

EPISODE 1676

[00:00:00]

FT: So Money episode 1676, how to plan a career break after having kids, with Neha Ruch, Founder of Mother Untitled.

***NR:** I didn't choose to initially downshift and then pause my career because I thought it was the right thing for him. I think he would have been just as well-served in the care of another trusted caregiver or in daycare. There are sort of pros and cons for all of those things. It's very important to call that out because I didn't come to this from a place of thinking that stay-at-home motherhood or chapters of stay-at-home motherhood were superior in any ways. I really came to it because I think I'd hit my own version of burnout."*

[INTRO]

[00:01:04]

FT: Welcome to So Money, everybody. I'm Farnoosh Torabi. When you think of a stay-at-home mom, someone who's opted out of the paid workforce, who do you imagine? Is it someone with an easier life than someone with the double duty of working outside the home and parenting? Is it someone that you assume might be privileged or someone who's woefully dependent on a partner for money?

My guest today is frustrated to say the least with the often deductive ways that we characterize stay-at-home mothers in our society. She's on a mission to rebrand stay-at-home motherhood, to bring more dignity and respect to these parents, including herself, who are taking a break from their careers to support their children and families. Neha Ruch is the Founder of Mother Untitled, and she's the author of the forthcoming book, *The Power Pause: How to Plan a Career Break After Kids – and Come Back Stronger Than Ever*.

A lot of what we focus on today is learning more about the realities of being a stay-at-home mom, how mothers can prepare for a career pause, how to protect our futures, including our financial futures, and as many state home mothers want, to return to the workforce after off-ramping. Here's Neha Ruch.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:02:21]

FT: Neha Ruch, welcome to So Money. I'm so excited to introduce you to our audience. Welcome.

[00:02:28]

NR: Thank you so much. It's a pleasure to be here.

[00:02:31]

FT: We talk often on this show about financial feminism and what it means to be a parent, a mom specifically, who works outside of the home or even runs a business from home, the complexities of being a financial breadwinner. I've written about that. What I love about your work is that you are very consciously trying to rebrand stay-at-home motherhood, and it's time. I will even say that I myself have made some judgments in the past, and maybe I have been a little unfair or a lot unfair about the assessments and the assumptions of women who opt out of the workforce.

From where I stand, my biggest concern is the financial ramifications of that. We can get into it. But I think that having now my kids are growing up a little bit, the challenges of parenting and working. I mean, listen. Neha, there are days where I'm like, "I can't. I can't do it all." Then, of course, the idea of staying home full-time, being present full-time as a caregiver, that's not easy either.

First of all, just I want to thank you for shining a light on this segment of the population. Your organization has done – Mother Untitled, you've done a lot of research into this space. I want to talk about some of the findings within this community of stay-at-home parents and the trends you're seeing. First, Neha, you come to this, obviously, with a personal story. This is very near and dear to you, this cause, this mission-driven business, organization. Tell us about how you arrived at this frustration. Really, it was a frustration that you had around the miscalculations we were making about stay-at-home mothers. How did this affect your life?

[00:04:18]

NR: I want to start off by saying how brave of you to acknowledge how your own mindset around mothers is evolving and motherhood. I think that that is part of the work we're all doing, and I think that's why this moment in time is so ripe because I think we're all acknowledging that it's time to reexamine the way that work works, and this is one slice of that conversation. So thank you.

To start and back up, I, like you, had prided myself on my career and my financial independence. I think I'd gotten very lucky sort of finding my niche in brand strategy very early on. I was able to be successful in sort of the typical terms. I was lucky enough to get into Stanford Business School. Sort of the outward markers of success were near and dear to me.

Then I'd landed my “dream job” and I had my first child. There was something about him and sort of the peace I found in that moment, those very early in the morning hours with him that I think I'd been looking for for a long time. It's important to call that out because I didn't choose to initially downshift and then pause my career because I thought it was the right thing for him. I think he would have been just as well-served in the care of another trusted caregiver or in daycare. There are sort of pros and cons for all of those things. There's a lot of data to show that children are well-served and safe as long as they know they are loved by their caregivers.

I think it's very important to call that out because I didn't come to this from a place of thinking that stay-at-home motherhood or chapters of stay-at-home motherhood were superior in any ways. I really came to it because I think I'd hit my own version of burnout in my career. I wanted to optimize for less stress and really enjoy the time with my child for a period of time. I was

gobsmacked by sort of the cultural stigma and the judgments I heard from my peers and even family around, “How could you give up on your ambition? How could you give up on your feminism and make this choice?”

Meanwhile, I was meeting so many incredible women in baby classes, on the playground, and online, in text threads, who were making room for family life in their own ways. They were downshifting into part-time work. They were taking full pauses and saying, “We’d clocked in a decade of career. We know we can transition back at some point.” None of them matched the outdated caricature of stay-at-home motherhood. Mind you, this was the height of the lean-in movement, the girlboss era. It was 2016.

I was looking around, and there was no content that spoke to ambitious women taking career pauses. I realized that we really inherited sort of this June Cleaver image, and I wanted to change that so that women could make that choice without so much stigma and a little bit more support.

[00:07:35]

FT: Yes. It was sort of this caricature of a mother. I'm curious. What was your goal in the beginning when you made this pause? What were what was the mindset initially, and how did it evolve? Honestly, you – it started as a personal sort of decision, but now you're at this helm of this organization, this movement. You're working, right? I want to also learn about that transition and when you made that conscious choice to start the business. But in the beginning, what were your visions of this pause, and in what ways were you maybe surprised by this new role that you had?

[00:08:20]

NR: Well, when I initially paused, and I think it's important to call out, it was a journey, right? I initially downshifted, so I went back to work two days a week. I think that was a really important test, and I encourage women also to really think about that it isn't so black and white anymore, right? It's not fully take a career break and stay home for a chapter or fully go full throttle.

There's a wide swath of choices and only increasingly so in between to keep yourself connected to the workforce if you want to.

My initial choice was to go back to work two days a week. I think that that was a really important test for me to figure out how would I enjoy those days fully at home. What would that feel like? What would my partnership feel like? I think it also let me keep a portion of my income. As you may know, I think consulting sometimes because it's contract or fractional work. You can actually figure out a model wherein your hours are valued even more so than a typical sort of traditional full-time role because you're trading off the benefits, right?

It worked out for me in that first year, and I think it allowed me and my husband to have a lot of conversations about what would it look like if I were to take a full pause. He was one of the ones, by the way, who was really concerned that I would be bored. He had only met me in a very career-oriented role, and it took us re-meeting each other really for us to gain comfort not only in the financial planning but also in the how would this new paradigm look in our household.

It was at about a year and a half into motherhood that I fully paused and parted with sort of that paid work. At that point, I think I had already started to see and feel this sense of I am really loving my self-growth and exploration in motherhood. No one else sees it or understands it. How can I make other people see or understand it? How can I shine a light on how actually wonderful the stage of life can be, how powerful it can be? I think that was my personal experience.

Even more than just sort of the shame and stigma I was hearing, I had to live and experience this sense of I'm walking through this, and I'm growing. I can see myself growing, right? I could see myself having a greater perspective, a greater sense of clarity than I'd had for a long time on what was important. I was getting better at time management, organization. I was even plugging myself into finances in a way that I hadn't previously because I hadn't have to. It was sort of my life had been a financial – once I'd achieved a certain sort of threshold of financial success, I hadn't thought about it with as much care as I had to when I parted with it, right?

All to say I think that, yes, that initial decision was met with sort of understanding and having to move through the judgment. But then I had to sort of walk through this sort of self-growth and realize, okay, now there's something interesting that I want to shed a light on. Then to your

point, what did it feel like to start this initially as a project? That actually took a lot of ego-checking because when I first came to this thesis, I was looking at I think I knew it was going to be a big business. I knew this was a big movement, and I knew that I needed to see it through, and I knew I wanted that time at home.

Those two things weren't matching up, so I had to have a real sort of inner work around what would it feel like to also not just move past the judgment around "stay-at-home mother" but the judgment around passion project, lifestyle project, mom blog. You hear all of these terms that are so diminutive towards women's exploration. I actually think that almost took another sort of ego check because outwardly what it presented as from the years of 2017 through 2021 was a small mom blog with an Instagram account.

I think there were loyal women who remained part of our community today who started rallying around it saying, "This is a really fresh voice. This is a really interesting cohort." I see this woman who's reflecting something back to me, an ambitious woman who's also choosing to make room for motherhood for a chapter, and she's saying it's okay, and we're going to live this alongside one another. But I talk a lot about it as planting seeds, knowing it was going to be big eventually.

It wasn't until 2022, to answer your last question, that I decided to dial up when both of my children aged into school, and culture, I think, was much more ready to reexamine this idea post-pandemic.

[00:13:30]

FT: There's so much I want to unpack with you, including this comprehensive study that Mother Untitled did looking at examining women and where they are in their careers, what are they considering, maybe a pause. Do you remember, though, and I'm sure you know this piece. It was in New York Times magazine years ago, and it was about these women who were opting out. These were highly educated, Princeton, Stanford, Harvard-educated women who were choosing as if like there's two lanes, right? I'm going to choose motherhood. Then they followed up with these women 10, 15 – I don't know how many years later. It was a lot of regret because,

to your point, maybe there was a point where they wanted to go back into the workforce, and they found just how difficult it was.

I think that Sheryl Samberg used that in her *Lean In* book or at least in her media around lean in to sort of highlight like, "Here's the danger, ladies, of leaving." Then there was this other sort of takeaway from that piece, in the first piece that was written, which was like, "Oh, so opting out is a privilege," because these women were in dual-income households. They had their Harvard degrees, and probably their partners were Ivy League-educated, too. I'm making assumptions, but that this is an option that is exclusive to women who have resources, the luxury of not working.

I think I want to hear from you like what were the marks that that article missed, and it allowed for a lot of judgment. I myself taking judgment because of this sort of presentation of these certain women, and I think it just feeds into what your work is today. But I guess the question really is how has our culture sort of led up to this point where you feel like we need to rebrand motherhood purposefully.

[00:15:29]

NR: I do remember that article, and there was a few like that. I think they all put a point on a trend that had been evolving really dating back to the 1970s, right? Brief history lesson, right? During World War II, women started working because of need. Then when the war ended, women were encouraged to go back home. Rightfully so, we started to see the beginning of the second wave of feminism where women said, "Wait a second. We should have access to earning potential, and we actually do have the capacity to participate in the workforce."

What we started to see with the beginning of the feminine mystique and subsequent works that were similar is that women who went to fight for their rights in the workforce were considered modern. Women who chose to stay at home were considered to be defending tradition, right? That started to perpetuate through the advent of media and advertising around the same time. Then we started to see advertising around dishwashers and washing machines that showed the woman enjoying her leisurely life on the pink telephone, wearing an apron, serving her husband cocktails at the end of the day. We started to create this portrait of the woman at home.

Then the woman in the workforce was more like the Diane Keaton from Baby Boom, right? Then we just see this power chasm just grow wider, and this all comes ahead in the eighties and nineties with media loves a mommy war. We love black-and-white caricatures. We created this concept of “mommy wars” when, realistically, we were all more in between than not and never more so than now, right?

I think as we start to think about where are we now versus where were we even when that opt-out article was written is we're at a generation where because of the access to technology and the digital landscape, because women are getting married later and having children later, right? We're having children at the average age of 29 or 30. Now, just take that one piece. We've accrued work experience now in ways that we never had previously. When we have work experience under our belt, we have now a career portfolio that we can draw upon that helps us to re-enter the workforce or keep our hand in the workforce; thanks to things like the booming gig economy, rising rates of women's entrepreneurship, digital technology that allows us online certifications and online coursework.

We have this ability for women to stay connected to the workforce on their own terms should they decide to pause or downshift their career. Those two facts in combination lead us to a very different portrait than what we were looking at previously. We're also looking at far more equitable relationships with our partners than ever before, right? I think the latest data from Motherly State of Motherhood, you're looking at a generation where 60% of women would say their partners are working equally in the home.

That's important to note because if a woman or a man, by the way, chooses to pause or downshift, it doesn't mean that they're tripping and falling into this well of domesticity. It means that someone has made the very conscious choice to make room for family life for a chapter to support the household. Then the final thing I will say is I think some of the portraiture that has happened and the archetypes around the stay-at-home mother really thrust stay-at-home mothers into this idea of luxury.

By the way, I remember the first time my husband and I got into this conflict in that first year when I was choosing to pause or downshift, and he used the word luxury. I said absolutely not.

There's no part of my day that is luxurious, but it is a privilege. It is a privilege for us to get to choose. I think what's important to call out is that that privilege today goes both ways. If a woman is choosing to pause and sort of forego that income, that is a privilege. If a woman is choosing to be able to pay for childcare, and her husband and her together can cover childcare so that they can both remain in the workforce, that is a privilege. If you get to choose to exist in between, that's a privilege.

The reality is that that goes both ways, and I think what we found from our data, and I'll end here because I think this will spark more conversation, is that for 62% of mothers, their finances are a consideration in making the choice to pause, right? One in three need to pause because of the cost of childcare. That really starts to upend this idea of this being the ultimate luxury or leisure.

[00:20:47]

FT: Yes. So often I hear about in the context of women choosing – like tradwives. Okay, let's talk about that. There's this whole movement of women online who are promoting the sort of 1950s caricature of a woman, a female housewife. More dangerously that they actually promote being dependent on your partner, that that money is not your domain. Don't worry about that. Your male partner is the one who has to sort of take care of that and support you. You have to support him. It's just very like this very – I just – it's gross. But what people will say is like, “Well, she's just choosing what she wants, so let her be.”

I'm like, “I'm not against women having the power to choose.” I want to come in and say, “Can you afford that? Can you really afford that?” Because what I'm really implying here is that there is a cost to this lifestyle, and maybe you don't see it today. But down the road, there's going to be a very high toll because we know the data. So going back to what you said about financially affording it and the privilege and all of that, as you educate your community and as you bring in resources for your community, what do you want women who do take this – who are choosing this downshift to know about the financial realities?

I mean, you've already discussed some of the personal ones, some of the challenging conversations you're going to have with your partner being more involved in the budget. But

what do you think really two, three things women need to know about money before they decide to do this if this is a choice?

[00:22:29]

NR: First off is have a very honest conversation, an assessment with your partner on if there's going to be mutual respect and value for each other's work, right? One of the biggest fears, one of the things women feel most stressed about per the data is this idea of being financially dependent. It is a scary position. I'm not going to sugarcoat that. That really depends on your partnership. That is not right for every partnership. It's really important to do that work privately and together to determine if your relationship is solid enough to withstand that transition.

As part of that financial planning and conversation, you should determine if there's going to be a mutual understanding that the partner working out of the home is equally dependent on the partner working in the home. It is very important for whichever partner. I'm being cautious with my words right now because one in five stay-at-home parents right now are dads, and I think that's important to call out, right? This isn't a gender conversation. But regardless of who's working out of the home for pay, it's very important that you understand that it is an interdependent organization. That's the first part. If there's resistance to that and it is still the right choice for your family, I do encourage the exploration around prenups, postnups. I think that we've sort of cast shame on that idea, but there is nothing to be said about making smart decisions to ensure that your interests are protected.

Part of the conversations once you have made the financial planning, the second thing I would say is when you're making budgeting shifts because most families, when they're making the decision to pause and they're going through, okay, if we're going to part with one salary, we're going to have to make budget changes, right? Maybe we're trading off on the dining-out budget and the personal care budget. We're going to make all of these sort of concessions for these three years while one of us stays at home. Make sure that each partner is making those concessions because it's not just one person, right? That is coming out of a joint household budget. You plan together whether you make those plans at the beginning of the each year, or you make it one monthly. You're giving yourself each budgets to invest.

The third thing, and I know you asked for two, but I want to say the third thing because it's really important.

[00:25:09]

FT: I love it. Tell me.

[00:25:11]

NR: Is that if you are investing in childcare or household help or any sort of support system, that comes out of the household budget. That applies, by the way, if both partners work out of the home, too. The math calculation shouldn't be like, "Oh, the woman's paying," and that's like – it especially applies if you are choosing to be at home for a period. If you are under the false belief that you have to work for pay to deserve help, that is a one-track way to burn out.

We saw in the data that 29% of stay-at-home mothers have never had any help, including family assistance. That really is because of a false belief that they have to earn that right. No person should have to work 24/7. So if you are going through a budgeting exercise regularly with your partner, make sure to include sort of a joint assessment around what kind of support you need.

[00:26:08]

FT: One of the frustrating questions you said you used to get in the beginning and maybe still is like, "So what do you do?" This is it. This is where it gets so frustrating. Tell us what stay-at-home mothers do. I want – because we've also known that this a several-hundred-thousand-dollar-a-year job if we were to actually outsource all of these supports that the stay-at-home parent is providing.

[00:26:35]

NR: I love that trend of data around – we started sharing it a couple years ago, and it's really picked up steam. Salary.com has done great work around it, Indeed, Welch's. There's all sorts of companies who've provided. Oxfam provided ways to value unpaid care work. I do think that's

incredibly important because even though there's no way we're getting to culture and with that [inaudible 00:26:58] basics like parental leave that they're paying childcare stipends in the next decade. However, I do think when we start to assign it value, we start to dignify it as real work. So that when you step into a chapter of unpaid work, you're able to sort of articulate to your partner that you're providing value and that there's sort of a joint understanding around that.

The real role that I like to talk about which goes above and beyond the chauffeuring and the meal prep and the diaper changing is the real intellectual and emotional labor of parenting today. We are operating in a system that is just so much more complicated and nuanced and intense for our children than ever before. I think every sort of parenting expert has now acknowledged this is the most complicated generation of parenting ever seen before. Part of that is technology and all of that as well, social media, mental health rates.

With all of that said, I think why I like to talk about the intellectual and emotional labor that parents on career pauses do but all parents do is because if we can dignify and elevate it in that way, if we can talk about the mental – really understanding your child's psychological needs, studying their nutrition, advocating for the supports they might need in the education system. We start to understand that what parents are doing is they're really getting an education of a different sort. That's all sorts of leadership training that's happening.

I think if we can dignify that work, then we don't make the argument that that can so easily be outsourced. We really start to understand, "Oh, wait. This person is providing unique value in their home." We're better able to understand that that person has had a non-traditional experience that adds to their previous work experience that makes them a really interesting candidate to return to the workforce when and if they need to.

[00:29:12]

FT: Speaking of the workforce and going to your study where you found amongst other things that one in three women are considering a career pause, one in two are considering a career downshift, 90% of women on pauses want to return to the workforce. We've covered some of the financial decisions and considerations ahead of the pause. Ideally, you make these ahead of the pause. But what about the foundation for your next career move, laying that before, during

this pause? How are you seeing women successfully transition out of the pause back into their professional lives in the workforce?

[00:29:54]

NR: Well, a lot of this I cover in sort of the middle section and the latter section of the book, which sort of follows three parts. The first part is about preparing, like we talked about. The second and third part are really about using this time not only to raise your children but to raise yourself alongside it and to really leverage the potential that taking time away from the traditional workforce can offer you.

One of the things that's so interesting about modern women today is that when and if they transition back, they don't necessarily return to the same role that they did before. A lot of that is because you'll see in the data that they're optimizing for more flexibility and less stress. That sort of changes the scope of what they're looking for, but they're also looking on that third criteria that they site more meaning.

I think one of the things that happens when women are at home is they have a period of time where they've stepped away from the traditional confines of the workforce, and they're saying, "Wait. If I can look around and meet all of these new people that I wouldn't have met in the traditional workforce before, and I can think about what are other problems that I need to solve," you're starting to spark new ideas and new interests.

We see that 90% of women also stay connected in some way, right? They're volunteering. They are taking an online certification class. They're dabbling with a new project or idea. They're coaching partners. There's all sorts of ways that they're still staying connected and exploring their interests. Making sure that this time at home is also oriented towards your own growth and exploration is a really smart starting point, is to really determine what areas do I want to grow and explore. How can I carve out time, which is why I talk so much about childcare? How can I carve out time to invest in myself? How can I use this time to, to your point, strategically network and keep myself in the game, even if that's staying on top of LinkedIn and liking my old colleagues' post, just to stay with your finger on the pulse. Make sure that you're sort of keeping

one hand in so that when and if you're ready to transition back, it's a smoother path back, and there's people ready and willing to help you.

[00:32:14]

FT: You hinted at your forthcoming book. It's called, everybody, *The Power Pause*. It's available for pre-order now. I'm so excited for this. It comes out in January, the beginning of 2025. We haven't even discussed the pandemic. We know that during the pandemic, women caregivers, women who were working in the workforce and then now at the forefront of caregiving, two full-time jobs, women suffered deeply during the pandemic. But there is a lot of data now that suggests that they're bouncing back, that a lot of women have returned to the workforce. I'm sure you're still seeing the sort of residual impact of that. How is that playing into also what you're seeing, and how did the pandemic ultimately maybe change our lives forever?

[00:33:05]

NR: I think the pandemic did a couple things. From my vantage point, of course, I think no one will ever ask what does a stay-at-home mom do all day because once you had that experience of actually being at home, everyone was like, "Oh, that's what they do."

[00:33:18]

FT: Oh, I get it. Yes.

[00:33:20]

NR: I think that was part one. Part two is we also saw a recession as part of that with mass layoffs, right? I think people started to realize, "Wait a second. If my job is so at risk, there's a difference between job and family, right?" I think that that was a really interesting boundary that emerged. Those two forces, along with a reckoning around the systems aren't working, so maybe we need to go create new systems is really the undertone that I'm hearing, which is you've mentioned opt out before. I think this idea of maybe opting out of the systems that aren't working and opting into systems that will.

I actually think that some of the data that we're seeing is that women are outpacing men in entrepreneurship in colossal rates, right? We're looking at women saying, "Okay, the traditional workforce didn't work for us. So maybe we need to go create a work system that does." The number one reason women seek to build their own companies is for autonomy. When you start to see things like that, when you start to see the impact of part-time work on women's return to the workforce, what I really see is less about this idea of Great Resignation that we saw sort of on the heels of 2020 and an ongoing great reexamination where we're all figuring out it didn't work. 2020 shined a light on it. The childcare crisis shines a light on it. I think it's giving women permission to say out loud, "This isn't working. We're going to figure out new ways to make it work."

The hope is that what that does is actually open up a range of possibilities, whether that's hybrid work, part-time work, freelance economy, entrepreneurship. Then what I really love and forecast, which would be really interesting, is this idea of women creating our own business ecosystems, where we're founding these businesses, that we're hiring gig workers among the women workforce. Then we're creating our own sort of world with more opportunities available to each other.

[00:35:38]

FT: Yes. Lean in, lean out, lean sideways. You're absolutely right, and we didn't really get too much into it. But the systems, they play such an important role in our ability to be successful and our ability to have these narratives, whatever the choices are. If there isn't ample parental leave where you work, if there is paid, by the way, then where does that leave you in terms of being able to even show up in your personal life? When you are expected to burn the midnight oil at work and there's no end to that, where does that leave you in your personal life?

These are important questions, and we do need to – at some point, you try to work within the system to change the system. But then sometimes, you're like, "I'm out. I'm starting my own blueprint." I fully support that.

[00:36:27]

NR: I think this won't be without its challenges either, right? Work-life integration and blend comes with its own risks, right? We're trying to figure out, okay, well, it's wonderful that we're now figuring out ways to blend entrepreneurship or the creator economy or the gig economy with family life. But there are a lot of women falling victim to the myth that you can have part-time work with no childcare, right? How does that work? I think that there's going to be a lot of examination that we're all doing to sort of figure out this way. But I'm optimistic that we're having the conversations and that we're open to finding new ways, including normalizing career pauses as one part of a larger, longer career story.

[00:37:15]

FT: Neha Ruch, thank you so much. I look forward to having you back as this conversation evolves and with your book coming out in January. Again, the book is called *The Power Pause: How to Plan a Career Break After Kids – and Come Back Stronger Than Ever*. Thank you for writing that, and thank you for building the community Mother Untitled. I'm so glad we're connected.

[00:37:35]

NR: Likewise.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[00:37:38]

FT: Thanks so much to Neha Ruch for joining us, for opening up this important conversation. You can check out more of Neha's work at motheruntitled.com. Her book, again, is called *The Power Pause: How to Plan a Career Break After Kids – and Come Back Stronger Than Ever*. It's available for pre-order, and it comes out in January. I'll see you back here on Friday for Ask Farnoosh. I hope your day is So Money.

[END]