

# **Mothering the Organisation**

**A phenomenological exploration of women who off-ramped careers: influences, time use, skills, and the business practices that support or hinder women's professional re-engagement.**

**By**

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**Doctor of Philosophy**

## **CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP**

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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## **Dedication**

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## Acronyms

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**ABS**, Australian Bureau of Statistics

**ACCI**, Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry

**AIM**, Australian Institute of Management

**AQF**, Australian Qualifications Framework Council

**BCA**, Business Council of Australia.

**DCA**, Diversity Council of Australia

**DEST**, Department of Education, Science and Training

**DEWR**, Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (now defunct)

**DEEWR**, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (now split in two: Department of Education and Training, and Department of Employment since 2013)

**DIISRTE**, Department of Industry, Innovation, Climate Change, Science, Research and Tertiary Education

**EEO**, Equal Employment Opportunities

**EOWA**, Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency (WGEA - Workplace Gender Equality Agency, since 2012).

**HILDA**, Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia

**HREOC**, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission

**IGR**, Intergenerational Report

**ILO**, International Labour Organization

**OECD**, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development

**SAHM**, Stay at Home Mother

**WGEA** - Workplace Gender Equality Agency

## **ABSTRACT**

This research challenges common images of the stay-at-home-mother as it explores the lived experiences of women who: a) off-ramped elite professional careers to become long term, stay-at-home-mothers (SAHMs), and b) have considered re-engagement with the professional workforce. I investigate firstly, the women's reasons and experiences of being SAHMs; secondly, their expectations of organizational re-engagement; and thirdly, managerial views and organizational practices that hinder or support such re-engagement.

The direction for this research emerged from a desire to address issues of inequality and marginalisation faced by professional women in organizations, as a penalty for becoming mothers. My research draws from sociology, philosophy, feminism, management and organization studies. Through the use of feminist, standpoint, phenomenological and narrative methodologies I create a space in which to give SAHMs voice, and consider issues of fit and misfit between their narratives and those of business managers.

This research makes three significant contributions. It profiles a politically unrepresented, socially marginalised and organizationally ignored group of professional women. It identifies SAHMs as a significant cohort of plausible re-entrants into professional roles in Australia's ageing workforce. It locates organisational receptivity to such re-engagement.

The findings suggest that SAHMs are highly educated and experienced women; that their strengths and employability potential are not understood within organisations; and that there are no pathways for them to re-enter the professional workforce. The overall conclusion is stark: this cohort who off-ramped from elite careers is not deemed employable in professional roles.

The thesis addresses a major gap in current literature, theory and discourse on professional women who mother, who off-ramp careers and who engage in care work activities long term. The research contributes to career, care work, skill, organisational practice and older workers literatures. The characteristics of SAHM-like women and their potential as an underutilised source of skilled talent should also be of interest to organisations, HR practitioners and ageing workforce strategists.

*Key words:* stay-at-home-mothers; off-ramped career women; skill; care work; professional work; career re-entry; older workers; ageing workforce.