

ECONOMY

Why Women Quit Working: It's Not for the Reasons Men Do

By PATRICIA COHEN JAN. 24, 2017

The go-to explanations for why so many men — even in their prime working years — have dropped out of the labor force do not apply to Krystin Stevenson.

At 31 with two children, she doesn't turn her nose up at jobs that are considered women's work. She hasn't been swallowed by the wildfire of opioid addiction, dogged by a brush with the law or sidelined with a disability after years of heaving loads in manufacturing or construction.

Rather, she gave up her \$40,000-a-year job as a customer service representative at a real estate firm in the summer of 2015 when her fragile support network collapsed. Her mother, a part-time home health care aide, took care of the children, picking up the older one from elementary school in the afternoon. But after she had a stroke, she was the one who needed to be taken care of, and Ms. Stevenson stepped in to manage her aging mother as well as her young children.

"I ended up just quitting my job," said Ms. Stevenson, who lives outside Denver. "I was trying to work and help her, but the job wasn't flexible."

Ms. Stevenson is part of the growing percentage of Americans who are neither in a job nor hunting for one — a stubborn trend at the center of the deep dissatisfaction

and anxiety about the economy's future that helped catapult Donald J. Trump to the White House.

Unemployment rates are at postrecession lows — 4.7 percent in December — but that overall rebound masks what is happening in rural towns, seen-better-days Rust Belt centers and even otherwise thriving urban centers where people not in school or retired have nonetheless fallen off the employment map.

Men have been the focus of much of the concern about those disappearing from the work force. But in the United States, unlike other industrialized countries, women are also part of the trend. And their stories are entangled with what is happening to their husbands, fathers, sons and brothers.

“I think the only reason anyone is talking about missing male workers is because there's so many missing female workers,” said Betsey Stevenson, an economist at the University of Michigan (and no relation to Krystin). “Male participation was declining for a very long time, and no one seemed to care about it because household incomes were rising because women's participation and hourly earnings were increasing.”

The share of prime-age women bringing home a paycheck rose at the end of World War II and streaked upward during the 1970s and 1980s before peaking in 1999 at 77 percent. Counter to expectations, it began to inch down in the early 2000s, then took a sharp plunge during the recession.

More than seven years into the recovery, it has failed to bounce back. Only 73.7 percent of prime-age women — those roughly 25 to 54 — were in the work force in 2015.

The slide among men started earlier, in the 1960s, and accelerated during the Great Recession, as traditionally well-paying manufacturing, mining and construction jobs vanished. About one in 10 prime-age men are not in the labor force.

Certainly women who have dropped out are not typically encumbered in the same ways as many men. They are much less likely to have a criminal record or a

disability. They are getting college degrees in greater numbers, and many of the sectors that they have traditionally dominated — lower-paid service jobs — are growing compared with middle-class occupations where men have ruled. Nor are they whiling away their jobless hours playing video games, which some economists suspect is helping to lure men away from the time clock.

But women are still the primary caregivers — for children, aging parents and ailing relatives.

“Child care, that’s my main thing,” Krystin Stevenson said, explaining why she had not yet returned to the work force.

Hardly any men who have dropped out say it is because they are helping with children or other family members, said Nicholas Eberstadt, an economist at the conservative American Enterprise Institute.

What Mr. Eberstadt calls the “care chasm” would seem to explain the stark contrast between working women in the United States and in other advanced industrialized countries with comprehensive family support policies. In most European nations, for example, women’s labor force participation has increased significantly since 2000 instead of faltering.

“I’ve always thought that women were reacting to the lack of paid family leave and child care,” said Heidi Hartmann, president of the Institute for Women’s Policy Research. They found it too much trouble to work, she said, “so they were dropping out.”

Even though men dominate the disability rolls, their health problems have a ripple effect on the women in their lives. Women tend to be the ones managing their husbands’ care, driving or accompanying them to doctor appointments and therapies that eat into a day.

Women’s lower wages and family responsibilities have always batted them in and out of jobs — and in and out of the labor force — with much more frequency than men. A sick child or a family emergency can quickly push someone out of a job.

And as wages, particularly at the lower end of the scale, have stagnated, the payoff from working decreases, as does the level of attachment. Women who ended their education at high school graduation, or earlier, dropped out of the labor force at even greater rates than their male counterparts between 2000 and 2015, according to a report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

But what has noticeably changed is the degree to which men's work patterns are increasingly matching women's in that they are regularly cycling in and out of the work force every few months. Stability and security are ever more elusive.

Although the share of prime-age women who are in the work force some but not all of the time has remained remarkably steady over the years (at 18 percent), for men, it has roughly doubled in the last four decades to 11.8 percent, according to new research by John Coglianese, a doctoral candidate at Harvard.

To some analysts, the single-minded focus on sidelined men without a closer look at women has placed too much attention on the failings of potential workers instead of the quality of the jobs.

They argue that the combination of missing women and relatively limp wage growth point to a weak economy as the primary culprit, and not, say, the heavy consumption of painkillers or video games.

"I'm sure the quality of jobs is part of the story," said David Madland, a senior adviser on the American Worker Project at the liberal Center for American Progress. "It's got to be worth your while."

Both women and men complain they are unable to find full-time, secure jobs that pay a middle-class wage. Krystin Stevenson, for example, needs to solve her child care problem, but echoing the comments of many men, she also does not want to settle for just any job.

"I have two degrees" — a bachelor's in public relations and an associate degree in human services — "so I don't want to work at McDonald's or Jiffy Lube," she said.

In the meantime, she has been paying the bills with a combination of family help, savings, child support from a former partner, temporary unemployment

insurance and food stamps.

For others, whether men or women, who may be getting by on a disability check with health insurance from the government, a minimum-wage job without benefits isn't all that appealing when it fails to add up to much more.

Before the recession, for example, Tonya Pinkston, 43, had a full-time job at a warehouse logistics company and a part-time position at night at a post office near her home in Lawrenceville, outside Atlanta. After a diagnosis of lupus, and with a kidney condition that requires dialysis treatments three times a week, she is now on disability.

“If I could find something flexible, I could work part time,” she said.

Her health has stabilized, but she is cautious. A friend with lupus who went back to work as a custodian when she felt better ended up losing much of her government assistance, including a housing subsidy and Medicare. Now she is starting to get sick again, missing work and at risk of being fired.

“I was like, ‘Oh, no, I just don't want that to happen to me,’” Ms. Pinkston said. “She didn't think about the long haul.”

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