

How women triumphed in the post-pandemic workplace

A new book by Sheryl Sandberg's former professor Claudia Goldin may explain why women's employment has boomed



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Amid all the talk of the “she-cession” and women taking on the lion’s share of the lockdown kid wrangling, everyone assumed that women’s careers were just another log on the bin fire of the pandemic.

Yet when economists conducted the first analysis of the data last week they were shocked. Women had defied their predictions. Not only had they taken on far more of the domestic load than their husbands, they were somehow experiencing a historic boom in the workplace too. “This is definitely not what I expected,” one British economist told me in bewilderment.

While male employment reached a record low in the early months of this year, women’s reached a record high, with 48 per cent of the workforce, according to a report by the Resolution Foundation. Mothers of young children in particular are working in unprecedented numbers. Hello 1970s, is that your mythical do-it-all Superwoman calling? What on earth is going on?

Claudia Goldin is the expert to ask. She is a professor of economics at Harvard University, and now in her seventies, has studied the idealism of the pill-popping women of the 1960s giving way to the outsize shoulder pads of the 1980s, and has had a breakthrough in understanding the surprising twists of the 2020s.

It’s this: “greedy” jobs — a certain type of “beck and call” job, which pays over the odds for extensive travel, unpredictable, inflexible hours and demanding client facetime.

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In Goldin’s new book, *Career & Family*, she painstakingly assembles research, much of it her own, to show that greedy jobs are the hidden poison for professional western women. “The greediness of jobs matters a lot,” she says. “The effect on women is a lot bigger than most people realise.”

Greedy jobs include City law, politics, corporate management, particular medical fields and banking, ie precisely the high-status roles desired by ambitious young men and women alike. But once they become parents it is these jobs, held by a woman — or, as detrimental, her partner — that will kill off a woman’s youthful dreams of job parity faster than you can say “norovirus at the nursery: come home quick”.

And, with remarkable timing, Goldin has identified the disproportionate damage “greedy” jobs do to women’s careers at an extraordinary point in history, when a pandemic forced a curb on the rapacious appetites of many employers and so proved a fascinating test case of Goldin’s theory. “The good news, it isn’t you, it’s the system,” Goldin writes. “The bad news, it isn’t you, it’s the system.”

I speak via video to Goldin in Massachusetts. She talks with slow professorial precision, and just when you think her severe she will laugh and switch from data sets to the “greedy job” problems of Tina Fey’s character in the TV sitcom *30 Rock*.

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Nowadays female graduates are mostly in career jobs, but after becoming mothers, their earnings and status compared with men “continue to make them look like they’ve been sideswiped”. Goldin realised that “greediness” was the problem by eliminating the common smoking guns of the wage gap.

Commentators blame “sex discrimination, gender bias, glass ceiling, mommy track, leaning out — take your pick”, Goldin writes in her book. She is sceptical about all of these factors, which alternately blame or victimise women.

“Data now shows that true pay and employment discrimination, while they matter, are relatively small,” Goldin writes. “Are women actually receiving lower pay for equal work? By and large, not so much any more.”

Meanwhile, it is typical of those on the right to argue that the gap comes from women's own choices. I mention *Lean In*, the slightly women-blaming self-help book by Sheryl Sandberg, the Facebook executive. "Well, you probably don't know this," Goldin says, "but Sheryl was my student. Her senior thesis was signed by me."

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The pair are friends and Sandberg has helped Goldin to study the wage gap in tech industries, so Goldin is diplomatic in her assessment of *Lean In*. Goldin says, for example, that she instructs her female students to "take a seat at the table" when they walk into her seminars, as Sandberg advises, instead of hugging the wall.

"It's one of many books and articles about how to make the world of work better for women," Goldin says. "Each of these has some germ of truth, that doesn't mean that if I put all the germs together I get something that is going to help me solve the problem."

Many experts argue that the wage gap is primarily about women choosing less lucrative fields. Goldin says that the research actually shows that this effect accounts "for at most a third of the difference in earnings between men and women".

"Thus, we empirically know that the lion's share of the pay gap comes from something else . . . We must give the problem a more accurate name: 'greedy work'."

To cite an example, there's Anne-Marie Slaughter, the lawyer who went from a demanding but flexible senior role at Princeton University to working as director of policy for Hillary Clinton, at the time the secretary of state. It wasn't that the new job required more expertise or overall hours. Slaughter was

horrified at what the greediness of her new role did for her children and marriage, and, like so many women in her situation, felt forced to quit.

“I found myself in a job that is typical for the vast majority of working women (and men), working long hours on someone else’s schedule,” Slaughter wrote of her resignation. “I realised what should have perhaps been obvious: having it all, at least for me, depended almost entirely on what type of job I had.”

“Realising something that should have been obvious” is a refrain Goldin gets a lot when presenting this theory. Of course, it seems obvious that in a marriage only one person can have the “big job” and few parents want to outsource child rearing entirely.

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Men and women have fairly equal pay trajectories until babies come along. Because women tend to marry men a little older, and so ahead of them on the pay scale, it is logical for the wife to step back. I see this among countless friends: an economic decision, not a sentimental one.

As Goldin writes, “couple equity is really expensive”. It wouldn’t make financial sense for mother and father to downshift to a “non-greedy job”. A greedy job in corporate law, Goldin says, will earn £500,000 a year compared with £100,000 at a more flexible boutique firm. The City lawyer works more, but not five times as much. That’s £500,000 joint income for one parent, versus £200,000 if they both chose less greedy jobs.



Claudia Goldin, is a professor of economics at Harvard University and the author of a new book, *Career & Family*

“That difference in earnings is enormously large,” Goldin says. So, I say, we have in many professional fields unintentionally created a system where the mother’s career sacrifice is financially rewarded?

“Yes,” Goldin says. “And this effect is greater in America and the UK, where overall inequality in wages is very high.”

It’s rare, she says, for the man to sacrifice his greedy job for his wife’s. Will that grow in future, now that female graduates outnumber male?

“There’s that possibility,” Goldin says, breaking into a smile. “I think of *Sex and the City*, in which the most educated woman, Miranda, the lawyer, has the greedy job. She has her baby with a bartender.”

However, here is the crucial bit. It’s not as obvious as it seems. Women don’t just “naturally” prefer to stay at home with the children. There are jobs that are equally academically selective, that are prestigious, demanding and responsible, but that are not greedy.

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In these jobs mothers are more likely to keep up their hours and rise at a rate more similar to male peers, and the wage gap is smaller. Goldin has compared greedy jobs with those that have become less greedy, such as dermatology, veterinary medicine and pharmacy, where teamwork and shared on-call practices are common.

These fields are increasingly female-dominated, but there are other occupations that are male-dominated but not “greedy” where the effect is the same. Or, as Anne Mulcahy, a former chief executive of Xerox, wrote: “Businesses need to be 24/7, individuals don’t.”

“So the devil is in the detail here,” Goldin says. “You really have to go occupation by occupation. And that’s the work that I’ve done, showing that there is a clear relationship between the occupational demands and the gender wage gaps. So, surprisingly, the occupations that had the smallest gaps are tech, engineering and others in science.”

There are a couple of benefits to measuring the effects of “greedy” work. One is that most young people wish for a happy mix of work and family, and set out far too naive about the devilish pacts they may feel forced to make with their job or their partner’s job.

The second is that employers realise how quickly “greediness” can devour the best talent. It’s hard to imagine corporate lawyers deploying a shared “on-call” system on Sundays, but perhaps clients would go for it if it meant access to a better legal brain during the week.

It is precisely the greediest aspects of work that the pandemic bashed out of bosses: the weekly trip to Japan; the 9pm office presenteeism.

I speak to Hannah Slaughter, an economist at the Resolution Foundation, a job-focused British think tank, about the latest figures. She points out that some of the strength of women’s employment during the pandemic comes from the fact that they are more likely to work in health, which was a secure sector, and less likely to be self-employed, which was badly hit.

Yet half a million British women have gone from working part-time to full-time since the pandemic began, Slaughter says. Mothers are twice as likely as fathers or child-free women to say

that flexible “pandemic protocol” working has enabled them to increase their hours.

British mothers fared unusually well, Slaughter says. “The UK is an outlier in what has happened to women.”

At present, no one knows why. “I’m cautiously optimistic about the effects of the pandemic on women’s careers,” Goldin says. “It may have a silver lining in bringing down the price of flexibility, but only if we do not create a female enclave that works from home.”

Goldin has not confronted the worst of “greedy” demands in her prestigious career. She married another high-profile academic, they both stayed at Harvard and she didn’t have children: “We’ve lived the good life.”

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