Pamela Stone “The Rhetoric and Reality of “Opting Out””

Main Point:
In today’s society, the former restrictions placed upon women working have been largely abolished. This has ushered a new age of choice and empowerment for women in the workplace. On the other hand, informal restrictions still constrain women, especially mothers with children, in the workplace, thus limiting their potential. One such restriction is seen in the social phenomenon of “opting out.” Stone researches and analyzes, via interviews with 54 professional women with former careers, how the rhetoric of choice given to women by our society is actually often intermingled with the realities of restrictions. Half of the women she interviewed were in their 30’s and the other half were in their 40’s. Stone specifically chooses to examine highly educated, elite women because they are the ones pushing the limits of women empowerment, “defining what is acceptable for all women in their work and family roles” (367). Furthermore, the most notable effect “opting out” has is on aspiring, elite, high-achieving mothers with young children. Stone thus feels that looking into the “elite women’s experiences provide a glimpse into the work-family negotiations that all women face” (367). Yet in her examination, even these accomplished and educated each women are affected by our society- they eventually hit workplace and even spousal constraints that interfere and even disrupts their career aspirations. These women choose to “opt out” of their careers not out of a romanticized return to traditional motherhood, but rather because no option and choices exist for them.

Central Issues and Concepts:
- The needs and demands of the workplace seem often contradictory and at odds with familial responsibilities. As such, the inflexible workplace gives women essentially the option to advance their careers at the expense of less familial involvement.

- The “ideal worker” model of the workplace is based on males without secondary family demands and concerns. A characteristic of these jobs include long, inflexible hours. Even if their workplace offers some familial flexibilities, the repercussions of taking these “family friendly” options means the relinquishing of job responsibilities and status. Mothers thus suffer, as they do not fit nor do they perform well according to this archaic worker model. Ultimately, most women quit and do not reach their full career potential.

- Husbands often do not force their wives to quit their jobs. However, they practice subliminal, passive way to get their wives to quit. Most notably, men would steadfastly progress their careers no matter the cost, thus almost obligating their wives to respond to the needs of their child by compromising their own job.

- The media plays up the notion of a return to traditionalism in these women who “opt out” of their careers to go back home and care for their children. Rather, in reality, women quit the workplace not out of choice or this idea of becoming a traditional “good mother” but rather they are simply choosing a way to quit against a system that is outdated and a model of work that provide no mechanism to account for the needs of being a mother and a caregiver to their families.
Two Key Quotes:
- “Many workplaces claimed to be “family friendly” and offered a variety of supports. But for women who could take advantage of them, flexible work schedules carried significant penalties [to their career aspirations]. Women who shifted to part-time work typically saw their jobs gutted out of significant responsibilities and the once-flourishing careers derailed… they begin to feel the pointlessness of continuing.” (SS 369).

- “The vast majority of the type of women I studied do not want to choose between career and family. The demanding nature of today’s parenting puts added pressure on women… women today “choose” to be home full-time not as much because of parenting overload as because of work overload, specifically long hours and the lack of flexible options in their high-status jobs.” (SS 372-373).

Two Questions:
- Given the needs and concerns of mothers as espoused in the interview excerpts Stone provides in her article, what are some possible options and policies that the workplace can put into place to create better, more flexible ways to work for mothers struggling to balance familial and career concerns?

- As aforementioned, husbands force their wives to eventually give up their jobs. How does this reinforce the notion of gender roles in families? Does gender trump socioeconomic levels? In other words, do you think a professional, married woman who undergoes hypogamy will face a similar pressure to and eventually will quit her job even if she is more successful? Or will the dynamics be different in these families?