Opting Out? Cohort Differences in Professional Women's Employment Rates from 1960 to 2005

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Over the past 50 years, women's roles have changed dramatically—a reality captured by substantial increases in employment and reductions in fertility. Yet, the social organization of work and family life has not changed much, leading to pervasive work–family conflict. Observing these strains, some scholars wonder whether U.S. women's high employment levels are sustainable. Women's employment in professional and managerial occupations—the core of the analyses offered in this article—merits particular interest because of the material and symbolic implications for gender equality. In a cohort analysis of working-age women born between 1906 and 1975, I show that employment levels among college-educated women in professional and managerial occupations have increased across cohorts. Full-time, year-round employment rates continue to rise across cohorts, even among women in historically male professions and mothers of young children. Although labor force participation rates have stopped rising, they have stalled at a very high rate, with less than 8 percent of professional women born since 1956 out of the labor force for a year or more during their prime childbearing years. Moreover, the difference in employment rates between mothers and childless women—the "child penalty"—is shrinking across cohorts.

Women's participation in paid employment increased substantially in the United States over the past 50 years, particularly among married women and mothers of young children. This occurred without a substantial reorganization of work or family life. Although husbands and fathers perform more housework and childcare than in the past, men still average far less time in these activities than women, leaving the gendered nature of family life and childrearing essentially intact. And, despite workplace adoptions of policies such as flexible work schedules and temporary parental leaves, the nature of paid work also remains fundamentally unchanged. Indeed, the organization of most workplaces is predicated on a concept of workers as "male" and free of personal responsibilities (Acker 1990). Many working women with children consequently experience a real time bind (Hochschild 1989, 1997) due to the competing demands of work and family life. This has prompted observers and scholars to wonder about the sustainability of high employment rates for women. In this article, I consider whether recent cohorts of women in professional and managerial occupations are increasing or maintaining high employment rates, or if they are "opting out" of professional employment to stay at home with children.

Professional work and families are both "greedy institutions"—institutions that demand undivided commitment (Coser 1974). More recent scholarship describes these institutions in similar ways; Blair-Loy (2003) finds that

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women in demanding professional work have "competing devotions" to work and family responsibilities. Compounding this problem, the time commitment required of professional work has escalated in recent years (Jacobs and Gerson 2004). Families in the United States confront particular challenges in combining full-time work and parenting responsibilities because there is limited public provision of day-care, no national policy of paid parental leave, and little regulation of work hours (Gornick and Meyers 2003).

In the absence of macro-level conditions that would make employment and family demands more compatible for all workers, individuals and families must decide how to allocate their time between employment, family responsibilities, and other activities such as civic engagement and leisure. Most men work full-time regardless of their family responsibilities, leaving women to face the "hard choices" (Gerson 1985). These choices include not having children or having fewer children, not working or working less, and coming up with private solutions that allow for both high levels of employment and fertility. These private solutions often involve care work provided by unpaid female relatives or purchased from less educated women. Substantial renegotiation of gender roles within families is not a common strategy.

Sociological perspectives and demographic evidence suggest that work–family conflict is substantial. How women's employment rates will respond to this conflict remains unclear. Extensive demographic research on women's employment has not produced a consensus as to how high we should expect women's employment rates to rise or whether high rates are sustainable, especially alongside replacement-level fertility.[1] Cross-sectional data show that neither employment nor fertility levels have declined substantially in the United States over the past three decades. However, working-age U.S. women's labor force participation rates dipped slightly over the past decade, with a decrease of 3.2 percentage points from 1994 to 2005 among college-educated married mothers (Mosisa and Hipple 2006).

Whether U.S. women will maintain high employment levels has sparked interest outside of academia. Mainly relying on anecdotal evidence, most major media outlets in the United States have run stories either predicting an exodus of women from professional work or claiming that an exodus is already occurring. A recent study found 119 print articles on this theme between 1980 and 2006, including recent cover stories in *Time* and *Newsweek* (Williams, Manvell, and Bornstein 2006). A 2003 *New York Times Magazine* (Belkin 2003) article describing an "opt-out revolution" of well-educated, professional women leaving the labor force for motherhood has perhaps been the most influential. It claims that these voluntary employment exits and reductions account for persistent gender inequalities in employment. Not surprisingly, this story became the most e-mailed *New York Times* article of the year and provoked considerable public reactions, including a National Organization of Women media campaign to "dismantle the mom myth" and incredulous comments from the Dean of Harvard Law School (Kagan 2005). Some recent scholarly work has taken the opt-out trend as established fact (e.g., Hill et al. 2006; Still 2006), and Grusky and Szelenyi (2007) identify "opting out" as a noteworthy new narrative about gender inequality.

Much of this attention centers on highly educated women in professional and managerial occupations, and perhaps for good reason. Largely due to the cultural and legal changes brought about by the women's movements of the 1960s and 1970s, women's educational and professional opportunities are greater now than at any previous point in history. The expansion of women's educational opportunities has yielded more women qualified for historically male-dominated jobs that require advanced schooling. Because professional and managerial occupations confer prestige, social influence, and economic rewards, women's success in these fields may be particularly important for gender equality.

This article describes cohort changes in employment patterns of college-educated professional and managerial women in the United States from 1960 to 2005 and evaluates whether

[1] In a 2006 address to the American Economic Association, Goldin (2006) stated that some scholars believe in "some type of 'natural rate' of female labor force participation" and that the United States may have reached this. Goldin does not believe we have reached that rate, if such a rate exists.

recent cohorts are increasingly "opting out" of paid employment. I also consider how the difference in employment rates between mothers and childless women—the "child penalty"—has changed. Using data from the U.S. Census and the American Community Survey, I examine trends by 10-year birth cohorts for three employment measures: labor force participation; full-time, year-round employment; and working more than 50 hours a week. Using decomposition techniques, the analyses delineate how much of the change in professional women's employment across birth cohorts can be attributed to changes in population characteristics—including the percentage of mothers and the occupational distribution—versus behavioral changes within these subgroups.

THEORY AND PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Using Birth Cohorts to Study Women's Employment

Widespread social change—such as the expansion of women's employment opportunities—is not experienced uniformly by birth cohorts who mature under different historical circumstances and occupy different stages in the life cycle when change occurs (Ryder 1965). In his classic article on birth cohorts and social change, Ryder writes, "Successive cohorts are differentiated by the changing content of formal education, by peer-group socialization, and by idiosyncratic historical experience" (1965:843). Cohort differences are highly relevant to changes in women's employment patterns. Recent cohorts of U.S. women have enjoyed greater educational opportunities and more egalitarian gender-role norms (Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001). Given these changes, findings of cohort differences in women's employment patterns (Goldin 1990; Rexroat 1992; Rosenfeld 1996; Sayer, Cohen, and Casper 2004) and cohort-specific responses to changes in employment opportunities (Goldin 1990) are not surprising. Among college-educated women, Goldin (1997, 2004) finds that each succeeding cohort has had higher employment rates, but that cohorts had varied experiences with combining paid employment, marriage, and children.

Possible Causes of Cohort Change among Professional Women

Many societal changes over the past 50 years may have affected employment levels among women in professional and managerial occupations and contributed to employment changes across birth cohorts. Change across cohorts can be thought of as stemming from two sources: changes in the composition of the population or changes in the behavior of subgroups of the population. For example, an increase across cohorts in the percentage of professional women who are mothers—a compositional change—could decrease employment rates across cohorts. Employment rates could similarly decrease if the percentage of mothers stayed the same while the employment rates of mothers decreased across cohorts—a behavioral change. In the following section, I highlight changes that may have affected either the composition or the behavior of the population, or both. Some changes—such as the expansion of employment opportunities and legal protections, increased fertility control, and greater adoption of work/family policies—are expected to increase employment rates. Other changes—such as decreased selectivity into the professions, increased marriage rates for educated women, conservative cultural shifts, and professional and managerial occupations' increasing time demands—are expected to depress employment rates. Changes in family life have ambiguous implications.[2]

Expansion of employment opportunities and legal protections. Beginning with the Equal Pay Act of 1963 and continuing with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978, and the Civil Rights Acts of 1991, the federal government has enact-

[2] The changes described in this section may have affected women's preferences, as well as constraining their choices or expanding their opportunities. Unfortunately, assessing the extent of constraints on women's choices is difficult with most available data. Qualitative research on professional women's exits from high prestige jobs suggests that many highly accomplished women who leave paid employment feel deeply conflicted about their agency in the decision (Blair-Loy 2003; Gerson 1985; Stone 2007; Stone and Lovejoy 2004).

ed increasingly inclusive protections for workers against gender-based discrimination. These legislative changes have limited overt discrimination and prevented women from being categorically denied entry to professional and managerial occupations.

INCREASED CONTROL OVER FERTILITY. Women's control over their fertility increased with the introduction of new birth control technologies and legal changes that granted unmarried women access to birth control. Widespread access to reliable contraception enabled more women to pursue professional work by decreasing the opportunity costs of lengthy educational requirements (Goldin and Katz 2002). Total fertility levels also decreased among all women in the United States. The combination of increased fertility control and decreased fertility levels resulted in more time that women could devote to work.

INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF WORK/FAMILY POLICIES. Some workplaces have adapted to better accommodate working mothers and dual-earner families by implementing policies such as parental leave, flexible schedules, and work from home. Some research suggests that white-collar workers are more likely than other workers to have access to these policies, but we know little about how the availability of these policies varies within the professional and managerial strata. Although the full effects of these policies are still unclear, parental leave policies seem to reduce the percentage of women who leave a job after having children (see Gornick and Meyers 2003 for a review).

DECREASED SELECTIVITY OF PROFESSIONAL WORK. Since 1960, women have been entering the professions in relatively greater numbers each year. While this signals progress toward gender equality, it also indicates a decline in the selectiveness of women entering the professions. If professional women differ by cohort in their average level of career ambition, preference for children, or dedication to feminist ideals, their employment behaviors may also differ.

CONSERVATIVE CULTURAL SHIFTS. Between 1960 and 2005, there was a rise and subsequent fall in the visibility of the women's movement(s). Some feminists noted a conservative backlash against feminism and gender equality (Faludi 1991). Two recent studies of feminist identity find that women who matured during the rise of second wave feminism (defined as the birth cohorts of 1946 to 1959 by Peltola, Milkie, and Presser [2004] and birth cohorts of 1936 to 1955 by Schnittker, Freese, and Powell [2003]) are more likely to consider themselves feminists than women born before or after these cohorts. Consequently, the women in the youngest cohorts may feel less social pressure to prove their professional capabilities and more freedom to leave professional work to care for children.

INCREASED MARRIAGE OPPORTUNITIES FOR EDUCATED WOMEN. Goldstein and Kenney (2001) find that college-educated women now have the greatest marriage rates of all educational groups, reversing a previous pattern in which college-educated women were less likely than other women to marry. Increases in marriage rates among educated women may result in a higher percentage of mothers and a lower percentage of childless women. Even if the relative rates of employment for childless women and mothers remained the same across cohorts, a change in the percentage of professional women who are mothers would result in cohort differences in employment rates.

CHANGES IN MANAGERIAL AND PROFESSIONAL OCCUPATIONS. Both returns to education and the earnings premium for workers in professional and managerial occupations have increased over the past few decades (Katz and Murphy 1992), making professional work more lucrative. Changes in the types of jobs available in the postindustrial labor market also favor professional workers, with greater demands for their skills. These changes mean there are more opportunities for professional workers and greater opportunity costs for not working. Concurrently, the time demands of these occupations have increased (Jacobs and Gerson 2004), potentially making it harder for workers to balance work and family responsibilities.

CHANGES IN FAMILY LIFE. Hays (1996) and Lareau (2003) argue that parenting expectations have increased in the past few decades as

children from middle- and upper-class families become involved in more structured activities that require parental participation. As Jacobs and Gerson (2004) point out, this change is particularly problematic for dual-earner couples. College-educated married men spend more time with their children now than in the past (Sayer, Bianchi, and Robinson 2004), but we do not know if this increase is enough to offset the rising time demands of motherhood. Across cohorts, married men have also increased the amount of time they spend on housework, but married women still do considerably more housework than men (Bianchi et al. 2000). While women in high-paying jobs can outsource some housework and childcare, many women still face a "second shift" at home.

Previous Research

Historically, college-educated women have had higher labor force participation (LFP) rates than the general population of women and different fertility and marriage patterns (Goldin 1990). Several studies find that the impact of education on employment rates has increased over time (Cohen and Bianchi 1999; England, Garcia-Beaulieu, and Ross 2004). The evidence on cohort change among professional and managerial women is limited; I found just one study of cohort employment patterns for this group using nationally representative data. Whittington, Averett, and Anderson (2000) examine postpartum employment patterns among married mothers using data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) from 1968 to 1992 and do not find significant cohort differences in models controlling for period effects. However, their sample size is small (N = 343) and their model specification may be inadequate for disentangling period and cohort effects. Additionally, their study only considers cohort changes in married mothers' patterns of employment.

Few studies examine reasons other than family responsibilities for employment exits, but evidence from two studies of women in science and engineering occupations suggests that family responsibilities account for only a small percentage of women's employment exits (National Science Foundation 2003; Preston 1994). Identifying which employment exits result from competing family responsibilities rather than other factors is difficult with most available data. Comparisons of the employment patterns of women in different family situations can provide some clues. Similarity in the employment levels of women with different family structures suggests a minimal role for family responsibilities in explaining variation among women. The converse is not necessarily true. Divergence by family structures may reflect conflicting employment and family responsibilities, but also differential selection into motherhood or differences in employer discrimination.

Goldin's (2006) analysis of a cohort of women born around 1958 who attended selective colleges finds relatively small employment differences between mothers and childless women. For this group of college-educated women, the mean cumulative time spent out of the labor force between college graduation and age 37, excluding time enrolled in school, was 1.6 years for all women and 2.1 years for women with children. Among women with professional or graduate degrees, the average time out of the labor force was just under 10 months. Moreover, less than half of the mothers in the sample were out of the labor force for more than six months at a time. This study shows that highly educated women in one of the most recent cohorts have high rates of employment and low rates of opting out.

Another cohort study considers the fertility and employment patterns of college-educated women born from 1960 to 1979 during their early career years, between ages 22 and 27. Vere (2007) finds modest decreases in cumulative annual employment hours for single-year cohorts born after 1974 and increases in fertility among cohorts born after 1966. This analysis is not able to show whether employment decreases were concentrated in women with children or were broadly shared across members of these cohorts.

Two studies from a period perspective also provide some insight. Bradbury and Katz (2005) examine LFP rates for college-educated women and men ages 25 to 54 using Current Population Survey data. They find that between 1994 to 1995 and 2003 to 2004, the LFP rate fell 3 percentage points for women, 1 point for men, and 8 points for women with children under age 3. Reductions in full-time employment rates and changes in hours worked were more modest. A second study (Boushey 2005) using Current

Population Survey data examines the child penalty—the difference between women with and without children—for LFP rates among women ages 25 to 44. Boushey finds that, after controlling for demographic changes and business-cycle effects, the child penalty decreased between 1984 and 2004 for all educational groups except advanced degree holders; for this group, the child penalty did not significantly change over this period.

DATA AND METHODS

Data

Among women born before 1935, just over 4 percent were college-educated and in a professional or managerial occupation between the ages of 30 and 34, and for all cohorts the percentage in historically male professions is very low. Thus, few data sources have large enough samples to enable comparisons across and within cohorts. In this analysis, I use the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS) Census data for the 1960 through 2000 Censuses and American Community Survey (ACS) data for 2005 (Ruggles et al. 2004). My sample includes college-educated women age 25 to 54 who have professional or managerial occupations (hereafter referred to as "professional women") in the 1960 General, 1970 Form 2 Metro, 1980 1% Metro B, 1990 1% Metro, and 2000 1% Census and 2005 ACS IPUMS samples. I limit the analysis to women age 25 to 54 because these are the prime adult working years and past the age at which most women will have completed a bachelor's degree.[3] For some analyses, I consider only women in the prime childbearing years (age 25 to 39).[4] In the discussion of results, I compare professional women's employment patterns to those of similarly aged nonprofessional women and professional men.

Professionals and managers. There is no consensus as to which occupations should be classified as professional. In this article, I define professional women as those with a college degree (or four years of college)[5] and an occupation classified as professional or managerial by the Census Bureau. Specifically, I use the IPUMS code *occ1950,* which is based on the 1950 list of occupational titles from the U. S. Census Bureau's (1950) *Alphabetic Index of Occupations and Industries: 1950* and attempts to make occupational titles equivalent over census periods. (For a list of the most populous occupations in this analysis, see Appendix Table A2). Using responses to the occupational item to define the population of professionals is the most conceptually clear way to select the sample, but it has three notable limitations. First, occupational titles are not completely equivalent across census years, although there is high equivalency across censuses for the most populous occupations in the professional and managerial category. Second, the universe of respondents asked occupational questions changed between 1960 and 2005; those currently employed or who had worked within the past 10 years were asked their occupation in census years 1960 and 1970, whereas the question was limited to those currently working or who had worked in the preceding five years in 1980, 1990, 2000, and 2005. Third, women who are not in the labor force at the time of the census may not report the occupation they previously held and instead may report their occupation as "keeping house" or "homemaker." An analysis of occupational responses suggests that the percentage of college-educated, working-age female respondents who were not asked the occupational item or did not report their occupation decreased from 18.6 percent in 1960 to 7.5 percent in 2000. Similarly, the percentage of women not reporting an occupation decreased across cohorts to less than 10 percent of women

[3] The age at which women complete professional degrees may differ across cohorts, but the data necessary to compute average age at degree completion is not available for all cohorts included in the analysis. Therefore, in all of my analyses, I either exclude women enrolled in school or add controls for school enrollment.

[4] Many demographers consider the prime childbearing years to extend until age 45. Because of data constraints and because childbearing after age 40 is still relatively rare, I use 39 as a bound.

[5] In the 1960 through 1980 censuses, respondents simply reported how many years of college education they had, while in the 1990 and 2000 census and 2005 ACS respondents indicated the highest degree they had obtained.

in the youngest four cohorts. Women who do not report an occupation are more likely to be married and to have young children and less likely to have an advanced degree than women who report an occupation. To ascertain whether omitting respondents without occupational data could be biasing the results, I replicated all of the analyses with those who did not report an occupation included in the sample of professionals. This did not change the pattern of results by cohort nor any of the substantive findings.

BIRTH COHORTS. I divide the sample into seven 10-year cohorts, starting with the birth year 1906 and ending with the year 1975. Deciding which birth years to group together as a defined cohort is somewhat arbitrary since there are many unique historical experiences that we might use to define a cohort. I use the cohort parameters defined by Sayer, Cohen, and Casper (2004) to facilitate comparisons with their research on women's employment.[6] The final sample, which includes observations from 1960 to 2005, contains 390,736 observations.[7]

MEASURES OF EMPLOYMENT. I examine three measures of employment by birth cohorts: labor force participation (LFP), full-time year-round employment (FTYR), and working more than 50 hours per week. LFP is the most inclusive measure of employment status because it includes any person who participated in at least one hour of paid work or sought employment in a given week. The other two measures of employment—FTYR and working long hours—provide considerably more information about women's involvement in paid employment. To measure FTYR, I use the standard Bureau of Labor Statistics definition of an average of 35 hours or more of paid work per week for 50 or more weeks per year. To determine whether an individual meets this definition, I use average hours worked per week and weeks worked per year based on respondents' reports.[8] I also examine whether respondents work more than 50 hours per week on average, which I refer to as "working long hours." Working long hours may be a particularly salient employment indicator in professional occupations that expect heavy time commitments from workers.

OCCUPATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS. There are many characteristics of an occupation that may affect women's employment rates. I focus on the historical gender composition or sex-type of the occupation because it captures a broad array of factors including prestige, working conditions, and salary. I limit the classification to occupations that have similar work tasks across time, require specialized certification and schooling, and are widely recognized as professions. I base the classification on the gender composition of workers in the profession in the 1960 Census and consider whether the profession is described as male-typed in Epstein's (1970) classic book on women in the professions. In the category of historically male professions I include doctors and physicians, lawyers and judges, engineers, accountants, college professors and deans, clergy, and dentists. All of these professions—except college professors and deans—were over 85 percent male in 1960. In the category of historically female professions are nurses, social workers, teachers, and librarians. Women made up approximately 70 percent of teachers and social workers, 88 percent of librarians, and over 97 percent of nurses in 1960.

[6] For a discussion of the unique historical experiences of each of these cohorts, see Sayer, Cohen, and Casper (2004) and Goldin (2004). Sayer and colleagues' cohort groups can be combined to be roughly comparable to Goldin's cohorts: Progressives and WW1 = Goldin's Cohort 2, Baby Boom Parents and WWII = Goldin's Cohort 3, Early Baby Boom = Goldin's Cohort 4, Late Baby Boom = Goldin's Cohort 5.

[7] Table A1 in the Appendix shows the distribution of observations by age and cohort.

[8] The wording of the items on hours worked changed slightly across censuses. In 1960, 1970, 1980, and 1990, respondents were asked how many hours they worked in the previous week, while in 1980, 1990, 2000, and 2005 respondents were asked how many hours they work in a typical week. The overlap of the two versions of the item in 1980 and 1990 allows for comparisons of item comparability; preliminary analyses suggest that the two versions of the item produce very similar responses.

FAMILY CHARACTERISTICS. The family characteristics I consider in this analysis are whether a woman has children and the age of her youngest child. I classify a woman who reports her youngest child's age as 5 or younger as "having young children" and a woman whose youngest child is between the ages of 6 and 18 as "having older children." Women who do not report any of their own children in the household are classified as "without children." This operational definition is likely to slightly underestimate fertility and maternal status, but fertility history items are not available for all cohorts considered. Using reports of "own children in the household" is a relatively good approximation for fertility (see Rindfuss 1976) for this group of women (between ages 25 and 39) because they are unlikely to underreport children, have children who already moved out of the house, have children who were removed from the home by the state, or have children who died in childhood. One should note, however, that the estimates of cohort fertility are almost certainly lower than they would be if calculated from complete fertility histories.

Analysis Plan

To examine changes in professional women's employment over time, I use a cohort analysis approach. First, I show how age-specific rates of LFP, FTYR, and working long hours have changed by cohort. This part of the analysis is similar to Sayer, Cohen, and Casper's (2004) cohort analysis of employment change in the general population; my analysis differs primarily in the population examined and the number of cohorts considered. Second, I track changes in the composition of professional women across cohorts and in employment rates among subgroups, defined by family characteristics and occupation sex-type. To calculate employment rates for the main childbearing years, I compute single-year, age-specific rates and then average these single year rates together to compute an average rate for 25- to 39-year-olds. For data from 1990, 2000, and 2005, I use weights as suggested by the U.S. Census Bureau. Finally, I describe the characteristics of women who were out of the labor force in the previous year and examine the individual-level predictors of labor force nonparticipation.

RESULTS

Age-Specific Employment Rates

LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATES. Figure 1 shows the trends in labor force participation (LFP) rates for professional women by age and birth cohort. Each line in the figure shows the trend in LFP rates for one five-year age group. The horizontal axis shows birth cohorts, starting with the oldest, Progressives (1906 to 1915), and ending with the youngest, Generation X (1966 to 1975). By following each line from left to right, one can see the trend of increasing age-specific rates across cohorts. Steep increases across cohorts are most pronounced for the youngest age groups, with more modest increases among older women. Most of the age-specific trendlines plateau or slightly dip across the youngest cohorts. For example, the LFP rate for 30- to 34-year-olds decreased from 87.1 for the Late Baby Boom cohort (1956 to1965) to 85.0 for Generation X and similarly decreased among 40- to 44-year-olds from 92.0 for the Early Baby Boom cohort (1946 to 1955) to 89.6 for the Late Baby Boom cohort. Professional men's LFP rates also decreased across cohorts. Among 30- to 34-year-old professional men, the rate fell from 97.8 for the Late Baby Boom cohort to 95.4 for Generation X, and among 40- to 44-year-olds the rate decreased from 98.5 for the Early Baby Boom cohort to 96.6 for the Late Baby Boom cohort.

FULL-TIME YEAR-ROUND EMPLOYMENT RATES. Figure 2 shows that the percentage of professional women working full-time year-round (FTYR)[9] has greatly increased across cohorts. Age-specific rates increased across every cohort, with the exception of a slight decrease among 35- to 39-year-olds (from 52.1 for the Late Baby Boom [1956 to 1965] cohort to 51.2 for Generation X [1966 to 1975]). While full-time work was relatively rare for professional women in older cohorts, especially during the prime childbearing ages of 25 to 39, it was the norm for younger cohorts. Professional men's

[9] Full-time, year-round (FTYR) employment rates are usually lower than one-point-in-time, full-time employment rates, as the latter estimates do not account for the seasonal nature of many jobs.

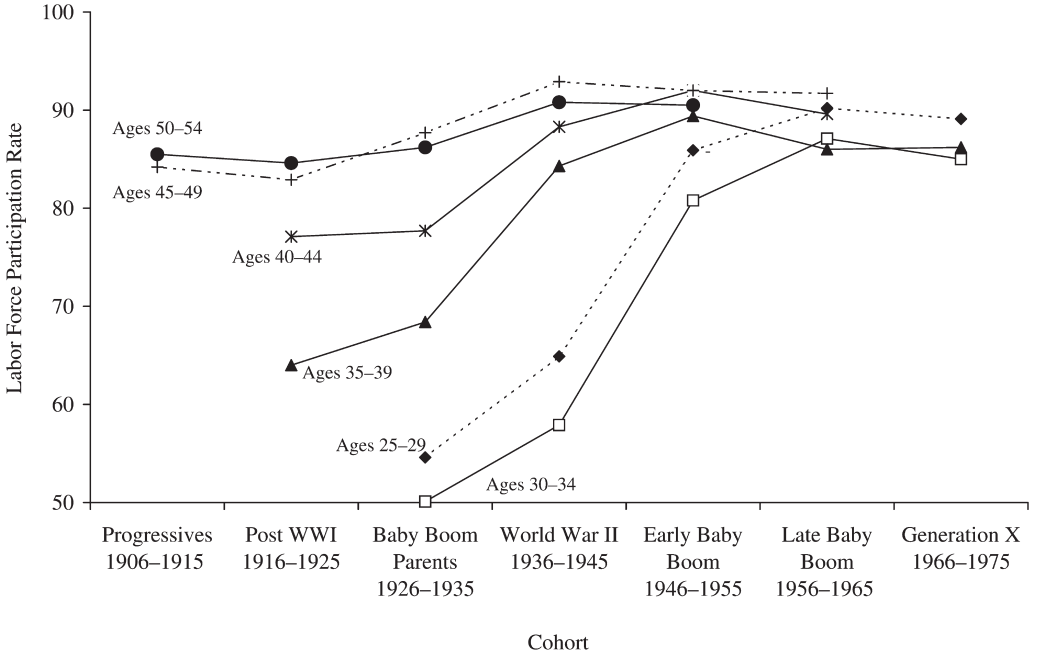

Figure 1. Labor Force Participation Rates for Professional Women by Age and Cohort

employment rates are considerably higher than women's rates, ranging from 70 to 80 percent for most age groups and cohorts, but the gap between women and men decreased across cohorts.

A comparison of professional women's FTYR rates with those of the total population of U.S. women shows that the former work at considerably higher rates than the latter. For women ages 25 to 34 in the general population, Sayer, Cohen,

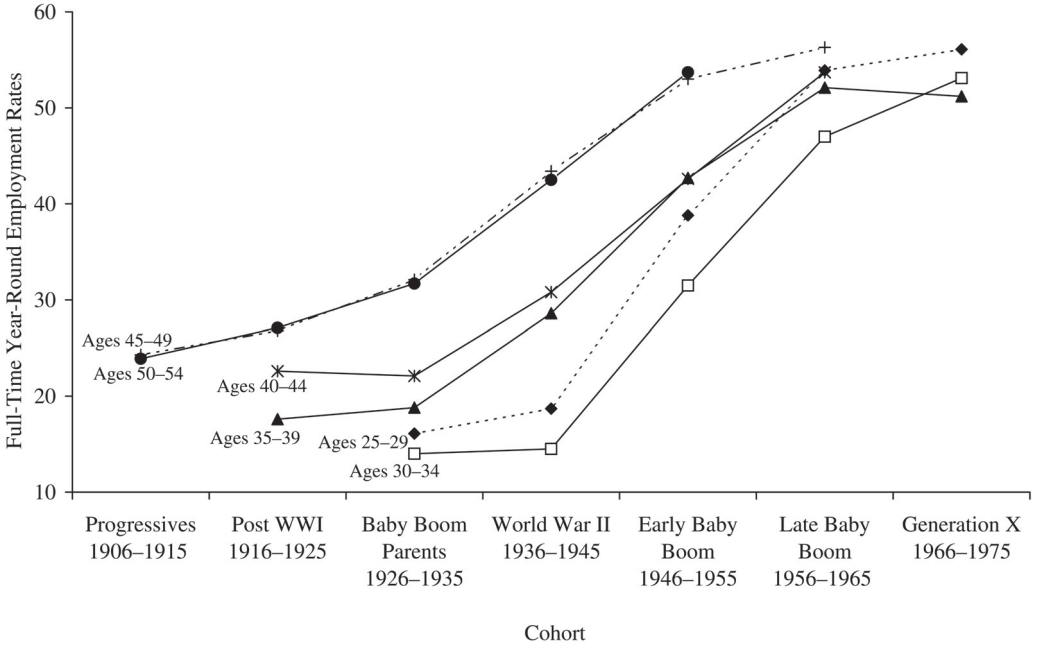

Figure 2. Full-Time Year-Round Employment Rates for Professional Women by Age and Cohort

and Casper (2004) report FTYR employment rates of 44 percent for Generation X (1966 to 1975), 42 percent for Late Baby Boomers (1956 to 1965), and 32 percent for Early Baby Boomers (1946 to 1955). For professional women of the same age range, the rates are 55 percent, 51 percent, and 37 percent, respectively.

PERCENTAGE WORKING LONG HOURS. The percentage of professional women working more than 50 hours a week increased from less than 10 percent in the oldest three cohorts (born before 1935) to over 15 percent for most ages in the youngest two cohorts (born after 1956). For this measure, there is no reversal of increasing rates, although the rate of increase has slowed between the Late Baby Boom (1956 to 1965) and Generation X (1966 to 1975) cohorts. Professional men's work hours have also increased across cohorts; the percentage of professional men over age 30 working more than 50 hours a week rose from approximately 25 percent in older cohorts to almost 40 percent in the youngest cohorts.

Limitations of Unadjusted Age-Specific Rates

The age-specific rates presented above are unadjusted for period effects (e.g., unemployment rates) or age effects (e.g., shifts in the mean age of childbearing). The challenges and perils of trying to separate age, period, and cohort effects are well noted in the literature (see Glenn 2005 for a recent review). Below, I address how period and age effects may influence cohort trends in professional women's employment.

PERIOD EFFECTS. Period effects include factors such as legal changes or labor-market changes that can be expected to affect women of all ages and cohorts at a given time. To test the influence of period effects on employment rates, I compare the actual rates for LFP, FTYR, and working long hours with rates estimated by logistic regressions models under different controls for period effects. The resulting rates are sensitive to the assumptions about which period effects are most important and how to measure them,[10] but none of the models predict rates that are substantially different from the observed unadjusted rates. I therefore ignore period effects in the following discussion but suggest that relatively small changes in rates, such as those of less than one or two percentage points, may reflect changes in period-specific conditions.

AGE EFFECTS. Among working-age women, employment rates vary substantially by age as evidenced by the age-specific employment patterns shown in Figures 1 and 2. In contrast, age-specific employment patterns are much less pronounced among working-age men, with little variation among men ages 25 to 50 who are not enrolled in school.[11] The age variation in women's employment rates is presumably because many women temporarily take time off from paid work to bear and care for children. Indeed, among childless women not enrolled in school, there is little age variation in employment. The age-specific pattern of women's employment is problematic for cohort comparisons if the mean age at childbearing and dispersion around that age change across cohorts. Since the mean age at first birth among U.S. women has been steadily rising across cohorts, comparisons across cohorts of narrowly-defined age groups may yield results that primarily reflect changes in the age of childbearing. In the subsequent analyses, I therefore restrict the sample to women in the prime childbearing years, ages 25 to 39, but do not make finer age distinctions.[12]

[10] For example, if the main period effects of concern are related to unemployment rates, then we must decide whose unemployment rates should be used in the model. Should it be the unemployment rate for the total population, all working-age women, professional women, or professional men?

[11] Men ages 50 to 54 have slightly lower rates, probably due to early retirement or health problems, but the data are insufficient to thoroughly investigate this.

[12] In alternate versions of the analysis, I used a conventional constrained generalized linear models approach, with five-year age dummies and constrained the age effects to be equal for ages 45 to 49 and 50 to 54. These results are consistent with my main findings and are available from the author upon request.

Compositional Changes across Cohorts

To better understand what drives cohort change, I examine changes in the composition of cohorts and in the behavior of subgroups within and across cohorts. Compositional changes that may affect professional women's employment include changes in the selectivity, educational attainment, or occupational distribution of the group, as well as changes in the family characteristics of professional women across cohorts.[13] Table 1 shows that the percentage of the total female population who are college-educated and in professional and managerial occupations has increased across cohorts, indicating decreased selectivity. As previously discussed, decreases in the selectivity of professional women predict falling employment rates. At the same time, more women in younger cohorts have advanced degrees, suggesting rising employment rates, because highly educated women have higher employment rates than do less educated women. Table 1 also shows that within the population of professional women, the share in historically male occupations has increased across cohorts, while the share in historically female professions has decreased. Would this be expected to result in higher or lower employment levels? On one hand, there is evidence of continuing discrimination against women and mothers in some of these professions (Blair-Loy 2001; Kay and Hagan 1995; Roth 2003). On the

Table 1. Cohort Compositional Changes: Educational and Occupational Characteristics of Women Ages 30 to 34 for the Total Female Population and for Professional Women

	Percent College-Educated Professionals and Managers		Percent with Advanced Degrees		Percent in Historically Male Professions[a]		Percent in Historically Female Professions[b]	
Birth Cohort	Total Female Population	Professionals	Total Female Population	Professionals	Total Female Population	Professionals	Total Female Population	Professionals
Baby Boom Parents	4.5	100	.8	12.7	.2	6.4	3.0	62.9
1926 to 1935	(4.3–4.7)		(.69–.82)	(11.5–13.9)	(.17–.24)	(5.5–7.3)	(2.9–3.2)	(61.1–64.7)
World War II	8.0	100	1.3	14.2	.5	7.7	5.6	66.6
1936 to 1945	(7.7–8.2)		(1.2–1.4)	(13.2–15.2)	(.46–.58)	(6.9–8.4)	(5.4–5.8)	(65.2–67.9)
Early Baby Boom	13.1	100	5.0	30.0	1.3	10.2	7.7	56.8
1946 to 1955	(12.9–13.3)		(4.9–5.2)	(29.2–30.8)	(1.2–1.4)	(9.7–10.8)	(7.5–7.8)	(55.9–57.7)
Late Baby Boom	15.4	100	6.1	31.3	2.5	15.4	5.7	39.7
1956 to 1965	(15.2–15.6)		(5.9–6.2)	(30.6–32.0)	(2.4–2.6)	(14.8–15.9)	(5.6–5.9)	(39.0–40.5)
Generation X	21.2	100	9.8	37.7	3.7	17.0	7.1	34.9
1966 to 1975	(21.1–21.4)		(9.7–10.0)	(37.2 –38.1)	(3.6–3.8)	(16.6–17.4)	(7.0–7.3)	(34.4–35.3)

Source: 1960 to 2000 Census and 2005 ACS microdata from IPUMS.

Note: 95 percent confidence intervals are in parentheses.

[a] Historically male professions are accountants, clergy, dentists, doctors, engineers, lawyers, and college professors and deans.

[b] Historically female professions are librarians, nurses, social workers, and teachers.

[13] Other demographic characteristics of cohorts—such as racial and ethnic composition and nativity—have also changed across cohorts. The extremely small number of professional women in early cohorts who were racial or ethnic minorities or immigrants makes cohort comparisons by race and nativity impossible.

Table 2. Cohort Compositional Changes: Family Characteristics of Professional Women and All Other Women

	Has Children, Ages 30 to 34		Has Children, Ages 35 to 39		Number of Children, Ages 38 and 39	
Birth Cohort	Professionals	All Other Women	Professionals	All Other Women	Professionals	All Other Women
Post WWI	n.a.	n.a.	69.5	80.8	1.71	2.20
1916 to 1925			(67.7–71.4)	(80.5–81.1)	(1.61–1.81)	(2.18–2.22)
Baby Boom Parents	70.1	82.8	76.4	85.2	2.03	2.62
1926 to 1935	(68.4–71.7)	(82.5–83.1)	(75.1–77.8)	(84.9–85.5)	(1.95–2.11)	(2.59–2.64)
World War II	73.0	85.4	72.0	84.0	1.68	2.18
1936 to1945	(71.8–74.3)	(85.1–85.7)	(71.0–73.0)	(83.7–84.3)	(1.63–1.72)	(2.16–2.20)
Early Baby Boom	56.4	80.1	65.5	75.5	1.36	1.69
1946 to 1955	(55.5–57.2)	(79.8–80.3)	(64.8–66.2)	(75.2–75.7)	(1.33–1.39)	(1.67–1.70)
Late Baby Boom	52.0	72.2	67.1	73.6	1.46	1.65
1956 to 1965	(51.2–52.7)	(71.9–72.5)	(66.5–67.8)	(73.3–73.9)	(1.43–1.49)	(1.64–1.66)
Generation X	51.0	70.0	67.3	75.1	1.44	1.67
1966 to 1975	(50.5–51.4)	(69.8–70.3)	(66.7–67.9)	(74.8–75.4)	(1.41–1.46)	(1.66–1.68)

Source: 1960 to 2000 Census and 2005 ACS microdata from IPUMS.
Notes: n.a. = not available. 95 percent confidence intervals in parentheses.

other hand, these professions confer higher salaries and more prestige, making the opportunity costs of not working higher in these fields than in the historically female professions.

Table 2 shows how the family characteristics of professional women have changed across cohorts and how they differ from nonprofessional women. For both professional and nonprofessional women, the percentage of those ages 30 to 34 who have children has decreased across cohorts, reflecting the rising mean age at first birth among U.S. women. The third column shows that the majority of professional women between the ages of 35 and 39 have children and that this has not varied much across cohorts.[14] The last columns show the average number of children per woman among women ages 38 and 39. Fertility levels are lower for professional women than for other women, but among both groups fertility has fallen somewhat across cohorts, with little change across the youngest three cohorts. Although the mean age at which women have their first child has changed, whether and how many children they have has remained similar across cohorts.

Employment Rates of Population Subgroups

Employment rates by occupation. Differences in labor force participation (LFP) rates by occupational sex-type are small or nonexistent across the cohorts studied. In contrast, rates of full-time, year-round (FTYR) employment vary more across sex-type of occupation. Women in historically male occupations have the highest rates and women in unclassified occupations record only slightly lower rates; both groups have much higher rates than those of women in female-typed occupations. Among the Late Baby Boom cohort (born 1956 to 1965), FTYR rates are 60.9 percent for women in male-typed occupations, 58.7 percent in unclassified occupations, and 42.2 percent in female-typed occupations. Patterns in who works long hours reveal even greater differences among occupational types. Among Late Baby Boomers, 24 percent in male-typed occupations work more than 50 hours a week, compared with 18 percent of those in unclassified occupations and 13 percent

[14] Hewlett (2002) argues that an increasing percentage of professional women find themselves childless. She bolsters this claim with data from an online survey of professional women. My estimates are not consistent with Hewlett's. Boushey's analysis of CPS data shows that married "high achieving women" between ages 36 and 40 are no less likely to have children than are less educated and less professionally successful married women (Franke-Ruta 2002); these estimates are more consistent with mine.

of those in female-typed occupations.

The drop in LFP rates between the Late Baby Boom cohort and Generation X is slightly greater for women in female-typed occupations than in male-typed occupations; the rate fell 1.8 percentage points among women in female-typed occupations and 1.1 percentage points among those in male-typed occupations. These decreases in LFP rates are small in contrast with the increases in FTYR rates of 4.5 and 3.8 percentage points for male- and female-typed occupations, respectively. This suggests that the increase across cohorts in the percentage of women in male-typed occupations contributed to the rise in professional women's rates of FTYR and working long hours, but it cannot account for much change in LFP rates.

EMPLOYMENT RATES BY MATERNAL STATUS. Among women without children, LFP rates have changed little across cohorts, probably because the LFP rate for this group was high even in the earliest cohorts. In contrast, LFP rates among women with young children increased greatly, climbing from 33.5 percent for the Baby Boom Parents cohort (1926 to 1935) to approximately 76 percent for the Late Baby Boom and Generation X cohorts (1956 to 1975). The percentage of women with older children who are in the labor force has also increased across cohorts and, in the youngest cohorts, women with children over age 5 have LFP rates similar to those of women without children. Table 3 highlights these changes.

Full-time, year-round employment rates show more dramatic increases than do LFP rates. Only about a third of women without children in the earliest cohorts (born before 1946) were employed FTYR, compared with two-thirds in the Late Baby Boom and Generation X cohorts

Table 3. Employment Rates of Professional Women Ages 25 to 39 by Motherhood Status and Age of Youngest Child

Cohort	Labor Force Participation Rates			Full-Time, Year-Round Employment Rates			Percentage Working 50+ hrs/week		
	Without Children	With Young Children[a]	With Older Children[b]	Without Children	With Young Children	With Older Children	Without Children	With Young Children	With Older Children
Baby Boom Parents *1926 to 1935*	88.7	33.5	77.2	33.2	5.6	17.9	7.2	1.3	2.1
World War II *1936 to 1945*	92.3	47.2	78.5	36.9	9.3	19.8	8.5	2.1	6.1
Early Baby Boom *1946 to 1955*	96.0	68.6	91.9	54.0	19.8	40.0	15.3	4.1	7.5
Late Baby Boom *1956 to 1965*	95.9	76.2	92.9	67.6	31.6	51.9	23.8	7.6	11.5
Generation X *1966 to 1975*	94.2	76.0	92.5	67.1	38.1	60.2	24.6	10.1	15.1

Source: 1960 to 2000 Census and 2005 ACS microdata from IPUMS.

Notes: Respondents enrolled in school are excluded from this analysis. Standard errors are the following: less than 2.5 for all LFP rates except for Baby Boom Parents with older children (3.0) and World War II with older children (4.3); less than 2.0 for full-time, year-round rates except for Baby Boom Parents with older children (2.2) and Early Baby Boom with older children (2.2); and less than 1.5 for all estimates of working more than 50 hrs/week.

[a] Children 5 years old or younger.

[b] Children 6 to 18 years old.

(1956 to 1975). FTYR employment among women with young children in the early cohorts was even rarer; less than 10 percent of these mothers worked full-time. For the Late Baby Boom and Generation X cohorts (1956 to 1975), FTYR employment among mothers of young children is much more common and the norm among mothers of older kids.

Differences between cohorts in the percentage working long hours are also substantial. Between 27 and 30 percent of similarly-aged professional men in the earliest three cohorts (1926 to 1955) worked more than 50 hours a week, but working this much was less common for professional women in these cohorts, even for those without children. For the Late Baby Boom and Generation X cohorts (1956 to 1975), the gap between the percentage of professional men and women working long hours is considerably smaller, but the difference in rates between women with young children and women without children remains large.

Despite the overall trend of increasing employment rates, this analysis shows some evidence of a leveling off of employment rates across the Late Baby Boom (1956 to 1965) and Generation X (1966 to 1975) cohorts. All subgroups of professional women in Generation X had slightly lower LFP rates than did their counterparts in the Late Baby Boom cohort. The decline in LFP was largest for women without children (from 95.9 to 94.2), with smaller and statistically insignificant declines for women with older children (92.9 to 92.5) and women with young children (76.2 to 76.0). FTYR employment rates also decreased for women without children (67.6 to 67.1), although this is not statistically significant. More than offsetting this slight decline in LFP is a substantial increase in the FTYR rates for women with young children (from 31.6 to 38.1) and for women with older children (51.9 to 60.2). Additionally, there are increases among all professional women in the percentage working more than 50 hours per week.

THE CHILD PENALTY. To examine how the child penalty on women's employment has changed across cohorts, I calculate the difference in employment rates by motherhood status and age of the youngest child for each cohort. Table 4 shows how much lower each rate of employment is for mothers with young children as compared to women without children. For example, the LFP rate of women in the Early Baby Boom (1946 to 1955) cohort without children is 96.0, compared with a rate of 68.6 for women with young children. The difference between the rates (96.0 – 68.6 = 27.4) is 28.6 percent of the rate for childless women (96.0). I compute this child penalty for all professional women, for women in historically male professions, and for women in historically female professions.

Previous research provides conflicting evidence about which occupations are likely to have the biggest child penalty in employment rates. Historically male professions demand greater time commitments, which may be particularly problematic for women with children. Women in historically male professions, though, may have more control over their work schedules than women in historically female professions. Nursing, for example, is well-known for irregular shifts. Although a nonstandard schedule may facilitate sharing childcare responsibilities with a spouse, it may also make finding paid care difficult (Presser 2003). Likewise, teaching at the elementary and high school level is often thought of as a mother-friendly occupation. Yet maternity leave is the only work–family policy available for most teachers. Teachers cannot reduce their work hours because there are limited opportunities to work part-time, and they cannot work flexible hours because of the rigidity of the school schedule.

Table 4 shows that women with young children have lower employment rates than women without young children for all employment measures and cohorts. Across cohorts, the gap in employment rates between mothers of young children and childless women has narrowed considerably for all professional women, including those in historically female and historically male professions. In the oldest two cohorts (1926 to 1945), professionals with young children had FTYR rates 75 percent lower than the rates of their colleagues without children; in the youngest two cohorts, the gap narrowed to 53 and 43 percent lower, respectively. The gap in the percentage working long hours is still large in the youngest cohorts; Generation X women (1966 to 1975) with young children have a rate approximately 60 percent lower than that of their colleagues without children. In most cases, the child penalty is of a similar

Table 4. Child Penalty on Employment for Professional Women Ages 25 to 39 for All Professionals and by Historical Gender Composition of Occupation

Cohort	Labor Force Participation			Full-Time Year-Round Employment			Works 50+ hrs/week		
	All Professional and Managerial	Male Professions[a]	Female Professions[b]	All Professional and Managerial	Male Professions	Female Professions	All Professional and Managerial	Male Professions	Female Professions
Baby Boom Parents *1926 to 1935*	62.3	58.7	60.5	83.1	77.5	79.4	82.2	81.5	79.1
World War II *1936 to 1945*	48.9	37.6	48.3	74.9	65.8	70.6	75.7	61.6	74.6
Early Baby Boom *1946 to 1955*	28.6	24.7	27.6	63.2	53.1	61.1	73.3	65.2	73.9
Late Baby Boom *1956 to 1965*	20.6	19.6	19.6	53.2	45.1	54.0	67.9	62.0	65.0
Generation X *1966 to 1975*	19.3	18.4	18.2	43.2	38.5	43.4	59.0	55.6	55.2

Source: 1960 to 2000 Census and 2005 ACS microdata from IPUMS.

Notes: Respondents enrolled in school are excluded from this analysis. The child penalty on employment is calculated as follows: $(R_{\text{childless women}} - R_{\text{women with young children}}) / R_{\text{childless women}}$.

[a] Historically male professions are accountants, clergy, dentists, doctors, engineers, lawyers, and college professors and deans.

[b] Historically female professions are librarians, nurses, social workers, and teachers.

magnitude for women in female- and male-typed professions, but where there are significant differences, the child penalties are larger for women in historically female professions.

Characteristics of Non-working Women

The subgroup employment rates discussed above show increases across cohorts in the percentage working long hours for all subgroups and in the percentage working FTYR for all subgroups except childless women. LFP rates show evidence of a stall across the youngest two cohorts. In this section, I calculate the percentage of women in their main reproductive years who were not working in the previous year and describe their characteristics.

Table 5 shows the percentage of professional women between the ages of 25 and 39 who were not employed or enrolled in school in the previous year. The first column shows that the percentage decreased from the Baby Boom Parents (1926 to 1935) to the Late Baby Boom (1956 to 1965) cohort and then increased slightly among Generation X (1966 to 1975). The second and third columns show that the percentage among those with advanced degrees and in historically male professions also decreased sharply between the Baby Boom Parents (1926 to 1935) and Early Baby Boom (1946 to 1955) cohorts and has been relatively stable across the Early Baby Boom, Late Baby Boom, and Generation X cohorts. For the youngest three cohorts, the confidence intervals overlap for all three measures. There is no evidence of a new opt-out phenomenon, but there may be a stall in employment rates. However, this stall appears to be at a very low level of nonparticipation; almost all professional women worked in the year prior to the survey.

What are the characteristics of women who did no paid work in the previous year? Table 6 presents some

Table 5. How Much Opting Out? Percentage of Professional Women Ages 25 to 39 Who Are Not Enrolled in School and Report Not Working in the Previous Year

	Percent of All Professional Women	Percent of Those in Male Professions	Percent of Those with Advanced Degrees
Baby Boom Parents	30.6	29.8	17.2
1926 to 1935	(25.7–35.5)	(23.7–35.8)	(13.9–20.4)
World War II	20.7	16.3	9.8
1936 to 1945	(15.2–26.2)	(12.2–20.5)	(7.4–12.2)
Early Baby Boom	8.0	6.6	5.1
1946 to 1955	(6.4–9.5)	(5.2–8.0)	(4.0–6.1)
Late Baby Boom	6.1	5.3	4.4
1956 to 1965	(4.9–7.3)	(3.7–6.9)	(3.4–5.3)
Generation X	6.4	6.0	5.0
1966 to 1975	(5.3–7.5)	(5.0–7.0)	(4.1–6.0)

Source: 1960 to 2000 Census and 2005 ACS microdata from IPUMS.
Note: 95 percent confidence intervals reported in parentheses.

of the characteristics by cohort. Three characteristics are particularly striking. First, their median family incomes—adjusted for inflation using the Consumer Price Index-Urban series of adjustment rates—are fairly similar across older cohorts but increased among the youngest two cohorts. Comparing these women with their working counterparts shows that average family income from sources other than women's own earnings (e.g., from husbands' incomes, alimony payments, or investment returns) are higher among the group who are not in the labor force. The second noteworthy characteristic of this group is that the percentage with children is decreasing. Much of the discussion around women's employment assumes that women who are out of the labor force are caring for young children. While the vast majority of these women have children at home, a greater percentage in the younger cohorts does not. Additionally, fewer in the younger cohorts are married. This is evidence of the weakening influence of children and marriage on women's employment rates and points to the need for researchers to consider factors other than caregiving responsibilities that may influence

Table 6. Characteristics of Professional Women Ages 25 to 39 Not Working in the Previous Year

	Median Family Income (in 2000 $)[a]	Percent with Children	Percent Married, with Spouse Present	Percent with Advanced Degree	Percent in Male Professions
Post WWI	52,067	95.6	96.8	9.5	7.5
1916 to 1925		(94.1–97.2)	(95.5–98.2)	(7.3–11.7)	(5.5–9.6)
Baby Boom Parents	50,372	95.8	97.1	7.4	5.7
1926 to 1935		(95.1–96.6)	(96.4–97.7)	(6.4–8.4)	(4.8–6.6)
World War II	57,918	94.7	96.4	9.1	6.2
1936 to 1945		(93.9–95.5)	(95.8–97.0)	(8.1–10.1)	(5.4–7.0)
Early Baby Boom	54,018	91.3	95.2	20.5	9.1
1946 to 1955		(90.2–92.3)	(94.4–96.0)	(19.0–22.0)	(8.0–10.1)
Late Baby Boom	69,124	90.5	93.9	22.8	14.0
1956 to 1965		(89.5–91.6)	(93.0–94.8)	(21.2–24.3)	(12.8–15.3)
Generation X	68,500	88.0	93.6	28.8	15.4
1966 to 1975		(87.1–88.9)	(92.9–94.2)	(27.6–30.1)	(14.4–16.4)

Source: 1960 to 2000 Census and 2005 ACS microdata from IPUMS.
Notes: This table includes women who are not enrolled in school and report not working in the previous year.
95 percent confidence intervals reported in parentheses.
[a] Adjusted using CPI-U inflation adjustment factors.

women's employment. Finally, while the percentage of women with advanced degrees and in historically male occupations who are not working is decreasing (see Table 5), the percentage opting out who hold an advanced degree or work in a historically male profession is increasing.[15]

Summary of Results, Limitations, and Future Directions

Age-specific rates of full-time, year-round employment and working long hours show that professional women in younger cohorts are working more than their predecessors, but labor force participation rates show a slight decrease across the youngest cohorts. Further analysis shows that compositional changes among professional women have not led to falling employment levels and may have even raised employment rates. Employment rates averaged across the main childbearing years show that women in younger cohorts in all subgroups—those in historically male- and female-typed occupations as well as those with and without children—are working full-time year-round and long hours at greater rates than their predecessors. There has been a slight decrease in the labor force participation rates of professional women in the youngest cohorts, but this decline is not much larger than that experienced by professional men in the same cohorts. Moreover, although women with children still work fewer hours than their colleagues without children, the child penalty is decreasing. Additionally, recent cohorts of professional women do not seem to be achieving high employment rates through reductions in fertility: fertility levels have remained similar across women born from 1946 to 1975. The majority of evidence shows that employment among professional women in recent cohorts is increasing or holding steady at high levels. The era of rapidly increasing women's employment rates, though, is at least temporarily over.

The results from this analysis are based on cross-sectional—not longitudinal—data and provide an aggregate-level picture of how professional women's employment behaviors differ by cohort. Because the sample is nationally representative, the number of observations for each cohort fairly large, and the cohorts easily identifiable, I treat the data as representative of cohort experiences over the life course. Selective mortality or migration into the population may affect the patterns that I describe, although probably not very much. Also, the youngest members of Generation X have not reached the end of their childbearing years. It is possible that different patterns will emerge as this cohort ages. Additionally, the data cannot tell us how individual women make decisions or transition into and out of the labor force over the life course. To better understand how macro-level factors differently affect individual members of birth cohorts, future research should follow professional women over time and attempt to disentangle the processes by which women and their partners make decisions about employment behaviors and family formation. Future research should also investigate non-family factors, such as continuing discrimination, that may prevent higher levels of employment among women—with and without children—and impede further progress toward gender equality in employment. A comparative analysis may illustrate whether the pattern of cohort change among U.S. professional women is generalizable to women in other industrialized countries, or whether patterns vary by labor-market structures, public policies, or cultural norms.

CONCLUSIONS

I find little evidence that recent cohorts of professional women are opting out of paid work to raise children at higher rates than did preceding cohorts. Indeed, the full-time, year-round employment rate of professional women with young children in Generation X is higher than for any previous cohort. Among highly educated women in historically male professions, there is no decrease in employment among younger cohorts. Although my analysis cannot directly test whether women in recent cohorts are opt-

[15] My findings are consistent with those from Boushey's (2005) analysis of the characteristics of women out of the labor force in 2004. She finds that women with advanced degrees who have children are more likely to be working than are mothers in any other educational group, but those with advanced degrees who are not working are more likely to have a child at home than those without an advanced degree. My analyses reveal the same pattern among the youngest cohorts.

ing out by moving to less prestigious jobs, I show that this is unlikely, as women in younger cohorts are more likely to be working long hours than women in older cohorts.[16] My analysis finds no "opt-out revolution" and does not support predictions of future declines in women's employment levels. I do find, however, that professional women's employment levels have held relatively constant over the last two cohorts. If these rates do not increase again across cohorts, the gap between women's and men's employment rates is likely to remain for the near future.

If there is no opt-out phenomenon, why have media stories suggesting otherwise garnered so much attention? Based on my findings, I suggest three possible reasons. First, there is an element in the opt-out journalistic accounts that rings true for working mothers in professional occupations. My findings show that having children is associated with substantially lower rates of employment. The "choice" to opt out is still one that many women confront and ultimately make. Although professional women are working more now than ever before, a large percentage are not working full-time year-round.

Second, many people think that more progress toward gender equality in employment and family life should have been achieved by now. While it is more feasible for younger cohorts to simultaneously pursue a career and raise children than it was for older cohorts, professional women with children are still much less likely to work full-time or long hours than are their male colleagues with children or their female colleagues without children. Women's employment experiences still do not resemble those of men. Most professions have not adapted to better accommodate dual-career couples and single-parent families, and many professions have actually increased average working hours. Increases in average working hours and the inflexible organization of professional work may partially explain why women's employment rates in these fields have stopped increasing.

Finally, there are simply more professional women now than ever before, so as Whittington and colleagues point out, "there are more women available to exit" (2000:340). The average person is thus more likely to personally know a professional woman who has left the labor force. A woman who does not work full-time and long hours may now seem anomalous and be more noticeable than the thousands of professional women who are working full-time in demanding jobs while raising young children. Additionally, although the percentage of women with advanced degrees who are not working is declining across cohorts, the percentage of non-working women who have an advanced degree is growing because the whole population is becoming more educated.

"Opting out" does not describe the trend characterizing the employment patterns of recent cohorts of professional women; persisting despite challenges is a more apt description. By most measures, professional women—including mothers with young children—are working more than ever. The absence of an "opt-out revolution" does not mean, though, that combining professional work and family life is easy for most women. Indeed, many working women successfully combine these roles by making great personal sacrifices, including curtailing their sleep, civic involvement, or leisure time.

By narrowly focusing on motherhood as the primary source of women's employment disadvantages, the new opting-out rhetoric pins the explanation for gender inequality on individual choices. This diverts attention from structural and institutional factors that may depress women's employment levels. Unfortunately, we do not know enough about factors other than family responsibilities that prevent women's fuller employment participation. We need to ask new questions about women's employment—questions that include issues of work–family conflict but also move beyond it—if we are to better understand gender inequality in the workplace.

[16] Further evidence is provided by Goldin (2006), who finds that in the 1958 (approximately) birth cohort women with advanced degrees work in the fields associated with their degrees at roughly the same rate as their male counterparts.

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APPENDIX

Table A1. Number of Cases by Age and Birth Cohort

	Age						
Birth Cohort	25 to 29	30 to 34	35 to 39	40 to 44	45 to 49	50 to 54	Total
Progressives *1906 to 1915*	—	—	—	—	2,113	2,104	4,217
Post WWI *1916 to 1925*	—	—	2,330	2,201	2,937	2,668	10,136
Baby Boom Parents *1926 to 1935*	3,140	2,882	3,584	3,310	4,080	3,800	20,796
World War II *1936 to 1945*	7,107	4,691	7,882	5,207	9,597	6,370	40,854
Early Baby Boom *1946 to 1955*	13,743	12,166	16,959	14,956	19,667	39,637	117,128
Late Baby Boom *1956 to 1965*	14,649	16,456	19,220	42,387	23,026	—	115,738
Generation X *1966 to 1975*	17,774	41,408	22,685	—	—	—	81,867
Total	56,413	77,603	72,660	68,061	61,420	54,579	390,736

Source: 1960 to 2000 Census and 2005 ACS microdata from IPUMS.

Table A2. Occupations of Professional Women

Rank	Occupation	Number of Cases	Percent
1	Teachers	127,380	32.6
2	Managers, officials, and proprietors (not elsewhere classified)	49,446	12.7
3	Nurses, professional	36,999	9.5
4	Professional (not elsewhere classified)	23,568	6.1
5	Accountants and auditors	16,816	4.3
6	Social workers	13,377	3.4
7	Professors	13,252	3.4
8	Musicians and music teachers	11,919	3.1
9	Personnel and labor-relations workers	8,780	2.3
10	Therapists and healers (not elsewhere classified)	8,690	2.2
11	Technicians, medical and dental	7,887	2.0
12	Lawyers and judges	7,515	1.9
13	Engineers	6,092	1.6
14	Editors and reporters	5,778	1.5
15	Librarians	4,771	1.2
16	Physicians and surgeons	5,616	1.4
17	Designers	5,039	1.3
18	Psychologists	3,119	.8
19	Pharmacists	2,649	.7
20	Officials and administrators, public (not elsewhere classified)	2,577	.7
	Subtotal	361,270	92.5
	Other occupations not enumerated	29,466	7.5
	Total	390,736	100

Source: 1960 to 2000 Census and 2005 ACS microdata from IPUMS.

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