

Parent trap, part II

By Diana Kapp

San Francisco Magazine

The subject on the minds of many high-powered, educated, even feminist Bay Area women: how did they end up as stay-at-home moms?

With an MBA from Wharton and a fabulous six-figure job at a multimedia company, Tina* never thought for a second that a time would come when she wouldn't want to work. At the young age of 37, the self-possessed, energetic New Yorker became the company's chief operating officer and eventually helped take it public. Even with two young children, she was consumed with work and surrounded by a group of friends, most of whom were as driven as she was. After she took time off when the company was having some growing pains, she still saw her career as the be-all and end-all, her future.

But that changed in 2002 when Tina's husband, a venture capitalist, was offered exciting work in San Francisco, the city where he had always wanted to live. Tina agreed to move the family across the country and help everyone get settled in their new home and adjusted in school, and then planned to begin surveying the work landscape. But time went by.

She has found great satisfaction in her unexpected role as caretaker of the family and the chance to serve on several charitable boards and raise money for her oldest child's school. But a big part of her wants to be working and honestly believes she is happier when she is. Yet in addition to worrying that any job she could manage with her now three kids would be a comedown after the one she had in New York, she has found San Francisco a difficult place in which to contemplate being a working mom. And so she sits, four busy, frustrating, and, yes, gratifying years later, trying to figure out how it is that she has never gotten back into the world of work that she loved. That's why when you ask her what advice she gives her friends about how to handle the work/family balancing act in the Bay Area, she doesn't hesitate. "Don't quit your job. Definitely don't stop. You will not be able to pull yourself back."

Tina is far from alone among Bay Area women, and that's part of her problem. Among her friends, in fact, being a stay-at-home mom is not just the new norm, it's the expected thing to do. At the all-girls private school her daughter attends, so many of the moms don't work that Tina is afraid her daughter would feel unhappy if she rarely showed up to get her at pick-up time or volunteer at school events. The school expects an incredible amount of involvement from the mothers. Some think it's like face time at work, Tina says, or even a source of status. And the pressure doesn't end at the school yard. "I've had

parents say to me, 'You can't go back to work—you have three kids.' Like it's some kind of sin to want a job and a family."

"Seriously, San Francisco is the new Greenwich," says Grace Kahng, a hard-driving television producer who, as a working mom, often feels out of the mainstream here. "This is a social factor tied to the boom of wealth. The result: you get Greenwich." Or Piedmont or Ross or even middle-class-seeming towns like Sunnyvale or Moraga. Look deeper, in fact, and much of the Bay Area starts to resemble traditional, wealthy suburbs where many dads hustle off to big jobs, many moms tend the home fires and volunteer, and, on the surface at least, no one is saying the situation is any too strange.

Yet it is strange. The media has been aflutter about this so-called opt-out revolution ever since it was spotlighted by a now-infamous 2003 New York Times Magazine cover story. Here in the Bay Area, scores of women have joined the ranks of those dropping out. There's no consensus on the data—for every study citing a rise in the numbers, there's another that contradicts it—but listen up on any playground or talk to anyone going through it, and you'll hear the same thing: more and more women are saying goodbye to high-powered careers and heading home.

"There was a time in the '70s when the cool thing was to work," says a Mill Valley mom who's cut back on a crazy work schedule to give herself more flexibility, but who is unsettled by the large number of women she sees who are giving up on work altogether. "Now the cool thing seems to be to stay home." How did this happen? How did it become conventional, even cool, to shelve careers and embrace the domestic life for a while, especially in the Bay Area, which, if anything, can be oppressive in its embrace of all things unconventional? And if deciding to stay home reflects feminism's hard-won freedom to choose, as some women claim, why do so many stay-at-home moms feel a pained ambivalence about their choice?

Conversations with more than 40 Bay Area women find most of them unwilling to go on the record about their fix, given how enviable their lives look to outsiders. Yet the fact remains that the most idyllic-seeming neighborhoods and towns are filled with stay-at-home moms who feel extremely busy yet maddeningly underemployed, indispensable yet oddly invisible, deeply satisfied yet frustrated beyond words—women for whom the freedom to do what they want comes loaded with rules about what they can't, won't, or shouldn't do. The positives of their choice nearly always outweigh the negatives, they say, but the negatives—my, are they hard to shake.

Of course, this scenario is hardly new. It's the very same domestic setup that prompted Betty Friedan's famous 1963 question that launched a thousand feminist ships: Is keeping house and raising children a good life for women? What's striking, and rather disturbing, is that the same question is back in play some 40 years later, and the women it's being asked of never anticipated staying at home; indeed, they're often heavily armed with degrees from prestigious schools and have held fast-track jobs in high-profile careers as CEOs, lawyers, and management consultants, where they were pulling down salaries well into the six figures. Even more, they were often leaders in their fields and thus, you could say, our best shot at correcting the gender imbalance in the halls of power and influence. Which, the experts will tell you, is probably the only way the work world will ever become more family friendly, here or anywhere else.

In the politicized Bay Area, as you can imagine, this throwback trend ignites passionate debate. A small group of Stanford-area women recently held a "salon" on the work/don't work conundrum. The intense, verging on teary, conversation lasted nearly four hours. Two new websites responding to the challenges facing working mothers, mommytrackd.com and flexibilityalliance.org, will be up this spring, both with Bay Area founders. **In response to the new ubiquity of at-home moms, Sharon Meers, 40, who recently left a managing director post at a top Wall Street investment bank, and her friend Joanna Strober, 37, a Palo Alto private equity investor, are writing a book called *Opting In*. It argues that women are no less ambitious than men, and that too many leave work for the wrong reasons: primarily, they've given up on their husbands becoming 50 percent partners in childrearing, and they believe the obstacles to flexibility in the workplace are insurmountable. Based on their own experience and an analysis of much research, they beg to differ and intend to show how women can get a better deal. (Meers, for one, snagged a seemingly unlikely 50-50 partner, a Midwestern Republican.)**

At the other extreme, *Total 180!*, a new magazine whose goal is to "bring pride and respect back to at-home moms," especially professional women who've chosen to stay home, just held a local launch party in Los Altos. Fifty women packed the living room on a Friday afternoon.

One thing becomes clear from all the talk: there's no single factor driving women's decisions to step off the career track. Some just happen to be in a job rut when the babies start to arrive, so it seems like a convenient time to take a break. Then, the Bay Area is loaded with older moms who have worked long and hard, so they're happy to slow down and enjoy this come-lately phase. "If I had something to prove,

I've already proved it," says a Harvard Business School–trained mother of three in Ross, who was a hotshot investment banker until she quit work after her first child was born.

Still, the theme that emerges again and again in women's discussions is how the Bay Area's ever-escalating, even obsessive, work culture—in which constant travel, weekend conference calls, and a Blackberry leash have become the status quo—limits everyone's options. "A family can handle 1.5 jobs," says mother of three Su-Moon Paik, a Stanford MBA who six years ago left a business development career that required travel twice a month to San Diego. Unfortunately, most good jobs really are too big to do part time, so inevitably someone ends up losing out.

"It would be a sleepless night if the kids were sick, as I fixated on what I would do the next day," says Cass Caulfield, 37, who recently left a job with a corporate foundation where she'd worked for 10 years. For five years she held up under the strain, until the older of her two kids went to kindergarten. "Could I pump them with Tylenol, drop them at daycare, and make it through half the day? The things I would do to get to work," she says, laughing. While she loved her job, years of wrangling two kids into the car by 7:45 a.m., commuting into the city, and dropping them off at different daycare centers eventually wore her down. Part of the problem was that she shouldered this responsibility alone because her husband was out of the house by 6 a.m. to get to his financial industry job.

Some women have tried pushing the part-time option but either hit a brick wall—one woman, for instance, worked at a company that doesn't allow a part-time schedule to anyone at the level of vice president or above—or felt marginalized by the choices. In Tina's business, she could never be where she sees herself, running a company or in upper management, working part time. "I have always enjoyed my seat at the table," she says.

However sanguine these women were about deciding to stay at home, they all marvel at how "June Cleaver-ish" and "'50s-esque" their lives have become. "One day it's grocery shopping, one day it's errands, one day it's something at school. I picked up the dry cleaning; now I'm finally going to put away the breakfast dishes," says a Pac Heights mother. And they're surprised at how quickly responsibilities and roles around the home become defined along traditional gender lines.

Andrea*, for instance, was warned by a friend who had been home for four years to set some ground rules with her husband before quitting her high-level finance job. Now she marvels at the aptness of the

advice. Her husband is suddenly on her back for racking up parking tickets and 411 calls. Her comeback to his hassling: "Look, when you're running kids from place to place all day, in a city with no legal parking, that's what happens." Another San Francisco mom feels an unspoken expectation to have more sex. "I can't get away with being the irritable, exhausted wife anymore," she says.

This is not to say Andrea or the other women feel they're getting a raw deal—not a one secretly wishes to switch places with her husband—only that they're constantly engrossed in a game of mental ping-pong about their situation. They're happy to be spending precious time with their kids, but many resent their husbands' exciting careers and question why they spent so many years and thousands of dollars on top-notch educations, only to end up coloring and building with Legos. Some say they're frustrated by their husbands' assumptions that they'll deal with the pediatrician, organize the summer camp schedule, schlep the kids from piano lesson to playdate. At the same time, they want to be the ones in charge. Still, many of them have devoured Judith Warner's book *Perfect Madness*, an alarming critique of what Warner calls our new culture of "sacrificial motherhood," and worry that they may be driving themselves and their kids insane with their 24/7 parenting. Warner claims that the "perfectionistic and hypercontrolling behavior" many mothers engage in today is the logical outcome of their being asked to do too much in a world that still doesn't care about or know how to accommodate working parents. "[My book] is about what happens to women (and men) when they feel entirely unsupported, about how they flounder and flail and go a little bit nuts when they try to take on a level of responsibility for their families that no person should or could ever be expected to shoulder alone," she writes.

Even some moms who are happy staying home are conflicted enough about it that they tell white lies to their kids to keep them from thinking they do nothing but carpool all day. Kristi Patterson, a Silicon Valley mother, got into this habit after reading to her son from Richard Scarry's *What Do People Do All Day?* To the question, What does your mommy do? her 5-year-old matter-of-factly replied, "Errands," and she was alarmed. "Now when I leave the house, I say I'm going to a meeting," Patterson says, laughing. "Oh, yeah," says Hayes Valley mom Mitra Modaressi, who does the same thing. "I always say, 'Mommy has an appointment.'"

At its most advanced, this frustration brings out the angry worst in the stay-at-home brigade. Stories are legion of the sniping between working and nonworking moms, though, in fact, incidents seem to be rarer than the lore would have it. Still, women develop pet peeves. Jane's* is stay-at-home moms who have full-time nannies. "If you're staying home to be with your kids, be with your kids," she says. For

Andrea, it's the working mom she carools with. "Even if she does run one of the largest consulting groups in the city, it's still inconsiderate to call at 9:30 p.m. to say she can't drive," she huffs. But the officious style of the stay-home moms "in their pony mules" who buzz around school in auction-planning frenzy drive her just as nuts.

Still, few can imagine returning to work full time. Once they sink into the world of playdates and afternoons at the Strawberry pool, even hyperqualified law- and business-school graduates start to feel alienated from, and even intimidated by, the work world. "The thought of having to update my resume and job hunt is so unappealing," says a San Francisco mother who says she would like to be working part time in a year. For some, the economics just don't add up. "If I went back now, I'd make a tiny fraction of my husband's bonus," says a Yale graduate who's home with her 6-month-old. "It's demotivating." If these aren't obstacles enough, the demands of domestic life exert their own inexorable pull. Whether it's weekend planning, school volunteering, caring for parents, or home remodeling, tasks expand to fill the available time. Some venture capitalists recently called Tina with a few job possibilities, and she felt she had to decline. "Honestly, I cannot imagine how I could extricate myself at this point," she says, sighing with exasperation. "I can't imagine having an hour a week to work, let alone a real job." So, what would the brave new world look like if women could press reboot and rewrite all the rules? It's no surprise that nearly every woman interviewed cited interesting part-time work or flexible job schedules as part of the solution. For that matter, shouldn't it be an option for women and men? In fact, says Berkeley author Peggy Orenstein, whose much-talked-about book *Flux* five years ago wrestled with the same work/family question bedeviling women today, part of the problem is that even in 2006, this is still considered a women's issue. "We live in a culture that looks down on men who aren't primary wage earners," Orenstein says. "Girls start thinking at age 12 about how they're going to balance careers and having kids."

Many women feel they'd get a lot of mileage just out of having a husband take half of the responsibility for the kids. "If men could actually pack a diaper bag and plan a day's activities, that would free up a lot of time and mental energy to go back to work," says Kara*, a San Francisco mom who, after a year off, is going back into consulting 20 hours a week. Turning back the clock on insane workloads and erecting a wall between work and home would also help, she says. "My ideal—first, he wouldn't open up the computer for three hours every night or spend eight hours on e-mail on the weekend."

And moms need to lighten up on their devotion to the hypermanaged parenting model. "The idea that something dire is going to happen if you miss the school play or your child's first step—this has now very much become our culture," says Myra Strober, a Stanford University economist who teaches a course on work/family balance. "All the research about early brain development has stressed out families. Why not have the babysitter video the play and watch it later with your child?"

Orenstein, now a mother herself, worries that the legacy of Betty Friedan may never be realized, that feminism is losing its steam. The very fact that so few of these women would go on the record and aren't particularly angry about—or don't even see—the giant systemic trap Orenstein and others say makes their situation almost inevitable is itself telling. "Womens' choice to stay home comes off as a decision made freely by someone doing the 'right' thing. But there are many economic and social pressures to insure that choice gets made," Orenstein says. "It's a little bit of a rigged game." Fixing the problem is still something every woman has to do for herself, since blaming the system can only take you so far. But giving voice to what's really going on is the right first step.

In their rare quiet moments, women go to a difficult place where they come closest to acknowledging this truth. "I tell my girls you can do anything you want," reflects Mia Walker, who left her TV news career years ago. "My daughter Abby says, 'First I'm going to be a TV producer and then I'm going to be a mom.' There's a part of me that's gratified that she'd like to be a mom. But honestly, I'd say to her, 'Don't just do that.'"

**These names have been changed.*