

## Lagging On Women's Advancement

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Women in the Jewish community are talking about the meaning and potential impact of "The Opt-Out Revolution," Lisa Belkin's cover story in the Oct. 26 issue of The New York Times Sunday magazine. "Why Don't More Women Get to the Top?" the cover headline asks, echoing a question that has reverberated for many women.

Belkin's answer derives from her own personal experience and from an emerging trend that she has spotted among a small, privileged elite of highly educated women whose financial situation allows them to "opt out" of high level jobs, from litigation to television journalism. Their choice — to devote themselves to family life — is used by Belkin to justify the paucity of women at the top of professional, political and corporate life. These qualified women have not taken "rightful ownership of the universe" because "they don't want to be at the top."

But she is telling only a partial story, and for many women, including Jewish women, the issue is not opting out but seeking to "opt" back in.

At first glance, Belkin provides some compelling statistics to support her thesis. While 95 percent of male MBAs work full time, only 67 percent of white female MBAs work full time. She also notes that surveys show that between one-quarter and one-third of professional women are out of the work force at any given period. Belkin notes that 57 percent of mothers in the Stanford class of 1981 spent one year caring for their infant children, and that one out of four stayed home for three or more years.

What do these numbers reveal? More than two-thirds of white female MBAs are actually in the work force. Every survey demonstrates that two-thirds to three-quarters of professional women are actively pursuing their careers. Finally, it shows that Stanford women take maternity leave and that three out of four do go back to work.

All this means is that there are millions of women in the talent pool. Logic dictates that a reasonable percentage of them might be willing to take on leadership posts, particularly when you add to their ranks the numbers of single women, women with grown children and women without children.

It is not surprising that "The Opt-Out Revolution" hit a nerve. Many women are empathizing with the mothers in Belkin's articles who are struggling with the conflict between personal life and professional advancement in a society whose workplaces are still designed as if dual careers were an anomaly rather than the norm.

But in our identification with the mothers in Belkin's article, we are missing the critical distinction between personal preferences about lifestyle, and institutional decisions about the structure of our workplaces and the pathways they offer to professional leadership.

Belkin cites the accounting and consulting firm of Deloitte & Touche for its flexibility policies. What Belkin did not illuminate was the magnitude and depth of systemic change that Deloitte & Touche undertook.

When CEO Douglas McCracken saw women opting out of the partnership track, he came to recognize that women could not advance without a fundamental attempt to address the gender bias that permeates most corporations. The company provided an intensive training program, "Men and Women as Colleagues"; restructured consulting assignments; and held managers accountable for promoting women. Between 1991 and 1999, the firm's annual turnover fell from 25 percent to 18 percent, and the number of women partners increased from 5 percent to 14 percent.

Belkin's article is so maddening because in a dizzying shell game, it powerfully supports the status quo by asserting on the one hand that women are "redefining success" by their exodus from the workplace while acknowledging only in passing that the American workplace may indeed bear some responsibility for the "hidden brain drain of women."

This talent loss is exacerbated by the failure of work institutions to provide ways for women to return to work after choosing to stay home for a time. Belkin cites Sylvia Ann Hewlett, who says there is an "off-ramp" for careers and at any given time "two-thirds of all women who leave their career to raise children are seeking to re-enter professional life and finding it very difficult."

The Newhouse brothers, Donald and Si, who are in their 70s, were described in that same issue of *The Times* as vigorously determined to remain at the head of their company, and Jack Valenti, head of the Motion Picture Association, was described in the next day's paper as still going strong at 83.

If careers, including top careers, are being extended over a time frame of 50 or 60 years, what can possibly justify the derailment of women's careers because of a child-rearing hiatus of a year, three years or even a decade?

Belkin's privileged mothers articulate a heartfelt wish that almost all of us have: that we could lead good lives, do great work and be loving parents. Certainly this desire resonates powerfully in the Jewish community, where the values of family, identity, spirituality and volunteerism are cherished. Yet just as in Belkin's world, our Jewish communal world has complacently accepted its gender gap at the top echelons by claiming that for the most part women cannot fulfill the demands of high-level posts. We need to challenge that assumption.

The Jewish community has been considered by many to be behind the curve in regard to flexibility in the workplace, initiatives to advance women, and readiness to consider fundamental innovations in the way they operate. Systemic change could be possible, but only in environments where alternative values challenge the prevailing norms.

Let's not opt out of the challenge of realigning our beliefs about how to live with our values about the way we work.

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