Clueless in Manhattan

The New York Times magazine finds a few rich white women to "prove" that working moms are starting their own "Opt-Out Revolution." Oy, not again.

By Joan Walsh

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Privileged white people of a certain age -- roughly my age, give or take a few years -- have a really bad habit. Thanks to the civil rights movement, we know, we really know, that our life experiences can't represent all Americans - that we're way too affluent and educated, too much the product of a singular moment in time, to be Everyman and Everywoman. But somehow we find a reason to insist we are anyway.

Lisa Belkin, a wonderful New York Times magazine writer, did it again. Her Sunday magazine cover story, with its gimmicky headline, "Q: Why Don't More Women Get to the Top? A: They Choose Not To," argues that "the women who were supposed to be the professional equals of men right now" aren't, but it's not because of discrimination or anything icky like that, it's because, well, they don't want to be. Belkin has identified a cohort of formerly ambitious 30- and 40-something women she calls "the Opt-Out Revolution" -- and she includes herself in it -- who change their priorities once they become mothers, and voluntarily abandon the pursuit of the top jobs they wanted when they were in college so they can be home at least part-time with their kids.

Belkin is smart and honest enough to layer in her disclaimers, which read like those annoying all-caps pop-up windows you see when you're downloading software: "I say this with the full understanding that there are ambitious women out there who are the emotional and professional equals of any man, and that there are women who stayed the course ..." yada yada yada, yawn. Also this: "I am very aware that, for the moment, this is true mostly of elite successful women who can afford real choice," more yada yada, don't read me, because my point is really elsewhere but my editor made me put this stuff here so I wouldn't look like a smug white Ivy League elitist. Because, honestly, if you take those disclaimers seriously, you'll think -- correctly -- that Belkin's piece is a real-time snapshot of a small cohort of privileged 30-something white women who are likely to think something entirely different in 10 years. Next story.

Actually, here's my disclaimer: I'm both a writer and an editor, and I kept wondering which half of that hallowed relationship is responsible for a piece that turned out this muddled. The last quarter takes off in an odd direction, arguing that women's dissatisfaction with their work/family tradeoffs -- Belkin is the Times' work-family columnist -- could ultimately change the workplace, and the world. But her subjects haven't changed the world yet, and most of the anecdote-heavy piece (not to mention the headlines) reads like Belkin believes they never will -- and never should, because they just don't want to, and neither does she, even though maybe she could. Somebody's really confused here, and it's not just me. The money graphs are these, before the first page break:

"Why don't women run the world?"

"Maybe it's because they don't want to."
This is a piece that's got the feel of a generation-defining talker -- and it's meant to be one. That's why its blind spots are so appalling. It cries out to be debunked. Its writer and editors know better. I say that as someone who accepts some of Belkin's premises: I'm 45, and I left the fast track for a few years -- if I ever was on it -- when my daughter was born, almost 14 years ago. But my experience also tells me that Belkin's anecdotal romp through upper-class neighborhoods in Atlanta, New York and San Francisco doesn't prove that women aren't changing the world -- or that if they aren't, it's because they don't want to.

One final disclaimer of my own: Let me say what I think Belkin got right. I've come to think most women (I'm allowing for many exceptions) want a little more from life than most men do: Specifically, more fulfilling engagement in the day-to-day work of family life as well as career satisfaction, two things that don't go well together for certain stretches of parenthood. Maybe it's because of the unique physical and psychological reality of motherhood -- as well as the class advantage of maternity leave, if we're wealthy or have high-earning husbands -- that lets us stand back and wonder about our priorities once or twice or three times in the prime of our lives, to ask "Is that all there is?" especially when the choice is "My 2-year-old" or "My crazy, demanding boss, who acts like a 2-year-old." It's a no-brainer.

And if we're honest and we can afford it, and we didn't buy silly "have it all" '70s feminism, many of us mute our ambition for a while and focus on our kids. I did it; no apologies, and no recriminations to women who didn't or couldn't. I also believe that modern feminism, disproportionately represented in the '70s by childless women, didn't tell the truth about what motherhood would feel like, which is part of why Belkin and her subjects are so confused, and feel like they're telling some new forbidden truth. It's a truth all right, but it's not forbidden; it's just partial and incomplete.

Belkin chooses to anchor the piece in her own experience and that of her generational cohort, which is her right but which also leaves her open to semipersonal criticism. I'll depersonalize it and speak to all women in their 30s and early 40s, especially those with young children. Free advice: What you're feeling feels like wisdom, but it may not be, not quite yet. God, I loved my 30s. That heady feeling of getting through the illusions of your teens and 20s, of being old enough to know better but still young enough to change your life completely. There's nothing better, really. But there's a lot of wisdom left to come.

I was stupefied by the limited sample in Belkin's story, whose headlines trade in absolutes. I was put off by the porcelain skin and blue eyes and overstuffed sofas in the photographs, by the book groups and the Ivy League educations and the six-figure salaries larded throughout. Lord, the class blinders. These are the women who were "supposed to" change the world? According to whom? Mostly women change the world because they have to, not because they were raised in a hothouse to do so.

I hate to smack someone on racial and class grounds, because it's seems so p.c. and I'm not, but Belkin begs for it, even after her disclaimer. She quotes an anthropologist who's "conflicted" about Belkin's theories that women are "hard-wired" to care more about children than their careers, and who notes that even female primates are "competitive" for social status. (When a magazine story about sex roles starts talking about primates, be very afraid.) But then the anthropologist admits that such competition is only evident in situations when it improves "the survival chances of their offspring," which Belkin takes as meaning women only compete when it helps their kids. But that should have -- and didn't -- show Belkin the class bias of her piece: Of course the notion that working -- and thriving at it -- won't improve your offspring's chances of survival is only true for wealthy families in which a mother can stay home while a father "competes." And the fact Belkin admits that the disparities she writes about between highly educated men and women don't apply to educated black women -- whose employment rates look like those of educated white men -- should have blunted her generalizing, but didn't.

Maybe that's because she was generalizing from experience, which is seductive, but dangerous. Like one of her subjects, she admits, she went to Princeton in the 1980s and "set my sights on the highest goal I could think of -- becoming editor of this newspaper [the Times] or at least editor of this magazine." But once she had children, she found her ambition blunted. "I was no longer willing to work as hard ... for a prize I no longer wanted," she writes. "I will never run this paper. But I will write for it, into old age, I hope, and that piece of the work is enough for me."

You know, I will probably never run the Times, either. But word to the world: I want to, even though I'm a mom, and I know other mothers who are journalists who do too. (Arthur Sulzberger, you know where to find me.) I want to run something, besides my daughter's basketball schedule (which I also run), and you know what? I think I will, or I'll go down trying to.

There's a smug assurance in Belkin's piece that the women who've "opted out" figured out some secret about the world. But the secret is, motherhood is consuming and tiring. It's also temporary, or at least the consuming, tiring part is. And then you're back in the world. What are you going to do there?

For most women, being the mother of young children lasts a finite amount of time, and there's time in there to do great things.
-- and more time later to do even greater things. Belkin and her subjects are a dangerous combination of smug and tired -- a combination I recognize from experience, but it passes. They need to take time off, since they can afford it, and stop rationalizing it. They also need to look for workplaces that will make it possible to combine work and family. I'm lucky enough to work in one, where the chief financial officer and the head of advertising sales are mothers; where dads, too, bring their kids to work when they're sick, and no, it's not the New York Times, but it's a great job.

There's an arrogant assumption in Belkin's piece that she's doing something better than running the Times: raising her kids. It's her life, it's her choice, if that's her path I'm glad she's happy with it. But the notion that she and her venerated "Opt-Out Revolution" subjects are making the right choice for all mothers, let alone all women, is really pernicious. I think it's great that she and these groovy book-group moms are putting their kids first. I put my daughter first, too. But don't speak for me. Don't say this is the way we all added it up and decided it was going to be. Most of us are actually trying to do both, raise our kids and do the best job we can, whether or not it leads us to the top of the New York Times. And many of us are going to get to the top, in our own time and according to our definition of the top, whether the Times magazine notices or not.

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