

Full-time professional to full-time mother: A choice laden with cost

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Women leaving work to raise children have to redefine who they are, a study from the SAGE journal *Human Relations* finds. After exiting professional and managerial occupations, mothers are engaged in an ongoing mother/professional identity struggle, argue the researchers Shireen Kanji and Emma Cahusac. The process through which the mothers' choice is constructed as 'right' does not occur before their exit from work but manifests itself afterwards and intensifies over time, the study reveals.

"Analysis of [mothers'](#) sense making reveals how the choice to exit, channeled as it is through layers of societal and individual pressures, is laden with cost. An evaporating work identity and evolving struggles for self-redefinition following workplace exit highlight the loss [women experience](#)", explained the researchers.

Based on in-depth interviews with 26 mothers in London, the study sought to build on research showing that what is on offer is a long way from what women want and reveals that the 'choices' available are a far cry from the reality of women's feelings and attitudes. The researchers found that:

"The mothers in this study wanted to work, and many of them could have afforded childcare, but they nonetheless left their workplaces. Their stories do not match popular media portrayals of professional women opting out after realizing their true vocation was caring for their children."

Having a child causes a challenging identity shift in the workplace as women inevitably no longer fit the devoted employee mold. Thus, women experience an immediate disjuncture between who they are and who they are meant to be at [work](#).

The study concludes:

"Over time, most women became reconciled to their loss, in part by changing their own priorities, and through this process they make their 'choice' the right one. But accepting or being content with the final outcome, which may have taken years to achieve, is not the same as mothers choosing what they had wanted. Many of the mothers in our study would have chosen a different path if other choices had been on offer."

More information: The article "Who am I? Mothers' shifting identities, loss & sense making after work place" by Shireen Kanji and Emma Cahusac and published in *Human Relations*, can be accessed by reviewers [here](#).

Provided by SAGE Publications

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