
W O M E N

AND THE

WORK Family

D I L E M M A

HOW TODAY'S PROFESSIONAL
WOMEN ARE FINDING SOLUTIONS

DEBORAH J. SWISS & JUDITH P. WALKER

Women and the Work/Family Dilemma

How Today's Professional Women
Are Finding Solutions

Deborah J. Swiss
Judith P. Walker



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To our children,

Alex and Alison Rice-Swiss

Jeff, Elizabeth, and Susan Walker

PREFACE

Judy and I first met in 1980, when we were charged with developing a day-care center at the Harvard Medical School in Boston. At the time, I did not yet have children and was working for the medical school's administrative dean while completing my doctoral dissertation. Judy, whose children were in high school and college, had just been hired as the university's child care advisor.

Our first professional collaboration focused on one specific piece of the work/family puzzle. This collaboration grew, along with our friendship, as we moved through parallel life stages, but with Judy half a generation ahead of me. When I took my first maternity leave from my position as an assistant dean at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, Judy helped me find the right child care. Like many women, I returned quickly to a job that I loved, but with some regrets for too short a leave.

Judy continued her work at the university, which included advising eight hundred to nine hundred faculty, staff, and students each year on child-care issues. By the time my second child was born and I had moved to a part-time position, Judy and I began to talk regularly about the challenges and complexities of working and having a family, and about how little information is available to women on merging two important aspects of their lives.

We decided to seek funding for an in-depth survey of women who had graduated from Harvard's professional

schools over a 10-year period. Initial responses to our project told us that the subject was a nonissue. Child-care options were expanding, and the increasing numbers of mothers who had entered the work force appeared to be fulfilling the superwoman myth. But our own experiences, coupled with those of the women we met in our work, convinced us that a different story about working mothers was about to break, a story that very much needed telling. With the support and enthusiasm of our agent Michael Snell, we were introduced to John Wiley & Sons, who believed a new book needed to be written for working mothers.

The stories we gleaned from 902 surveys and 52 personal interviews were even more compelling than our instincts told us they would be. This is not the book we set out to write. In the early stages of this project, we made what we thought was a safe assumption: If we surveyed a large population of women with top-flight professional credentials, we would discover many examples of support in the workplace for women confronting the career/family dilemma. But a different, nearly opposite, picture began to emerge. The vast majority of the women whom we heard from achieved their individual resolution for balance entirely on their own, with virtually no recognition in the workplace of their role as parents.

Our revised agenda became to define in honest and realistic terms how working mothers are leading their lives today. *Women and the Work/Family Dilemma* describes the powerful presence of what we term *the maternal wall*—an unfortunate accomplice to the glass ceiling. Over and over, we heard confirmation that the glass ceiling, which limits how far a woman can advance, is still firmly in place. And it is buttressed by the often transparent, yet still formidable maternal wall, which further hinders a mother's career progress.

For the past decade, women have managed away logistical conflicts between work and family, or have simply assumed all the blame when collisions occur between career demands and

children's needs. A woman's choice at work has been to play the game, or challenge the rules and risk suffering a career penalty.

Without question, women have proven that they are as capable and talented in their professions as the men who sit next to them in the office. However, neither society nor our standard work ethic has in any way addressed the new demographics of the office and the home, and traditional expectations of father as breadwinner and mother as nurturer do not hold up when both parents are in the work force, and when many women must go it alone as single parents.

As surveys were returned and we began the personal interviews, we were at first discouraged by how little progress has been made, and at times shocked by what we were told. We learned that women with proven dedication to their professions find their commitment questioned by bosses and co-workers as soon as they decide to become mothers. Despite obstacles placed in their career paths by those who believe that career ambition must relegate family to a secondary priority, today's professional women have begun to forge a new identity for what it means to be a working mother.

Our research evolved into a book about life choices and about how our culture of work impacts our options: How family influences career paths and how careers affect choices about family life; what goes into making decisions about merging two important, if seemingly contradictory, roles; what advice the women we met would pass on to other women currently making decisions about balancing a professional and personal life. Finally, our research has led us to propose some new definitions for "having it all."

We hope that mothers will share this book with sons and daughters about to embark on their own careers; that husbands will read it with their wives, as they discover in their own households how to manage their dual careers; and that progressive employers will consider some of the strategies we

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propose for recognizing the new demographics in the work force. And we want mothers to know that they are not alone in the dilemma they face in the career/family/marriage triad. Despite certain inherent tradeoffs between work and family, we hold the optimism that the workplace *can* change in ways that will support a more comfortable alliance between careers and children.

DEBORAH J. SWISS

Lexington, Massachusetts
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From both:

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From Deborah:

With loving thanks to my parents, Ed and Peg Swiss, who have always encouraged me and who in so many thoughtful ways helped me finish this book. This book is dedicated with love

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Women and the Work/Family Dilemma

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INTRODUCTION

The Many Dimensions of “Having It All”

For the generation that grew up during the feminist revolution and the rapid social change of the 1960s and 1970s, it at first seemed achievement enough just to “make it” in a man’s world. But coupled with their ambition, today’s women have developed a fierce determination to find new options for being both parent and professional without sacrificing too much to either role or burning themselves out beyond redemption.

Women have done all of the accommodating in terms of time, energy, and personal sacrifice that is humanly possible, and still they have not reached true integration in the workplace. For a complicated set of reasons—many beyond their control—they feel conflict between their careers and their children. All but a rare few quickly dispel the myth that super-woman ever existed.

For many women, profession and family are pitted against one another on a high-stakes collision course. Women’s values are stacked against the traditions of their professions. In the home, men and women struggle to figure out how dual-career marriages should work. Role conflict for women reaches far beyond the fundamental work/family dilemma to encompass a whole constellation of fiercely competing priorities. Women today find themselves in an intense battle with a society that cannot let go of a narrowly defined work ethic that is supported by a family structure that has not existed for decades. The

unspoken assumption persists that there is still a woman at home to raise the children and manage the household. But the economic reality is that most people, whether in two-parent or single-parent families, need to work throughout their adult lives. As a consequence, the majority of today's mothers are in the labor market.

The first full-fledged generation of women in the professions did not talk about their overbooked agenda or the toll it took on them and their families. They knew that their position in the office was shaky at best. With virtually no choice in the matter, they bought into the traditional notion of success in the workplace—usually attained at the high cost of giving up an involved family life. If they suffered self-doubt or frustration about how hollow professional success felt without complementary rewards from the home, they blamed themselves—either for expecting too much or for doing too little. And they asked themselves questions that held no easy answers: Am I expecting too much? Is it me? Am I alone in this dilemma? Do other women truly have it all?

Until now, this has been a private dilemma, unshared, as each woman was left to forge her own unique solution to merging her dual loyalties to work and family. Too often she felt that she alone had failed to achieve a comfortable balance between the two.

STRIKING THE RIGHT BALANCE

Women bristle at the notion of a “mommy track”—even if they choose to slow their careers or reduce their hours—because it is founded on assumptions determined solely by gender and labeled to define only one aspect of a woman's complex identity. Moreover, the assumptions are dangerous because any kind of tracking assumes uniformity among the group. No such uniformity exists. First, there is no one right way for a mother

to lead her life. Second, people's priorities cannot remain fixed over time. At different phases of their lives, women recalibrate the balance between profession and children as careers evolve and family circumstances change.

Like men, women derive personal reward and satisfaction from achievement in their careers. Where women differ from many men is in the expectations they hold for balance in their lives. Realistic about how much one person can accomplish in a given day, women expect to have to make some trade-offs between work and family. Families, however, have absorbed all the stress and strain they possibly can. The entire responsibility for accommodation is taking place on the home side of the equation.

As things stand today for working mothers, professional ambition is pitted against maternal pride under a seemingly no-win set of rules. Working mothers hire baby-sitters to cover the home front when important clients must be entertained for dinner, yet these same mothers feel guilty when they leave work early to attend a piano recital or championship game. Briefcases can come into the home every night, but it is the rare parent who feels comfortable bringing a child to work on a school snow day. The intractable work culture often translates the work/family dilemma into an either-or choice, with little room for reasonable accommodation between the two.

Women's gender does not render them any less able than men to excel in their chosen profession. They can do their jobs as well as any man. But no one can be expected to do the impossible: to be an involved parent with little or no recognition in the workplace that they have another life outside the office.

The term *working father* is not even in our vocabulary. Society's traditional expectations exert no pressure on fathers to star as both parent and professional. And the term *working mother* is itself a misnomer because all mothers "work" long hours even if not at a paid job.

As long as a woman plays by the male rules of the game, the career doors stay open. Proving she can do her job is not enough. As soon as she proposes a different agenda for combining a career with an involved family life, doors in the professions begin to swing shut. Despite the rapid evolution and expansion in women's roles in the last decade, the roles of men at home and the rules for success in the office have barely moved. Reflected in deeply entrenched attitudes about how to be a "professional," and intensified by the realities of who does what in the home, today's rules of work dictate that one critical aspect of a woman's life is destined to be out of balance.

Because there is so little real support for parenting issues in the workplace, women view the high potential for collision between their careers and their children as a unique personal problem. No one—man or woman—can have it all without support from the workplace and genuine help at home. Women, regardless of how they have chosen to lead their lives, can now breathe a collective sigh of relief that superwoman is dead. Women are not alone in the self-doubt and ambivalence they face in their individual struggle to locate the right balance between two important aspects of their lives.

GETTING THE TRUE PICTURE

We set out to discover how women in the professions are confronting their complex agendas of career, children, spouses, and personal life satisfaction. We thought that if we surveyed some of the "best and brightest" we would learn how they have achieved balance through creative approaches to the work/family question. If anyone would have the answers, women from Harvard's Business, Law, and Medical schools would seem to be likely candidates. We assumed that the women we surveyed had it all. What we found is not what we expected.

Women in the professions are *doing* it all. They have proven