

Women and the Workplace-Parenthood Squeeze

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In her new book, “Unfinished Business: Women, Men, Work, Family,” Anne-Marie Slaughter, the president and CEO of the Washington-based think tank New America, argues that while we have made great progress, we must still knock down plenty of “obstacles and barriers to true equality.” One of those is the utopian conviction that animates her book: namely, the idea that a critical indicator of true equality is women’s ability -- or, for that matter, men’s -- to achieve professional preeminence without sacrificing family life.

In January 2009, Slaughter left her position as dean of Princeton’s Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs to join the Obama administration as the first woman director of the State Department’s prestigious Policy Planning Staff. Her husband, Andrew Moravcsik, a professor of European politics and international relations at Princeton, stayed in the family home with their two adolescent sons. She commuted to Washington, rising in the wee hours each Monday morning to catch Amtrak and boarding a train back to Princeton on Friday afternoons. In February 2011, she returned to Princeton to teach politics and international affairs.

There was nothing obviously newsworthy about Slaughter’s decision to resign her position at the State Department. Many leading universities provide faculty members a generous leave to serve in government. To preserve their tenure status, many professors with government appointments—even when they have prospects of rising higher—return to their universities after half a presidential term.

During her two years in the nation’s capital, however, Slaughter, made what she regarded as a momentous discovery: the demands of her State Department post conflicted with her adolescent sons’ need for their mother. Contrary to what she had apparently believed into the sixth decade of her life, she learned “unexpectedly,” thanks to her adventure outside the confines of the elite university world she had inhabited since she was a teenager, that women can’t simultaneously hold down top positions running the free world and excel at parenting.

This realization, arguably a piece of common sense for a majority of Americans, precipitated for the foreign policy expert and international law scholar an extended rethinking of the relationship between career and home.

Slaughter gathered her thoughts together about how government and business were rigged against women in “Why Women Still Can’t Have it All,” a 12,000-word article in The Atlantic. It quickly became one of the most read pieces in the magazine’s history. It inspired many

high-income women with its sympathetic portrayal of their plight while irritating middle- and low-income women who found Slaughter's concerns about powerful women having it all of little relevance to their efforts to make ends meet.

Men, Slaughter argued, created workplace arrangements that prevented women from reaching the uppermost positions of power in government and business without also forsaking a healthy home life. By revising cultural norms and restructuring economy and society, she suggested, women could "have it all." And so could men.

A major obstacle to achieving true equality, maintained Slaughter, is the cultural norm that places professional advancement ahead of family. Without any detectable cognitive dissonance, she asserted in *The Atlantic* that establishing a new, more balanced cultural norm would require that we "close the leadership gap" by electing "a woman president and 50 women senators" and ensuring "that women are equally represented in the ranks of corporate executives and judicial leaders." In other words, to promulgate the norm that caring for the family is as valuable as pursuing a career, women must dedicate themselves to amassing political power.

Slaughter acknowledged that women could not ensure that they would achieve it all merely by redoubling their commitment to success. While urging women to find husbands who would share equal responsibility for child-rearing—or even assume principal responsibility—and advising them to time carefully the births of their children, she stressed that these self-help steps also would not by themselves reconcile a prosperous career and a flourishing family.

That something more involved a revolution in belief and practice. Women must enlist men, according to Slaughter, to transform the "man's world" of fierce competition for status and wealth that characterizes the public sphere.

To undo "the culture of 'time macho'—a relentless competition to work harder, stay later, pull more all-nighters, travel around the world and bill the extra hours that the international date line affords you—workplaces must adopt more family-friendly policies such as allowing more work to be done at home and providing more generous parental leave policies. In addition, "the climb to leadership" must be reconceived in terms of "periodic plateaus (and even dips)" as women—and men, too—learn to pass up some professional opportunities available during the years their kids most need them. And "the simple pleasures of parenting" and the benefits of "a more balanced life" must come to be seen as essential ingredients of human happiness.

The balance that Slaughter commended, however, embodied a new extreme. On behalf of the specious assumption that women *can* have it all, she argued that the happy and proper life for a woman combines a sterling career and unstinting devotion to family. But women can't have it all, and that's not because women are women. Nor is it that society's norms are out of whack, or that men constructed the public sphere to serve men's interests.

Women can't have it all because women are human beings. Women's years, like men's, are numbered. For everyone, resources are scarce, desires are multifarious, and the achievement of true excellence in any substantial pursuit generally comes at the expense of true excellence in most other substantial pursuits. Women no less than men face a world in which tradeoffs are inevitable; competition for power, wealth, fame, and glory is fierce; and fortune resists the best efforts to command it.

In "Unfinished Business," Slaughter expands and refines the argument of her Atlantic article. She enriches the account of the caregiving virtues and develops her ideas about progressive reforms that would make the workplace more hospitable to men and women who wish also to be there during the moments and years that their kids most need them. She acknowledges ambivalence about her assumption that women can have it all without withdrawing that assumption, while stepping back from the contention that true equality depends on women obtaining equal representation in the commanding heights of government and business. Much of her discussion is sensible, even as she continues to present as a major intellectual breakthrough insights about the importance of life beyond work that are common among millennials.

Another reason that Slaughter's argument has a reinventing-the-wheel quality is that she writes as if discovery of the caregiving virtues is the next advance for the orthodox feminism that formed her as a young woman. Actually, Slaughter is rediscovering the old-school understanding that the caregiver's task is demanding and inherently rewarding, a traditional view that the feminism to which she proudly subscribes has done everything in its power to deny.

The traditional view, moreover, is in crucial respects superior to Slaughter's, because it recognizes, as hers does not, that the public sphere has a logic of its own; that there will always be dogged types—women as well as men—who will work longer and harder in the quest to be first; and that a division of labor in the family is useful because the vices—and sometime the virtues—developed in pursuit of public preeminence tend to crowd out the qualities that enable one to nurture others.

We should seek equality of opportunity for women as well as for men and we should give the caretaking virtues their due. We should not conflate these laudable goals with the delusive belief that women—or men—can simultaneously rule in the public sphere and, in the private sphere, provide all the love and care for which their family and friends long.

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