



Women Who Quit: Media and Policy Discourse about Gender and Work

SHANI ORGAD 

RESEARCH



ABSTRACT

The article examines dominant media and policy discourse about women who leave paid employment in the context of motherhood and menopause. It shows that this discourse frames women's decision to leave the workforce as a personal choice, minimising the role of workplace and societal structures; centres on women in professional jobs and leadership roles, overlooking women in low-paid, informal or insecure jobs; links women's employment patterns and experiences to their reproductive bodies, thus ignoring women's unequal load of caring responsibilities; and prioritises keeping women in the workforce over the state's and employers' responsibility for supporting workers' health, wellbeing and job satisfaction.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Shani Orgad

Professor of Media and
Communications, Department
of Media and Communications,
London School of Economics
and Political Science (LSE), UK
s.s.orgad@lse.ac.uk

KEYWORDS:

Motherhood; menopause;
media; workforce; policy;
gender; inequality

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Orgad S. Women Who Quit:
Media and Policy Discourse
about Gender and Work. *LSE
Public Policy Review*. 2025;
3(4): 4, pp. 1–11. DOI: [https://
doi.org/10.31389/lseppr.121](https://doi.org/10.31389/lseppr.121)

Women's growing participation in the labour force is often celebrated as a success story.¹ Since the 1970s, women's participation in the labour force in most OECD countries has been on the rise. For example, in the UK, women's overall (full-time and part-time) rate of employment has increased from 52.8% in 1971 to 72.1% in 2024 (1). However, there is a significant countertrend of women leaving the workforce, which has received considerable attention in media and policy discussion, particularly in relation to two contexts: becoming a mother or experiencing menopause. The debate is often presented as a matter of alarm and concern, with warnings about gender equality stalling after 'mass exodus' of working mothers or a 'talent drain' due to 'droves' of menopausal women quitting their jobs (e.g., 2, 3).

Women leaving the workforce in large numbers is alarming and should be considered seriously. We need to understand the factors driving this trend in order to design effective solutions to the issue. However, the fascination with 'women who quit' and the way the phenomenon is discussed and framed in media and policy discourse in relation to motherhood and menopause tend to obscure the specific factors affecting and driving these disparate experiences. This discourse also serves to divert attention from and obfuscate fundamental aspects that have critical implications for gender inequality.

In what follows, I start by discussing how the dominant narratives in media and policy discourse depict the issue of women leaving the workforce in relation to motherhood and menopause. The discussion draws on previous research that examined media and policy representations of motherhood and work (4) and has been updated by more recent examples, and a separate study of UK media and policy discussions of menopause (5).² I go on to argue that notwithstanding these two very different moments in women's life and work trajectories, media and policy framing of women leaving the workforce in both contexts has clear similarities. These similarities reveal broader patterns and have significant implications for discussions on gender equality and workforce and related policies.

MOTHERS 'OPTING OUT'

Mothers are almost twice as likely to leave the workforce as women without children (4). As a result, labour force participation of women with children is significantly lower than the overall female participation rate. The Covid-19 pandemic and the enormous caring pressures it imposed, especially on women, have exacerbated this trend. UN Women and International Labour Organization data show that, in 2020, over two million mothers aged 25 to 54, with at least one child under the age of six at home, left the labour force (6). Many women returned to paid work after the pandemic and, in general, most mothers *do* return to paid employment, although half of those women returning from maternity leave reduce their working hours (7). However, mothers' return to the workforce, as well as the many systemic barriers and challenges they face in returning and staying in the workforce, receive less attention than the issue of their departure. For example, a widely-cited report by the Fawcett Society from November 2023 shows that one in ten working mothers in the UK 'quit jobs due to childcare pressures' (7). Though the report's leading title is 'The number of working mothers is on the rise, but obstacles remain', it is the 'one in ten' figure related to women quitting their jobs that received headline coverage. For instance, the headline of a *Guardian* article discussing the report read 'Motherhood penalty "has driven 250,000 women out of jobs"', going on to say that the 'cost and difficulties of balancing work and childcare has led one in 10 to quit' (8), while the headline of a BBC article stated 'One in 10 mothers with under-fours quit work over childcare' (9).

Mothers leave the workforce for various and often multiple reasons. Among these are lack of affordable childcare, toxic work cultures, inflexible working arrangements, unreasonable

¹ I use 'women' in an inclusive sense to include all who identify as such, including trans and gender nonconforming individuals, while noting that the media and policy discourses I discuss primarily refer to cisgender women.

² The discussion of menopause in this article draws on data reviewed and analysed as part of the research project 'Menopause in UK public discourse: visibility, content, factors and implications', funded by the Leverhulme Trust (RPG-2023-037).

workloads, absence of support networks and career opportunities, and the ‘motherhood penalty’ — the reduction in women’s pay when they become mothers. Such factors are reinforced by societal norms and pressures of ‘good mothering’ and by persistent inequalities in the home, where women consistently shoulder most of the unpaid work of domestic responsibilities and childcare. However, these factors are often minimised in media discussions. While there may be some reference to the constraints imposed on women’s ability to stay in paid employment, their decision to leave is often framed as a personal choice. Writing about US press portrayals of mothers leaving the workplace in the early 2000s, sociologist Pamela Stone observed that ‘women, especially high-achieving, college-educated women’, are depicted as ‘rejecting the workplace’ and ‘trading aspirations to professional success for the values and comfort of home and family’ (10 p4). More than two decades later, this framing persists on both sides of the Atlantic. It can be seen in UK media, across news articles, women’s magazines, advice books, memoirs, social media and the blogosphere, and in workplace and government discourses. Though the notion that mothers are ‘opting out’ of employment has been widely criticised for misleadingly suggesting that this is a free choice made willingly (10), the idea that mothers choose to leave the workforce remains.

The ‘choice’ of mothers to ‘opt out’ of employment is frequently depicted as a rational response to (but not a critique of) increasingly demanding workplace conditions. For example, a *Daily Mail* article (11) describes a ‘huge social trend’ of mothers quitting their jobs to look after their teenage children. The article focuses on several high-flying, self-described ‘workaholic’ mothers who decided to leave their successful but stressful jobs in order to prioritise their children’s needs. Their jobs were very demanding and profoundly incompatible with family life — the women interviewed describe being forced to work punishing hours and being unable to switch off and stop working when at home. Nevertheless, the article frames their decisions as entirely private and personal choices; as sensible decisions in response to the impossibility of achieving a desirable work-life balance. For instance, a former career woman, depicted as ‘utterly exhausted by the home and work-life juggle’, is described as realising that ‘something had to give’. Similarly, Jacinda Arden’s resignation speech as prime minister of New Zealand was frequently framed as a personal, rational decision driven by exhaustion and childcare commitments. Arden acknowledged that she ‘no longer had enough in the tank’ to do the job and promised her daughter that ‘Mum is looking forward to being there when you start school’ (12).

Thus, the prevalent image emerging from current media constructions (and popular media whose discussion is beyond the scope of this piece; see (4)) is of an exhausted woman with no more to give, who realises that her paid work and family life are incompatible, and consequently revisits her life priorities and makes the ‘sensible’ decision to step off the treadmill in order to devote herself to her family.

The decision of women to leave the workplace when they become mothers is also sometimes cast as a nostalgic return to traditional gender roles. This can be vividly seen in the media’s fascination with the phenomenon of ‘tradwives’ (13), a contemporary iteration of what American feminist journalist, Susan Faludi, in the 1990s called the ‘New Traditionalist’: a woman who had chosen ‘freely’ to return to the ‘traditional’ lifestyle values of domesticity and feminine passivity (14). Even if the tradwife is a marginal phenomenon, it reflects the broader, deeper and more insidious view that when women become mothers their commitment to and interest in their jobs dwindle dramatically, and they are willing to ‘throw their lives away’ to look after their children and family.

Such preconceptions can have significant consequences. As the visibility of the pregnancy increases, employers and fellow workers tend to think of pregnant women as becoming more emotional, irrational, less committed to their jobs and less competent than other employees. ‘One of the strongest stereotypes of the pregnant worker is that she will not return to work following the birth of her child’ (15 p227). Organisations such as Pregnant Then Screwed and Young Women’s Trust show consistently how this biased view of mothers and their ‘preferences’ and ‘choices’ underlies and underpins the ongoing discrimination of women in the workplace (4, 16).

That said, the perceptions of stay-at-home mothers are uneven and are profoundly shaped by class. The economically poor, working-class women who look after their children full-

time are consistently portrayed and perceived as ‘abject’ mothers leading ‘inadequate’ and ‘mismanaged’ lives (4). Indeed, neoliberal government policies and government discourse over the last three decades have consistently been critical of stay-at-home mothers. Yet this view stands in contrast to middle-class mothers, whose ‘choice’ to leave paid employment to look after the family tends to be framed in more positive terms. Theirs is commonly portrayed as a commendable decision enabling them to provide ‘quality parenting’, implied to be primarily mothers’ responsibility (4, 17).

However, this does not insulate middle-class stay-at-home mothers from critique, attacks and derision. Stereotypical representations of upper-middle class and middle-class mothers who are not in paid employment commonly depict them as glamorous, as living lavish lifestyles, as being lazy or bored — and, importantly, of their own free choice (4). This stereotypical view and its implicit criticism of women for not returning to the workplace, reflect and reinforce the broader neoliberal welfare and labour market policies of UK governments since New Labour. These policies strongly encourage the rapid move of mothers out of the home and into the workplace once childbearing was over. While this agenda targets lower-income families in particular, as a way to reduce child poverty, the broader message is that unreasonably long periods out of the workplace are a burden on the taxpayer and are at the expense of these women’s long-term economic prospects.

This message gained additional force under the Coalition and the Conservative governments’ austerity programmes, during and after the financial recession. For instance, one of the Coalition government’s first acts was to freeze all child benefit and to remove it completely from higher-rate paying households. Baby and pregnancy-related grants were also cut and child-tax credits were reduced, particularly for middle-income households. Policies were also implemented to encourage women to return to the workforce. In 2015, increased childcare entitlement was announced (from 15 free nursery hours per week for 3- and 4-year-olds to 30 hours) and in 2017 the government announced allocation of a £5 million fund to help those returning to paid employment after long career breaks. As former director of the UK Family and Parenting Institute, Katherine Rake, noted in the early 2000s, for mothers who engage full time in unpaid caring work, government policies send out strong signals about the duration of this unpaid work that government deemed appropriate (18).

Whether the woman’s exit from the workforce to look after her family is seen as a valuable and positive decision or is criticised and denigrated, the emphasis tends to be on the mother’s individual choice and responsibility. Rather than the decision being profoundly influenced and sometimes forced by a series of factors not of their own making and over which they have limited control, mothers are frequently depicted as free agents who choose to ‘opt out’.

THE MENOPAUSE ‘EXODUS’

While motherhood and its impact on women’s lives and society have been a public and much-discussed topic in the media and in public policy, menopause has received very little attention. It has been shrouded in silence, taboo and stigma. Only recently — especially since 2021 — has it started receiving growing attention and visibility in the UK (5). This rise in visibility has been animated by news, television, celebrity culture (notably the 2021 Channel 4 television documentary ‘Davina McCall: Sex, Myths and the Menopause’), and by influencers, campaigners and activists. Alongside this, there has been an expanding market for menopause-related products and services and a reinvigorated clinical debate, as well as increased scholarly interest and government attention to the topic (5, 19). Much of the discussion has focused on the impact of menopause on women in the workforce, particularly those occupying professional or clerical positions. This focus has been driven by government policies encouraging women to become ‘active agers’ and remain in paid work for as long as possible to prevent dependence on the state (20) — an emphasis seen in the Parliamentary Women and Equalities Committee’s ‘Menopause and the Workplace’ inquiry (21) and the 2023 government-appointed Menopause Employment Champion (22).

Although the majority of menopausal women stay in the workforce (women over 50 constitute the fastest growing workplace demographic), much like discussions about mothers leaving the workforce, the focus is often on women who *leave* because of menopause. In this discussion

too, a Fawcett Society report has become a central reference (23). Published in 2022, the report presents the findings from a survey of 4,014 UK women aged 45–55 who, at the time of the survey, self-identified as experiencing or having previously experienced perimenopause or menopause, based on a list of symptoms presented in the survey.³ The report highlights the lack of workplace support for women to deal with menopause symptoms, suggesting that one in ten women have left work due to these symptoms. Another report by the private health insurance company, BUPA, found that almost 900,000 women in the UK had left their jobs because of menopause symptoms, although the period over which this took place is not specified (24). News articles reporting the Fawcett Society research highlighted the trend of menopausal women quitting their jobs (e.g., 25, 26). The ‘one in ten’ (which, interestingly, is a similar figure to that reported by the Fawcett Society survey about mothers quitting their jobs), has become a ‘sticky’ statistic, cited repeatedly in the press. It has been used also to inform policy discussion, including the new guidance on menopause in the workplace issued in February 2024 by the Equality and Human Rights Commission, which defines employers’ legal obligations under the Equality Act 2010 (27).

Unlike the emphasis on personal choice in depictions of mothers leaving the workforce, the discussion about midlife women (many also mothers) leaving the workforce tends to highlight that these women are compelled to quit due to lack of appropriate workplace support for symptoms such as brain fog and fatigue. For example, a BBC article states explicitly that since ‘menopause-related symptoms can be debilitating’ and many workers lack employer support, they ‘have *no choice* but to leave their roles’ (28, my emphasis). At the same time, the ‘faces’ of this phenomenon, that is, the most visible women aged over 50 who quit their jobs, tend to be women in professional high-power positions. Their exit from their jobs is often depicted as a choice driven by personal preferences and circumstances, symptoms associated with menopause such as lack of energy and brain fog, and desire to focus on private life. There is little attention to unsupportive work cultures, demanding caring responsibilities and ageing, that make it very difficult for women in midlife to remain in highly demanding jobs and top positions of power. For example, in February 2023, former YouTube CEO, 55-year-old Susan Wojcicki, who tragically died the following year, announced she was leaving the company to ‘start a new chapter focused on my family, health, and personal projects I’m passionate about’ (29). In the same month, Meta’s chief business officer, 53-year-old Marne Levine, announced she was leaving her job after 13 years with the company, in order to ‘recharge and prioritize some quality time with family’ (30). The visibility of these women’s decisions to leave their jobs and the way they are framed — to which the women themselves contribute through resignation social media posts and media interviews — echo and reinforce an image similar to that characterising discussion about mothers who quit: an exhausted workaholic woman who has reconsidered her priorities and made a personal, rational and free choice to leave paid employment and focus on family and health. The structural factors that affected their decision to quit tend to be minimised or completely erased.

MOTHERHOOD, MENOPAUSE AND THE GENDER AND WORK DEBATE

Motherhood and menopause are two very different experiences in women’s lives and work trajectories. However, as I have shown, both are central in discussions about women and work, especially about women leaving the workforce. What are the implications of this discussion for the broader debate on and policy related to gender equality and work?

First, it is crucial that the phenomenon of women leaving the workforce is fully understood in its particular and different contexts. It is vital to identify trends over time; the factors explaining these trends; the points in women’s lives and work trajectories when they tend to leave paid employment and the implications of these employment patterns; and the structural changes needed to help women – or at least those who are not leaving voluntarily or entirely voluntarily – stay in paid work. Media and policy attention to this issue is crucial. However, we need more reliable and rigorous data to support these discussions and the proposed solutions. In particular, in the case of the exit of menopausal women from the workforce, the available statistics come

3 This raises issues concerning sample bias and a somewhat narrow definition of menopause.

from relatively small surveys which suffer from methodological problems. We need systematic analysis of large-scale data drawn from the databases of the Office of National Statistics, Labour Force Survey, British Household Panel Survey and the UK Household Longitudinal Study. To enable this, it is imperative to include the topic of menopause in these national database panels; currently many of them do not provide specific data on perimenopause, menopause and post-menopause, and those which do, rely on self-reporting certain symptoms (thus, for example, respondents may not experience any of the symptoms listed by the survey but be going through menopause).⁴ In short, policy discussions about women's employment seem to have taken off in the media often with limited evidence, and it is vital that policymaking in this area is evidence based, and that this evidence is rigorous and representative of the diverse experiences of women in different life stages across lines of class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, location, occupation and other identity markers and/or sociodemographic dimensions.

Second, while the issue of women leaving the workplace is significant, by focusing on it in relation to motherhood and menopause, the discussion entwines women's employment with their reproductive bodies. It links leaving the workforce to the time of women's peak reproductive function of bearing children and to the moment considered to be the end of their biological reproductive life, that is, menopause. Although this link may not be explicit in media and policy discussions, the repetition of generalised alarmist headlines about the 'exodus' of 'droves' of women from the workforce because of motherhood or menopause, makes an implicit and persistent link between women's biology and their ability to participate in the world of paid work. This association risks reinforcing and naturalising the regressive notion that women are determined by their 'unruly' biological bodies. It also diverts attention away from the structural and systemic factors that contribute to women's decisions to leave paid employment, including sexism and discrimination, inflexible working arrangements, inequality in the home, caring responsibilities (for children, elderly relatives, disabled family members and friends), and stubborn sexist and ageist views. It is the deep-seated normative perceptions and societal expectations of their bodies, and the way their bodies are constructed and treated in the workplace, that link women's employment to their 'natural' biological functions.

This is not to say that becoming a mother and going through menopause do not involve biological changes and symptoms that can affect work in significant ways. Rather, I want to warn about the danger of locating the *cause* (and thus blame) of women's changing working patterns and work experiences in their 'unruly' bodies. Management scholars Lucy Ryan and Caroline Gatrell (33) note that employers' understandings and organisational attitudes to women's ageing are informed and influenced by powerful biomedical accounts of menopausal women's health failing, which associate menopause and post-menopause with diminished capabilities such as worsening cognition. Workplace conceptions of women's pregnancy and maternity are shaped by similar biomedical scripts and ideas about reduced cognitive function, echoing late Victorian cultural and legal constructions of women's weak cognitive and volitional capacities (34). Instead, the discussion should focus on workplace and societal structures and how to design and adjust them to best enable women to participate meaningfully in the workforce throughout their life course.

Third, the linking of women's departure from the workforce to their reproductive function and its decline, conceals a major structural factor that determines women's employment: a heavy and unequal caring burden. Across class, race and other identity markers, mothers consistently shoulder most of the childcare, and women in middle and older age tend to do the lion's share of caring for ageing parents and other relatives, teenage children, partners in ill health and/or grandchildren (33). One of the decisive factors affecting the decisions made by mothers and/or menopausal women to leave the workplace is the huge insufficiency of high-quality and affordable state-provided care. Thus, while improving workplace conditions to support women to remain in the workplace is an important area on which policy should focus, without an accompanying serious commitment to and investment in the provision of a robust

⁴ In October 2024, NHS Confederation published a report on 'Women's health economics' in the UK, which presents more robust data about unemployment due to menopause (31). Based on data from the British Cohort Study, the report estimates that 60,000 women in the UK are not being in employment due to menopause symptoms. However, it too admits that there is need for more robust data. For example, its analysis 'operates under the notion that those experiencing perimenopause and menopause symptoms are typically aged 46 - 55 and therefore does not capture the approximate 5 per cent of the population who enter the menopause prematurely' (32 p7).

care infrastructure and valuing and rewarding care work, the effect of improving workplace conditions will be highly limited (35).

Fourth, as I have shown, in discussions about both motherhood and menopause (although to different extents), there is a tendency to frame the woman's decision to leave the workforce in terms of a personal choice. It is often presented as a 'sensible' response to workplace pressures and exhaustion and to the appeal of having a better family and/or private life. The premise of this framing is that in the global North women enjoy free choice about how they live their lives and pursue their work trajectories (36). Indeed, ideas of personal freedom, agency and choice animate debates on and constructions of women, family and work. As feminist scholar Shelley Budgeon notes, the rhetoric of choice implies that:

structural factors which once systematically ordered social relations to the detriment of women have now been largely overcome... [thus] any differences which remain in the lives of women and men can be accounted for by choices knowingly made by individuals (37 p304).

However, women's work and family choices are never completely free, autonomous or only theirs. As has been aforementioned, there is a large stream of research showing the various structural factors at play in shaping women's life and work patterns, including their exit from the workforce (4).

Framing mothers' and menopausal women's decision to quit paid employment as a personal choice not only obscures the systemic factors at play; it also shapes women's future experiences in often negative ways. In my study of professional women who left paid employment after having children (4), the women I interviewed clearly identified the social forces of inequality that had influenced their decision to quit. They spoke about the impact of work structures and cultures that were utterly incompatible with family life, lack of suitable and sustained childcare support, unequal distribution of labour at home and stubborn social perceptions and cultural ideals against which they were constantly measured and judged. These women's 'choice' to leave paid employment and their subsequent decisions were not free, nor private or entirely personal. Yet they struggled to articulate their decision outside the narrow and individualised terms of personal choice; they often resorted to personal explanations of the kind rehearsed in popular explanations of women's work and family-related decisions. Consequently, many of them internalised the blame attached to leaving paid work and experienced it as a personal and painful failure, telling me: 'I don't have the personality type of a professional mother,' 'I'm not a natural,' 'I was not cut out for this type of demanding job,' 'I didn't have the ambition it takes,' 'I lacked the confidence you need for this job'. Steffan's (38) study of older women's experiences of menopause at work similarly shows how female employees internalise a neoliberal narrative of the ideal worker for whom managing and 'enduring' menopause is a personal responsibility. They hide their menopause symptoms and present an unchanged/unchanging body at work, often to the detriment of their health and wellbeing, which can lead to precarious work outcomes.

Workplace policies and cultures have a central role and responsibility to shift the focus away from employees' personal responsibility for managing their symptoms and 'fixing' themselves and their bodies, to providing holistic organisational support for the constraints imposed by these symptoms. For example, Steffan (38) found that working women experiencing menopause suffered a decline in self-confidence. While individualised programmes, such as self-confidence training, which has become popular, might be helpful, employers need urgently to look at the factors in the workplace that might be causing or contributing to women's decreased self-confidence and consider how to redress them (39).

Fifth, the preoccupation of media and workplace-related policy discussions with the phenomenon of women leaving the workforce, diverts attention away from the many serious constraints and factors negatively affecting those many more women who *stay* in the workforce – either by choice or because they have no choice. In focusing on the reported 10% of mothers and 10% of menopausal women who leave the workplace, the discussion diverts attention from the 90% of mothers and 90% of women in midlife who stay in the workforce. In particular, the focus on women who quit obscures the more widespread trend of women reducing their hours of paid work. UK Office for National Statistics data show that almost three in ten (28.5%) of mothers

(compared to 1 in 20 (4.8%) of fathers) with a child aged 14 years or under reduce their working hours for childcare reasons (40), while Fawcett Society research on working parents with at least one child aged four years or under, found that half of returning mothers reduced their working hours (7). These statistics are further confirmed by a longitudinal study, based on data from the British Household Panel Study and the UK Household Longitudinal Study (1992–2019) (41), which found that the gap in weekly paid work hours between mothers with at least two children and childless women was 18.4 hours, compared to the corresponding figure for fathers of only 1.6 hours. Furthermore, in the seventh year after childbirth, the difference in hours of paid work between mothers and childless women was around 14 hours a week and had not changed over three decades. The reduction in number of hours worked is a major contributor to the gender pay gap.

Figures related to menopausal women's reduced working hours are less reliable, reinforcing my previous comment about the need for more robust data. However, existing surveys suggest that between 14% and 19% of women experiencing menopause reduced their hours, 59% took time off work due to symptoms of menopause and 18% were off work for more than eight weeks (24, 42). Interestingly, a US study on the impact of menopausal symptoms on work and career development found that no symptom was significantly associated with leaving the workforce, but that mood changes and anxiety at work – and, crucially, insufficient support in the workplaces for women experiencing these symptoms – were associated with reducing hours (43). The preoccupation with women who leave the workforce therefore also serves to divert attention away from the majority of women who stay in the workplace and who experience multiple difficulties.

Sixth, the discussion about women leaving the workforce centres heavily on women in two-income households, women in professional jobs and especially those occupying leadership roles. It mostly ignores women in low-paid, informal or insecure jobs (4, 44), in part, because far fewer women in these categories can afford to leave paid work. This bias is also markedly classed, racialised and ableist; the discussion is focused largely on white, middle-class, non-disabled women. cursory perusal of the images accompanying many of the news articles and policy reports discussing women who leave the workforce in relation to motherhood and menopause reveals that the women depicted frequently occupy office jobs and appear as businesswomen. This reinforces the wider very selective and skewed debate on gender equality in the workplace, since 77% of jobs in the health and social work sector and 70% of jobs in education (many of which are not office jobs) are held by women (1). For example, female employees aged 50 to 64 are concentrated in education, retail and the health and social work sectors (women between the ages of 45 and 54 make up a fifth of all NHS employees) and many of them perform manual jobs and casual work (44). These workers' experiences are vastly different from and often far worse than those of the professional women whose accounts receive far greater visibility. For instance, Steffan and Potočnik's study highlights that the inflexibility in teaching compared to many office jobs inhibits women from managing menopause symptoms (45). Yet these workers are also less likely to be able to afford to leave the workplace (44).

Single mothers and single women in midlife are also marginalised and often completely absent from the discussion. Notably, while half of mothers returning from leave reduce their working hours, single mothers are less likely to be able to do so due to financial pressures (7). This likely applies also to single women in mid-life, although there is a lack of data in this area. Unpaid workers, such as carers, as well as those working in the informal economy, are also missing from the discussion, although their work experiences and patterns significantly influence those of women whose exit from the workforce receives attention. Therefore, media and policy discussions need to proactively take an intersectional approach; one that takes account of the various identity factors that shape women's employment and unemployment paths in significantly different ways and offers different forms and means of support tailored to individual circumstances and needs. One-size-fits-all solutions, predicated on a universal model of the white middle-class professional woman, are inadequate and doomed to fail.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that the main, sometimes exclusive interest underpinning discussions about women who leave the workforce, is to retain them in the workforce so they can continue to contribute to the formal economy. Put simply, there is a clear business case for keeping both mothers and menopausal women in the labour force. However, this crucial

economic goal must be pursued alongside and balanced with a fundamental and ethical commitment to support and protect workers, to allow them to experience healthy, meaningful and satisfying lives, both within and outside of work. The accounts of professional women who left paid employment suggest that their workplaces were interested in maximising their productivity with little or no concern for their wellbeing and health, resulting in many having to take sick leave and not returning to work (4). What if the priorities were to be reversed? What would public and workplace policy look like if it were to prioritise employee health and wellbeing? The commonsense argument is that this would result in greater employee health, satisfaction, resilience and, thus, productivity and contribution. However, the drive to keep women in paid employment so that they remain economically productive does not necessarily translate into ensuring their wellbeing and health. Crucially, it also fails to acknowledge their contribution outside the formal economic sphere. Further, while the debate about women leaving the workforce is underpinned by and, in turn, reinforces an uncritical assumption that keeping ageing women in paid employment is an unquestionable good, there is no critical examination of the reality that, for some women, especially those in manual and poorly paid jobs, staying in paid employment after becoming mothers and/or in their late fifties and sixties might be detrimental to their health and wellbeing (44).

More broadly, the fault lines and blind spots of the debate about ‘women who quit’ in the context of both motherhood and menopause, underscore the fundamental ‘contradictions of capital and care’ (46). That is, they expose the fundamental incompatibility between current employment structures and conditions and women’s largely unpaid social reproductive labour, namely caregiving and sustaining social bonds and communities (46). For policies aimed at supporting women in the workplace and encouraging them to stay in the workforce to be effective and just, they must be part of a wider societal reorganization of the relation between economic production and social reproduction. We need social arrangements that allow people at different stages of their lives to combine life-sustaining social reproductive activities with meaningful, safe and rewarding work.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Sara De Benedictis for her helpful feedback on an earlier version of the article.

FUNDING INFORMATION

Part of the work for this article was supported by the Leverhulme Trust [RPG-2023-037].

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Shani Orgad  orcid.org/0000-0001-5129-4203

Professor of Media and Communications, Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), UK

REFERENCES

1. **Women and the UK Economy.** House of Common Library. 4 March 2024 [cited 2024 June 24]. Available from: <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN06838/SN06838.pdf>.
2. **Kiderlin S.** Gender equity at work is stalling after ‘mass exodus’ of women during pandemic, new research finds. *CNBC*; 26 October 2022 [cited 2024 June 24]. Available from: <https://www.cnn.com/2022/10/26/gender-equity-at-work-stalls-after-mass-exodus-in-pandemic-research.html>.
3. **Cameron N.** Menopause talent drain – half of women going through menopause are considering leaving work. *Royal London*; 16 October 2023 [cited 2024 June 24]. Available from: <https://www.royallondon.com/about-us/media/media-centre/press-releases/press-releases-2023/october/Menopause-talent-drain-half-of-women-going-through-menopause-are-considering-leaving-work/#:~:text=New%20research%20from%20Royal%20London,employment%20altogether%20as%20a%20result.>

4. **Orgad S.** *Heading home: motherhood, work and the failed promise of equality*. New York: Columbia University Press; 2018. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7312/orga18472>
5. **Orgad S, Rottenberg C.** The menopause moment: The rising visibility of 'the change' in UK news coverage'. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*. 2023; 27(4):519–539. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/13675494231159562>
6. **International Labour Organization.** Over 2 million moms left the labour force in 2020 according to new global estimates. *ILO*; 8 March 2022 [cited 2024 June 24]. Available from: <https://ilostat.ilo.org/blog/over-2-million-moms-left-the-labour-force-in-2020-according-to-new-global-estimates/>.
7. **Fawcett Society.** Paths to parenthood: Uplifting new mothers at work. 2023 November 6. *Fawcett Society*; [cited 24 June 2024]. Available from: <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/paths-to-parenthood-uplifting-new-mothers-at-work>.
8. **Wood Z.** Motherhood penalty 'has driven 250,000 women out of jobs'. *The Guardian*; 5 November 2023 [cited 2024 June 24]. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/money/2023/nov/05/motherhood-penalty-has-driven-quarter-of-a-million-women-out-of-jobs-says-report>.
9. **Ashdown M, Hooker L.** One in 10 mothers with under-fours quit work over childcare, says charity. *BBC*; 6 November 2023 [cited 2024 June 24]. Available from: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-67325993>.
10. **Stone P.** *Opting out? Why women really quit careers and head home*. Berkeley: University of California Press; 2007. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520941793>
11. **Nicholas S.** Working mums who quit their jobs to look after their teenage kids is becoming a huge social trend but are these women making others mothers feel guilty? *Daily Mail*; 23 November 2023 [cited 2024 June 24]. Available from: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-12780905/Mothers-quit-jobs-look-teenagers-kids-social-trend-make-working-mums-feel-guilty.html>.
12. **McClure T.** Jacinda Ardern resigns as prime minister of New Zealand. *The Guardian*; 19 January 2023 [cited 2024 June 24]. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/19/jacinda-ardern-resigns-as-prime-minister-of-new-zealand>.
13. **Rottenberg C, Orgad S.** Tradwives: the women looking for a simpler past but grounded in the neoliberal present. *The Conversation*; 7 February 2020 [cited 2024 June 24]. Available from: <https://theconversation.com/tradwives-the-women-looking-for-a-simpler-past-but-grounded-in-the-neoliberal-present-130968>.
14. **Faludi S.** *Backlash: the undeclared war against women*. London: Chatto and Windus; 1992.
15. **Fox AB, Quinn DM.** Pregnant women at work: the role of stigma in predicting women's intended exit from the workforce. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*. 2015; 39(2):226–242. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684314552653>
16. **Young Women's Trust.** New research shows employers discriminating against women who may go onto have children. *Young Women's Trust*; 31 March 2021 [cited 2024 June 24]. Available from: <https://www.youngwomenstrust.org/media-centre/new-research-shows-employers-discriminating-against-women-who-may-go-onto-have-children/>.
17. **Orgad S, De Benedictis S.** The 'Stay-At-Home' Mother, Postfeminism and Neoliberalism: Content Analysis of UK News Coverage. *European Journal of Communication*. 2015; 30(4):418–436. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323115586724>
18. **Rake K.** Gender and New Labour's social policies. *Journal of Social Policy*. 2001; 30:209–31. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279401006250>
19. **Jermyn D.** Everything you need to embrace the change: The menopausal turn in contemporary UK culture. *Journal of Aging Studies*. 2023; 64. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2023.101114>
20. **Fegitz E.** Neoliberal Feminism in Old Age: Femininity, Work, and Retirement in the Aftermath of the Great Recession. *Gender, Work and Organization*. 2022; 29(6):1815–1830. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12879>
21. **UK Parliament.** Menopause and the workplace. 17 September 2021. London (UK). Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/1416/menopause-and-the-workplace/>.
22. **Department of Work and Pensions.** Government appoints first Menopause Employment Champion to improve workplace support. *UK Government*; 6 March 2023 [cited 2024 June 24]. Available from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-appoints-first-menopause-employment-champion-to-improve-workplace-support>.
23. **Fawcett Society.** Menopause and the workplace. *Fawcett Society*; 2022 [cited 24 June 2024]. Available at: <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=9672cf45-5f13-4b69-8882-1e5e643ac8a6>.
24. **House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee Menopause and the workplace.** 19 July 2022; London (UK). Available from: <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/23281/documents/169819/default>.
25. **NG K.** One in 10 women have quit their job due to menopause. *Independent*; 2 May 2022 [cited 24 June 2024]. Available from: <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/women/menopause-women-quit-jobs-hrt-b2069754.html>.

26. **Wylie C.** One in 10 women have quit their job due to menopause symptoms – survey. *The Standard*; 2 May 2022 [cited 24 June 2024]. Available from: <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/fawcett-society-hrt-menopause-davina-mccall-government-b997445.html>.
27. **Equality and Human Rights Commission.** Regulator provides advice for employers on menopause and the Equality Act. *Equality Human Rights*; 21 February 2024 [cited 24 June 2024]. Available from: <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/media-centre/news/regulator-provides-advice-employers-menopause-and-equality-act#:~:text=Research%20on%20'Menopause%20and%20the,their%20jobs%20due%20to%20symptoms>.
28. **Taum M.** Without support, many menopausal workers are quitting their jobs. *BBC*; 9 April 2024 [cited 24 June 2024]. Available from: <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20240408-menopause-women-job-quits#:~:text=Three%20quarters%20of%20people%20will,day%20to%20day%20lives>.
29. **Liu J.** 'It's a huge concern': Senior-level women are calling it quits after decades climbing the career ladder. *CNBC*; 21 February 2023 February [cited 24 June 2024]. Available from: <https://www.cNBC.com/2023/02/21/why-youtube-ceo-susan-wojicki-and-other-powerful-women-keep-quitting.html>.
30. **Hinchliffe E, Crowley K.** Marne Levine's exit costs Meta another female leader. Meet the exec who's taking over half her job. *Fortune*; 14 February 2023 [cited 24 June 2024]. Available from: <https://fortune.com/2023/02/14/marne-levines-leaves-meta-facebook-nicola-mendelsohn/>.
31. **Gorham B, Langham O.** Women's health economics: investing in the 51 per cent. Report. NHS Confederation. 2 October 2024. London (UK) Available from: <https://www.nhsconfed.org/publications/womens-health-economics>.
32. **NHS Confederation.** Women's health economics: investing in the 51 per cent. Appendix: Data sources and expanded methodologies. 2 October 2024. Available from: <https://www.nhsconfed.org/publications/womens-health-economics>.
33. **Ryan L, Gatrell C.** How are middle- and older-age women employees perceived and treated at work? A review and analysis. *International Journal of Management Reviews*. 2024; 26(4):536–555. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijmr.12365>
34. **Lacey N.** *Women, crime and character: from Moll Flanders to Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2008.
35. **Dent T, De Benedictis, S.** Mapping care leave in the creative economy (not published). *British Sociological Conference*. 2023 April 12–14; University of Manchester, Manchester.
36. **Hakim C.** *Work-lifestyle choices in the 21st century: preference theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2000. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780199242092.001.0001>
37. **Budgeon S.** Individualized femininity and feminist politics of choice. *European Journal of Women's Studies*. 2015; 22(3):303–318. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506815576602>
38. **Steffan B.** Managing menopause at work: The contradictory nature of identity talk. *Gender, Work and Organization*. 2020; 28(1):194–214. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12539>
39. **Orgad S, Gil R.** *Confidence Culture*. Durham and London: Duke University Press; 2022. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478021834>
40. **Office for National Statistics.** Families and the labour market, London UK: 2019. Available from: [https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/familiesandthelabourmarketengland/2019#:~:text=Almost%203%20in%2010%20mothers,in%2020%20fathers%20\(4.8%25\)](https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/familiesandthelabourmarketengland/2019#:~:text=Almost%203%20in%2010%20mothers,in%2020%20fathers%20(4.8%25)).
41. **Zhou M, Kan MY.** The Gendered Impacts of Partnership and Parenthood on Paid Work and Unpaid Work Time in Great Britain, 1992–2019. *Population and Development Review*. 2023; 49(4):829–857. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/padr.12593>
42. **Department for Work and Pensions.** Economic labour market status of individuals aged 50 and over, trends over time: September 2023. London (UK). Available from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/economic-labour-market-status-of-individuals-aged-50-and-over-trends-over-time-september-2023/economic-labour-market-status-of-individuals-aged-50-and-over-trends-over-time-september-2023>.
43. **O'Neill MT, Jones V, Reid A.** Impact of menopausal symptoms on work and careers: a cross-sectional study. *Occupational Medicine*. 2023; 73(6):332–338. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/occmed/kqad078>
44. **Yoeli H, Macnaughton J, McLusky S.** Menopausal symptoms and work: a narrative review of women's experiences in casual, informal, or precarious jobs. *Maturitas*. 2021; 150:14–21. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.maturitas.2021.05.007>
45. **Steffan B, Potočnik K.** Teaching through the menopause: A flexible work paradox. In: Marsh-Davies K, Burnett C, (Eds.) *Teachers and Teaching Post-COVID*. Routledge; 2023. p. 64–86. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003352129-6>
46. **Fraser N.** Contradictions of capital and care. *New Left Review*. 2016; 100:99–117.

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Orgad S. Women Who Quit: Media and Policy Discourse about Gender and Work. *LSE Public Policy Review*. 2025; 3(4): 4, pp. 1–11. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31389/lseppr.121>

Submitted: 22 October 2024

Accepted: 22 January 2025

Published: 14 March 2025

COPYRIGHT:

© 2025 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

LSE Public Policy Review is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by LSE Press.