

## **PRESS RELEASE:**

### **“Opt Out” or Pushed Out? – The Untold Story of Why Women Leave the Workforce**

*The information in this press release is EMBARGOED until 12:01 a.m. EST on Tuesday, October 17, 2006. The Center for WorkLife Law is providing the release in advance as a courtesy to the media.*

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SAN FRANCISCO – Depictions of work/family conflict in the news typically focus on professional women’s choice to “opt out”—to cut back on work or leave the workforce—for family reasons. A new study debunks the myths surrounding the opt out story, and details the ways in which women do not opt out—more often they are pushed out of their jobs by inflexible workplaces, failures of public policy, and outright workplace bias.

The Center for WorkLife Law—a research and advocacy group at the University of California, Hastings College of the Law—will release a new report on Tuesday, October 17, 2006 that shows the flaws in how newspapers typically cover why women leave the workforce and provides more accurate, alternative ways of telling the story of women’s workforce participation. The report, *“Opt Out” or Pushed Out?: How the Press Covers Work/Family Conflict – The Untold Story of Why Women Leave the Workforce*, reviews more than 100 news articles and shows that they:

- focus overwhelmingly on the lives of professional/managerial women, who comprise only about 8% of American women;
- pinpoint the pull of family life as the main reason why women quit, whereas a recent study showed that 86% of women cite workplace pushes (such as inflexible jobs) as a key reason for their decision to leave;
- give an unrealistic picture of how easy it will be for women to re-enter the workforce; and
- virtually always feature women in one situation: *after* they leave the workforce and *before* they are divorced, which is unrealistic in a country with a 50% divorce rate.

The study not only critiques the Opt Out story line that predominates today. It also provides new, more accurate analyses of existing data, notably that:

- although mothers are *not* increasingly likely to stay home with their children, a *real* trend is that both men’s household contributions and women’s work hours have stalled;

- better educated women are *more likely* to be in the labor force than less educated women; and
- women’s decisions to opt out do not represent a return to “traditional” values; in fact, much of what contemporary professional moms stay home to do is not traditional.

Finally, the report provides new, more accurate story lines about women and work.

- ***Workplace/workforce mismatch.*** Today’s workplaces are often designed for a workforce that no longer exists: the workforce of the 1950s, in which male breadwinners were married to housewives who took care of home and children. Today, 70% of families have all adults in the labor force.
- ***Macroeconomic deskilling story.*** The United States cannot maintain its competitiveness if it continues to pay large sums to educate the many women who then find themselves “deskilled”—driven out of good jobs and into less good ones—by inflexible workplaces and family responsibilities discrimination.
- ***Inflexible, all-or-nothing workplaces drive women—and men—into neo-traditional roles.*** Inflexible, all-or-nothing workplaces drive women out of breadwinner roles and men out of caregiver roles. The result is many fathers working longer hours than they would like and many mothers working fewer hours than they would like.
- ***Lack of supports for working families impedes work/family reconciliation.*** The United States lags far behind most other industrialized countries in supports for working families. This lack of supports is a major reason many American women are pushed out of work.
- ***Stereotyping and discrimination drive men into breadwinner roles and women out of them.*** Many women quit because they encounter “maternal wall bias”: gender bias triggered by motherhood. Such women are not freely opting out—they are being pushed out by gender discrimination.

Researchers at the Center for WorkLife Law analyzed 119 news articles published in major U.S. newspapers and regional papers between January 1, 1980 and March 10, 2006. This is the most comprehensive news content analysis of this issue published to date.

Distinguished Professor of Law Joan C. Williams, Founding Director of the Center for WorkLife Law and lead author of the study said, “Too often, the press sends the message that work/family conflict is about professional women who ‘opt out.’ Our analysis shows that many women do not ‘opt out’—they are pushed out by workplace inflexibility, lack of child care, and job discrimination.”

*“Opt Out” or Pushed Out?* is one of a series of reports that the Center for WorkLife Law has published to provide accurate pictures of work/family conflict in the United States. The series includes the influential report released last March, *One Sick Child Away From Being Fired: When “Opting Out” Is Not an Option*.

*“Opt Out” or Pushed Out?* will be posted on the web at [www.worklifelaw.org](http://www.worklifelaw.org) at 1:00 p.m. EST / 10:00 a.m. PST on Monday, October 16, but will be embargoed until 12:01 a.m. EST on Tuesday, October 17.