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## Career with Kids: An Illusion?<sup>2</sup>

### Research results of Career Perspectives of Working Mothers in Germany Frankfurt Career Study 2010

The Frankfurt Career Study' by Prof. Dr. Regine Graml and Prof. Dr. Yvonne Ziegler explores the career perspectives of working mothers in Germany. 1.801 female professionals and managers participated in summer 2010 in the online survey and gave a very detailed insight into the world of working mothers in Germany. The results are disillusioning. Although companies match many requirements of working mothers e.g. offering flexible working hours, it is still difficult for women to have children and a career. For 58 percent of the working mothers, one of the biggest career barriers experienced is the difficult reconciliation of work and family life. In many cases the return to the company after maternity leave is not smooth. Proposals by the mothers to improve their situation include more qualified part-time work (82 percent) and a change in people's awareness that women can be at the same time capable managers and responsible mothers (79 percent). There is still a high need for change of structures and culture to improve the situation of working mothers sustainably.



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Women in Germany are still underrepresented in management positions - as in many other European Union Member States. Only 27 percent of management positions in Germany are held by women. The underrepresentation of working mothers is even more drastic. Of the 27 percent of women in leadership positions, 77 percent live in a household without children (Holst & Busch, Führungskräfte-Monitor 2010).

At the same time, companies in Germany as well as in Europe are facing unprecedented demographic changes leading to a shortage of skilled workers and managers and consequently intensifying the war for talents. Within this context, sustainable economic development and business success requires to make full use of the potential of qualified women and especially mothers.

Women still underrepresented in management positions in European States

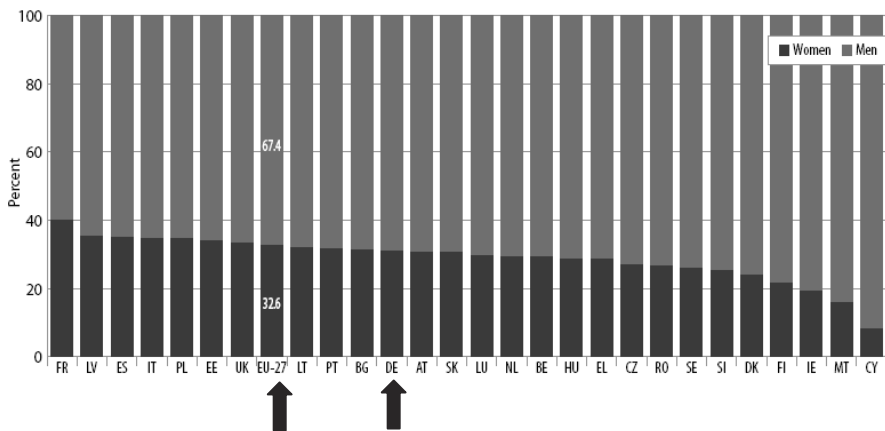


Figure 1: Gender distribution of leaders of businesses in 2009 - European comparison (European Commission 2011: Report on Progress and Equality between Women and Men in 2010)

In comparison to other European Member States, Germany is not among the leading countries with regard to women in management positions.

In addition, the discussion about working mothers in Germany is very emotional and biased. The German term 'Rabenmutter', which means 'bad mother' who is neglecting her kids, makes the controversy quite obvious. The working mother in Germany is seen either as 'Rabenmutter', or often played down as 'mummy' who is denied outstanding management competencies and authority at her workplace.

'The Frankfurt Career Study' explores the career conditions and behaviours of working mothers in Germany. It points out the current situation of working mothers in Germany and gives recommendations for sustainable improvements. The study by Prof. Dr. Yvonne Ziegler and Prof. Dr. Regine Graml, University of Applied Sciences Frankfurt, was conducted in summer 2010 as an online questionnaire. 1801 female professionals and managers participated in the study. Due to the high number of

participants, the study provides a very detailed insight into the world of working mothers in Germany.

Participants of the study have on average 1.7 children, the vast majority with one or two children (89 percent). The education level of the participants is high. 70 percent of the women surveyed have a university-entrance diploma, nearly two thirds (65 percent) of the women have a university degree. 27 percent of the women hold a position with leadership responsibility. The participants are predominantly from the West of Germany (88 percent). "Career with Kids" obviously is for women in western Germany a much more explosive issue which is far from being a matter of course.

### **Reconciliation of work and family life – at the cost of the career**

The majority of respondents (83 percent) answered the question "Can you reconcile career and family satisfactorily in your current position?" with "Yes". Only 17 percent of mothers stated that that they can not satisfactorily reconcile both in their current position.

When asked about major barriers to their career, the majority of participants (58 percent) stated that one of their **biggest career barrier experienced** is the **difficult reconciliation of work and family life**. These results indicate that many women reconcile work and family – but at the cost of their career. Sometimes even at the cost of their health. In addition, the compatibility of work and family life has been established as a social norm. Female professionals are expected to be able to balance job and family. Otherwise, they will be blamed of not 'having control of their life'. The problem of reconciliation shows, that there is still a high need for a change of the structures in society and within companies. Right now, it is possible as a woman in Germany to have a career and kids at the same time, but the price the women pay to have both, is very high.

### **Job – no minor matter for mothers**

When a woman becomes a mother, the job is not automatically being pushed into the background. After all, 42 percent of respondents state that job and family are equally important to them. Two percent describe the job to be a little more important than family. For the majority of women (56 percent), the family is more important than the job. Nevertheless, many women are interested in more than job or kids, they want the combination of both.

### **Length of timeout influenced by fear of discrimination**

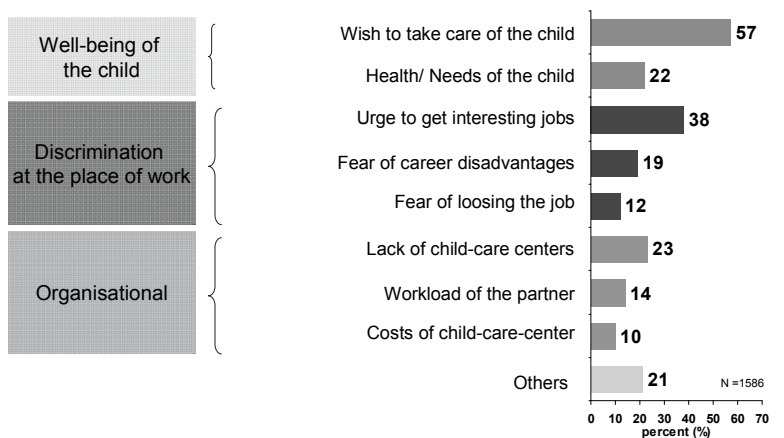
In the study, both the duration of the break per child was surveyed as well as the influencing factors on the length of the break. 19 percent of the mothers have not taken any time off or just paused up to 3 months. One third of all respondents (32 percent) have paused on average up to 6 months per child. Half of the women surveyed (51 percent) has paused 7-24 months. Another 17 percent have had a break of 25 months or more. The opportunities for mothers in Germany, to pause up to 3 years within the framework of national statutory parental leave provisions, were seldom used.

Women in positions with leadership responsibilities tend to have a shorter break than women without leadership responsibility. For instance, for women with managerial responsibilities, the proportion of women without break or only a break up to 3 months is 33 percent. Half of the mothers with managerial responsibility have paused up to 6 months.

To investigate the **factors influencing the duration of the timeout**, the participants were asked, how the length of the timeout was agreed upon and especially what kind of role the supervisor played at this. The vast majority of the participants (87 percent) stated that the length of the timeout was mainly based on their own decision. 10 percent of mothers indicate that they decided jointly with their supervisor on the break and only 3 percent received precise instructions from their superior.

The factors influencing the duration of the break are very diverse. Three clusters can be distinguished here: the well-being of the child, discrimination at the workplace and organizational factors. 57 percent of the participants state, that their desire to take care of the child by themselves influenced the length of the timeout taken. The frequent entries in the cluster "discrimination at the workplace" indicate, that the fear of negative consequences in the company is influencing the length of the timeout in many cases. The women said that their urge to get interesting assignments (38 percent), the fear of career disadvantages (19 percent) and fear of job loss (12 percent) have influenced the length of their timeout taken. Lack of child-care-centers as an organizational factor is of importance to 23 percent of all respondents.

Length of timeout influenced by fear of discrimination



Question: What factors influenced the duration of your timeout? (multiple answers possible)

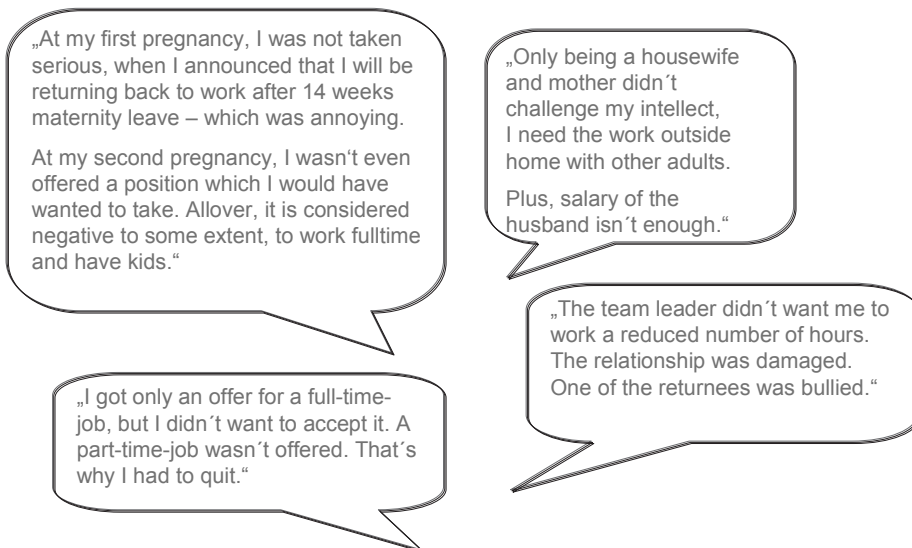
Figure 2: Factors influencing the duration of the timeout

By comparison, for **women with leadership responsibilities**, the desire to continue to receive interesting assignments (48 percent) and the fear of career disadvantages (25 percent) are mentioned more often as an influencing factor. Without the fear of discrimination at work, mothers would decide to take a longer break.

The results show, that while the decision on the duration of time off is taken mostly by the women themselves, this decision is heavily influenced by social and work-related conditions.

It can be stated that firstly, a large proportion of mothers fear that a longer break will cause disadvantages in their job. Second, the women react to this situation, by arranging the length accordingly – which means the break taken will be shorter than originally intended. The fear of possible discrimination at the workplace but also financial reasons have a shortening effect on the time off. In contrast, the lack of child-care-centers for example has a prolonging effect on the break - when mothers are faced with waiting times for child care. The need to improve the situation for working mothers becomes obvious, when we look at the time off and the consequences. By improving the general conditions such as equal treatment the workplace, working mothers would have more choices regarding the design of their time off period.

### Comments of Participants



*Figure 3: Selected comments of participating mothers*

Asked about the **interest and efforts of the company** regarding their return to work after parental leave, 64 percent of the mothers stated that their employers showed interest. This interest was expressed in different forms. For example, by finding a replacement person to cover the absence, invitations to company events, involvement in the corporate communication and training activities during the break.

### **Return – a setback**

The return to the company was not always smooth for the mothers. 30 percent of respondents reported that their former position has been filled permanently (25 percent) or was completely eliminated (5 percent). The majority of respondents (68 percent) have returned to their former company after maternity and parental leave. 26 percent of them did not take over their former position - which was predominantly not their own wish.

When asked explicitly for the level of their position after return, 75 percent of respondents said that the position after their return met the level before the break. Therefore, for a quarter of respondents, the level changed. For two-thirds of these respondents, the level of the position was lower than before, whereas a third could improve the position.

### **Pregnancy – a nuisance**

“Pregnancy complicates the workflow. The absence of the employee will be accepted reluctantly.” 18 percent of the respondents answered, that this statement reflects the **attitude of their superior towards pregnant employees**. 12 percent describe the attitude of their manager as follows. “A pregnant employee drops out, lacks resilience and should not come back.” Thus, almost one third of the participants state, that their supervisor considers the pregnancy of employees as a nuisance. The vast majority of women, as many as 70 percent, indicate a positive attitude of their superiors towards pregnancy.

### **Career moves & salary increases – Ice Age**

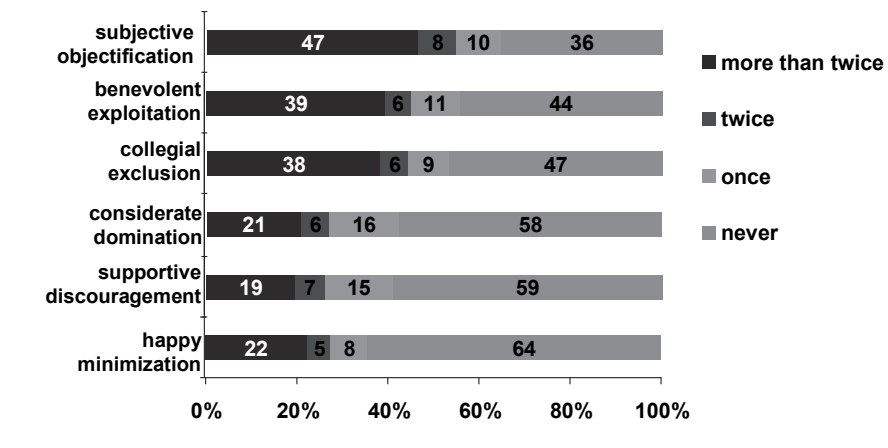
Looking at career steps and salary increases, the study shows how strongly mothers are affected in their career by pregnancy and motherhood. 72 percent of the participants indicate, that the reaction of her supervisor to her pregnancy was to **put upcoming career steps on ice** (39 percent) or even **cancel upcoming career steps** (33 percent). Only for 20 percent of the respondents upcoming career moves were implemented accordingly.

The picture is similar for upcoming salary increases. For almost half of women (48 percent) upcoming salary increases were deleted with their pregnancy (37 percent) or only paid out at a reduced amount (11 percent).

## Family competence rather than professional competence?

Professional skills and competencies of women and mothers are undermined frequently and in many different ways. The participants were asked about incidents of subtle discrimination according to the description by Lorber (Lorber 1994: Paradoxes of Gender) based on the classification of Benokraitis and Feagin. A total of 65 percent of respondents have experienced **subjective objectification**: being grouped with all women. They were exposed to sweeping statements about “women” or “mothers”, 55 percent of the respondents even several times. **Benevolent exploitation** has been experienced by more than half of the participants (56 percent), by **39 percent even more than twice**: where a woman is given all the detail work so she can learn the job, but a man takes credit for the final product. Also **collegial exclusion**, thoughtlessly scheduling networking meetings for times where women are likely to have family responsibilities, was experienced by 53 percent of the respondents. **Considerate domination**, such as deciding what responsibilities a married women can or cannot handle, instead of letting her determine how she wants to organize her time, was experienced by 43 percent of the respondents. 41 percent of the women encountered **supportive discouragement**, where a woman is not encouraged to compete for a challenging position, because she might not make it. 35% of the women faced **happy minimization**, where they were told jokes about their family duties, like “Going again to a parent-teacher-conference?” when they had to leave earlier from work.

Mothers experienced subtle discriminatory behaviour



Question: What kind of behaviour did you experience during your on your work life?

Figure 4: Subtle discriminatory behaviour

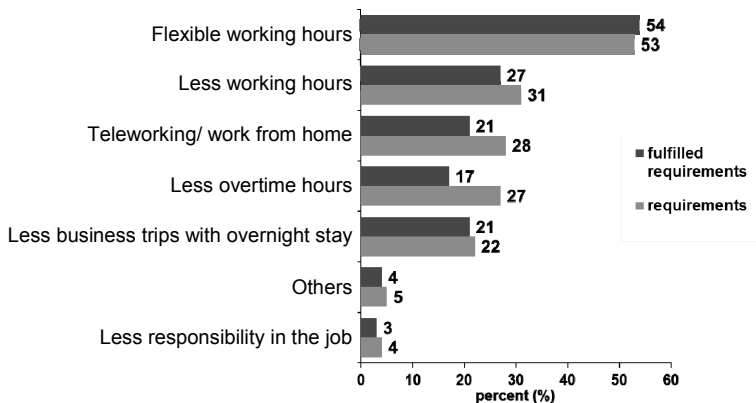
## Requirements of working mothers

The needs and demands of women often change once they have children. For many women, flexibility in working time and location as well as predictable working hours become of interest. Among the changed demands are flexible working hours (53 percent), shorter working hours (31 percent), telecommuting / work from home (28 percent), less overtime (27 percent) and less business travel with overnight stays (22 percent). Only 4 percent of the respondents want to have less responsibility in their job. For 22 percent of respondents the demands do not change after they gave birth.

Companies already meet the changed demands of mothers to a large extent. A high degree of congruence between the demands of the mothers and the offers by the companies is accomplished for more flexible working hours. More than half of the women desire more flexible working hours and at the same time this desire is being taken care of by the companies for more than half of the responding mothers (54 percent). However, it is important to recall, that women 'buy' flexibility by signing working contracts with working hours less than 100 percent, but in fact, they work much more. Thus they can relate to their reduced working hours according to their contract and don't have to give justifications when they need to go home a little earlier to fulfill their family duties. Discrepancy between the expressed needs of women and the offers by the companies can be found for 'less overtime' and 'work from home'. 27 percent of the women request to have less overtime, but for only for 17 percent of the women this demand is met.

As working with kids will no longer be an issue just for mothers, the demands of working fathers and working parents have to be identified and met as well.

Companies match many requirements of working mothers



Questions: Do you have other requirements after the birth of your last child to your professional position? (choose as many as you like) / Look at your current situation. Which of these requirements were fulfilled by your current manager? (choose as many as you like)

Figure 5: Requirements of working mothers

## Proposals by the mothers

The most frequently mentioned proposals to improve the situation of working mothers include **'qualified part-time work'** (82 percent) and a **change in people's awareness** (79 percent). The awareness, that working mothers are both able and willing to accomplish excellence is the basis of a career development according to skills and potential.

The majority of the participants call for more day care centers and kindergartens, an equal distribution of parental leave on mothers and fathers as well as clear target agreements to fill a defined number of manager positions with female managers. **Other ideas mentioned were:** a corporate culture, where performance matters as opposed to sheer presence, working time models, cultivation of part-time work in management positions, equal pay for male and female employees, recognition of parental leave and reduction of pressure on fathers taking parental leave.

More part-time jobs, especially qualified part-time jobs are not the ideal solution for improving the situation of working mothers. Part-time concepts don't go far enough, if part-time is just used as a mean to enable women to reconcile work and family life under the existing structures.

Therefore, in order to achieve **sustainable improvements on the situation of working mothers**, the conditions in society and business world - structure as well as culture – have to change. Thus the reconciliation of work and family life, even with full-time or reduced full-time jobs is possible. And the women have a real choice.

