Experiences of brazilian women in light of the 'opt out' phenomenon

Experiências de mulheres brasileiras à luz do fenômeno 'opt-out'

Experiencias de mujeres brasileñas ante el fenómeno de "opt-out"

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Abstract

This paper aims to understand the reasons that led women with consolidated careers to interrupt their professional lives due to the work-family conflict. In order to reach the objective, in-depth interviews were carried out with fifteen married professionals, who are mothers, and have higher education some of which are post-graduated. The interviewees' nar-ratives were analyzed using content analysis. The results suggest that such a decision, far from being the expression of free choice, is the result of a set of pressures from the work environ-ment, the dominant social construction of gender, and constraints associated with social origin. Also, although many interviewees resent this decision, their discourse endorses its character of "choice" as they do not recognize the structural constraints that condition it.

Keywords: woman; work-family conflict; career break; opt-out. career.

RESUMO

Este artigo tem como objetivo compreender os motivos que levaram mulheres com carreira consolidada a interromperem a vida profissional em razão do conflito trabalho-família. Para atingir o objetivo, foram realizadas entrevistas em profundidade com quinze profissionais casadas, mães e com Ensino Superior, algumas delas com pós-graduação. As narrativas das entrevistadas foram analisadas por meio da análise de conteúdo. Os resultados sugerem que tal decisão, longe de ser expressão de livre escolha, é fruto de um conjunto de pressões do ambiente de trabalho, da construção social dominante de gênero e de constrangimentos associados à origem social. Além disso, embora muitas entrevistadas se ressintam dessa decisão, seus discursos endossam seu caráter de escolha, pois não reconhecem os constrangimentos estruturais que a condicionam.

Palavras-chave: *mulheres, conflito trabalho-família, interrupção de carreira, opt-out, carreira.*

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Resumen

Este artículo tiene como objetivo comprender los motivos que llevaron a mujeres con una ca-rrera consolidada a interrumpir su vida profesional debido al conflicto trabajo-familia. Para alcanzar dicho objetivo, se realizaron entrevistas en profundidad con quince profesionales ca-sadas, madres y con Educación Superior, algunas de ellas con estudios de posgrado. Las narra-tivas de las entrevistadas fueron analizadas mediante análisis de contenido. Los resultados sugieren que dicha decisión, lejos de ser una expresión de libre elección, es el resultado de un conjunto de presiones del entorno laboral, de la construcción social dominante de género y de restricciones asociadas al origen social. Además, aunque muchas entrevistadas resienten esta decisión, sus discursos respaldan su carácter de elección, ya que no reconocen las restricciones estructurales que la condicionan.

Palabras clave*: mujeres, conflicto trabajo-familia, interrupción de carrera, opt-out, carrera.*

The dilemma of choosing between motherhood and work was experienced by Anne-Marie Slaughter, former Director of Policy Planning for the US State Department, who re-signed from the position to dedicate more time to her children's care. In an article published in "The Atlantic," Slaughter (2012) stated that American women "still cannot have everything," "everything" meaning a career and motherhood, which triggered a wave of debates and criti-cisms. Anne-Marie's controversial statement brought up an issue that remains current: the dif-ficulty faced by middle-class women to balance work and motherhood.

Taking a career break is also a reality for many Brazilian middle class women. Catho Comunicação (2024), a job search site in Brazil, released research in which motherhood appears as one of the factors that contribute to gender inequality in the job market. According to the study, in 2018, the percentage of professionals who opted out of careers to care for their children was 30% for women and 7% for men. The research also pointed out that, among the main conflicts faced by professional mothers is the fear of having to miss work if the children are unwell, the embarrassment of arriving late to work due to school meetings, and possible delays due to the double burden. Career breaks are a complex issue because they involve different approaches, personal and professional context, children's age, family configuration, satisfaction, and ex-pectations in the performance of maternal and professional roles (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Powell & Greenhaus, 2010; Roman, 2017; Stone & Lovejoy, 2019).

Women represent ' majority of the Brazilian population over 10 years of age. However, they are still the minority among the employed population: in 2022, the percentage of em-ployed men and women was 73,2% and 53,3%, respectively (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatístic [IBGE], 2024). In addition, de-spite being more educated (in 2022, in the group aged 25 to 54 years, 21,3% of women had higher education, versus 16,8% of men), women earn less. The monthly income of employed women belonging to the mentioned age group was around 78,9% of men's earnings (IBGE, 2024).

Xavier et al. (2015) point out that the growing female participation in the labor market has not yet been sufficient to dissociate them from being responsible for domestic and care work in Brazil and worldwide (Abramo, 2007; Hirata, 2018; Mota-Santos et al., 2019; Pinheiro et al., 2023; Pinto et al., 2009; Sørensen, 2017). Data released by the Brazilian Statis-tic Institute (IBGE, 2024) on "gender statistics" point out that the workload of household chores for women was 21,3 hours, almost double the workload of men, around 11,7 hours. Such an unequal division of time and energy means greater difficulties for women to dedicate themselves to paid work; the double burden of Brazilian women is a clear consequence of a strongly patriarchal society (Arruzza, 2015; Lerner, 2019; Melo & Thomé, 2018; Mota-Santos et al., 2019).

In addition to the influence of patriarchy, middle and upper-class female Brazilian pro-fessionals have little government support to ease the burden of childcare. Society in Brazil is significantly hierarchical, and the (few) daycare centers and pre-schools in the public system, do not meet the demands of middle-class working mothers and are not considered to be of sufficient quality for the children of these strata. Thus, these professionals tend to resort to hiring nannies, housekeepers, and private daycare centers in order to balance work and family lives (Garcia & Viecili, 2018). Family members, especially grandmothers, often take care of the children so that their daughters and daughters-in-law can work, which is common in Brazil, regardless of social class (Dessen & Braz, 2000; Souza et al., 2023).

The asymmetries between men and women are due to cultural barriers still ingrained in Brazilian culture, where functions related to care, food, hygiene, and organization are consid-ered feminine attributions (Garcia & Viecili, 2018; Souza et al., 2023). Fur-thermore, on the part of employers is the stereotype that the costs of hiring women are higher since they are considered the only ones responsible for having a child. The absence from work due to maternity leave, breastfeeding breaks, in addition to the care that will be needed for the child after returning to work after maternity leave predispose employers against hiring women (Arena et al., 2023; Nascimento & Bôas, 2016; Valadares et al., 2024).

Recently, the crisis produced by the COVID-19 pandemic has entailed an additional burden to women. The sudden adoption of telework during the quarantine (Aguiar et al., 2022; Savic, 2020; Waizenegger et al., 2020; Zimmer et al., 2023)forced many professionals to adapt to the new reality: household chores increased due to the absence of the services nor-mally hired; schools started to teach via digital platforms. In this scenario, Brazilian women reported an increase in their workloads (Lemos et al., 2020).

At the organizational level, Brazilian companies rarely have human resource manage-ment policies and practices facilitating employees' work-family balance, which leads to career breaks for women who wish to be mothers (Machado & Pinho, 2017; Oliveira et al., 2013). The lack of policies in the country and the growing popularization of 'high-performance' corporate cultures – based on intense work dedication and long working hours – form a challenging context for female professionals with children to find work-family balance (Lemos & Cavazotte, 2018).

The combination of these structural and cultural constraints leads many Brazilian female professionals to stop their career due to the difficulty of balancing work and family (Melo & Thomé, 2018). Women opting out of work is not only a Brazilian issue but it is a central theme of the debate about the phenomenon named by Belkin (2003), the 'Opt-Out Revolution.' In an article published in "The New York Times Magazine," the author reported cases of highly qualified American professionals who, pressured by the double burden of work and mother-hood, chose to quit their jobs. Belkin's article inspired a series of later studies dedicated to understanding this phenomenon (Biese, 2017; Mainiero & Gibson, 2018; Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005; Warner, 2013). On this track, Mainiero and Sullivan (2006) published the book 'The Opt-Out Revolt', in which they presented a study with American women who took career breaks from large companies because they were unable to balance work and personal life, especially the demands of motherhood.

The issue of women opting out of work has gained attention from researchers. However, although a significant part of this literature does not ignore the difficulties faced by women in balancing work and motherhood, it emphasizes the notion of "choice" for such a decision. These works follow the argument underlying the proposal by Belkin (2003), which is based on the thesis that differences in the biological nature justify women's decision to leave their ca-reers to care for their children (Filippo & Nunes, 2021; Mota-Santos et al., 2019; Willians et al., 2006; Williams & Cuddy, 2012;). In addition, some research that discusses the opt-out phe-nomenon has focused more on the description of the women's new careers, reinforcing the notion of "free will" implied in this decision (Biese, 2017; Mainiero & Sullivan, 2006).

Aligned with these critical works, this article aims to understand the reasons that led married women with consolidated careers to take a break from their professional lives to dedi-cate themselves fully to motherhood. The study explores the conditions associated with such a decision and questions the idea of "free choice," contributing to expanding the critical debate about women's career breaks. In practical terms, the study is relevant because it reveals that organizations still do not have policies and practices that allow for the much-desired reconcili-ation of domestic and labor spheres. The research method consisted of in-depth interviews with professionals from different academic backgrounds who opted out of work to dedicate themselves wholly to motherhood.

Theoretical Framework

Work-family Conflict and the Opt-Out Revolution

The number of studies addressing the issue of the balance between work and non-work (particularly family) dimensions and the complex influences around how workers deal with this aspect of life increased in the first decades of the twentieth one century (Eby et al., 2005; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). In Brazil, in particular, the topic has been receiving increasing attention from researchers who are dedicated to understanding the challenges faced by pro-fessionals in the difficult task of balancing work and family life (Aguiar et al., 2022; Andrade, 2017; Carvalho & D'Angelo, 2021; Garcia & Viecili, 2018; Maia et al., 2015; Oliveira et al., 2013; Oliveira et al., 2017; Oltramari et al., 2014; Xavier et al., 2015).

In addition, the gender issue gained a central space in this debate (Canabarro & Salvagni, 2015; Chung & Van der Lippe, 2020; Lemos et al., 2020; Powell & Greenhaus, 2010; Roman, 2017; Teixeira & Bomfim, 2016). Initially, the reflections about the work-life imbal-ance (WLI) focused on emerging conflicts when the demands of one of these dimensions jeopardize the capacity of meeting the demands of the other (Eby et al., 2005; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Zhao et al., 2021). These concerns are due, in particular, to the set of changes experienced in the post-World War II period, such as the massive entry of women into the labor market and the consequent increase both in working hours and the number of couples with two incomes (Bruschini & Puppin, 2004; Herman & Gyllstrom, 1977; Holahan & Gilbert, 1979).

The extensive and irregular working hours are among the aspects that predict work-life conflict (WLC) (Beutell & O'Hare, 2018; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Lemos & Cavazotte, 2018; Nganga et al., 2023). Additionally, many studies have addressed the relationship be-tween work role stress and family functioning (Arena et al., 2023; Lobo et al., 2023). This includes research on the effect of job stress on the family and research about both employee and spouse stress (Eby et al., 2005). Other aspects aggravating WLC are the low offer of schedule flexibility and social support structures (such as the public offer of daycare centers and family support) (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006; Pleck et al., 1980)

Many of the studies related to such conflicts pay special attention to the dilemmas faced by women in the early and intermediate stages of their careers, in which many have children of school or pre-school age (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Such a condition not only amplifies the difficulty in balancing professional activities and family but can result in opting out of work (Carvalho & D'Angelo, 2021; Elliott, 2002; Warner, 2013).

In line with the trend perceived in organizational and career studies, the assumption of free choice or agency is one of the pillars of the debate about work-family conflicts (Gregory & Milner, 2009; Stone & Lovejoy, 2004, 2019). For some scholars, by privileging the individ-ual dimension at the expense of recognizing structural constraints, this

debate follows the trend of the post-feminist perspective that values a 'neoliberal culture' where "the vocabulary of 'empowerment' and 'choice' has come to function as substitutes for feminism" (Sørensen, 2017, p. 297). In this sense, the gender gap verified in managerial positions is reinterpreted in terms of free choice, instead of being faced as the result of different structures of opportunity available to men and women, with the consequent reproduction of the sexual division of labor (Kanji & Cahusac, 2015; Sørensen, 2017; Willians et al., 2006).

Several interpretations seek to understand the underlying causes of the process that cul-minates in a career break for many women due to the difficulties in resolving the work-family conflict. Among them, the opt-out phenomenon stands out. This term portrays the intentional departure of women from the labor market to dedicate themselves to motherhood, originally proposed in the article 'The Opt-Out Revolution' (Belkin, 2003). The author used statistical evidence from the period between 1998 and 2000 that pointed out the reduction in the num-ber of new mothers who chose not to return to work, and interviews with a group of women participating in a book club, all of them Princeton University graduates.

Another important reference for the debate is the work 'The Opt-Out Revolt' (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2006), which deepens the discussion around the option of many mothers to leave their corporate jobs in search of balancing the demands of motherhood and career. The authors developed the Kaleidoscope Career model, which shows these women's attempts to find the perfect fit between work and personal life. When describing the cases of women who opted out of work to dedicate themselves to domestic work and their children, the authors empha-size the positive and idealized side of such a choice. However, Mainiero & Sullivan (2006) do not highlight issues such as low self-esteem, loneliness, stress, and depression, which also ap-pear as a consequence of this decision (Barsoum, 2019; Eby et al., 2005; Spector, 2006; Stone & Lovejoy, 2004).

After gaining visibility, the opt-out phenomenon received a series of criticisms for its controversial aspects. Such criticisms, which Cossman (2009) classified as descriptive, analyti-cal, and normative, are addressed in the following section.

The Opt-Out Phenomena and its Criticisms

The descriptive criticism of the opt-out phenomenon questions its very existence. Critics claimed that the statistical reduction in the percentage of new mothers who returned to work in the early 2000s is the result of aspects such as the demographic changes that occurred in the decades following World War II and the economic recession of the early 2000s, rather than a voluntary decision to withdraw from the labor market.

Analytical criticism, in turn, targets the nature of the decision to opt-out of work to ded-icate to motherhood – voluntary or involuntary. In general, recognizing the barriers faced by women in an attempt to address the work-life imbalance, this current rejects the association of a career break with a process of free choice, in which individual, organizational, and structural constraints are not relevant (Willians et al., 2006). In contrast to a voluntarist perspective, studies have shown that many women in managerial or professional positions choose to leave work after becoming mothers due to the difficulties in balancing family demands with inflexi-ble and long workdays (Filippo & Nunes, 2021; Gregory & Milner, 2009; Stone, 2007). Ulti-mately, patriarchy is present in the absence of adequate organizational policies and in the per-sistent domestic responsibilities focused, for the most part, on women, which are considered challenges that make it difficult to achieve a balance between work and family (Bruschini, 2007; Lerner, 2019; Reis et al., 2021; Thomé & Schwarz, 2016).

Consistent with the trend observed in organizational studies about work-family interfac-es, the discussions around the opt-out phenomenon tend to portray a minority of privileged individuals, formed mainly by white, heterosexual, and highly qualified women. In a study that analyzed the content of articles on the subject from 1980 to 2006, Willians et al. (2006) found that the analytical focus of the research undertaken is directed, primarily, to the experi-ences of a minority of women with professional careers. Based on the analysis of articles on the opt-out phenomenon published between 1988 and 2003 by the North American press, (Kuperberg & Stone, 2008) found that only five of the 98 women portrayed in the articles worked in occupations classified as "non-professional," such as child care workers, retail workers, and dental assistants.

Finally, normative criticism questions the reductionist view of narratives like Belkin's, 2003, tending to reproduce the status quo of the sexual division of labor. For Vavrus (2007), the ideological orientation underlying the emergence of the opt-out phenomenon is associated with a socio-political context marked by a growing conservatism in the USA. In this period, the Christian right was working to impose an agenda based on preserving traditional con-structs such as marriage and family, in a movement that culminated in the re-election of Presi-dent George Bush in 2004. Both the "new traditionalism" emerging in the 1980s and the opt-out phenomenon are related to wide media coverage that highlights women's free choice to leave their career and disregards the structural and cultural constraints resulting from gender status (Vavrus, 2007).

Methods

In 2018, fifteen women were interviewed to understand the career break process. All re-spondents were white, married, mothers,had higher or postgraduate education and lived in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. During the interviews, they were asked about their career trajectory up until the moment they decided to stop working, the reasons that led them to interrupt their careers and what their lives were like after this decision.The research subjects were chosen based

on the predominant profile in the studies on the opt-out phenomenon (Belkin, 2003), which describes the decision to interrupt a career taken by privileged individuals, formed mainly by white, heterosexual, and highly qualified women. The interviewees are classed as belonging to the Brazilian middle class (Souza, 2018).

Table 1 presents the interviewees' profiles with fictitious names. These Brazilian women were approached firstly based on the researchers' relationship networks and then through the snowball sampling technique.The interviews were based on a script with three questions (1) the interviewees' professional trajectory until the moment of opt-out, (2) the reasons and con-ditions that led to this decision, and (3) dilemmas experienced before making such a decision. All interviews were recorded and transcribed so subsequent analysis could be performed. The interviews lasted fifty minutes, on average.

The hermeneutic approach adopted in this article sought to critically apprehend the ex-periences lived by the interviewees, narrated from their systems of perceptions and meanings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2010). The content analysis (Boeije, 2009) sought to identify and discuss the conditions under which the opt-out decision was made. The analysis adopted a broader perspective, observing not only the immediate context but also the socio-economic, cultural, and historical dimensions.

Following the content analysis technique, in the coding stage, similar words and ex-cerpts of conversations that converged on the same subject were identified. Thus, themes were identified and grouped in three categories, guiding the subsequent discussion of results. These categories portrayed the conditions behind choosing to opt-out of work, and definitions were inspired by critical readings (Gregory & Milner, 2009; Kerrane et al., 2022; Tommasi & Degen, 2024; Willians et al., 2006), which question the belief of "free choice". The conver-gence of several themes and the repetition of justifications and experiences indicated the satu-ration point with the 12th respondent (Denzin & Lincoln, 2010). Three additional interviews were conducted to confirm that the saturation point had been reached.

Table 1

Interviewees profile

Interviewee	Number of chil-dren	Age	Qualification	Post-graduation
Cleo	2	41	Administration	
Lara	1	41	Pedagogy	
Liz	1	46	Economy	
Bia	1	36	Pedagogy	Postgraduate
Isa	2	33	Law	Postgraduate
Ada	1	38	Journalism	Postgraduate
Iara	2	39	Social communications/ public relations	Master
Beth	2	37	Information systems	
Rita	2	41	System analysis	
Ana	2	40	Psychology	MBA
Luna	1	46	Architecture	MBA
Cida	1	39	Psychology	Postgraduate
Ruth	2	34	Fashion	
Mara	1	46	Dentistry	Postgraduate
Taís	2	36	Administration	

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Results and Discussion

The data analysis sought to identify, initially, the main conditions that led the interview-ees to opt-out of work. The data analysis also revealed the participants' feelings and dilemmas when making such a decision. Most of the interviewees did not return to work after having children. Among the 15 interviewees, 4 returned to work, 10 resigned, and 1 was made re-dundant after maternity leave.

All interviewees reported difficulties, fears, and other negative feelings after deciding to take a career break. Even those apparently satisfied with the current condition and declaring to be personally fulfilled with motherhood and the roles it entails, revealed some concerns. Some interviewees revealed fear of not being able to return to the job market in the future, if they wish, a fear corroborated by Elliott (2002) and Warner (2013), who argue that the longer a woman stays out of the market, the more difficult it is to return.

Another important revelation in the interviewees was the fear of their husbands leaving them, which again highlights the traditional role they assumed when taking a career break. Because they depend financially on their partners and are aware that returning to the job mar-ket can be difficult, they mention that if their husbands ask for a divorce, they will not know what to do. Feelings of worthlessness and devaluation were also mentioned by several inter-viewees,

who feel unproductive after giving up their profession, in line with the low self-esteem observed by Spector (2006). The interviewees also talked about 'feeling lost,' 'apart from society,' 'ashamed for the decision,' 'feeling empty', 'sad' and having an 'identity cri-sis,' i.e., not recognizing themselves after choosing to be full-time mothers. Faced with dis-comfort with the current situation, one interviewee stated that, even without the support of her husband in domestic activities, she intends to return to work at any cost.

The collected data showed congruence with the criticisms toward the notion of 'volun-tarism' underlying the decision to opt-out of work (Gregory & Milner, 2009; Stone, 2007; Willians et al., 2006), evidencing different conditions behind the 'choice.' These constraints are discussed in the three categories: 1) a conditioned choice; 2) a gender choice, and 3) a class choice.

A Conditioned Choice

At first, several interviewees declared to have tried balancing the demands from work and motherhood. However, the difficulties faced to execute both activities led them to opt-out of work and focus on the care of the home and children. According to the participants, some of the main difficulties are: long working hours, lack of family support, high costs to outsource childcare and housework, lower incomes than husbands, and lack of company poli-cies to facilitate work-family balance. The difficulties mentioned corroborate those observed in the literature (Guiginski & Wajnman, 2019; Machado & Pinho, 2017; Oliveira et al., 2013).

The issue of long working hours was mentioned as one of the most important in the in-terviewees' decision to stop working, corroborating the understanding that the excessive time dedicated to the career is a significant source of work-family conflicts (Beutell & O'Hare, 2018; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Lemos et al., 2020; Nielsen, 2017). This issue was also highlighted in the debate around female opt-out (Filippo & Nunes, 2021; Mainiero & Sullivan, 2006; Reis et al., 2021). Some interviewees had experienced routines of long working hours before having children and could anticipate that work demands would greatly compromise the attention dedicated to their children. Based on this anticipation, they did not even try to bal-ance these two dimensions. In their words:

"[...] I couldn't conceive that. Leaving him in a nursery all day long [...] you don't just work on your regular schedule, you have evening meetings, you have training sessions once a week." (Isa)

Other participants tried to find a balance but ended up being overcome by the excessive demands from work:
"[...] the work is very dynamic [...] I don't have a regular time to arrive [at the office]. Then taking work home, taking a laptop because I have to work, I have to do that. And then it started to consume me because I didn't have time to take care of my home." (Rita)

Another aspect that influenced the decision to stop working was the absence of close family members with whom they could share the care of their children, especially grandpar-ents (Dessen & Braz, 2000):
"[...] if my family were here, I would certainly continue [to work], because I would have someone to pick her up […]" (Mara)

Despite it being common in Brazil for families in the middle class to hire a nanny, housekeeper, or use a daycare center (Carvalho et al., 2010), the high costs of these ser-vices caused some interviewees to reject this alternative.
"[…] and adding it all up and considering how much I earned and how much I was go-ing to spend, it would be practically the same. So, it wouldn't be worth it, anyway." (Beth)
"So, I would spend a lot of my salary on one person [...] it doesn't make any sense, pay-ing, working like crazy, being away from him [...]" (Bia)

The interviewees' choice not to outsource childcare and dedicate themselves entirely to this task is reflected in the results of the IBGE (2024) survey, which reveals that, because they usually learn less than men, women decide to leave their paid jobs to dedicate themselves to their family. In other words, rejecting outsourcing does not always represent, for women in general and the interviewees in particular, a desire for full dedication to motherhood, but, of-ten, a lack of options given the costs involved:
"And then because my husband's salary was the highest salary in the house and I could stay at home, I chose to stay at home." (Isa)

The lack of company policies and practices aimed at balancing personal and professional activities also impacted the decision of some interviewees to stop working. They claim that the corporate environment is refractory to motherhood. They suggested that some companies avoid hiring women because they fear a possible pregnancy (Guiginski & Wajnman, 2019). The absence of this support, combined with the other factors already discussed, compromised the efforts of these professionals to remain in the job market:

"So, I felt it when I got pregnant, I already felt it changed. They looked at me crooked-ly." (Beth)

Faced with the lack of support from the company to accommodate the multiple de-mands, another interviewee revealed her plans to start a business:

"Maybe if I own a business, I will be able to work [...]. People sometimes do not believe you, unfortunately. Sometimes you call in sick, and they think you are not really sick [...] Sometimes they believe you and it's ok, but… your work is there and you have to do it." (Ri-ta)

The interviews indicate that in view of the many constraints to carry out a good balance of the work and personal spheres, opting out of work is the only alternative. In this sense, in line with Willians et al. (2006), it is worth questioning how free this "choice" is. The inter-viewees faced, to a greater or lesser degree, a series of barriers related to motherhood, which made it impossible for them to stay in the labor market. They ended up opting out, apparently without questioning the underlying dynamics. It is important to observe that criticisms toward the capacity of companies – and their work processes characterized by the long work hours – to address work-life imbalance are scarce. The interviewees mentioned the structural inequali-ties between men and women (Sørensen, 2017), which, as will be discussed in the next sec-tion, make this choice a gender choice (Kuperberg & Stone, 2008).

Finally, it is worth noting that none of the interviewees complained about the absence of public policies to facilitate work-family balance, such as assistance for pre-school age children. This indicates the little relevance of the Brazilian government on this matter. The absence of references to public policies is less an indication of the governmental activities on this matter and more a sign of the lack of expectations of these women about public policies. These wom-en tend to consider that the responsibility for raising children is an individual matter, to be exercised directly by them or by someone hired for this purpose.

A Gender Choice

The interviewees' decision to opt-out of work reflects, to a large extent, the fact that it is still up to women, especially in patriarchal societies such as Brazil, to resume most of the responsibilities for the care of children and the home (Melo & Thomé, 2018; Mota-Santos et al., 2019). The increasing participation of women in the labor market is still not enough to free them from being considered responsible for this care (Kuperberg & Stone, 2008; Sørensen, 2017). In this sense, there is no way to dissociate the interviewees' decision from the debate on traditional female roles (Melo & Thomé, 2018). In other words, the choice to stop working to dedicate themselves entirely to the family, is the kind of dilemma that is mostly faced by women. For most interviewees, the low participation of partners in care tasks put the responsi-bility of balancing paid and domestic work entirely on their shoulders, which affected their decision:

"I came home and had to buy the groceries, I had to this and that, there's no more of this, there's no more of that [...] I said: 'Man, I don't know,' because when you have the sup-port of your husband, I think it helps." (Ada)

"[...] but the man, he does not take the responsibilities of the household, he does not." (Rita)

The interviewees show their husbands had little participation in housework and child-care. The men prefer to "support" their partners' decisions rather than take career breaks them-selves to dedicate fully to their children, which reinforces the traditionalism in the sexual divi-sion of labor (Garcia & Viecili, 2018; Melo & Thomé, 2018; Xavier et al., 2015). The interviewees, although professionals with consolidated careers, assume the role of primary caregivers and, the men, the role of providers:

"[...] he [husband] supported me [decision to opt out] because he has a very intense job [...] he doesn't stay with me, he comes back home at 10 pm, 11 pm every day [and when] I call him, he is at the company." (Ada)

The weight of traditionalism can be observed in the interviewees' responses, who em-phasized that they stopped working because of motherhood (Kuperberg & Stone, 2008). This decision reflects, to a large extent, the notion that it is "natural," (as put by Sørensen (2017) when discussing the issue) that women are opting out of work to be full-time mothers; it is considered a "natural thing." For the author, the feeling of "doing the right thing" when prioritizing children over work reinforces the idea of stereotyped femi-ninity (Sørensen, 2017). This stereotype was present, to a greater or lesser extent, in the re-sponses of the fifteen interviewees:

"[...] for me it was obvious that the best person to take care of [daughter's name] was me [...]" (Iara)

"So, it's personal [...], this role of mother was something that is right for me, I like it." (Cida)

The decision to assume the traditional female role was reflected in the interviewees' statements who, despite the possibility of sharing tasks with their partners, underlined that certain functions should not be performed by their husbands, and the interviewees believed they should do it themselves (Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2019; Seierstad & Kirton, 2015):

"[...] there are things I wanted to do because I wanted to, it's not because it needed to be me [...] I didn't want it to be [husband's name]." (Iara)

As previously mentioned, the interviewees' testimonies reveal that the choice to stop working is, above all, a gender choice, since it is guided by feelings strongly associated with the dominant construction of the female roles (Melo & Thomé, 2018). However, it cannot be overlooked that such a "choice" is also permeated by class issues. Typically privileged women have the financial support of professionally successful partners, and can easily make a decision that implies giving up income from paid work. This particular aspect is explored in the follow-ing section.

A Class Choice

Career breaks would not have been possible for any of the interviewees if they were not married or did not have the financial support of their partners (who became the exclusive breadwinners). This point reinforces the traditional stereotype of the gender division of labor discussed above (Garcia & Marcondes, 2022; Garcia & Viecili, 2018; Xavier et al., 2015). Without this support, opting out of work to dedicate fully to motherhood would not have been a possibility. Many interviewees expressed feeling "gratitude" in their responses:

"[...] thank God my husband is able to support the household alone, with sufficient in-come, we do not have [financial] problems or anything like that. And I thank God very much for this opportunity because I know how many mothers want to be able to live how we live, right?" (Bia)

However, this feeling of "gratitude" is not shared among all the participants. Some of the interviewees reveal the pragmatic nature of such a decision. It is possible to identify that the couple had an agreement about the situation, i.e., it is not about a "generous" concession from the partner:

"[...] because I gave up work. I know the effort it takes, we sat down together, this was an agreement [...]." (Rita)
"Because it bothers me, you know? I struggled a lot for it, I studied a lot. And even so, it was a dedication [...] studying all night and exhausted, right?" (Mara)

However, all interviewees recognized that their privileged social condition was decisive for choosing to opt out of work. All women interviewed were white, heterosexual, educated, and had consolidated careers, which reinforces the understanding that this 'choice' is, to a large extent, a 'class choice' (Kuperberg & Stone, 2008; Willians et al., 2006).

Conclusions

This study addressed the issue of female career breaks, a decision of many qualified professionals in the face of the difficulties to balance work and family demands. The research indicates that such a decision, far from being the expression of free choice, is the result of a set of pressures both from the work environment (which is little receptive to personal and fam-ily demands) and from the dominant social construction of gender roles (which considers childcare a female attribution). It is also a class choice (privileged social condition was deci-sive for the opt out decision). In other words, the women interviewed in this research were able to make the decision to interrupt their careers because they belong to a class that allows «free choice». It is important to emphasize that for women from economically disadvantaged social class, this "free choice" would be a more difficult one, given their financial limitations. Thus, there are both material and cultural aspects that influence this decision.

As for the elements hindering the work-family balance in the work environment, the in-terviewees mentioned long working hours, lack of family support, high costs to outsource childcare and housework, lower incomes than their husbands, and lack of specific company policies. According to the interviewees, these obstacles ended up "pushing" them to opt-out of work and leave the labor market, despite their previous professional achievements (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2006; Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2019; Stone & Lovejoy, 2004; Valadares et al., 2024). However, despite reporting strong pressures and lack of support from their work, most interviewees seemed resigned to this situation, understanding that balancing the demands of work and motherhood is an individual rather than a structural issue, and con-sider opting out of work a 'personal choice.' Women do not realize how patriarchy is rooted in their choices and attitudes. This is a contribution of the article, by alerting how the system of domination-exploitation of women by men is still seen as natural and invisible.

With regard to cultural aspects, the naturalization of the caregiver role as female, seems to have contributed to the interviewees' compliance with the decision to opt-out of work. However, three interviewees stated they tried to find balance, emphasizing their dissatisfac-tion with being dedicated to their children and home full time – which was

not their original life project. These professionals, even though feeling fulfilled with motherhood, yearn for a job that allows them to find work-life balance.

The anxieties and fears shared by the interviewees – added to the obstacles faced at work after becoming a mother – contribute to reinforce the arguments raised by those who question the idea of a 'free choice' in the process of women opting out of work. Such con-straints bring into question idealized readings of the opt-out, which portray women's exit from the labor market as an expression of authenticity and freedom.

Resuming the question underlying this research that examines the nature of the women's decision to opt-out of work: is it possible to talk about 'free choice,' when it is evident the influence of so many social and material constraints? What margin of choice did the female professionals actually have, given that the work environment was not receptive to family and personal demands, and the dominant cultural context still reinforces the notion that childcare is an eminently female role? Also, the privileged economic condition of the interviewees was a central element in this decision-making, reinforcing the conditioned character of this 'choice.'

The main theoretical contribution of the study is the reinforcement of the criticism of the opt-out phenomenon as an autonomous decision, emphasizing the material and cultural aspects that condition this decision. The findings reinforced the considerations of Gregory and Milner (2009), Stone (2007), Tommasi & Degen (2024), and Willians et al. (2006) that this decision was strongly conditioned by economic, social and labor factors. Such findings support the understanding that the decision is, above all, is a female choice, as Brazilian women are sub-mitted to patriarchal traditions dictating their ultimate responsibility for the care of their chil-dren and the home. The interviewees did not consider the possibility that the husband/partner would stop working to take care of the children. On the contrary, their testimonies naturalize the idea that, given the demands of such care, stopping work was an "inevitable" option. An-other element highlighted in the study was the social condition of the interviewees. For them, leaving paid careers was only possible because their husbands had well-paid jobs. Therefore, opting-out is also, to a large extent, a class choice.

The study highlights an aspect little explored in critical studies on the opt-out phenome-non: that, despite the constraints and frustrations resulting from the effects of the decision taken, most interviewees endorse the "choice" character of this decision. The difficulty for these women to see the structural constraints that condition such a decision makes them feel fully responsible for the consequences, corroborating this understanding.

The practical contribution of the study is to highlight the fact that organizational prac-tices and governmental policies have yet to be outlined to enable the reconciliation of domes-tic and labor spheres. The difficulties and barriers encountered after motherhood were often silenced by these women who, for fear of losing their jobs and professional opportunities, did not express their feelings and difficulties in reconciling professional and personal demands. Thus, they opt out of their jobs, consequently strengthening patriarchy and weakening femi-nist movements that fight for gender equality. Not reconciling professional and personal life is a problem that must be solved with the support of companies through initiatives that seek gender equality. Men also need to be aware of such obstacles to women's work-life balance. When women leave their jobs and do not expose their difficulties, they are helping to maintain the status quo for both men and companies. Once again, patriarchy is implicitly present. The patriarchal system is present in women, men and companies and thus, its business policies and practices reinforce male domination because they were designed for a man to exercise such norms.

Although the objective was not to explore the question of intersectionality,, which is in-creasingly present in gender studies, the research findings reinforce the relevance of future studies using markers of class and race, especially in unequal societies with a history of slav-ery, such as Brazil . When seeking, through the "snowball" technique, professionals with high-er education who took career breaks, we were introduced to white women from the middle class, which illustrates the small representation of black women with this profile, despite the percentage of black people in Brazil being 56% (Ministério da Igualdade Racial [MIR], 2023). This results endorses the social class bias present in the decision to opt-out of work.

Reinforcing the criticism toward the romanticized views of the decision to opt-out of work, the interviewees' reality is permeated by anxieties such as the fear of financially de-pending on their husbands and the fear of not being able to return to work if they wish. They feel professionally outdated and undervalued due to their choice. Full-time motherhood and the abandonment of a well-built career does not remove the desire to feel productive.

Future research could employ a longitudinal approach to explore opt-out women's trajec-tories with a view to discovering whether or not they have returned to the job market and, if so, to understand what type of work they are dedicating themselves to. Furthermore, as a sug-gestion for expanding or continuing the study, it may be interesting to understand the same research explored in this article with an audience of women who are not married and also with women from economically disadvantaged social class, in an attempt to better understand the reality of Brazilian women.

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