

Drop-out career moms are media's darlings [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

I see them in their Lululemons, pushing the Bugaboos into the gym, parking their children in the daycare before heading for a midday class.

They are the Yummy Mummies, many of whom "opted out" of the Bay Street rat race for the Riverdale rugrat pace.

Lucky them to have the wherewithal to do so.

But are there more of them than last year, or 10 years ago? Are those boot camp babes some kind of feminist backlash, mommy power, back-to-home-and-hearth trend? Should I write about my neighbour with the three kids, minivan, SUV, terrier, million-dollar reno overlooking the park and the mouldering MBA as if she were typical?

Uh. No.

But, judging from all reports, which relentlessly paint high-powered professional women as, in the words of Boston University journalism professor Caryl Rivers, "superwomen or twitching wrecks," the career dropout is the dominant "news frame."

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I've followed several of the women-going-home news trendlets over the years, and you can almost hear the sigh of relief behind them. Well, now they're doing it. Finally they are going home. (Where, of course we always knew they belonged.)"

According to the recent *Off-Ramps and On-Ramps: Keeping Talented Women on the Road to Success* by Columbia University's Sylvia Ann Hewlett, these women are in the fortunate minority & 37 per cent & who temporarily quit their professions for an average of 2.2 years. Still, she writes, "contemporary women are deeply committed to their careers."

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Similar Canadian data are not available but Statistics Canada reports that more women work now than ever. Of women with children under age 16, 73 per cent were in the workforce. That's up from 39 per cent in 1976. Women's "quit rate" & once you exclude maternity leave & is greater than that of men's but is falling. In fact, it dropped below the men's rate in 1997.

Still, the media are filled with stories about white, affluent women abandoning the workforce. The New York Times is one of the worst offenders, starting in 2003 with the controversial "The Opt-Out Revolution" by reporter Lisa Belkin, who would later be criticized for her questionable statistics.

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Since then, for better or worse, women's work issues have filled the remainder bins at bookstores with such titles as *The Feminine Mistake: Are We Giving Up Too Much?*, *Opting Out? Why Women Really Quit Careers and Head Home*, *Get to Work: A Manifesto for Women of the World* and *Mommy Wars: Stay-at-Home and Career Moms Face Off on Their Choices, Their Lives, Their Families*.

It's not enough that working women with kids are stretched to the limit and feeling guilty, but the media have them "facing off" with stay-at-home mothers who are made to feel guilty for not working.

The media have us fighting each other instead of working together for on-site daycare, flexible hours, elder care leave, "phase-back plans" and other support. Rare is the business story that plumbs these plans.

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- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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