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The Opt-Out Generation Wants Back In

By JUDITH WARNER

Sheilah O'Donnell tells herself that her new home, a townhouse in a development in Chevy Chase, Md., just a stone's throw from a Safeway, isn't really all that bad. Sure, it's near a gas station. And the front window, with its cheerily upholstered cushions, overlooks a dreary parking lot. And yes, it's kind of small — "an apartment," O'Donnell, who is 44, sometimes says bitterly, when she's reminded of her former life with her ex-husband in their custom-built, six-be.2 (il) -5edsoe,u,

nonprofit group devoted to girls' emotional empowerment and physical well-being, and was eventually hired part time, at low pay. She loved the work. The organization's message, about respecting yourself and surrounding yourself with people who appreciate you, resonated with her. "I started feeling very devalued when I was with him," O'Donnel said of her husband, "but when I was doing all this nonprofit stuff, I felt great."

O'Donnel and Eisel agree the job drove a destructive wedge between them. "I look back on it as the beginning of the end of our marriage," Eisel said when we talked by phone last month. "Once she started to work, she started to place more value in herself, and because she put more value in herself, she put herself in front of a lot of things — family, and ultimately, her marriage."

O'Donnel's family encouraged her to leave. But with three young children and no means of support, she couldn't see a way out. Eventually, after a particularly bad fight, she went to see a lawyer.

"He said, 'Before you do anything, you get a job,' " she recalled. "I said, 'Everyone I spoke with said you don't get a job because your spouse will have to pay less in alimony and child support.' He said, 'You have to look at the next 30 years of your life, and if you're in control of the situation, and you have a job that's paying you money, he's going to be far less powerful over you in the process.' "

A few weeks later, O'Donnel separated from her husband. She soon ran into an old Oracle colleague in a doctor's waiting room. The woman was working at Monster.com, the employment Web site, and encouraged O'Donnel to get in touch. One former Oracle connection led to another. O'Donnel found that her reputation — 11 years out — was still intact, and she was quickly offered a job. But while she waited for her first paycheck, she found herself with no access to cash. She took a big chunk out of her old 401(k) and borrowed money from her sister. It was "the scariest time in my entire life," she told me when we first spoke last summer.

What had been a nasty divorce was entering its end stages and the "60 Minutes" interview had come up. When O'Donnel saw the video again, the image of her younger self, giving up her job and proclaiming the benefits of staying at home haunted her. "I was this woman who made this great 'choice,' " she said, sadly. "It wasn't the perfect fairy-tale ending."

I reached out to O'Donnel — and nearly two dozen other women — because I was curious, after 10 years and many, many "why women still can't have it all" debates, to know what happened to the mothers who gave up promising careers in the late 1990s and early 2000s to be home with their children.

The economic landscape had changed greatly since these women — buoyed by their prestigious

these succeeded in getting back in, and only 40 percent got full-time jobs. "It was distressingly difficult to get back on track," Hewlett told me. In addition, the women Hewlett surveyed came back to jobs that paid, on average, 16 percent less than those they had before. And about a quarter took jobs with lesser management responsibilities or had to accept a lower job title than the one they had when they left. The impact of those sacrifices, Hewlett noted, was in many cases amplified after the financial meltdown, when 28 percent more of the women she surveyed reported that they had a nonworking spouse at home.

But money was not the primary focus of the women I spoke with — whether they needed more of it or not. Rather, what haunted many of them, as they reckoned with the past 10 years of their lives, was a more unquantifiable sense of personal change. They had been supremely self-confident when they took the "plunge into full-time motherhood," as a former high-level corporate lawyer put it to me. (Like a few of the other women I talked to, she didn't want to be identified — she was newly re-employed and didn't want attention brought to her years out of the work force.) Many even spoke of it as a unique post-feminist adventure — "Real women's empowerment is being able to do what you want to when you want to," Amy Cunningham Atkinson, a Yale graduate and former "60 Minutes" producer (and 2004 Lesley Stahl interviewee), told me. But now they were learning that some things were beyond even their prodigious powers of control.



Jeff Brown for The New York Times
Carrie Chimerine Irvin at
home in Bethesda, Md.

She made the decision to leave work almost without a backward glance. It was what she wanted. It was what her husband, Stuart, a lawyer, wanted. "It didn't feel like a sacrifice," she told me last summer when we reconnected, after a gap of almost 10 years. "I wasn't even sure what I wanted to be when I grew up. I knew I was a mom. In my family, even before we had kids, I was such a caretaker. I loved having a home. I really took care of Stuart. It felt like a natural extension of that."

As the girls grew older, however, Carrie started to feel that the unstated bargain the couple had struck — her husband earning the money, Carrie keeping their home — was problematic. She had no issue doing full-time child care; that was a labor of love. But housekeeping? That was another matter. She resented that the couple's mutual mess was now seen as *her* concern.

"I had the sense of being in an unequal marriage," she told me. "I think he preferred the house to be 'kept' in a different kind of way than I was prepared to do it. If I had any angst about being an overeducated stay-at-home mom, it was not about raising the kids, but it was about sweeping."

She came to think that returning to work would not only be good for her, but also healthy for her marriage. She chose her words carefully as she related this turning point in her life: "My husband was getting impatient," she said. "I think he was worried I wasn't yearning for a career again. He'd come home at night, and I'd want to talk about what was going on at school and with the other parents, and I'd get frustrated he was not finding it more engrossing. I think he felt even more than I did that it would be good for me to have something professional, that I'd be more fulfilled as a whole person if I was pursuing some career goals."

With middle school on the horizon for her daughters, Carrie started working the contacts she made as a self-described "professional volunteer" operating among Washington's most-powerful parents. Very quickly, the effort paid off. "Friends who were former colleagues said, 'When you're ready, come.' So sight unseen, I got work. I didn't have to do a résumé — nothing," she said. She was first offered part-time consulting; then, eager to move on, she reached out to a contact at the Gates Foundation whom she met when she was chairwoman at her daughters' preschool. The contact had become the founding board chairman of a charter school, and he invited Carrie to tour it. She and

The seed money came in. Carrie's network of connections continued to build. And in two years she and her partner, Simmons Lettre, raised \$1.2 million, hired staff members and rented office space for their new nonprofit company, Charter Board Partners.

I visited Carrie there last summer, one evening when a work dinner kept her in the city unusually late in the day. White boards were marked with colorful, enthusiastic-looking flourishes, and the young, ethnically diverse, heavily female, earnest and friendly staff members were heading home for the night. Irvin, in a crisp summer dress, her light brown hair falling neatly at her shoulders, showed me around. She was excited, revitalized, virtually glowing, like a person in love. "I'm so energized by our success," she told me. "I feel like I'm fulfilling the professional potential that I never did before. I feel smart. I feel successful. I feel like I escaped a whole slog level of my career. I got to stay home with my kids and yet I got to come back to a leadership position. And I'm earning a living."

She was doing it all without dropping any of her maternal duties — not school pickup, not homework, not dinner, not party planning, not even those photo books for the grandparents. She had a housekeeper now for the heavy cleaning. But she still pushed herself to provide the special little touches at home, like making sure her kitchen counter always had a bowl of "seasonably appropriate" candy — even if that candy, to her great annoyance, was now perpetually buried under a pile of unsorted junk.

She acknowledged that what she was trying to do was impossible. "The pace at which I'm living right now is unsustainable," she told me. She tried her absolute best to cut things that weren't strictly essential (he) -(ht) -0.2 (.) 0.5 (t) -0.2(She) -0.5 () -0.2 (a) 0.2 (l) -0.2 (m) 0.2 (o) -0.1(s) -0.2 (

with her husband's encouragement, first as an at-home mother, then as a start-up visionary, while Stuart's steady job made it all possible. And he had to adjust to the loss of her attention when she first shifted it to their daughters and then to her new job.

Their situation was common enough among middle-aged, overtaxed, professional working parents. Stuart was hardly the first man to find himself sidelined either by his wife's devotion to her children or her dedication to work or both. But knowing that their story was playing out in households all around them didn't make their readjustment to life as a working couple any easier. "I think a big issue is that we both want to be taken care of at the end of the day, and neither of us has any energy to take care of the other," Carrie said. "It's the proverbial 'meet me at the door with a martini and slippers.' Don't we all want that? A clean house and someone at the door? I think when I wasn't working I had some guilt that that wasn't me, but now I want to be that other person. . . . When you're absolutely exhausted, it's hard to be emotionally generous."

Hewlett's women, post-recession, said their husbands were worried financially, and 30 percent said their husbands were "envious or angry" about their decision not to work, many of Stone's high-earning husbands came, over time, to want their wives to stay home. "This round, I'm hearing more, 'My husband really prefers that I be home,' " Stone said of her recent talks with those women. "They say, 'It's a big surprise: we've really gone to a very traditional household now.' "

Many of the women I spoke with were troubled by the gender-role traditionalism that crept into their marriages once they gave up work, transforming them from being their husbands' intellectual equals into the one member of their partnership uniquely endowed with gifts for laundry or cooking and cleaning; a junior member of the household, who sometimes had to "negotiate" with her husband to get money for child care.

The husbands hadn't turned into ogres. Their intent was not to make their wives feel lesser. But when traditional gender arrangements were put into place, there was a subtle slide into inequality. "The dynamic changes," said Hope Adler, a former manager at the professional-services firm KPMG who spent 10 years at home full time with her four children before starting work again and choosing to take a much-lower-paying job at a smaller consulting firm that allowed her to work some of the time from home. "When I worked at KPMG we did 50/50," she said. "We were making equal money. Then once I started staying home, I was doing laundry, dinner. . . ." But once she started working again, the expectations remained the same. "There just doesn't seem to be a way to go back," she said.

Kuae Kelch Mattox and her husband, Ted — she a former producer for NBC News, he a multimedia consultant — met 27 years ago when they were in their early 20s. She was home from Howard University for the summer in Philadelphia; he was working with some former Temple University football teammates as a bouncer at a private club. They were equally educated and equally ambitious.

Before they were married, they made a neatly egalitarian deal: whenever one of them got a really

