

Wake Up, Employers: Working Moms Are Giving Up

By [Courtney E. Martin](#), [AlterNet](#). Posted [December 20, 2006](#).

The majority of working moms who leave their jobs do so because of inflexible office policy, not Martha Stewart fantasies.

New York Times writer Lisa Belkin's controversial October 26, 2003 article about smart, young women leaving the workforce to raise children -- dubbed the "opt out revolution" -- sparked a firestorm of debate centered around one dramatic question:

Is the most well-educated generation of women in history -- the daughters of feminism and Title IX and glass-ceiling smashing pioneers -- really choosing domesticity over career?

Books have been written in response (*Get To Work: A Manifesto for Women of the World* by Linda R. Hirshman), class curricula have been created (NYU's Stern Business School will offer a course on work/family balance this spring), and studies have been done.

It turns out that Belkin's "opt out revolution" was more like an opt out overreaction. Heather Boushey, an economist at the Center for Economic and Policy Research in Washington, D.C. found that the drop in women's work participation rates between 2001 and 2005 was largely due to a weak labor market, and further, men's labor rates also dropped at this time. Joan Williams, the director of the Center for WorkLife Law at the University of California, Hastings, recently reported that 86 percent of those women who did leave their jobs did so because of inflexible office policy, not Martha Stewart fantasies.

While old guard feminists have been busy pointing fingers at young, frivolous co-eds, ignorant of the legacy they have inherited, they should be placing the blame where it is most deserved: in the boardrooms where inflexible and sometimes even inhumane work/family policy is established and in the government offices where little legislation is ever written to protect working parents.

The question we should all be asking is not: why aren't more young women enthused about living lives of work rigidity? But, what can we do to change work/family policy in this country so that mothers and fathers, and those who are caring for aging parents, can live their fullest lives?

That's exactly the question that filmmakers Laura Pacheco and John de Graaf explore in their documentary film, *The Motherhood Manifesto*, a companion project to the book of the same name written by Joan Blades and Kristen Rowe-Finkbeiner. In both, the creators weave personal stories with expert commentary to explore what happens to working mothers and families in a country that doesn't support them.

For example, only 1 in 7 American workers get paid childcare leave -- a policy that has proven to reduce infant mortality, improve children's learning and reduce juvenile delinquency. Selena Allen, a non-profit worker and mother of two in Kent, Washington, is featured in the film and illustrates just how devastating this lack of leave can be. She and her husband both worked full time, but still money was tight.

"We rent a house," Allen explains. "We don't drive fancy new cars. We don't do anything luxurious. We're just trying to make ends meet."

When her second son was born six weeks premature and rushed to intensive care, there was no way that Allen could take time off. Her workplace only offered one month of paid maternity leave, and Allen and her family decided it would be best spent once the baby came home. She gave birth on a Wednesday and went back to work on a Monday. Allen reflects, "I felt like a piece of me got left in that hospital, and I had to pretend like I was okay."

This is not just a touchy-feely topic, but an economic watershed. The average female college graduate who becomes a mother will sacrifice about a million dollars over her lifetime. And it's not just personal financial loss that is caused by rigid work/family policy. A new [study](#) by Catalyst, a research and advisory organization on women at work, and The Community, Families & Work Program (CFWP) at Brandeis University, found that of the 1,755 working parents studied in three Fortune 100 organizations, 1 in 20 parents, experience high stress as a result of inflexible work/family policy. A staggering number when you consider that, according to American Psychologist, workplace stress costs companies an estimated \$50-\$300 billion in lost job productivity each year.

The failure is rooted in the workplace -- particularly, corporate and low wage industries -- and perpetuated at the governmental level. Horrifyingly, only four countries in the world -- Lesotho, Swaziland, Papua New Guinea and the United States -- fail to provide paid maternity leave to all workers. Though President Bush paid lip service to caring about working mothers in speech at the 2004 Republican National Convention -- "Today, two-thirds of all moms also work outside the home ... and government must take your side." -- his administration has done next to nothing to ensure that working parents are protected.

[Moms Rising](#), a grassroots movement advocating for work/family policy reform, started by Blades and Rowe-Finkbeiner this May, already has more than 50,000 citizen members and the support of Senators Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton. The organization has a six point agenda based on the acronym MOTHER: M-maternity/paternity leave; O-open, flexible work; T-TV we choose and other after school programs; H-healthcare for all kids; E-excellent childcare; R-realistic and fair wages. They also host a series of blogs on these and other issues at their [Momsblogging link](#).

Using the house party model popularized by Moveon.org, they have disbursed *Motherhood Manifesto*, the film, across the nation this fall and will continue through the winter. They hope that the dialogues that follow screenings among working mothers and fathers will incite even more passion for changing this pathetic state of work/life affairs.

For all of this country's obsession with family -- the supposed sanctity of marriage, abstinence-only sex education, the "family values" touted by the religious right -- we are certainly not supporting ours. And it's not just the conservatives who are missing the boat. Rather than being up in arms about a few elite college grads excited about being stay-at-home moms, liberal feminists should be directing our energies into changing the harmful policies that continue to limit women's and men's choices about where and how to devote their critical time and energy.

As long as this country and its companies so profoundly ignore the needs of families, the quality of all of our lives will be compromised.