



## work & leadership

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# tests of manhood



AT THE BEGINNING OF the twenty-first century, women have become full-time and continuous participants in the labor force. But even as the gender composition of the workforce has changed, the demands of both careers and motherhood have remained the same. Workers of both sexes are still expected to sequence their lives according to jobs and career demands—getting married after completing school, moving to a new city to get the big promotion, having children at a career transition point. At the same time, mothers are expected to display unending dedication to their children, from providing young children with afternoon milk and cookies to sideline cheering and chauffeuring teens to sports practices and games.

For those who aspire to the top ranks of an organization, the competing demands of work and family aren't difficult to negotiate early on when they are investing in education and career opportunities. The dilemma only arises later, once these men and women are well entrenched in the labor force. It is often a major change or crisis—the birth of a new child, a nanny quitting—that forces families' hands. Then they face the conflict between work and family head-on.

**The gender composition of the workforce has changed over the last several decades, but the demands of both careers and motherhood remain the same**

*by* ROSANNA HERTZ





And there's the rub. Work is all-demanding, while raising children is sequestered as a private problem to be resolved by individual families. Since gender equality in employment has not been accompanied with gender equality in the home, the burden of resolution falls primarily to women, who feel they must choose whether work or family will come first. This is especially true for those women who possess the financial resources to have a meaningful choice—which is to say, those who are most likely to be able to reach the top of organizations. What does this conflict mean for women who aspire to be leaders?

**Motherhood versus manhood**

Most corporate careers are constructed around traditionally male social roles and experiences. This outdated view harkens back to days when wives tended to the home and children, freeing men to pursue careers with a singular focus. However, though dual-career couples are now much more common, the prototypical career has not changed. Employers expect employees to invest themselves fully in their jobs, and employers invest, in turn, in those who do. Long hours, evening and weekend work, unplanned travel, after-hours socializing, lengthy out-of-town training, and high stress levels presuppose that someone who wants to succeed in conventional terms will either have no serious life outside of work or will have someone else, a spouse perhaps, to tend to the details of house, home, and family. Succeeding in an organization, then, requires passing a “test of manhood”—meeting the organization on its own (masculine) terms.

While society promises women they can be and do whatever they want, such freedom does not extend to the choice to become mothers. Instead, women face an expectation of compulsory motherhood, regardless of their career choice. Compulsory motherhood confounds career goals because there is no “right” time to have children. Some women meet this expectation by continuing to work, placing their children in day care or hiring nannies, while other previously work-focused women are startled to discover a deeply rooted belief that they want to be at home as their children’s primary caregivers. Becoming a mother is still viewed as one of

further reading



**More Equal Than Others: Women and Men in Dual-Career Marriages**, by Rosanna Hertz, University of California Press, 1986.

**“Working to Place Family at the Center of Life: Dual-Earner and Single-Parent Families’ Strategies,”** by Rosanna Hertz, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*, vol. 562, 1999.

**Geeks and Geezers: How Era, Values, and Defining Moments Shape Leaders**, by Warren Bennis and Robert J. Thomas, Harvard Business School Press, 2002.

women’s primary contributions to their families and the larger community. It is our single most important test of womanhood, and our culture remains deeply ambivalent about women who do not commit to this task. Thus, women’s career aspirations must be reconciled with both personal and social expectations about women’s behavior and roles within the family.

Our social norms demand that women place their families first. But the corporate emphasis on the achievement of organizational, rather than individual, goals directly conflicts with this belief. If a woman decides to take time off while her children are young—following the expectations of compulsory motherhood—her behavior is commonly interpreted as a decision to disinvest in the organization. As one woman I interviewed put it, “It can take years to make up for the fact that you’ve had a child. It’s like something you’ve done to the corporation.” Allowing a child to disrupt her career means she has failed the test of manhood, but not having a child means she has failed the test of womanhood.

When these sorts of career-family conflicts arise, dual-career couples—those in which both the husband and wife are highly educated and pursuing demanding but well-rewarded upwardly mobile professions—have choices not available to those of more modest means. They can remain fully committed to the labor force, become stay-at-home parents, or work part-time. Nonetheless, they face much greater ambiguity and confusion about how to negotiate the work-family tradeoff, since no one partner can claim authority or primacy in the household based on “bringing home the bacon.”

Because of this cultural ambiguity, dual-career couples need to define a set of principles that can guide the pursuit of two careers and simultaneously create an acceptable union between career and family. But most couples cannot accurately describe how their careers are related, how they came to choose those careers, and, most important, how they came to mesh and manage two careers in one marriage. One man struck on what he felt was an apt metaphor: “It’s like a dual carriageway, and we are both going down those carriageways at more or less the same speed, I would say. While those carriageways don’t cross one another, if something happens on one of them, something necessarily happens on the other one.” How couples negotiate their career carriageways, then, has much to do with our cultural conceptions about work and parenthood.

**Private solutions**

My research over the last two decades has shown that women in dual-career couples adopt a variety of strategies to handle the conflict between work and family. Some choose not to bear children at all. They devote all their energies to their work lives and enjoy the full opportunities to succeed at work, since they are behaving in effect as a man would within the organization. However, they face the cost of not succeeding at home, at least in the eyes of others, since they do not have children. Other women take a market approach to child-rearing—paying

others to provide child care, house cleaning, and so on while they and their husbands continue to pursue full-time careers. They view their children as resilient, not in need of intense mother-nurturing. These women can succeed to a degree in both realms, but many find themselves stretched between the demands of their paid work and social expectations about intensive mothering.

Other dual-career women find ways to keep the family at center stage. Some opt entirely out of the workforce for extended periods of time to care for their children. Despite these women's previous attachment to their careers, their belief in the necessity of intensive mother-nurturing outweighs their fidelity to their work. Similarly, many women who continue to work after child-bearing still believe that the family should be organized around caring for children, not around work. These parents tend to feel like the woman I interviewed who said, "When we

dressed. These private solutions do not go far enough. They do not fundamentally alter our ideologies of work and family.

#### **Leadership: the ultimate test of manhood**

Many argue that we could alter these ideologies by creating greater work-life balance. In this view, work and life (family, friends, health, and so on) are the two ends of a pendulum's swing. The idea of work-life balance is to move the pendulum away from work, where it has been stuck too high, and towards the other aspects of life. This should lead to a more satisfying and enriching lifestyle, with one part reinforcing instead of competing with the other. And it places the onus onto the workplace, rather than the family, to change and accommodate this choice.

So far, so good. But the problem is, when we are talking about families in which both spouses have high-powered careers, it is

## **When we are talking about families in which both spouses have high-powered jobs, it is usually the wife who "balances" and the husband who has the career**

decided to have a kid, I decided I wanted to be a mom, a little bit, or why have a child? I just felt that if I am going to raise this kid, I want to be there for some of the events. Otherwise, I wouldn't have bothered."

In some of these families, the mother takes primary responsibility for the children, while in others, both parents are full participants. But in either case, the wives frequently try to straddle the worlds of work and family by working part-time. Part-time workers maintain some connection to the work world and a greater possibility of returning to a position of similar prestige and power, while at the same time, they have more time to be with their children. But part-time work is not a panacea. Organizations frequently make these arrangements on an *ad hoc*, case-by-case basis rather than creating formal policies or structures, which forces each woman to confront and negotiate with the organization as an individual on her own. As a result, other women in the organization do not benefit, and not enough high-prestige, powerful part-time positions are created.

Moreover, it's not clear that part-time work fully passes the tests of manhood and womanhood. Bosses and coworkers still view part-timers as less committed, since they are less available and less a part of the team. This can slow or curtail their job advancement. At the same time, part-time women are looked at askance by those who believe that children need their mothers at home full-time.

So far, change has been slow because we have enacted private, individual solutions, cobbled together in response to what is viewed as a private problem. Dual-career families look to themselves, to the marketplace, and ultimately to their checkbooks for solutions. In only a few instances do they look to their employers or to society for help. The real issue—our unchanged definition of what constitutes success at work and at home—is never ad-

usually the wife who balances. She is the one who reduces her career time or finds a job that is less demanding or becomes a part-timer in order that her husband's career might rise. In a study of parents' decisions about child-care arrangements in their children's first years of life, I found that it was rare for men to scale back significantly when their first child was born, whereas those wives who continued working frequently negotiated reduced work-hour schedules. Even the men who did cut back at first—working one fewer day per week, say—eventually went back to full-time, five-day-per-week employment. Their wives, however, continued to strive for "balance," moving the pendulum even further towards family as they increased their involvement with their young children. One man told me when his second child was born, "I have already experienced fatherhood with my first child. And with the second I didn't even ask my boss because I was promoted and rising fast and we needed the income. Anyway, my wife preferred to continue to work part-time." In these families, work-life balance meant that his career soared while hers limped along.

The ideology of balance reinforces the current structure of careers, which presumes that there is someone other than the employee who tends to the home and children. Work cultures do not care about the employment status of spouses. Thus, those employees who choose to seek balance do so at the expense of violating the cultural norms of careers. From an employer's perspective, work-life balance looks like disinvestment in work—a clear failure of the test of manhood. And to become an organizational leader still requires a singular passionate focus on work. So long as women do the balancing and men continue to keep the tradition of late nights and extensive travel, women will continue to fail the test. Achieving "balance," then, may come at the cost of precluding women from becoming leaders.



### The future of women as leaders

If we want women to lead, we will need to change our definition of leadership. The desire among many younger men and women to pursue both a personal and a professional life may help point the way. Take, for example, the case of a 32-year-old female automotive executive profiled in Warren Bennis's and Robert J. Thomas's recent book, *Geeks and Geezers*. She noted that in her company (and in the industry more generally), the operating definition of "leader" was someone who worked extraordinary hours, made all the key decisions in a forceful and directive way, rallied the troops from a corner office, and was ranked by the number of people who reported to him or her. But the value she attached to having a life after work forced her to find a different path. Rather than pull marathon work sessions, she planned her projects carefully, with realistic timetables. Rather than insist that her desk be the crossroads for all decisions, she delegated responsibilities to her team and rewarded them appropriately. And, she mobilized her people to be more efficient, so that they, too, could have a measure of balance in their lives.

To move us closer to the day when this woman's experience is not the unusual but the norm, we need more accounts and case studies of women who are organizational leaders, so we can understand the forces that have helped them to advance in their careers. We need to look at the varied life courses that women select that allow them to demonstrate leadership. We need to know whether it is even possible for aspiring women leaders to be anything other than completely devoted to their work; and if it is, we need to know more about how to combine leadership with families. Most important, we need to use this information to develop models for how organizations can best use the talents of women, rather than forcing women to choose between work or family because it is impossible to do both effectively and simultaneously.

Three-quarters of men and women at every life stage are working more hours than they would prefer. Many wish they did not have to make such drastic choices that preclude either children or a high-powered career. At the same time, organizations are increasingly bearing the cost of losing talented women who cannot make the current system work. We must ask ourselves what it would take to reorganize employment to make it more compatible with family life. But we must also remember that the solution is not just a matter of balance. We need to find better ways to allow talented women to excel. ✱

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# paying the price

evidence on how  
family choices affect  
career outcomes

by CARRIE CONAWAY





IN MAY 2004, Brenda Barnes reached the Holy Grail of the ambitious working woman. Seven years earlier, she had resigned her job as president and CEO of Pepsi-Cola North America—two steps away from the top job at PepsiCo—to spend more time with her family. Yet she returned to the workforce right where she had left off: as the number-two person at Sara Lee Corporation, one of the nation’s largest consumer products companies.

Still, there were consequences. Barnes gave up seven years of earnings, which added up quickly at her Pepsi-Cola salary of \$2 million per year. And there was no guarantee that she could return to such professional heights. Indeed, many people—even, or perhaps especially, people on the path to the top—who make similar choices face the possibility of not only lost earnings, but also reduced future opportunities in the forms of employment, promotions, and authority.

These reduced opportunities do not come, for the most part, because employers instantly demote or cut the wages of people who take time out for family reasons. While discrimination of

this kind may occur, opportunities also decline because of the cascading impact that family choices can have on work hours, relocation decisions, and even career direction.

What are the penalties for stepping, even temporarily, off the career track to care for family needs? And which family choices matter most?

#### **Children and earnings**

If family choices have an impact on career outcomes, it should show up in people’s paychecks. The research evidence is quite clear that, at least in recent years, the choice to marry by itself does not reduce people’s incomes. Married men have long enjoyed a wage premium over single men, although the effect has declined somewhat recently. And married women without children earn just as much as single women; indeed, some studies even show a marriage premium for women without children.

Earnings differences don’t appear until children enter the equation. A recent study by researchers David Ellwood, Ty Wilde, and Lily Batchelder presents the best evidence to date on

