

## Opting-Out Occupationally? US Women's Post-Birth Occupational Behavior<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract** Women's labor force participation following the birth of a child has garnered both popular and scholarly interest in recent years. Tales in the media of professional women who bid the firm farewell after having a child (cf. Belkin 2003) have fostered a lively public debate about an "opt-out" revolution. Academic research has shown, however, that such a revolution has not occurred, at least when it is understood as mothers completely stopping working (Boushey 2005, 2007). This extremely important research has not yet addressed a second component of "opting out," namely a shift in occupation among professional women in order to make work more compatible with childrearing. In this paper, I will use the Panel Study of Income Dynamics to explore occupational shifts following births to professional women. In preliminary analysis, I find that professional women with a birth are more likely to shift to nonprofessional occupations than those without a birth.

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One of the key concerns of the women's movement has been assuring the ability of all women who want to participate in the labor force to be able to do so. While this goal has proved easier to achieve for women without children than for mothers, in 2005, 67% of mothers with children under age 18 worked (US Department of Labor 2006). In the past five years, however, there has been growing public discussion of an "opt-out" revolution. This revolution refers to an increasing number of women, particularly professional women, opting to leave the labor force following the birth of a child. Although framed in the language of choice, such a trend, if true, is of concern to feminists for what it might imply about successful integration of women into the workforce overall, and particularly into male-dominated occupations. The trend, again if true, is at the very least a stinging critique of the ability of US employers to structure the workplace in a manner that allows women (and men) to balance work and family.

Discussion of an opt-out revolution appears to have begun with Lisa Belkin's 2003 piece in the *New York Times Magazine*, which described elite women leaving the workforce in droves after becoming mothers. This article raised a host of questions about feminism's track record, but did not systematically address the actual trends in labor force participation. The related academic literature showed a contrasting picture. Boushey (2005) has shown that the effect of children on women's labor force participation actually *decreased* between 1984 and 2004 such that the labor force participation rate of prime-aged women with children was only 8.9 percentage points lower than for women without children. Furthermore, although labor force participation did fall for mothers after 2001, it actually fell for all women because of the recession (Boushey 2007).

The highly-educated women in their thirties detailed in Belkin's article could have exhibited behavior different than the rest of the population, but they also continued to work, with or without children (Boushey 2005). This leaves one question: if these women continued to work, did they keep the same job, or did they perhaps shift jobs or even occupations in order to achieve a more favorable work-family balance? Highly-educated women vested in continuing to work following the birth of a child are particularly well-equipped to shift occupation, given both their high levels of human capital, and the likely support of a well-employed husband.

It does not appear that anyone has systematically explored the possibility of occupational shift as a form of the opt-out revolution. Most research has examined whether women work at all following the birth of a child (cf. Glass and Nath 2006; Hofferth and Curtin 2006). The research that exists on the relationship between occupation and motherhood has focused on whether women choose occupations based on their compatibility with motherhood (cf. Desai and Waite 1991), or the relationship between occupational choices and wage gaps (cf. England 2002). Others have intriguingly shown that non-professional US women use self-employment to achieve a balance between work and family, but that professional women do not do the same (Budig 2006). Earlier research from Israel found that women who changed their occupations following the birth of a child were more likely to move into more female occupations (Stier 1996).

Based on the continuing interest in the opt-out revolution, the possibility that it may be better observed at the occupational, rather than the employment, level, and the gap in the literature on occupational shifts following childbirth, I plan to use the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) to explore the effect of childbearing on occupation among professional women. As a nationally-representative, longitudinal survey focused on employment behavior, the PSID is ideal for answering this question. Table 1 shows preliminary results for women employed in professional and managerial positions in 1999. Among these women, those who

had a child between 2000 and 2004 were more likely to shift to non-professional employment than those who did not experience a birth.

**Table 1. Employment Shifts among Women in Professional Occupations in 1999 between 1999 and 2005, by Occurrence of a Birth between 2000 and 2004 (Percentages)**

	<i>Did not have birth</i>	<i>Had birth</i>
<i>Stayed in professional occupation</i>	36.0	38.6
<i>Shifted to non-professional occupation</i>	38.3	47.1
<i>Shifted to not working</i>	25.7	14.3
Total	100%	100%

Source: PSID 1999-2005 (N = 331)

Note: Data are unweighted. I am unsure as to why so many women are leaving the workforce in the absence of a birth.

I plan to expand this analysis to a multivariate framework predicting the hazard of a shift in occupation based on previous occupation (professional or nonprofessional), education levels, and spousal characteristics. I will also examine the effect of first versus subsequent births on occupational shifts. The results will shed light on the adjustments women make to their working lives in order to balance career and family.

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