

Singapore Management University

Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University

Research Collection School of Social Sciences

School of Social Sciences

1-2019

Book review: Mothers at work: Who opts out?

Aliya Hamid RAO

Singapore Management University, aliyarao@smu.edu.sg

Follow this and additional works at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soss_research



Part of the [Family, Life Course, and Society Commons](#), and the [Gender and Sexuality Commons](#)

Citation

RAO, Aliya Hamid.(2019). Book review: Mothers at work: Who opts out?. *American Journal of Sociology*, 124(3), 936-937.

Available at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soss_research/2831

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Social Sciences at Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Research Collection School of Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. For more information, please email cherylids@smu.edu.sg.

Book Review

Mothers at Work: Who Opts Out? By Liana Christin Landivar. Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2017. Pp. xii+237. \$72.50.

Aliya Hamid Rao

Stanford University

Published in *American Journal of Sociology*, 2019, 124 (3), 936-937.

<https://doi.org/10.1086/699789>

Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License.

Why do mothers in elite professions opt out? This question has been important both sociologically as well as in the mainstream media. In *Mothers at Work: Who Opts Out?* Liana Christin Landivar turns the question on its head to instead ask *do* mothers in elite professions opt out? Landivar centers on *occupational* statistical analysis in her consideration of this question of which mothers, across the occupational spectrum, opt out. She meticulously considers what factors, such as mothers' age, their children's age, and the organization of their paid work, are important in shaping mothers' work experiences, including, perhaps, inflection points that lead to opting out. The book itself is comprised of eight chapters starting with an introduction, a background chapter on employment and cultural attitudes. This is followed by the main empirical analysis in chapters 3–7, which address several questions that Landivar raises: Which occupational groups are mothers most likely to opt out of? How do the characteristics of their workplaces, for example in terms of schedule flexibility, shape their pathways to opting out? How does age—both of the mothers and of their children—matter in these decisions? What are the implications for mothers' earnings?

Perhaps the largest contribution of this book is its analysis of mothers' labor force participation by centering on mothers' occupations. Landivar constructs a group of five major occupational groups: managerial and professional; service; sales and office; construction and natural resources; and production, transportation, and material moving. Fifty-five detailed occupational groups are further categorized under these five broad groups. Centering on occupations allows Landivar to take into account earnings, benefits, flexibility, and such factors that are germane in terms of mothers' abilities to continue their participation in the labor force. By focusing on occupations, Landivar is able to provide her reader with a more precise analysis of how the organization of mothers' work pushes some mothers out but enables others to remain in the labor force. Although the focus of Landivar's analysis is mothers, she also helpfully provides comparison with nonmothers at appropriate points to clearly illuminate how the motherhood role is important in sometimes shaping exits from the labor market.

A key finding of this book, related to Landivar's central question of whether mothers opt out and if so which ones, is that mothers from managerial and professional occupational groups are actually the *least* likely to opt out of paid work, despite popular narratives to the contrary. These are the mothers who are most likely to have access to parental leave policies. Additionally, these mothers tend to be in occupations that allow them to *scale back*. Pointing to the case of physicians in particular, Landivar explains that although this occupation is one with very long work hours, mothers who are physicians were also some of the least likely to opt out. Landivar explains that their occupation gives physician mothers the discretion to cut back on hours worked per week. This consequently allows them to manage work-life conflict without resorting to leaving the labor force. Mothers in less elite occupations, though, typically lack workplace benefits such as parental leave as well as a high enough level of income to enable them to afford paid childcare. Mothers on the lower end of the occupation spectrum thus end up being the ones more likely to leave the labor force periodically.

Another important aspect of the book is Landivar's attention to the age of mothers as well as the age of their children. Landivar finds evidence for several trends. Some of the findings that have been discussed previously in the literature but nonetheless benefit from an occupation-centered analysis are the following: although older mothers work more, employed mothers of school-age children tend to scale back more. Younger mothers of younger children are more likely to leave the labor force. Marriage also plays a part, such that it is associated with reduced labor force participation among younger women but greater participation among older women.

Landivar presents a compelling, and detailed, view of how mothers' occupations shape their labor force participation. Yet, at times, her findings warrant more analysis, perhaps pointing to fruitful directions for future research. Landivar describes, for example, that mothers who work full time earn *more* than nonmothers, even when controlling for demographic and employment characteristics. This fact deserves greater analysis than the book provides. Landivar also finds interesting racial differences in earnings, specifically that younger Asian, black, and Hispanic women earn more than white women of the same age, controlling for demographic and occupational characteristics. For Hispanic women, this gain reverses in the 40–50 age range when they earn about 5% less than white women. This too merits greater discussion than it receives in the book. These kinds of detailed, counterintuitive findings, if discussed more, could provide even better insight into how race intersects with motherhood to shape trends in women's labor force participation over the life course.

Mothers at Work: Who Opts Out is a useful book on how motherhood and occupational characteristics combine to shape a mother's labor force participation. The meticulous analysis and details it provides will be especially valuable to scholars of gender, work, and family. This book could be taught in a graduate-level course on these issues. Selections from it may also be appropriate for undergraduate courses in sociology of the family. By centering on occupations analytically, this book extends sociological knowledge on mothers' labor force participation.