

Don't blame baby: Survey finds most women quit big firms over culture, not family

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In explaining the relative scarcity of women equity partners at major law firms, there's a pat answer: Women drop out to start a family or raise children. But a new survey by Leopard Solutions of 200 women lawyers who quit their jobs in the last two years belies this assumption, at least in part. While three-quarters of survey respondents said they are mothers, nearly 70% also reported that staying home with their children had little or nothing to do with their decision to leave their legal jobs. Nor is the pandemic to blame. Only 20% of survey respondents flagged it as a key factor in deciding to resign.

Three-quarters of the "Women Leaving Law" survey respondents quit jobs at Am Law 200 firms*. The majority were in the middle of their careers, with about 60% between the ages of 35 and 55. As the survey notes, those years are "the prime time to advance to partnership and law firm leadership." *The Am Law 200 ranks U.S. law firms by gross revenue.

Those years are also the prime time to raise children. The survey responses suggest that women who quit don't do so in order to be stay-at-home moms, but fault their Big Law firms for making a work/life balance infeasible. As one anonymous respondent put it: "Having two young children makes it extremely difficult to put in the hours the firm requires." Indeed, the vast majority of women surveyed - 90% - cited their workplace culture as the main reason for quitting, with 82% blaming lack of flexibility and work/life balance and 74% pointing to lack of career trajectory.

These findings cast a poor light on Big Law. "Women do not feel supported at their law firms in the way that men feel supported," Leopard Solutions founder and CEO Laura Leopard told me, calling the results "incredibly depressing." "I really thought things had changed more," she said.

While women have been attending law school in roughly equal or greater numbers than men for more than 30 years, they remain stubbornly underrepresented in the top ranks of Big Law. According to the latest statistics from the National Association for Law Placement, only 22% of equity partners are women.

In part, it's a pipeline problem. Many women aren't sticking around long enough to make it to the highest rung.

Leopard Solutions, a legal data intelligence provider has been digging into why women lawyers leave and where they go. According to the company's industry-wide data, women between the ages of 25 and 30 have been exiting top 200 law firms at a "very high rate." But like their male counterparts, these young women associates mainly "traded one top law firm for another." Women lawyers in their 30s and older, however, were far more likely to leave Big Law altogether. A whopping 61% of survey respondents moved to smaller firms, opting for employers outside the Am Law 200. About 20% of the respondents took non-lawyer jobs or were not working at all. The rest moved to academia, the government, in-house or (least popular of all) became solo practitioners.

As one anonymous survey respondent put it: "I was tired of having to fight with others (primarily men) for billing credit, for prime assignments, for marketing opportunities, and all things legal. I did it for over 30 years, and I was successful, but, wow, it was exhausting."

While only 24% said "needing to stay home with children" was a somewhat important or very important reason to quit, 85% cited work/life balance. Attaining such balance is more difficult for female attorneys "because they often have more obligations both inside and outside of work without the same amount of support," one respondent noted.

Leopard Solutions suggests 11 steps firms can take to help retain and elevate women, including adopting a zero-tolerance policy for sexism, uncovering unconscious bias and offering flextime schedules and remote work. The company also suggested stepping up hiring of women partners, noting that only 28.6% of partners hired at U.S. law firms last year were women. Among associate hires, however, the numbers were roughly equal.

The survey also asked respondents what they missed most about Big Law. In the single least-surprising result of the poll, salaries topped the list.[...]