

# *Mothers* on the Fast Track



*How a New Generation Can  
Balance Family and Careers*



Mary Ann Mason & Eve Mason Ekman

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Can Balance Family and Careers

MARY ANN MASON  
EVE MASON EKMAN

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## Mothers on the Fast Track

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# Introduction

## Do Babies Matter? Mothers on the Fast Track

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“It’s 51 percent!” exclaimed my assistant Judi, thrusting new registration figures before my eyes. “Women are 51 percent of our new graduate student class. This makes history!”

This was the year 2000. I had just become the first woman graduate dean at the University of California, Berkeley. Berkeley confers more doctorates than any other university in the country, and the university’s eleven professional graduate schools cover almost all professions, from law to public health to journalism to business administration. There are nearly 10,000 students in all.

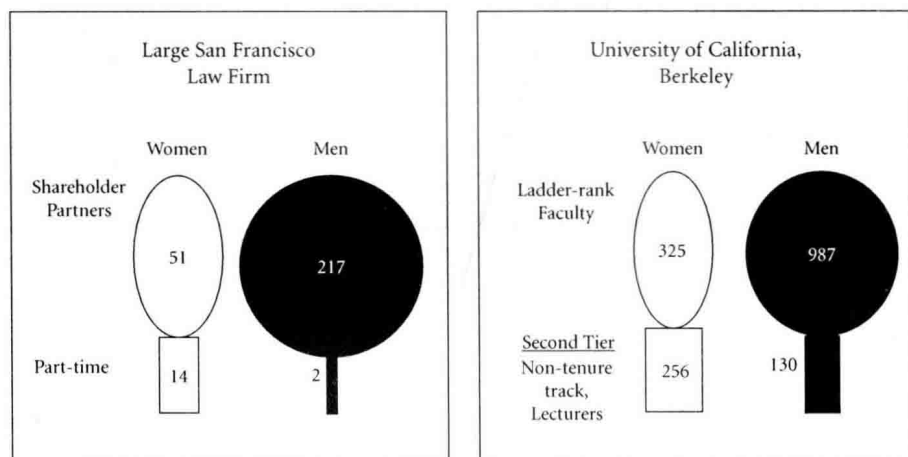
As I greeted this incoming class of 2,500 new graduate students, more than half of whom were women, I realized that this was a moment anticipated by the women of my generation who had struggled to open the gates to high-status, male-dominated occupations. Achieving graduate degrees, we believed, would lead to professional and economic equality. We hoped that once a critical mass of women entered the “fast track,” the power balance between men and women would inevitably be achieved in boardrooms, courtrooms, and university classrooms.

I was excited and proud when I announced this historic first to the evenly mixed audience of young graduate men and women. But soon my enthusiasm was tempered by a familiar reality check at a faculty senate meeting that same afternoon. Looking around the chamber, I saw only a few female faces. As a longtime faculty member, I was accustomed to this dynamic; at Berkeley, only 23 percent of the tenure-track faculty are women, a number that has been stagnant for about a decade. This is not simply a chronological lag. Last spring, women received 46 percent of the doctorates granted at Berkeley, but this fall only 26 percent of the new faculty hires on campus were women. This hiring-gap of nearly two to one has been the norm for four decades.<sup>1</sup>

Women are even less visible in the administrative power structure. At the first meeting of deans I attended that fall of 2000, I stood out as the only

woman at the conference table. “You’re in a box by yourself,” the dean next to me commented, studying the organizational chart of deans. Alas, it was true. Equal student participation in graduate studies is a step forward, but it’s too early to declare victory in academia.

The imbalance between gender equity at the beginning of the race toward career success and male dominance at the finish is still the norm in the university world. In fact, it’s also the norm in law, medicine, and the corporate world. The number of women sitting at a senior partners’ meeting in a major law firm, a chiefs’ meeting in a university hospital, or the top executive conference in a Fortune 500 firm would look very much like our deans’ meeting.



These two trends—women entering graduate and professional schools in record numbers and fewer reaching the top of their professions—raise important questions. What happens between school and the boardroom that causes large numbers of women to drop off of this fast track? When does the exit start to occur? And what solutions will stem this retreat? Can mothers remain on the fast track? And if so, what is the secret to their success?

In this book we will address such questions by applying our research on careers and family over the life course. We will both frame the issues and offer solutions. The qualitative component of our research—interviews with dozens of women pursuing or sidetracked from fast track careers—tells the story of how these issues play out in women’s lives. Drawing on both their advice and our research, we will offer personal and institutional strategies for helping women succeed as professionals, wives, and parents.



The idea for this book came in part from my women graduate students who frequently ask, When is a good time to have a baby? While this question seems straightforward, there are no easy answers and few studies have tackled this question. We know more about why women don't succeed than about how they do. Arlie Hochschild in *The Second Shift* shows that, in spite of women's massive entry into full-time employment, they still bear the burden of family care at home.<sup>2</sup> Ann Crittenden, in *The Wages of Motherhood*, argues that working mothers lose out on all economic fronts in large part because our society doesn't value motherhood.<sup>3</sup> And Joan Williams in *Unbending Gender* observes that the inflexible "ideal worker" model of the American workplace discriminates against mothers, undermining the purpose of Title VII.<sup>4</sup> When I examined these issues in my earlier book, *The Equality Trap*, I suggested that opening the door to women without changing the structure of the workplace was setting up mothers for failure.<sup>5</sup>

Some women, however, do manage to have it all, juggling family and fast-paced careers. When do women who stay on the fast track have their children? When do their careers take off? Studies to date have counted the heads of women who have succeeded in a particular profession, but they have not systematically tracked women over their career span. There is little understanding of why some women succeed or what happens to women who drop out. Perhaps only now, a full generation after the major entrance of women into male-dominated professions, can we begin to see clearly how the story of women on the fast track unfolds from university education to retirement.

This question of mothers on the fast track is of great interest to me as someone who is part of a generation that saw major shifts in workplace opportunities for women. I myself was able to walk through newly opened doors and balanced my own juggling act. My graduate students, 4,000 of them over the years, have shown me that women's experiences have not been dramatically simplified in recent years. I've watched many capable women struggle to find their own way. The question is even more pressing for the generation of my daughter and co-author, Eve Mason Ekman. As a twenty-six-year-old graduate from a master's program, Eve is part of a group of young women now passing into adulthood without clear models for how to have a career and family but facing a path strewn with obstacles. "When is a good time to have a baby" may not be a question that every twenty-six-year-old thinks to ask herself. But few young women even consider that the fertility window is at odds with career ambitions, which means that finding new pathways and

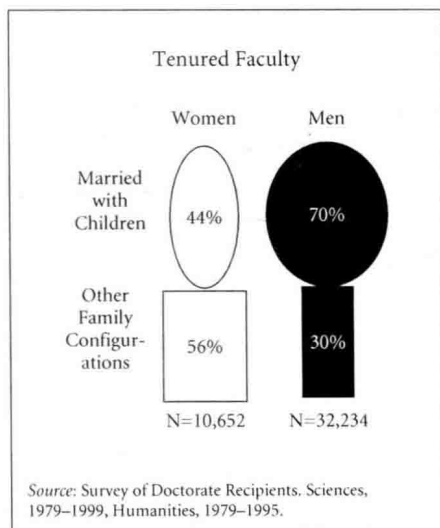
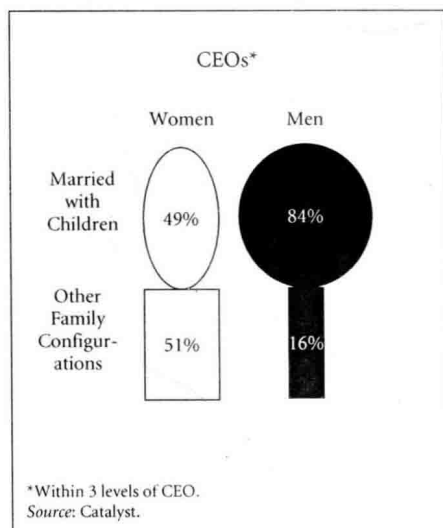
solutions—and soon—for this new generation of mothers is invested with utmost importance.

In my first year as graduate dean, I formed a research team to study how family formation affects the careers of both men and women in academia over the course of their lives. We called our pursuit the Do Babies Matter? project. The name stuck because it points to the heart of the matter, often skirted by those who believe there is equal opportunity in America today. It also touches a nerve for young women entering the fast track who wonder what family compromises they will have to make in order to succeed.

After making some surprising discoveries in academic fields, we decided to expand our investigation to include other fast track careers in law, science, medicine, and the corporate world.<sup>6</sup> We believed that finding similar patterns in these career tracks would indicate that we were discovering the shape and challenge of motherhood in all fast track professions.

My daughter requested that we add the media world, her chosen career field. Journalism in all forms—newspaper and magazines, TV, and radio broadcasting—attracts talented, ambitious women. Although the career track for women in these professions does not require a graduate degree as an entry-level requirement, the similarities are still more compelling than the differences. The long-term career track in media looks much like the other fast track professions, with a disproportionate density of women in the lower ranks and

### Married with Children



only a scattered few at the top. These women are far less likely to be married with children.

All of these male-dominated professions now have a significant representation of women, and all have begun to investigate the career paths of female employees over time. Each offers adequate or better data sources for study. The best of these data sets is the Survey of Doctorate Recipients (sponsored largely by the National Science Foundation), which tracks 160,000 Ph.D.'s in all disciplines throughout their career until age seventy-six. The American Bar Association and the American Medical Association have also undertaken long-term surveys of the career lives of men and women. *Catalyst*, a business journal, and a variety of other professional organizations have surveyed men and women in the corporate world. The 2000 U.S. census also offers a rich snapshot of Americans' experience with family and career.

Our investigation uncovered stunning similarities across these professions and revealed the common problems experienced by fast track professionals. Initially our careful study of numbers and trends didn't explain exactly why some women drop out and why others stay the course and reach the top. We had framed the problems but not the solutions. Finally we realized that an effective way to complement the research was to learn from the experiences of individual women struggling and succeeding with these very issues. One of the core components of this book is based on identifying and interviewing women in fast track professions. Almost all of these interviews were conducted by my daughter, Eve Ekman.

The issues raised in this book aren't just an academic matter for me. Coming of professional age during the women's movement in the late 1960s, I rode the ups and downs of history through the last third of the twentieth century. I was part of the first large wave of women to enter a doctoral program; in my case American history, which is still my passion. When I entered graduate school, an unusual choice for a woman, I considered this accomplishment to be entirely my own. I was unaware that my generous fellowship and very welcoming graduate program were products of the galloping economy of the times, which created a huge growth in higher education and opportunities for Ph.D.'s to fill the faculty ranks of burgeoning new state universities.

I was also an unknowing beneficiary of the civil rights movement that had begun in the 1950s and later the new feminist movement. In 1966 author-activist Betty Friedan put down her pen to take to the streets after her surprise best-seller *The Feminine Mystique*, which sharply critiqued 1950s domesticity.

Friedan and fifteen other professional women founded what became the National Organization for Women (NOW) in a hotel room in 1966. Friedan and Dr. Pauli Murray coauthored NOW's original statement of purpose, which began, "The purpose of NOW is to take action to bring women into full participation in the mainstream of American society now, exercising all the privileges and responsibilities thereof in truly equal partnership with men."

What brought these women together was gender inequality in the workplace and lax enforcement of employment discrimination laws that had been extended to include gender. Most male-dominated professions like law, medicine, and the corporate world were closed to them. Breaching these enclaves of power was breaking through the "glass ceiling." In addition, true gender equality, they decided, had to occur both in the workplace and in the home; men and women must share equally in all aspects of domestic life, including child rearing.<sup>7</sup>

But the strongly individualistic rhetoric of the feminist movement didn't always match women's personal experiences or desires. From the beginning of my graduate studies, I was torn between family and career. Like many of my classmates, I had married one month after graduating from college in 1965. And like most women of that era (and many today), I deferred to my husband's career. His job brought us to California, where the job market for women with newly minted Ph.D.'s was still closed. My only options were poorly paid part-time lecturer positions, which I pursued while completing my degree. Our son, Tom, was born in 1972, and after a lot of agonizing, I chose to pursue law—a profession I believed would offer more opportunities and fewer geographical constraints.

I did not do well in the probationary period of law practice, also known as the associate years. My husband and I divorced and I gave up law after a year, unable to deal with the demands of work and home. With few friends or relatives to help with child care, I could not manage the long hours required to succeed as an associate. Although I considered myself a failure for leaving the practice of law, I have come to understand that women often consider such choices personal failures, even when there are no real options. Even mothers with a stable marriage and a strong support system struggle to hold on to their career during these difficult make-or-break years.

For nearly a decade I worked in the "second tier" as a midlevel, non-tenure track academic administrator at a small college. These years gave me breathing

space to focus on my family obligations, remarry, and welcome my second child, Eve, in 1980.

Unlike thousands of other women who have stepped or fallen into the second tier to accommodate family obligations, I was given a second chance when my children were older. I was offered an entry-level, tenure-track faculty position at UC Berkeley at age forty-four. For someone over forty to be hired for an entry-level position in any of the fast track professions is unusual. The “résumé gap”—the years between the completion of training and the first fast track job—usually damns the applicant’s résumé to the “no interview” pile. In fact the central administration initially turned down my appointment because of my age, but a strong dean championed my cause.

I was offered this opportunity because I wrote a book in the late 1980s while working in the second tier. This accomplishment was made possible by a six-month break to accompany my husband on his sabbatical to England. That precious time, with our children in English schools, allowed me to rethink, retool, and begin a book. Having struggled—and failed—to make it on the fast track, I had personal insight for my book, *The Equality Trap* (1988), which expressed concern about encouraging women to run on the fast track without changing the track itself to accommodate families. I marshaled my historical and legal knowledge to make the best case I could for transforming the workplace. In retrospect, I suspect I was also trying to make sense of my own failure.

The rare opportunity to return to academia after years in the second tier was a defining point in my career. I was able to deal with the stressful make-or-break years leading to tenure in large part because I was older and more experienced, and my children were older. Eve, then nine, and Tom, sixteen, no longer made the exceptional time demands of early childhood. They were healthy and engaged in their school and social communities. And my husband Paul Ekman, also a professor, was a helpmate both emotionally and financially.

My years as a professor, and more recently as graduate dean, have been deeply satisfying, just as I had hoped they would be years ago as a graduate student. Although my story is exceptional in some ways, it reflects the critical work–family junctures that often halt or sidetrack women’s professional trajectories.

Our goal in this book is to help finish the task that my generation began when we opened professional doors for women to assume an equal place alongside men in the workplace and at home. This book offers a road map of

how careers unfold, what to expect at each stage of life, and how to maneuver each obstacle in order to achieve life goals.

For women like my graduate students, who work hard to contribute to their chosen profession and have a family, I hope the material and advice in these pages will make the road ahead more manageable. This book is also for men like my male graduate students. Transformative structural changes in the workplace to accommodate family must work for them as well, or they will fail. They must have the opportunity to become full participants in raising their children. Finally this book is for Eve's generation, to help young professional women in all professions understand their struggle and inform the choices that they make in order to create the new paradigms for family and career success.

—Mary Ann Mason

While many women of my generation experience anxiety over the sheer number of career choices facing us, we often forget that just three decades ago the opportunity to pursue a career in any arena was not a given. In one respect the women of my mother's generation had it easier: there were clear directions for how they should proceed after graduation. For my mother and her friends, receiving a wedding band soon after accepting a college diploma was the norm and husbands' careers came first. But current graduates will find no prescribed path once they receive their degree. Young professionals focus their time on developing and pursuing their individual identity and career. Our generation treasures a prolonged single period that lasts well through the twenties and often into the thirties. Young women and men focus on their careers before considering their future family plans. The interviews I conducted for this book have given me the opportunity to consider the paths chosen by the women navigating this freedom and family bind.

None of the successful mothers I interviewed consider themselves super-women. They believe that most mothers can do what they have done, and they freely share their strategies. Several common strategies cross generations and professions: time management skills, knowing when to say no, and controlling "mother guilt." Almost all of these women experienced remorse (mother guilt) at some point and worried that they were not spending enough time with their

children, but they all found ways to manage their anxiety and pursue their career goals.

These successful women offered thoughtful suggestions about structural reforms that are or should be in place, which would make their professions more family friendly and the second tier a better option. Many of these structural changes focus on the make-or-break years, roughly the decade between ages thirty and forty—the period of maximum demand that occurs at the beginning of the fast track career and leads to tenure, partnership, or CEO. During these years the time demands of work make parenthood nearly impossible for women, yet these are the years that offer women their last chance at parenthood. The career clock and the biological clock are on a collision course. It is during the make-or-break years that most women drop out of the fast track.

Yet women make the decisions that determine their career paths during the student and young adult years, often based on little information and few role models. And again later in life, those who survive the make-or-break years must still deal with obstacles to leadership, which often prevent them from shattering the second glass ceiling and achieving the highest positions in their profession. I interviewed these pioneer women in their bay view offices, in former gentlemen's clubs, and in their homes—from a minimansion in Oakland to an elegant apartment overlooking Central Park. These women, now poised and powerful, had been on the front lines, battling their way into positions that were not considered theirs to occupy. Some were met with overt bias and even ridicule, and most faced undercutting and invisibility. Yet they prevailed. These are their stories.

—Eve Mason Ekman

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