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The Opt-Out Revolution

By LISA BELKIN

The scene in this cozy Atlanta living room would -- at first glance -- warm an early feminist's heart. Gathered by the fireplace one recent evening, sipping wine and nibbling cheese, are the members of a book club, each of them a beneficiary of all that feminists of 30-odd years ago held dear.

The eight women in the room have each earned a degree from Princeton, which was a citadel of everything male until the first co-educated class entered in 1969. And after Princeton, the women of this book club went on to do other things that women once were not expected to do. They received law degrees from Harvard and Columbia. They chose husbands who could keep up with them, not simply support them. They waited to have children because work was too exciting. They put on power suits and marched off to take on the world.

Yes, if an early feminist could peer into this scene, she would feel triumphant about the future. Until, of course, any one of these polished and purposeful women opened her mouth.

"I don't want to be on the fast track leading to a partnership at a prestigious law firm," says Katherine Brokaw, who left that track in order to stay home with her three children. "Some people define that as success. I don't."

"I don't want to be famous; I don't want to conquer the world; I don't want that kind of life," says Sarah McArthur Amsbary, who was a theater artist and teacher and earned her master's degree in English, then stepped out of the work force when her daughter was born. "Maternity provides an escape hatch that paternity does not. Having a baby provides a graceful and convenient exit."

Wander into any Starbucks in any Starbucks kind of neighborhood in the hours after the commuters are gone. See all those mothers drinking coffee and watching over toddlers at play? If you look past the Lycra gym clothes and the Internet-access cellphones, the scene could be the 50's, but for the fact that the coffee is more expensive and the mothers have M.B.A.'s.

We've gotten so used to the sight that we've lost track of the fact that this was not the way it was supposed to be. Women -- specifically, educated professional women -- were supposed to achieve like men. Once the barriers came down, once the playing field was leveled, they were supposed to march toward the future and take rightful ownership of the universe, or at the very least, ownership of their half. The women's movement was largely about grabbing a fair share of power -- making equal money, standing at the helm in the macho realms of business and government and law. It was about running the world.

"We thought there would be a woman president by now," says Marie Wilson, director of the Ms. Foundation for Women and president of the White House Project, who has been fighting to increase the representation of women in work and politics since 1975. "We expected that women would be leading half the companies in this country, that there would be parity on boards." Instead, Wilson has just finished a book that includes an examination, in her words, of "how far we haven't come," titled "Closing the Leadership Gap: Why Women Can and Must Help Run the World."

Arguably, the barriers of 40 years ago are down. Fifty percent of the undergraduate class of 2003 at Yale was female; this year's graduating class at Berkeley Law School was 63 percent women; Harvard was 46 percent; Columbia was 51. Nearly 47 percent of medical students are women, as are 50 percent of undergraduate business

majors (though, interestingly, about 30percent of M.B.A. candidates). They are recruited by top firms in all fields. They start strong out of the gate.

And then, suddenly, they stop. Despite all those women graduating from law school, they comprise only 16 percent of partners in law firms. Although men and women enter corporate training programs in equal numbers, just 16 percent of corporate officers are women, and only eight companies in the Fortune 500 have female C.E.O.'s. Of 435 members of the House of Representatives, 62 are women; there are 14 women in the 100-member Senate.

Measured against the way things once were, this is certainly progress. But measured against the way things were expected to be, this is a revolution stalled. During the 90's, the talk was about the glass ceiling, about women who were turned away at the threshold of power simply because they were women. The talk of this new decade is less about the obstacles faced by women than it is about the obstacles faced by mothers. As Joan C. Williams, director of the Program on WorkLife Law at American University, wrote in the Harvard Women's Law Journal last spring, "Many women never get near" that glass ceiling, because "they are stopped long before by the maternal wall."

Look, for example, at the Stanford class of '81. Fifty-seven percent of mothers in that class spent at least a year at home caring for their infant children in the first decade after graduation. One out of four have stayed home three or more years. Look at Harvard Business School. A survey of women from the classes of 1981, 1985 and 1991 found that only 38 percent were working full time. Look at professional women in surveys across the board. Between one-quarter and one-third are out of the work force, depending on the study and the profession. Look at the United States Census, which shows that the number of children being cared for by stay-at-home moms has increased nearly 13 percent in less than a decade. At the same time, the percentage of new mothers who go back to work fell from 59 percent in 1998 to 55 percent in 2000.

Look, too, at the mothers who have not left completely but have scaled down or redefined their roles in the crucial career-building years (25 to 44). Two-thirds of those mothers work fewer than 40 hours a week -- in other words, part time. Only 5 percent work 50 or more hours weekly. Women leave the workplace to strike out on their own at equally telling rates; the number of businesses owned or co-owned by women jumped 11 percent since 1997, nearly twice the rate of businesses in general.

Look at how all these numbers compare with those of men. Of white men with M.B.A.'s, 95 percent are working full time, but for white women with M.B.A.'s, that number drops to 67 percent. (Interestingly, the numbers for African-American women are closer to those for white men than to those for white women.)

And look at the women of this Atlanta book club. A roomful of Princeton women each trained as well as any man. Of the 10 members, half are not working at all; one is in business with her husband; one works part time; two freelance; and the only one with a full-time job has no children.

Social scientists -- most of them women -- have made a specialty in recent years of studying why all this is so. Joan Williams ("Unbending Gender"), Sylvia Ann Hewlett ("Creating a Life"), Arlie Russell Hochschild (who coined the phrase "the second shift") and Felice N. Schwartz (who made popular the phrase "the mommy track"), to name just a few, have done important work about how the workplace has failed women.

But to talk to the women of the book club -- or to the women of a San Francisco mothers' group with whom I also spent time, or the dozens of other women I interviewed, or the countless women I have come to know during the four years I have reported on the intersection of life and work -- is to sense that something more is happening here. It's not just that the workplace has failed women. It is also that women are rejecting the workplace.

I say this with the full understanding that there are ambitious, achieving women out there who are the emotional and professional equals of any man, and that there are also women who stayed the course, climbed the work ladder without pause and were thwarted by lingering double standards and chauvinism. I also say this knowing that to suggest that women work differently than men -- that they leave more easily and find other parts of life more fulfilling -- is a dangerous and loaded statement.

And lastly, I am very aware that, for the moment, this is true mostly of elite, successful women who can afford real choice -- who have partners with substantial salaries and health insurance -- making it easy to dismiss them as exceptions. To that I would argue that these are the very women who were supposed to be the professional equals of men right now, so the fact that so many are choosing otherwise is explosive.

As these women look up at the "top," they are increasingly deciding that they don't want to do what it takes to get there. Women today have the equal right to make the same bargain that men have made for centuries -- to take time from their family in pursuit of success. Instead, women are redefining success. And in doing so, they are redefining work.

Time was when a woman's definition of success was said to be her apple-pie recipe. Or her husband's promotion. Or her well-turned-out children. Next, being successful required becoming a man. Remember those awful padded-shoulder suits and floppy ties? Success was about the male definition of money and power.

There is nothing wrong with money or power. But they come at a high price. And lately when women talk about success they use words like satisfaction, balance and sanity.

That's why a recent survey by the research firm Catalyst found that 26percent of women at the cusp of the most senior levels of management don't want the promotion. And it's why Fortune magazine found that of the 108 women who have appeared on its list of the top 50 most powerful women over the years, at least 20 have chosen to leave their high-powered jobs, most voluntarily, for lives that are less intense and more fulfilling.

It's why President Bush's adviser Karen Hughes left the White House, saying her family was homesick and wanted to go back to Austin. It's why Brenda C. Barnes, who was the president and C.E.O. of Pepsi-Cola North America, left that job to move back to Illinois with her family. And it's why Wendy Chamberlin, who was ambassador to Pakistan, resigned, because security concerns meant she never saw her two young daughters.

Why don't women run the world?

Maybe it's because they don't want to.

Attitudes cluster in place and time. This is particularly true of a college campus, where one-quarter of the student population turns over every year. Undergraduates tend to think that the school they find is the one that always was, with no knowledge of the worldview of those even a few short years before. Looked at that way, the women of the Atlanta book club are a panoramic snapshot of change.

Sally Sears, the oldest of the group, entered Princeton in the fall of 1971. Women had been fully admitted two years earlier, and the school was still very much a boys club. Sears had gone to a small public school in Alabama and entered college "very conscious of being a representative of women and a representative of the South." As she describes it, the air was electric with feminism. "Margaret Mead came to talk one night, and I was stunned by how penetrating her questions were about what it was like to be the first women," she says. "I thought, my God, she's thinking of us as Samoans."

Upon graduation in 1975, Sears felt both entitled and obligated to make good. "The clear message was, 'You've been given the key to a kingdom that used to be denied to people like you,'" she says. "It never occurred to me that my choices would be proscribed. I could have anything I wanted."

What she wanted, at first, was to be "a confirmed single person, childless, a world traveler." She spent a couple of years running The Childersburg Star, a small Alabama newspaper owned by her family, and then, in 1978, she took a job on the air at a television station in Birmingham. That led to a job in Memphis, followed by a yearlong trip around the world, then another TV job in Dallas. By 1984 she was on the air in Atlanta, where she became a local celebrity and where she met Richard Belcher, a fellow reporter and now a local anchor. They were married in 1988, when Sears was 35.

Three years later, their son, Will, was born. Soldiers of feminism take only the shortest of maternity leaves, and as soon as Sears recovered from her C-section she was back at work. The O.J. Simpson trial was the first real test of what she calls "work plus love plus a child," because both she and her husband were sent out to California for the duration. "I got my mom and dad to bring Will out, and we all camped out at the New Otani Hotel for a few weeks," she says. "I was determined not to blink."

By the time Katherine Brokaw arrived on campus, seven years after Sears got there, women were no longer a curiosity. "I guess I knew I was a significant minority," Brokaw says, "but I never felt like I didn't belong there."

Clearly she belonged there. She'd been scoring off the charts on tests since she started taking them, and by seventh grade she was a serious student of Latin and French. In high school she added ancient Greek and slam-dunked her SAT's. Two of the best classics departments in the country were at Princeton and Harvard; she was accepted to both and chose Princeton.

When Brokaw and her classmates spoke of the future, it was not about blazing paths, as Sears's generation had done, but it was certainly not about fitting work around motherhood either. "I always knew I wanted to get married and have children," she says, "but I was looking at careers in terms of what would I find intellectually stimulating and personally fulfilling."

Brokaw thought briefly about pursuing a Ph.D. in classics. Worried that she would chafe within the ivory tower, she opted for law school instead. Because she would be paying for her law degree herself, she worked for several years -- first as the principal speechwriter for Gov. Thomas Kean of New Jersey and then as the speechwriter for the March of Dimes Foundation. She began Columbia Law School in the fall of 1987. There she met a student at the business school, and they were married in 1990.

Success followed her to Columbia, in the form of a spot on a prestigious law journal, internships at New York's top law firms and a job offer from every firm to which she applied. She also nabbed a clerkship with a federal judge and then went on to become an associate at the firm of Davis Polk & Wardwell.

After Brokaw had been at Davis Polk for a year, her husband was offered a position in Atlanta that was worth the move. The change was particularly appealing to Brokaw, because Atlanta offered her something that Manhattan could not -- an easy commute. "I could practice law in a top firm and still be only 10 minutes from home," she says. "It seemed like an ideal way to have children and a career."

Three years later she became pregnant for the first time and went into labor at the office at 9:30 one November night. During her three-month maternity leave she had access to the firm's e-mail system through her laptop and then went back to work full time, "which was always my intention."

At first, she says, her new equation was "more manageable" than she had expected. She had a "wonderful nanny," and for a couple of months, her workload was relatively light. Her hours were regular; she took her breast pump to the office. But that didn't last. In mid-May she learned that a major case, on which she was the lead associate, had been moved up on the calendar by the presiding judge and would go to trial in mid-August.

For the next three months Brokaw worked a crushing schedule, up to 15-hour days, seven days a week, while still nursing her daughter, who was not sleeping through the night. When the trial date came, she was exhausted but prepared. That morning, though, the judge postponed the case, and by the end of the week he announced that he had taken it off his calendar indefinitely. Later Brokaw would learn that he had decided to go fishing for two weeks.

That Sears and Brokaw were schooled in different generations is made clear by the different ways they gave up their jobs. Sears took nine years to quit. And she did so with great regret. "I would have hung in there, except the days kept getting longer and longer," she explains. "My five-day 50-hour week was becoming a 60-hour week." As news reports could be transmitted farther and farther from the "mother ship," she found herself an hour or two from home when the nightly news was done. "Will was growing up, and I was driving home from a fire," she says.

"I knew there would always be wrecks and fires, but there wouldn't always be his childhood."

First she tried to reduce her schedule. "The station would not give me a part-time contract," she says. "They said it was all or nothing." So in August 2000, she walked away from her six-figure income and became a homeroom mom at her son's school.

"It was wrenching for me to leave Channel 2," she says. "I miss being the lioness in the newsroom -- to walk through and have the interns say, 'There she goes.' It kills me that I'm not contributing to my 401(k) anymore. I do feel somehow that I let the cause down."

Brokaw, while torn about leaving, did so without nearly as much guilt or angst as Sears. She did not think for a moment that she had failed the movement, though she did wonder whether she had failed herself. Even while she was preparing for her trial she raised the possibility of a part-time schedule. She wrote a proposal that was circulated among the partners, and some back-and-forth had begun about, among other things, whether reduced hours would count as time toward partnership.

"Every once in a while I would raise my head from the grind of getting this case ready and I would say, 'Where are we with my proposal?'" she remembers. "Finally, when the case was pulled from the calendar, I did a lot of soul-searching. My life, my home life and my new family life were at the mercy of other people's whims. The judge had chosen to go fishing. My partners had chosen not to place my request on high-enough priority."

One night she and her husband sat down, and he asked, "What is the ultimate goal?"

"In theory," she answered, "the goal is to become a partner."

"Does your life get better or worse if you become a partner?"

"Well, financially it gets better, but in terms of my actual life, it gets worse."

And that is when Brokaw quit. She now cares full time for that eldest daughter, as well as the two children who followed. "I wish it had been possible to be the kind of parent I want to be and continue with my legal career," she says, "but I wore myself out trying to do both jobs well."

Fast-forward a decade, and compare the decision that Brokaw, class of '82, made with that of Vicky McElhaney Benedict, class of '91. "Even before I became a mother, I suspected I wouldn't go back to work," she says.

The Princeton Benedict entered was on its way to complete coeducation, and, she says, "I never felt discriminated against in any way." From there she went to Duke University School of Law, where she met her future husband, who was there earning his M.B.A. A native of Dallas, she "had fabulous offers from firms back home, but I didn't take them," she says. Though not yet engaged, she decided to follow Charlie Benedict to Atlanta instead, "where I joined a law firm that was not as high-profile." She made the choice, she says, looking back on it, "because I knew that the long-term career was going to be his."

The couple were married in 1995. Benedict quit her law job after nine months and began working in the development office of Emory University. Her daughter was born in 1998, and she quit that job while on maternity leave. Her son was born three years later, and she says she is secure with her decision.

"This is what I was meant to do," she says. "I hate to say that because it sounds like I could have skipped college. But I mean this is what I was meant to do at this time. I know that's very un-p.c., but I like life's rhythms when I'm nurturing a child."

"I've had people tell me that it's women like me that are ruining the workplace because it makes employers suspicious," she continues. "I don't want to take on the mantle of all womanhood and fight a fight for some sister

who isn't really my sister because I don't even know her."

These are fighting words of a most retro sort, and, no doubt, a 70's feminist peering in the window would be confused at best and depressed at worst. But unmapped roads are not, de facto, dead ends. Is this a movement that failed, or one reborn? What does this evolving spectrum of demands and choices tell us about women? And what does it mean for the future?

Katherine Brokaw and I were classmates. We did not know one another well at school, but the Princeton she describes was the one that I knew too. We were told we could be anything then, which we took to mean we could do everything, and all of it at the same time. We felt powerful and privileged when it came to being women (and, let's face it, only during freshman year did we learn to actually call ourselves women). Any generalization is dangerous, but for the most part we didn't feel the same obligation to succeed as the women before us, nor were we bordering on blasé, like those who would follow.

I rarely thought about combining life and work while I was at Princeton. In fact I never remember using the two words together in the same sentence. The only choice I thought I had to make was between journalism and law. Having chosen the former, I set my sights on the highest goal I could think of -- becoming editor of this newspaper, perhaps, or at least editor of this magazine -- and figured the path would be upward and linear. Then I got down to work.

I enjoyed the work -- loved the work -- but life got in the way. My first readjustments were practical; while a national correspondent in Houston I learned you can't hop on a plane every morning to explore the wilds of Texas while leaving a nursing baby back home.

Quickly, though, my choices became more philosophical. My second son was born while I was back in New York, working as a metro reporter. I decided to leave that full-time job in the newsroom for a more flexible freelance life writing from home, and I must admit that it was not a change I made only because my children needed me. It's more accurate to say I was no longer willing to work as hard -- commuting, navigating office politics, having my schedule be at the whim of the news, balancing all that with the needs of a family -- for a prize I was learning I didn't really want.

I will never run this paper. But I will write for it, into old age, I hope, and that piece of the work is enough for me. Much of the writing I do now is in the form of a biweekly column for The Times about life and work. Over the years I have written more than 100,000 words and received more than 10,000 e-mail messages from readers on the subject. It's not a scientific sample, but it is a continuing conversation, and a surprising amount of the talk is not about how the workplace is unfair to women, but about how the relationship between work and life is different for women than for men.

"Sometimes I worry that we're really just a little bit lazier," Sears says. "But in my heart of hearts, I think it's really because we're smarter. Maybe evolution has endowed us with the ability to turn back our rheostat faster, to not always charge ahead after one all-consuming thing. To prefer a life not with one pot boiling but with a lot of pots simmering; to prefer the patchwork quilt, not the down comforter. Oh, God, would you listen to these domestic analogies? Are they really coming out of my mouth?"

Sarah Amsbary also raises the question of biology. "It's all in the M.R.I.," she says, of studies that show the brains of men and women "light up" differently when they think or feel. And those different brains, she argues, inevitably make different choices. Amsbary graduated with a degree in English, not science, in 1988, and while at Princeton she was one of the first women in the University Cottage Club, which, when I was there, was still an all-male eating club known for attracting preppy good ol' boys. I can only imagine that being the first woman in such a place was its own kind of Darwinian experience.

When I talk to Jeannie Tarkenton, another member of the book club, biology comes up yet again. "I think some of us are swinging to a place where we enjoy, and can admit we enjoy, the stereotypical role of female/mother/caregiver," Tarkenton says. "I think we were born with those feelings."

Tarkenton graduated in 1992 and worked first in publishing and then on the start-up of the Atlanta Girls' School, until she had her first child in 2000. She went back and worked three days a week, until her second child was born last year. "I didn't want to work that hard," she says of her decision to quit completely. "Women today, if we think about feminism at all, we see it as a battle fought for 'the choice.' For us, the freedom to choose work if we want to work is the feminist strain in our lives."

When these women blame biology, they do so apologetically, and I find the tone as interesting as the words. Any parent can tell you that children are hard-wired from birth: this one is shy, this one is outgoing; this one is laid-back; this one is intense. They were born that way. And any student of the animal kingdom will tell you that males and females of a species act differently. Male baboons leave their mothers; female baboons stay close for life. The female kangaroo is oblivious to her young; the male seahorse carries fertilized eggs to term. Susan Allport, a naturalist, writes in her book "A Natural History of Parenting," "Males provide direct childcare in less than 5 percent of mammalian species, but in over 90 percent of bird species both male and female tend to their young."

In other words, we accept that humans are born with certain traits, and we accept that other species have innate differences between the sexes. What we are loath to do is extend that acceptance to humans. Partly that's because absolute scientific evidence one way or the other is impossible to collect. But mostly it is because so much of recent history (the civil rights movement, the women's movement) is an attempt to prove that biology is not destiny. To suggest otherwise is to resurrect an argument that can be -- and has been -- dangerously misused.

"I am so conflicted on this," says Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, an anthropologist and author of "Mother Nature: A History of Mothers, Infants and Natural Selection." Female primates, she says, are "competitive" in that they seek status within their social order. So it would follow that women strive for status too.

But there is an important qualifier. When primates compete, they do so in ways that increase the survival chances of their offspring. In other words, they do it for their children. "At this moment in Western civilization," Hrdy says, "seeking clout in a male world does not correlate with child well-being. Today, striving for status usually means leaving your children with an au pair who's just there for a year, or in inadequate day care. So it's not that women aren't competitive; it's just that they don't want to compete along the lines that are not compatible with their other goals.

"I'm very interested in my family and my environment and my work, not in forging ahead and climbing a power structure," Hrdy explains by way of personal illustration. "That is one of the inherent differences between the sexes." Then she warns, "But to turn that into dogma -- women are caring, men are not, or men should have power, women should not, that's dangerous and false."

In a loftlike apartment in San Francisco, a weekly play group is meeting over lunch. Lisa Tafuri Krim is "hands down" the best cook in the group, the other mothers all agree, as they grab bites of her crepes with goat cheese and tomato while chasing their toddlers. The conversation, mostly about food allergies and baby music classes and coming birthday parties, occasionally drifts toward the faraway world of work.

"I got a call from a guy that I hired," says Krim (University of Michigan '93; Harvard Business School '98), who is working part time now at a brand-consulting firm she joined before she became pregnant. "Now he's way ahead of me on the ladder. He calls and says, 'Hi, stay-at-home mom.'"

The women of this play group did not know each other when they were matched, purely on the basis of their children's ages, by the Golden Gate Mothers Group, an organization designed to make it easier to be a mom in San Francisco. But when they made their introductions at their first gathering more than a year ago, they saw themselves reflected in the capsule descriptions of one another's lives.

"Everyone had an M.B.A.," says Tracey Liao Van Hooser, the only one in the present group without one, though she does have a degree from Brown University and a decade of work in advertising and marketing to add to the cumulative resume. "It was wonderful to find a group of women who had made the same decisions I had. This play group is the reason I feel so happy with my choice."

Since that first meeting, and even in the months since I first spent an afternoon with them this summer, those capsule descriptions have changed. Van Hooser, still home full time with Jack, is now pregnant with her second child. Anne Kresse (Stanford '91, U.C.L.A. '98), who had been working four days a week as a senior marketing manager and spending one day with Jackson, switched to three days, then just last month, quit completely. She's pregnant again, too. Courtney Klinge, on the other hand (Colgate '88, Harvard '95), had stayed home for a year and a half with her daughters, Eliana and Paulina, but last month she went back to work three days a week.

All that coming and going, they say, is the entire point. "This is not permanent," Kresse says. "It's not black and white; it's gray. You're working. Then you're not working. Then maybe you're working part time or consulting. Then you go back. This is a chapter, not the whole book."

Van Hooser says: "I am not a housewife. Is there still any such thing? I am doing what is right for me at the moment, not necessarily what is right for me forever."

Talk to any professional woman who made this choice, and this is what she will say. She is not her mother or her grandmother. She has made a temporary decision for just a few years, not a permanent decision for the rest of her life. She has not lost her skills, just put them on hold.

"I'm calling this my 'maternity leave,'" Sears says. "As long as I have the chit on the table that says 'This is not forever,' then I feel O.K. about it."

Brokaw agrees, protesting, "Don't make me look like some 1950's Stepford wife." In the years since she left her law firm, she has helped found the Atlanta Girls' School (the same place where Tarkenton once worked) and also raised a successful challenge to a bridge that was to have spilled its traffic into her residential neighborhood. "I use my legal skills every day."

Don't look at her as something out of "The Bell Jar" either. She is not trapped. This is a choice. And don't worry for her that she will have no resources should something happen to her spouse, his career or their marriage, she insists. "My degree is my insurance policy."

But is it enough insurance? Not only in the event that she needs to go back to work, but also when the time comes, that she wants to. Because at the moment, it is unclear what women like these will be able to go back to. This is the hot button of the work-life debate at the moment, a question on which the future of women and work might well hinge. For all the change happening in the office, the challenge of returning workers -- those who opted out completely, and those who ratcheted back -- is barely even starting to be addressed.

If that workplace can reabsorb those who left into a career they find fulfilling, then stepping out may in fact be the answer to the frustrations of this generation. If not, then their ability to balance life and work will be no different than their mothers', after all.

On the one hand, there are examples out there of successful women whose careers were not linear. Shirley Tilghman, president of Princeton and the first woman to run the university, spent years deflecting administrative jobs -- exactly the sort of jobs that traditionally lead to becoming university president. And Ann Fudge, now chairman and C.E.O. of Young & Rubicam, left the fast track for two years to travel the world with her husband and help start a tutoring program for African-American children.

There are also trends working in these women's favor. One legacy of the dot-com era is that nonlinear career tracks are more accepted and employers are less put off by a resume with gaps and zigzags. Second, a labor shortage is looming in the coming decade, just as this cohort of women may well be planning to re-enter the work force.

On the other hand, the current economy is hardly welcoming to re-entrants, and the traditional workplace structure does not include a Welcome Back mat. "As a society we have become very good at building offramps," says Sylvia Ann Hewlett, who caused a stir last year with her book, "Creating a Life," which postulated that the more

successful the woman the less likely she was to marry or have children. "But we are seriously lacking onramps."

Hewlett has recently founded the Center for Work-Life Policy and, along with Cornel West, a Princeton professor, and Carolyn Buck Luce, a senior partner at Ernst & Young, has created a task force to study what she calls the "hidden brain drain" of women and minorities from the work force. (I have been invited to join that group.) Task-force members include representatives from a wide range of power bases -- large law firms, accounting firms, investment banks and universities -- who are coming to recognize that it is not enough to promote and retain talent. You have to acknowledge that talented workers will leave, and you have to find a way to help them come back.

The task force begins its work this winter. But Hewlett's preliminary research makes her pessimistic about what today's women will face when they want to return to work. At any given time, she says, "two-thirds of all women who quit their career to raise children" are "seeking to re-enter professional life and finding it exceedingly difficult. These women may think they can get back in," she said, when I told her of what I had been hearing in San Francisco and Atlanta and on my own suburban street, where half the women with children at home are not working and where the jobs they quit include law partner and investment banker. "But my data show that it's harder than they anticipate. Are they going to live to the age of 83 and realize that they opted out of a career?"

If so, they say they are braced for the trade-off. "I don't know how you just step out for three to five years until your kids are in kindergarten and then announce to the world that you're ready to pull out your resume and take on the challenging, fulfilling job that you deserve," Kresse says. "If and when I go back, it may never be full time. So given that I'm going to be a part-time person, is it also a given that my male colleagues are going to get ahead of me? Or is it going to be a meritocracy where talent really does matter most? I can't know that now."

Some are already preparing for re-entry by working part time. Sally Sears is one. The same television station that refused to give her a part-time contract in 2000 has started calling her in for periodic projects: a week of work during the summer while her son was at camp; five days straight when the Legislature opened its session. "The benefit to them is they get a seasoned, savvy reporter to grab the ball and run," she says. "And the benefit to me -- I get to say no."

Brokaw was asked back, too, but she declined -- for now. In the years since she left, her law firm has allowed several litigators to work a shorter week, and she has watched them struggle. One of those litigators, a member of the book club who would not let me use her name, asks: "How do you litigate part time? It's supposed to be 10 to 5 -- at a law firm, that's part time -- but lately I've been working until 4 a.m. because I have a project due. It's the type of job where if something's due, you work until it's done."

For the moment, therefore, the future is a question mark. "I assume my daughter will work," Jeannie Tarkenton says, "and I want to give her some example of working women as she grows up. I plan for this example to come from me, somehow. Maybe it will be part-time work, maybe full time, or maybe just through stories about the 10 years I worked before she arrived."

There is a powerful institution run largely by women: Princeton University. Shirley Tilghman is a molecular biologist who took the top job more than two years ago. Her provost, Amy Gutmann, is a professor of politics and was dean of the faculty before being appointed to the post by Tilghman.

Of the five academic deans who report to Gutmann, three are women: Nancy Weiss Malkiel, a historian, is dean of the college; Maria M. Klawe is dean of the school of engineering; Anne-Marie Slaughter, a lawyer, is dean of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. On top of that, Janet Lavin Rapelye is the new dean of admissions.

This has not gone unnoticed. One member of the class of '41 wrote to the Princeton Alumni Weekly magazine that since "we now have a lady president and a lady second in command, to save time I recommend that the trustees promptly convert Princeton to a single-sex female university and be done with it." Another wrote to suggest that

the name of the school be changed to "Princesstonia."

Tilghman says she was not really surprised by this old-guard crankiness. These were the same alums, she says, who objected to coeducation in the first place, arguing that women would not donate large amounts to their alma mater after they graduated. Meg Whitman, class of 1977 and president and C.E.O. of ebay Inc. seems to have silenced that objection with her recent \$30 million gift.

What did surprise Tilghman, though, was the reaction -- or lack of reaction -- from current female students. Last spring, after one of these new deans was appointed, The Daily Princetonian ran an editorial suggesting that the president was practicing "gender-based affirmative action." Tilghman waited for the women on campus to "rise up in protest" at the implication that "the only way you can possibly justify appointing a woman is in the interest of affirmative action, because, after all, it couldn't possibly be because they were the best person for the job."

But nothing of the sort happened. "Have these young women internalized the idea that women really do not lead?" she asks sadly. "There was a time when that kind of thinking would have inspired outrage."

One such time was in 1968, when Tilghman graduated from Queens University in Kingston, Ontario. "I am very much a child of that revolution," she says of the early years of the women's movement. "I came of age at the time when Betty Friedan set things in motion, and it had a tremendous impact on my life. It opened doors for me," as a woman in the sciences, "beyond a shadow of a doubt."

Now Tilghman finds herself presiding over a new generation, one that is, arguably, more accomplished and more qualified than any that has come before, but one that is not at all sure what to do with all that talent. She raised her son and daughter on her own (she was divorced when her children were young), and she is more than aware of the compromises made both at work and at home. She sees the effect those compromises have had, particularly on her daughter, a 2003 Princeton graduate.

"A life in science, combined with motherhood, meant leaving undone a lot of things I might have wanted to do," she says. "There were books I wished I had read, courses I wished I had taken, community service I wished I had done, places I wished I had seen, friends I wished I had made -- but time constraints made this impossible." Her daughter, she says, "is not as ambitious as I was. I think she saw the trade-offs that I made as ones she might not be prepared to make herself. She is looking for more balance in her life."

Other members of that generation seem to feel the same way, Tilghman says. She and I had dinner one night in a dining room of Prospect House, where university presidents, including Woodrow Wilson, used to live. We were joined there by Gutmann and Slaughter. Pointing at them, Tilghman said, "I think that for every one person who looks at an Amy or an Ann-Marie and says, 'I want to be like her,' there are three who say, 'I want to be anything but her.'"

Tilghman is now a leader. In that role she wonders how to educate women to enter this shades-of-gray world and how to create an environment for her own staff that encourages a balanced life. But Tilghman is also a scientist, and she suspects that policies and committees, while crucially important, cannot change everything. And she wonders whether evolution has done both men and women a disservice.

"My fantasy is a world where there are two kinds of people -- ones who like to stay home and care for children and ones who like to go out and have a career," she says. "In this fantasy, one of these kinds can only marry the other." But the way it seems to work now is that ambitious women seem to be attracted to ambitious men. Then when they have children together, "someone has to become less ambitious." And right now, it tends to be the woman who makes that choice.

Sarah McArthur Amsbary of the Atlanta group leads a much-examined life. Back in college, she says, she gave no thought to melding life and work, but now, "I think about it almost constantly."

And what she has concluded, after all this thinking, is that the exodus of professional women from the workplace isn't really about motherhood at all. It is really about work. "There's a misconception that it's mostly a pull toward motherhood and her precious baby that drives a woman to quit her job, or apparently, her entire career," she says. "Not that the precious baby doesn't magnetize many of us. Mine certainly did. As often as not, though, a woman would have loved to maintain some version of a career, but that job wasn't cutting it anymore. Among women I know, quitting is driven as much from the job-dissatisfaction side as from the pull-to-motherhood side."

She compares all this to a romance gone sour. "Timing one's quitting to coincide with a baby is like timing a breakup to coincide with graduation," she says. "It's just a whole lot easier than breaking up in the middle of senior year."

That is the gift biology gives women, she says. It provides pauses, in the form of pregnancy and childbirth, that men do not have. And as the workplace becomes more stressful and all-consuming, the exit door is more attractive. "Women get to look around every few years and say, 'Is this still what I want to be doing?'" she says. "Maybe they have higher standards for job satisfaction because there is always the option of being their child's primary caregiver. When a man gets that dissatisfied with his job, he has to stick it out."

This, I would argue, is why the workplace needs women. Not just because they are 50 percent of the talent pool, but for the very fact that they are more willing to leave than men. That, in turn, makes employers work harder to keep them. It is why the accounting firm Deloitte & Touche has more than doubled the number of employees on flexible work schedules over the past decade and more than quintupled the number of female partners and directors (to 567, from 97) in the same period. It is why I.B.M. employees can request up to 156 weeks of job-protected family time off. It is why Hamot Medical Center in Erie, Pa., hired a husband and wife to fill one neonatology job, with a shared salary and shared health insurance, then let them decide who stays home and who comes to the hospital on any given day. It is why, everywhere you look, workers are doing their work in untraditional ways.

Women started this conversation about life and work -- a conversation that is slowly coming to include men. Sanity, balance and a new definition of success, it seems, just might be contagious. And instead of women being forced to act like men, men are being freed to act like women. Because women are willing to leave, men are more willing to leave, too -- the number of married men who are full-time caregivers to their children has increased 18 percent. Because women are willing to leave, 46 percent of the employees taking parental leave at Ernst & Young last year were men.

Looked at that way, this is not the failure of a revolution, but the start of a new one. It is about a door opened but a crack by women that could usher in a new environment for us all.

Why don't women run the world?

"In a way," Amsbary says, "we really do."

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