

# The top reasons mothers are still leaving the workplace <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS:

Women, more than men, downscale their careers or step away from professional life altogether while their children are young.

This "opting out" phenomenon, observed worldwide, comes despite the fact that some countries have stepped up their support for working parents.

Opting out occurs mostly in families where one partner earns enough that the mother can afford not to work, and, on the other end of the spectrum, those whose jobs don't pay enough to cover the cost of childcare. The main drivers of the opt-out decision: educational attainment and childcare issues.

### Education and choice

In the United States, mothers at the top of the educational ladder are disproportionately opting out, according to a new paper by Joni Hersch, a professor at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. Those with bachelor's degrees from the most elite universities who are married with children are 20 percentage points less likely to work than women in this group who don't have kids. For women who hold bachelor's degrees from lower-ranked schools, those who are married with children are only 13.5 percentage points less likely to work than those without kids.

The study found that the drop-out effect is magnified when women who received bachelor's degrees from the most-selective schools go on to earn masters of business administration (MBA) degrees: Just 35% of women with bachelor's degrees from top schools who also hold an MBA work full time. In comparison, 66% of female MBAs with bachelor's degrees from less-selective schools work full time.

Hersch's study examined data from the 2003 National Survey of College Graduates, which provides information on more than 100,000 graduates from US colleges and universities.

In the US, women might drop out of the labour force less often if there were more professional opportunities for advancement and raises, some say.

"For a lot of women, when they're struggling through that tough pipeline mid-career phase when everything is on their shoulders at work and at home, what women need is to have really strong opportunities to make it worth it for them and their families," said Ilene Lang, president and chief executive of Catalyst, a New York-based non-profit that advocates for executive women.

### Day-care

The quality and cost of day-care also impacts whether mothers drop out of the workforce. In China, where day-care has become less affordable, views on working mothers are changing. A rash of press coverage has recently depicted the ability to stay home with children as an enviable status symbol. This is a surprising shift, some say, since men and women were theoretically equal under Communist rule.

"Anecdotally, in the media, we're starting to see an attitude that women should focus on their kids when they are young," said Julia Broussard, the country programme manager of UN Women's China office.

Among the crucial factors in explaining the higher rates of working motherhood in countries like Sweden is the availability of high-quality childcare. There, children are guaranteed a spot at public preschool and parents are charged no more than 3% of their salary for the care.

In the rest of Europe, countries generally offer a higher level of government support than in many other regions. But a 2007 McKinsey & Co report noted that employment rates for mothers ranged from a high of 78% in Sweden to a low of 42% in Spain, according to the consulting firm's report. Those figures are likely even lower for mothers in Europe's hardest-hit economies since the European financial crisis.

"It is not surprising that access to day-care significantly influences the number of women who work outside the home," the report noted. "To have a positive impact on female employment levels, childcare services must be of sufficiently high quality and... exist in adequate amounts."

-reprinted from BBC News

**Region:** Europe <sup>[2]</sup>

**Tags:** gender <sup>[3]</sup>

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