

Taking up job title of full-time mother

CEO, astronaut, boxer, builder — girls can be anything they want to be. And with more and more career options opening up for them, motherhood is no longer seen as the end goal. Indeed, almost one in five women in Ireland aged between 40 and 44 are childless. Meanwhile, the sugar-coating of motherhood is being stripped away by parenting forums and bloggers.

Despite this change in the perception of motherhood, most women go on to have children, and in a recent survey carried out by Sudocrem, 63% of Irish mums said they would like to be at home if it was financially possible.

There's a cruel financial irony at play here — some parents are working reluctantly because they can't afford to give up, while others are at home reluctantly because they can't afford childcare or find suitable part-time work.

In an ideal world, every parent would have the option to choose to stay at home or go to work, and in my experience interviewing parents, most would like a bit of both — part-time or flexible work that doesn't involve giving up completely.

Some women give up work because although it's unpaid and can be isolating, they see motherhood as their most important role.

As Mother's Day approaches, we ask what prompts women with successful careers to walk away?

Michelle Teahan, 32, a medical scientist from Cork, says growing up, career was everything. "Going through secondary school all I wanted was to go to college and work in something worthwhile. Children were never in my future plans."

Then she got married, and something changed. "It was like an invisible switch flicked to 'on' and all I wanted was a baby."

After her first child was born, despite wanting to

stay at home, she went back to work, conflicted about how she felt.

"After all the years of study, all I wanted to do was stay at home. I was almost embarrassed to admit how I felt but then I realised everyone is different and that's perfectly OK. By the time I was pregnant with my second baby, I knew I didn't want to go back to work."

Helen Delaney, 42, who gave up her banking career to be at home with her children, says she loved her job and never intended to leave. "I thought I wouldn't cope well at home when they were very small. I

sometimes used to wish the crèche was open on Saturdays, just to get a break!"

However, as time went by, she found juggling long hours and childcare increasingly difficult.

"Looking back, I realise it was the start of an all-consuming state of overwhelm and I didn't feel at all connected to my children."

Helen, who is from Kilkenny, has been at home with her two daughters (aged 11 and seven) for three years, and describes herself as a "happy stay-at-home mother, still working very hard".

Maria Lambert, 40, from Co Kildare says her career in financial services came to an end after a changing-mat epiphany.

"I was just home after picking up the kids and the youngest needed to be changed for bed. I had her on the changing table and the other two were running riot. I just started crying. I wasn't able to do it all."

She applied for block parental leave, realised home was where she wanted to be, and ultimately resigned her post.

For **Laura Molloy, 36**, the moment of clarity came when she found out she was expecting her third child.

"I knew almost immediately that I wanted to be at home with him and I had to

OK to want that. I think number three was almost the excuse I needed to do what I had wanted to do for a long time," she says.

Laura resigned from her job in digital communications and despite having been very ambitious in her 20s, she's spent the last two years happily at home in Co Meath with her three children.

Indeed, for many families, anecdotally at least, three children seems to be a tipping point. The cost of childcare for three kids can make even high-earners question the logic of continuing to work. Ireland still has some of the highest childcare costs as a proportion of disposable income in the OECD. However, the financial cost of giving up a well-paid job is a key consideration.

Michelle has been at home with her two daughters (aged three and one) for less than a year, and financially, it's "so far so good", she says. "There'll be no big holidays or new cars for the next few years, every cent needs to be watched, but it's definitely not as difficult as we expected."

Are there changes she would like to see, to help stay-at-home parents?

"While it's fantastic and so necessary that a step is being made to supplement childcare costs for working parents, incentives should be given to those who stay at home too. The tax relief could be greater on the working partner's income to encourage more of those who would like to stay at home, essentially providing their own childcare."

In fact, the work done by Ireland's 305,000 stay-at-home parents has a monetary value that is often underestimated. In a calculation carried by insurance company Royal London, the duties of a parent at home would cost about €12,000 a year if outsourced.

Of course, there's an emotional cost too. For many people, identity is tied up in their career — it's a badge of sorts. Being at home means no badge, and women often speak of being asked what they do and being met with silence when they answer. 'I'm a stay-at-home mother.'

But this is not always the case.

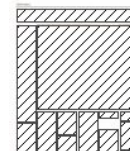
"I was at a social function recently and there were lots of women with great jobs," says Maria. "I was the one 'desperate housewife' in the room. But you know, it never came up in conversation — I was the one judging myself. I have friends who work full-time, part-time, or are at home, and when we chat, we realise we all have the same bad days."

Financial and emotional costs aside, there is often a fear of isolation. What if being at home with the kids means no adult interaction at all?

In her book, *Concentrated Parenting*, journalist Cristina Odone says new mothers are more removed than ever from extended family. Before they could expect to be pampered and cooed over, she says. "But today, they are likely to be pushed out of their hospital bed because of overcrowding."

"As for those who are going to stay at home after the birth of their child, they can't assume that grandparents, uncles and aunts, cousins will be on hand with advice, support, even just offers of babysitting. The extended family is as much a rarity as the lying-in period."

However, while many of us live far from extended family, other networks can take their place — friends, school mothers, and even online parenting groups can bridge the isolation gap and give an outlet for communication that goes beyond 'can you please stop fighting over the Lego?'



Maria, whose children are aged 12, eight, and five, says she found the isolation greater while she was still working, because she wasn't in the same circles as other local mothers.

"When my kids started school, my network exploded. The four walls would close in on me if I was at home all day. I need to be out seeing people. Now that all three of my kids are at school, I have the opportunity to do things for myself. I volunteer at the schools, I run a Brownie unit, and my sacred outlet is singing in a choir."

And does she ever have bad days?

"Oh yes! Sometimes they're all screaming and fighting and I think I could be getting paid to deal with less."

Helen, too, knows what it's like to be overwhelmed, but finds it much easier these days. "Now the

children are older, there's more craic with them and you find you enjoy their company a lot more, so there's less running upstairs to lock yourself into the bathroom for some 'me time'.

"For me, I needed to simplify everything, step off the spinning wheel, live in the now, and build stronger and more connected relationships with the people I love most."

Laura, whose children are 11, six, and almost two, says she sees how the kids benefit from seeing her every day.

"My mother always worked when I was growing up and I remember thinking as a child I would have loved to have her around more. My eldest was in childcare from 13 months until she was nine, and she tells me all the time how happy she

is I'm at home."

There is of course another beneficiary in all this — the partner who no longer needs to worry about crèche drop, work travel, or taking time off when kids are sick. Laura says her husband sees the benefits.

"He can leave earlier to go to the gym before work, work late when he needs to, and travel for work more easily. Also because all the housework, homework and dinners are done, he has more time in the evenings."

He brings the boys to bed every night to give me a break, whereas we used to be a lot more stressed trying to play catch-up on all the housework, and it always felt like we were exhausted by the end of the day."

It's clear that for many households, having one parent at home makes a difference when kids are small.

But children grow up quickly and their needs change as they get older.

With this in mind, Helen plans to return to work.

"I've maintained my Q&A qualification since leaving the bank," she says.

"I hear lots of people say how hard it is to get back into the workplace, especially the longer you leave it, but funnily enough this doesn't worry me too much."

"When I feel the girls don't rely so much on me and can make their own way home from school, and I don't have any childcare costs, that will be the right time for me."

Is motherhood devalued in today's career-driven world?

"I don't think so, though it's definitely more 'the norm' to be career-driven these days," says Michelle.

"I don't think girls should be steered in any direction — they should know they have options. Working mum, stay-at-home mum — every woman is an individual."

Work it out

If you're thinking of giving up work, here's what to consider:

Finances: It's not just about the salary you lose. You may also make significant savings on childcare, commuting costs, and work clothes.

Tax: Your tax credits can be transferred to your husband if you are married, and you may be entitled to Home Carer's Tax Credit.

Network: It can be lonely without the social elements of work but being at home also means you'll spot who else in your neighbourhood or school is a potential coffee buddy.

Head space: Running or rock-climbing or writing or volunteering; it can be hugely beneficial to have something that's just for you, so you can step away from the always-on work of parenting.

Timeout: Don't fall into the trap of thinking you shouldn't get a break. At work, you had annual leave. If you have a partner or family who can take over, take time off.

Organisations: Stay-at-home Parents Association Ireland (find it on Facebook).



Michelle Teahan, from Coachford, Co Cork, with her daughters Johanne and Christina and cat Mr B. Picture: Dan Linehan



**Laura Molloy from Donacorney,
Co Meath, with her children
Chloe, Sean and Cian.**

Picture: Ciara Wilkinson