

## DESIREE COOPER

# Workplaces lose when moms leave



In the late 1980s, I was an idealistic, young lawyer who thought I could handle a family without making sacri-

fices in my career.

Reality struck when I went to a senior partner's office to talk about a case. He decided to chat about the firm's new maternity leave policy before we got down to business.

"If a woman lawyer wants to have children, then by all means she should," he said as he leaned deeply into his leather chair. "But I think she should take off about 13 years to raise her family before she thinks about coming back to practice law."

It was as if I'd been slapped by a fish. Thirteen years? If that's the attitude of many professions toward working mothers, I thought, no wonder women leave high positions when they start families — or opt never to have children at all.

## Costly detours for moms

For most women today, staying at home 13 years to raise a family is not an option. Many women are raising families on their own and others can't provide the life they envision for their children on one income.

Yet, a study in this month's Harvard Business Review has revealed that even society's most powerful women continue to suffer enormous setbacks in their professional advancement by virtue of having children.

Researchers questioned 2,400 women who had graduate, professional and/or undergraduate degrees with high honors about their experiences leaving and re-entering the workforce.

The study, "Off-Ramps and On-Ramps: Keeping Talented Women on the Road to Suc-

cess," was conducted by Sylvia Ann Hewlett, founder of New York's Center for Work-Life Policy and Carolyn Buck Luce, an executive at Ernst & Young.

The study found that family obligations are still the biggest single reason why women temporarily leave the workforce. Forty-four percent of women take an off-ramp to tend to children and other relatives, as compared to 12 percent of men. When men leave the workforce, it's more likely to change careers or earn a degree — strategies to continue their upward mobility.

"Women don't lack ambition," said Luce, mother of four. "These women told us they loved their work, but a full 60 percent had taken time out or bypassed promotions or chosen a job with less responsibility in order to manage everything on their plate."

Nearly all of the women who stepped off the career track planned to go back to work (93 percent). But the study documented the heavy price they pay for their detour on the road to success. Even though the women surveyed were sidelined an average of only 2.2 years — those in corporate jobs left an average of 1.2 years — they were socked with an average 18-percent salary decline. Those who took off three years or more (as might a mother of preschool age children) faced a whopping 37-percent drop in earnings.

## Ramping up the workplace

The brain drain is not only devastating individually, but collectively as we struggle to maintain a globally competitive workforce. Luce urges companies to stem the off-ramping of women by creating reduced-hour or flex-time jobs, and removing the stigma of options like telecommuting in order to retain women as long-time employees.

"Companies re-engineer their business model all the time," said Luce, who believes that these changes would benefit all workers. "Why not think imaginatively and re-structure work to retain talent? Not only would employees be more productive, companies would create a better environment to be a human being."