In 2007, Pamela Stone’s groundbreaking book *Opting Out? Why Women Really Quit Careers and Head Home* laid to rest the misbegotten idea that highly educated and high-achieving mothers choose to quit their jobs and head home. Stone urged her readers to consider the context in which such “choices” are formed. Through a wealth of qualitative data, Stone compellingly explained that inflexible workplaces imposed extensive demands on these mothers. The organization of paid work—not women’s individual choices—was the key reason women were heading home. Most mothers Stone interviewed also told her that they intended to get back into the labor force.

About a decade later, Stone and Meg Lovejoy interviewed these women again, now in their 40s and 50s, to see how their work and family lives had unfolded. Although a significant amount of time had passed, the authors nonetheless managed to interview 43 out of the original 54 women. Their findings from these rich and revealing follow-up interviews form the bulk of *Opting Back In: What Really Happens When Mothers Go Back to Work*.

Stone and Lovejoy show that these women had a two-stage process of opting back in. The first stage was what the authors term the “family first” stage, wherein these mothers sought to reenter the workforce (usually when their youngest child had entered school full-time). But these mothers only went back to work as long as this reentry allowed them to meet the demands of the domestic realm. Usually, this part of reentry into the labor force was a process of getting their feet wet in the world of paid work again, anticipating that they would reenter more fully at a later stage. During this phase, mothers prioritized flexibility over what kind of work they were doing.

The second stage of this process is the “career relaunch” stage, where mothers are far more invested in paid work and approach their reentry energetically, usually when they anticipate becoming empty-nesters. In this career relaunch stage, the authors identify three types of reentry strategies: 1) changing course, where mothers enter new occupations (often feminized and low-paying ones, instead of the high-paying and masculinized occupations they had been in prior to “opting out”); 2) course correcting, where mothers reenter their former high-powered occupations and industries but usually on a part-time or contingent basis; and 3) making a comeback in their former professions (although not with their former employers) but seeking more flexibility.

The implications of these three career strategies are concerning: they illuminate how, when these women opt back into the labor force, they are marginalized as workers and are funneled into lower-paying and less prestigious sectors as well as roles and positions. In the earlier years of their careers, before they “opted out,” these mothers had scaled enormous professional heights and had broken gender barriers by their achievements in male-dominated...
fields. They had been, at least then, a shining example of the strides women have made in the workplace, important in the context of a society where the quality of employment one can access in prime working years also often determines access to essentials such as healthcare and financial stability. Their opting back in stories are not quite as triumphant. Decades after receiving their elite educational degrees, these mothers reenter the labor force via low-paid positions in feminized sectors of the economy, or in freelance roles. Opting back in is a bleak tale of the colossal squandering of professional talent. This loss is facilitated by workplaces that refuse to see workers as people with obligations outside work and a policy context that devalues caregiving to the point of abandoning families—and really, within that, mothers—to deal as best as they can individually.

This loss is a key paradox of privilege identified by the authors: that the women most equipped to break the glass ceiling in elite professions do not do so. Their entire career trajectory—opting out, opting back in—is shaped by their domestic roles, and especially by their marriage to men who are also highly educated and in high-earning occupations. This last fact means that these mothers’ income is often seen as supplementary to the household. However, their participation in paid work often becomes a strategy for managing household finances in turbulent economic times. Many of the husbands of these mothers had experienced job loss in the decade between the publication of Opting Out and the present book. The jobs of several husbands were casualties of the Great Recession (lasting, officially, from December 2007 to June 2009), which occurred soon after the publication of Opting Out.

The Great Recession solidified trends in organizational practices that had been simmering for some time. Specifically, the Great Recession clearly showed that even highly educated professional and managerial workers have become subject to the tumults of the broader economic context in the United States, including organizational restructuring as a means of generating profits. Had these couples been living their lives in earlier decades, the husbands of women profiled in this book would have been far less likely to lose their jobs.

In the wake of these economic changes, scholars in the fields of gender, work, and family have been at the forefront of illuminating the role of insecurity in shaping how couples think about paid and unpaid work. Particularly insightful in this regard is Marianne Cooper’s incisive study Cut Adrift: Families in Insecure Times (2014). The experiences of the families that Cooper terms “upper class” are instructive when laid against the findings that Stone and Lovejoy share. Cooper explains that in wealthy families, where both husbands and wives typically have elite education similar to those in Opting Back In, an acute sense of economic uncertainty means that families ratchet up what they feel they need materially in order to feel secure. One multimillionaire father explains that he would need millions more before he felt like he and his family were economically secure. These wealthy families are particularly worried about the fates of their children in a world that they view as being furiously competitive, with this competition coming from Asian countries, specifically China. Their deep worries about their children’s future financial well-being prompted the upper class families in Cooper’s study to adopt neo-traditional marriages where fathers are responsible for paid work and mothers, although they have impeccable educational credentials and often have employment experience in brand-name firms, nonetheless stay at home to closely monitor their children’s educational, extracurricular, and social development. These parents, as Cooper explains, wanted nothing less than perfection for their children. Cooper shows that often, once children’s college admission to the top Ivies had been secured, mothers sought to reenter the labor force.

The experiences that Cooper recounts are similar to what Stone and Lovejoy characterize as privileged domesticity in Opting Back In. Privileged domesticity is a pull toward the home experienced by the elite mothers in their study. Mothers in both studies focus on overseeing various aspects of their children’s development. Cooper attributes this to the high level of insecurity that privileged families in her study perceive. She explains
that the experience of feeling insecure plays an important part in shaping these marriages into their neo-traditional organization. Stone and Lovejoy, in contrast, emphasize how privileged domesticity allows mothers to be the “status keepers” of their families. When understood through the prism of the other study, both books illustrate how domesticity offers a cultural validation through a form of intensive mothering. This validation, as Stone and Lovejoy show, had been sorely lacking in mothers’ workplace experiences where employers were dismissive of mothers’ lives outside of employment.

Recently, an emerging body of research is combining this consideration of insecurity and domesticity for privileged women by exploring what happens when highly educated women lose their jobs. In my own work, I find that highly educated mothers who lose their jobs also frame—at least for some time—the domestic as offering them a culturally valued identity. In my book *Crunch Time: How Married Couples Confront Unemployment* (2020a), I show that while searching for a job tends to be framed as a full-time activity for unemployed men, this is not the case for unemployed women. Many of the mothers in my study, like those in *Opting Back In*, had had unpleasant workplace experiences, including being made to feel guilty for any caregiving obligations. In this context, motherhood, for some time at least, provided a respite.

Stone and Lovejoy point to the importance of the husbands of these mothers in their study for encouraging privileged domesticity. My research also shows that husbands of unemployed mothers play a key part in emphasizing that employment is only one option among many for these mothers. In fact, I find (Rao 2017) that while in families of unemployed men, reemployment becomes urgent and even a source of tension for couples, in families with unemployed women (Rao 2020b) the emphasis shifts to ensuring that husbands’ careers are flourishing such that husbands’ sole income can support the family. Couples here fight less over whether women are job-searching and more over what husbands can do to expand their earnings. In a recent study, however, Sarah Damaske (2020) finds that middle-class women (generally highly educated and in professional jobs) were more likely to emphasize the importance of participating in paid employment. As such, Damaske explains that they were more likely to pursue what she terms a “deliberate” job search, treating their job search as a job itself. Damaske’s study, in a more optimistic vein, points to the limits of the domestic in pulling highly educated women to the home.

This emerging research is grappling with key trends identified by Stone and Lovejoy in *Opting Back In*, specifically how paid and unpaid work are being organized in a context of widespread economic uncertainty. Usually, this economic uncertainty pertains to shifts in the employment landscape and the steady erosion of the employer-employee contract. Key studies exploring how the osmosis of economic insecurity permeates various aspects of family life include Ana Villalobos’s *Motherload* (2014) and Alison Pugh’s *The Tumbleweed Society* (2015). In her study on motherhood in an era of risk, Villalobos argues that given a context where jobs and relationships dissolve frequently, intensive mothering—where the mother-child bond is culturally prized and expected to take up the mother’s emotional energy as well as her time—provides a route for mothers to feel secure through this intensive attachment. In *The Tumbleweed Society*, Pugh notes that while workers, whether privileged or not, expect their work to be precarious and unstable, they nonetheless expect that they should be loyal to the employer in what she terms the “one-way honor system.” Furthermore, Pugh shows that insecurity at work means that people put extremely high demands on their marriages and personal relationships as they erect a “moral wall” by acquiescing to lower expectations of loyalty at work but amping them up at home.

Key to the organization of paid and unpaid work that Stone and Lovejoy thoughtfully critique through this longitudinal look at the women who “opted out” and then “opted back in” is the role of social policies. In her book *Making Motherhood Work*, Caitlyn Collins uses interviews with middle-class mothers across four countries: the United States, Sweden, Germany, and
Italy (with each country representing a different childcare policy regime). Collins’s study shows how comparable mothers of young children in different policy contexts have extremely distinct experiences of participating in paid work depending on their policy context. Mothers in the United States, as Collins shows, have some of the most unsupported and frenzied experiences. They struggle to contend with cultural norms of intensive motherhood and a policy context that expects families—usually mothers—to manage entirely without help, while often striving to advance in fast-paced careers.

These contributions about motherhood and work have been important, but as recent work by Dawn Marie Dow and Riché Barnes shows, motherhood is not experienced in the same way by all mothers, nor does it mean the same thing to all mothers. Mothering while Black (2019) by Dow and Raising the Race (2016) by Barnes center the under-studied experiences of Black professional women. Dow’s work calls into question the issue of privileged domesticity as an option for the women in her study. Instead, she argues that for Black women, “integrated motherhood” more accurately captures their experiences of motherhood. Integrated motherhood is where mothers see paid work, caregiving, and kinfolk’s help with childcare as all inextricably tied up to their motherhood. Dow points out that for women in her study, not working conjures up images that have been used to disparage Black women—for instance, the Welfare Queen—rather than denoting privilege and high social status, as is often the case for White women. In Raising the Race, Barnes draws on the experiences of highly educated Black women who either left or modified their careers. She explains this as both a radical choice in a social context where Black women have been historically coerced to work, and as a politics of respectability. Each of these books highlights how the concept of privileged domesticity is a nuanced one, where even similar practices may nonetheless have distinct meanings.

Opting Back In, like its predecessor Opting Out, is about how workplaces are failing highly educated mothers, who are in many ways the women best positioned to break the glass ceiling under the neoliberal organization of paid work. In Opting Out, Stone had identified these mothers as “canaries in the coal mine,” influencing scholars who followed her to study this privileged group of mothers as conceptually important in terms of representing a best-case scenario. Of course, the scholarship that the initial book influenced also demonstrated why such elite women may not, after all, have a reason to put their “gender interest,” in the words of Stone and Lovejoy, ahead of their “class interests.” The significant research that has emerged in the time between the publication of Opting Out and Opting Back In has documented the many challenges that remain for mothers and the utter lack of political will to mitigate these. Making paid work equally possible for women as for men and appropriately recognizing and remunerating unpaid work are urgent feminist issues within contemporary U.S. capitalism.

References
We have all had the experience of being thrust into a group of strangers and tasked with solving a problem. Immediately, we look around at the others and quickly ascertain their individual utility and value. Who will be most helpful? Whose opinions hold the greatest gravitas? Who is most likely to make no contribution, or to even be disruptive? Once this has been determined, we relax a bit and make progress with the task. Inevitably one or two people will assume the necessary leadership roles, either by the forcefulness of their assertions or simply because the others recognize that they possess something valuable that will help solve the problem. We defer to them and afford them a level of status based on our perceptions of their potential contribution. Even though we know little or nothing about them, we are willing to grant them a level of authority based on the presumption of their ability. They have acquired status in our eyes, whether or not they aspired to it. Since such events are multiplied throughout our daily lives, status is—as Cecilia Ridgeway argues in Status: Why Is It Everywhere? Why Does It Matter?—everywhere.

Key to Ridgeway’s thesis is the idea that we embrace status hierarchies as a way to manage social situations where cooperative interdependence is reconciled with competitive interdependence to achieve valued goals. In other words, we learn to cooperate in order to achieve individual goals in a competitively structured environment. We accede to such hierarchies because we understand the shared socio-cultural blueprint that frames such activities. This is, according to Ridgeway, a cultural schema theory of status that helps us organize our behavior in cooperative ways to achieve individual goals. She also claims that such hierarchies inevitably produce and reproduce inequality that is as rampant in today’s meritocratic societies as it was in ancient ascriptive ones.

Many of Ridgeway’s empirical and theoretical assertions focus on the implicit ways people bring status into goal-oriented settings, using it as a building block behind group organization to achieve individual goals without compromising mutual interdependence. People use status as a way to make sense of group activities, and the more they adhere to such hierarchical structures, the greater their legitimacy. Inequality rears its ugly head when one considers variables such as race, gender, and social class. Unsurprisingly, men are viewed with greater status than women, whites with greater status than blacks, and the wealthy with greater status than the poor—even though individuals from each of the subordinate groups might possess the requisite knowledge or skills to solve the problem. This is part of the cultural schema where established norms have endowed certain groups with privileged status, and such a normative framework is reproduced through routine interactions. Ridgeway’s book focuses on status between groups of individuals in society, such as those mentioned above, as well as status in interpersonal hierarchies.

Many of us think of status as inextricably linked with wealth or even class; the rich person can afford the trappings that denote