with their specialties to about the same degree as did comparable men. The vast majority of women who went to medical school were employed as doctors when in their late 30's; similarly, women who received law degrees were practicing lawyers.

What about more recent graduates, those who finished school 10 years ago and are, today, in their early 30's? It is too early to tell for sure, but there are strong hints that little has changed on the opt-out front. Statistics from the National Vital Statistics System show that highly educated women today are having babies even later in life on average than did the entering class of 1976 (and are having more of them). The Current Population Survey tells us that the percentage of college-educated women in their 30's who work has been high (in the 80 percent range) and fairly constant since the early 1990's, although the percentage dropped a bit — along with that of their male counterparts in the recent economic slump.

The fraction in their late 30's who are married, moreover, is around 75 percent and has not budged in the last 25 years. Taken together, the facts — later babies, more babies, high and fairly constant employment rates, stable marriage rates — don't spell big opt-out to me. And they don't spell big opt-out change either.

I'm not saying that all is rosy. These hard-working women still earn less than their male counterparts and they work more around the house. Given their lower earnings, it isn't surprising that some do opt out. But for the most part, female college graduates — especially those from top-notch schools — who are in their 30's are career women who care for their children if they have them and work hard for their families.

These are the opt-out facts. So why is there so much focus on women leaving the work force instead? My friend Ellen, a Ph.D. economist with two young children who teaches in a top-ranked medical school, recently noted with frustration that many people have difficulty believing that “women can actually contribute professionally and participate meaningfully in the raising of a family.” But the truth is that a greater fraction of college women today are mixing family life and career than ever before. Denying that fact is ignoring the facts.

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