

'I had to choose being a mother': With no child care or summer camps, women are being edged out of the workforce ^[1]

When parents can't do it all, women's paid labor is often the first to go

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If day cares closed because of the novel coronavirus, Aimee expected her family to fare better than most. She worked full time as the chief executive of a tech company while her husband stayed home. He'd been taking some time off from his own tech career, managing a rental property while considering his options. He could look after their 3-year-old son, she thought — at least for a while.

"That lasted a grand total of three days," Aimee said. (We have withheld Aimee's last name and her husband's name because of threats made against their family.)

Once her son was home full time, she realized they'd need a different solution. She was holed up in the guest room, wielding dual-monitors at her desk. Her husband was exhausted. "I can't do it," she remembers him saying: "I can't watch him for this long."

Aimee, 46, had been logging 70-hour weeks for years — and she was proud of the work she'd done. When she started her career in San Francisco, she was one of two women at a video game company, buying nondescript jeans and hoodies so she could be "one of the guys." Eventually she came to run a company she co-founded, building open-source websites for clients like Stanford University. Aimee, who oversaw software development, co-led a diverse team of 13 employees. She was intentional about hiring women, minorities and others who challenged the stereotypes about Silicon Valley.

Aimee had long been planning to take six weeks off. It would be a time free from computers and headphones, she'd promised her husband. She'd make bath bombs with her son and plant pumpkins in the backyard.

But it was never the right time. Her co-founder, busy with her own kids and aging parents, was able to help out less and less. Even outside work hours, Aimee would field emails and take calls as her son, Ryan, climbed into her lap and tried to grab her phone. Her husband would plead with her to "get off the computer," she said, teaching Ryan a trick to get her attention: When she wasn't responding, her son would call her "Aimee" instead of "Mom." (Aimee's husband declined to comment for this story.)

When the company lost a client because of the coronavirus, Aimee realized she'd have to devote even more time to work. If she really pushed herself, she knew she could probably keep the company going even if day care closed. But could she ask her husband to handle 12-hour shifts of child care, with no help, no breaks and no clear end point? She wasn't sure her family could survive that. She wasn't sure he'd do it, even if she asked.

"I thought to myself, 'I can carry this company forward, but I'm going to be so broken. My son will be so broken. My husband will be so broken.' "

Women's jobs — concentrated in service industries — are particularly vulnerable in the coronavirus economy; there's evidence that women are being laid off or furloughed at a significantly higher rate than men. But there is another threat to women's paid labor that can be harder to see: With kids at home, and families forced to take on significantly more domestic labor, women are opting out of the workforce.

Nearly all of the women interviewed for this story — who had either stopped working because of the virus, or were planning to — said the hiatus was temporary. Once schools and day-care centers reopen, they say, they plan to go back.

It might not be so easy.

On March 16, with schools and day cares on the verge of closing, Aimee and her co-founder agreed to dissolve their company, laying off all their employees. Aimee brought home eight of the office chairs, wheeling them into her dining room, one by one. Her family would live off their savings until the pandemic subsided.

In the end, Aimee said, she felt she only had one option: "I had to choose being a mother and being at home."

Across the country, most schools have been closed since the middle of March, with many day cares following soon after. While some day cares have started to reopen, few parents feel comfortable sending their kids, worried they may not be able to maintain proper social

distancing. Other support systems for working families have disappeared, too: It's not safe for grandpa to watch the kids three times a week; the neighbor had to cancel the standing weekly playdate. If a family has enough money to outsource other domestic tasks — house cleaning, laundry, dog walking — they're probably doing all that themselves.

On top of everything else, parents are now expected to be teachers. While online learning programs vary wildly, few schools are offering more than a few hours of daily instruction. After that, parents are left to lesson plan the rest of the day. Families without a stable Internet connection are cut off from formal education.

It's an impossible situation for caregivers who continue to go out to work, and for those who now work from home. There is not enough time to do everything. Families have to make tough choices: If a ball must be dropped, which one should it be? Chances are, in a heterosexual couple, it will be a woman's paid labor.

"When something has to give, it is very often women's careers: their working hours, the expectations of what they are able to accomplish on the job, or the job itself," said Caitlyn Collins, a sociologist of gender and families at Washington University in St. Louis. Early studies suggest that, while fathers are picking up more domestic labor than before the coronavirus, mothers still do the majority of housework and care of young children.

"I'm an economist, so I usually try not to say things without data," said Martha Gimbel, a manager of economic research at Schmidt Futures. "But I feel very comfortable going out on a limb and saying that this burden is going to fall on women. We just know it's going to be women."

The decision to quit is a privilege. Stay-at-home orders have forced many businesses to shutter or drastically scale back. Sixteen percent of women are currently unemployed, according to Labor Department data for the month of April. Fired and furloughed workers face their own set of tough decisions, fighting to keep their families financially afloat.

Even if they weren't actually forced to leave their jobs, many working moms said the "choice" to stop working didn't really feel like a choice at all.

"How many layers of responsibility — how much weight — can you take on before you crumble?" Aimee asked. "I think I did pretty well."

Facing the 'good mom' pressure

Ashley Fariss Stewart knew she would have to stop working her job as soon as schools and day cares closed. It was never even really a question. Her husband, Craig Stewart, works full time in accounting, making far more money than she did working two days a week as an occupational therapist. Her paycheck was always "icing on the cake," she said, barely covering the cost of child care for the hours she spent on the job.

"It just kind of came naturally," said Fariss Stewart, 32, living in Goochland, Va. She has a 4-year-old son and 2-year-old twin daughters. The idea that her husband might scale back at his job, she said, "honestly didn't even cross either of our minds."

Farris Stewart loved her job. She'd put herself through a two-year master's program to get her certification. She'd go into schools, helping children with conditions such as autism and ADHD use the bathroom, or get themselves dressed. It would have been easier to quit when she had kids — there were days when she commuted 90 minutes each way, pumping breast milk while she drove — but she didn't want to. She took a year off, then came back.

"Having a career, instead of just being 'Henry's mom' or 'Amelia's mom' — that meant something to me," she said.

Craig said he cares about his wife's personal fulfillment. Eventually, he hopes she will "find whatever it is she wants to do for her work-career piece," he said. "I want her to be happy with that."

But right now, he said, they need to make the best financial decision for their family.

Lauren Smith Brody, author of "The Fifth Trimester," a manual for working moms, said couples all over the country are probably making similar calculations: When they're deciding who should scale back at work, or quit altogether, they'll be comparing their salaries.

U.S. women, on average, still make 81 cents for every dollar a man makes, concentrated in industries that tend to pay less. (For many women of color, the wage gap is far greater: Black women make 62 cents to the white man's dollar; Latinas make 54 cents.) And because mothers tend to get hit with a "motherhood penalty" when they have kids, Brody said — costing them an average of \$16,000 per year in lost wages — while fathers often enjoy a "daddy bonus," the higher earner in a heterosexual couple is likely to be the man.

Moms are also more likely to leave their jobs during the pandemic because they feel pressure to be a "good mom," Collins said. It's not the same for dads. Even in the most egalitarian households, she said, women typically do the bulk of the domestic labor: When something isn't working at home — if there's a pandemic, say, and the kids are bouncing off the walls — women are more likely to feel they need to be the ones to fix it.

That "good mom" pressure is particularly intense right now. All over social media, there are pictures of influencer moms, teaching their kids to identify bugs and bake zucchini bread. With no school, and no after-school activities, there is a "new Olympics for being a perfect mom," Collins said; mothers are frantically trying to "enrich" their kids, scared they'll somehow fall behind if they leave them alone with an iPad.

Laura Reese, from Rockville, Md., has that fear. She worries that her daughters — ages 11 and 14 — are spending too much time on their phones. They're constantly in their rooms, she said, sprawled out on the bed, scrolling through TikTok or Snapchat.

She's read the stories about social media and teenage girls — how these apps make them compare themselves to other people, crippling their self-esteem. Her older daughter has seemed a little down lately, she said. "I feel like I'm neglecting my kids."

Reese, 44, works 60-hour weeks as the director of marketing for a building company. She's also divorced. If her family had a second income right now, she said, "I would 100 percent back away from my career and take care of my kids."

She worries the summer will be even worse. Her daughters spend between two and five hours on school work every weekday. Soon, those precious windows of occupied time will vanish. The summer camp her daughters usually attend won't be happening this year.

"At least in the morning, they have a good schedule right now. Once school is done, they'll have nothing," she said. "It will be up to me to program their entire day."

There is no way she can stop working completely, Reese said. She can't afford it. But if schools don't open in the fall, she plans to make some major changes: find a job with fewer hours, and move to a less expensive area, so she can spend more time with her daughters. In the meantime, she's been trying to get off Facebook.

"All these moms who are like, 'I went on this hike with my daughter for two hours,'" Reese said. "I get so jealous. It looks like they're all living their best lives, and I am crushed with work."

Breanna Pompey, 23, has had time to be the kind of mom Reese envies. At home with her three kids — ages 4, 2, and 6 weeks — in North Liberty, Ind., she's been plopping Mentos in Coke bottles, watching them explode at the bottom of the driveway. She used to work full time at a United Federal Credit Union call center, filling unpredictable shifts at odd hours. She often came home just in time to put her kids to bed.

Pompey decided to quit even before day cares shut down. By early March, when the news started reporting on local coronavirus cases, Pompey was wondering whether day care was a safe place for her kids. Her fiancé made the final decision.

"When it comes to the kids, he is very protective," she said. "He was like, 'No, this is not happening. We don't know who the kids are going to be around.'"

Pompey could have seen herself working for the United Federal Credit Union for years. She'd never had much of a career before, working mostly short-term retail jobs: a stint as the manager at Justice, a clothing store for preteen girls; a part-time job at Dollar General.

Working for a credit union with call centers across the country, she saw positions to strive for. She'd already started moving up. In December, she'd applied for a position at a new branch in Reno. The hiring manager called a few days later, offering her the job. If Pompey worked hard, the manager said, she could be promoted to a leadership position in a few months.

She would have her own office.

"You have to understand: I don't win anything," Pompey said. "To hear her say, 'I want you. I want you to come here' — I felt like I'd won the lottery."

Pompey has lived in rural Indiana almost her entire life. This job was her "steppingstone" to an actual city, she said, where Walmart isn't the most exciting place you can go on a Saturday night. Once her fiancé agreed to the move, she immediately started making plans, reserving the moving truck, boxing up nonessentials like summer clothes for the kids and their toys. The move was still weeks away, but "so what," she said. They were going.

The first case of the coronavirus was reported in Indianapolis three weeks before Pompey was supposed to leave for Reno. With the kids at home, Pompey said, it just made sense that she would be the one to quit. They couldn't realistically move across the country in the middle of a pandemic. Her fiancé had a steady job working 60 hours a week as a roofer.

Of course she was disappointed, she said, but it wasn't really that big of a loss.

Most of her paycheck had gone to day care, anyway.

'Real costs' to leaving the workplace

Aimee has logged onto her computer at 5 a.m. almost every day since she shut down her company. She spends much of the next four hours scanning the open-source technology chat rooms she frequented as CEO. She tries to chime in whenever she can, offering advice and pieces of code.

"I have this personal nagging feeling: Am I doing enough to stay relevant?" she said.

Aimee knows she might struggle to find a new job. Once all this is over, she would love to work in a director or program manager role for a large tech company. But she suspects she's not exactly what they're looking for.

"Once you have a role like CEO on your resume, it's hard." She'll probably be told she has "too much experience," she said. "People don't know how to hire that."

Even in normal, non-pandemic times, women struggle to reenter the workforce after leaving to take care of their kids. In 2003, Lisa Belkin declared the dawn of an "Opt-Out Revolution" for college-educated women in a blockbuster cover story for the New York Times Magazine. Ten years later, the revolution had run its course, the paper announced in a follow-up story by Judith Warner: Women wanted back in.

The trouble was, the workforce had changed. Their old jobs required new skills. Their networks had decayed over time. What they wanted out of a job had changed, too. Most women did not want to return to the kind of grueling work schedule they'd had before they left. They wanted the flexibility to work from home, or leave early to pick their kids up from school.

Across the board, women stayed out of the workforce longer than they expected. They returned to jobs that were less prestigious and had lower pay.

“The risk of leaving the workplace is so high. There are real costs,” said Pamela Stone, a professor of sociology at Hunter College, who wrote “Opting Out?” in 2007 and “Opting Back In” in 2019, tracking a group of highly educated women who chose to leave the workforce.

“Especially in a job that requires formal experience and knowledge, you can become quickly obsolete.”

It’s especially risky to leave the workforce in the thick of an economic crisis. With massive layoffs, there are far fewer jobs to go around.

In 2019, when U.S. unemployment fell to a 50-year low, employees had all the power, said Gimbel, the Schmidt Futures economist. In the years immediately before the coronavirus, many women who left for a period were able to successfully transition back into the workforce, she said, taking advantage of all the accommodations that employers were suddenly willing to make.

“If you said, for example, ‘I need to leave at 4 o’clock on Fridays to pick up my kid,’ your boss would probably agree,” said Gimbel. But now, with so many people out of work, employers no longer need to make concessions. “At times like this, you see the balance of power shift back to the employer.”

Rajamani Selvam just returned to work after a 12-week maternity leave. A research fellow based in Rockville, Md., she’d mapped out a plan for balancing her job with first-time motherhood: Her mom would come from overseas to live with her and her husband, looking after their son while Selvam worked until he went to full-time day care in August.

Now, her mother wants to get home as soon as possible. Even if Selvam’s chosen day care does reopen soon, she’s not sure she’ll feel comfortable sending her son there. If nothing major changes, there is a good chance that Selvam — who makes far less money than her husband — will have to quit.

Selvam, 31, worries most about the questions she’ll get when she tries to come back. Her PhD is in neuroscience, a field with few women and fewer young mothers. Looking over her resume, she suspects future employers will question why she chose to take a break.

“Sometimes they mother-tag you,” Selvam said. Interviewing for jobs during her pregnancy, she was acutely aware of her baby bump. Potential employers would offer unsolicited opinions about how to balance work and family. One told her she “may not be able to function at full capacity.” They assumed motherhood would make her weaker, less capable.

How would it look if she quit now?

“You had a couple of months, maybe a year gap,” she can imagine an interviewer saying. “What did you do to make yourself better? What did you learn?”

Selvam’s maternity leave was only 12 weeks, and she said she’d already started to forget things. A few days before she went back, her research mentor texted her about something they’d worked on together.

“Do you remember that?” she’d asked.

Selvam didn’t remember.

Some moms might not want to go back to work when all this is over. After an initial “rough” adjustment period, Stone said, the women she followed in her research generally enjoyed focusing on their kids, choosing to start their job search later than they’d initially planned to.

“They’d say, ‘Maybe I’ll take a year off,’ ” said Stone. “Then five years later, it was like, where did the time go?”

In Indiana, Pompey isn’t sure she’ll go back to work after the coronavirus. If she does, she’ll be part-time. Now that she’s home with her kids, nudging them through the day, she’s realizing how much she’s missed. Her 2-year-old used to come home from day care using unfamiliar words and signals. She cheered him on, even though secretly she hated it. Some part of her wanted to be the one who taught him everything.

“Their dad is missing it all, and I can tell it affects him,” she said. “I don’t think I could handle that on top of everything else.”

Aimee used to worry about missing things, too. Now that she’s not working, she is determined to throw herself into every new experience she can have with her son. Her latest mission is to get him potty-trained.

A few weeks ago, her alarm — a ringtone she found specially for Ryan — went off while she was in line at the grocery store. Everyone turned to look as she sheepishly pulled her phone out of her pocket.

“Poop poop poop poop poop diarrhea. Poop poop poop poop.”

She wasn’t quite ready for a new job yet, she thought. But it couldn’t hurt to start looking.

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