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.

Being successful at work means following male social norms. How can working women succeed and still act like women?

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 This outdated view harkens back to days when wives tended to the home and children freeing men to pursue careers with a singular focus.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 daycare 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 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
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be with their children. But part-time work is not a panacea.
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advancement. At the same time, part-time women are looked at
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and not enough high-prestige, powerful part-time positions are created.

Moreover, it’s not clear that part-time work fully passes the
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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 them-
selves, 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-
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
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hit, 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 responsi-

bility for the children, while in others, both parents are full par-

icipants. 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.

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The ideology of balance reinforces the current structure of careers, which presumes
that someone other than the employee is taking care of the home and family

is 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 childcare 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,
wheras those wives who continued working frequently negoti-
ated 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 father-
hood 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 perspec-
tive, work-life balance looks like disinvestment in work — a
clear failure of the test of manhood. And to become an organiza-
tional leader still requires a singular passionate focus on work.
As 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 ideology of balance reinforces the current structure of careers, which presumes
that someone other than the employee is taking care of the home and family
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 profes-
sional 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
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 experi-
ence is not the unusual but the norm, we need more ac-
counts 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 be completely devoted to their work; and if it
is, we need to know more about how to combine leader-
ship 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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