



Why No One Can “Have It All” and Why That Matters for Everyone¹

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New trends in the organization of economic and private life have added a major wrinkle to the still unfolding gender revolution. The decline of the standard employment relationship has eroded the ability of salaried and wage-earning men to support a family household, while the decline of permanent, heterosexual marriage has undermined the traditional gender bargain that encouraged most women to provide unpaid caregiving in exchange for a partner’s financial support. These widespread social shifts have created new economic insecurities and intensified work–family conflicts. Drawing on 120 in-depth interviews with a diverse group of mid-life adults, I examine how workers and parents are navigating these new conflicts and insecurities. Four work-care strategies are emerging, all of which involve significant trade-offs. Among the four patterns, however, people are most satisfied with an egalitarian strategy. A substantial proportion in the other groups, which include traditional couples, childless singles, and unequal dual-earners, also express a preference for a more egalitarian sharing of work and care, although the preference for equality varies by gender. Effective social policy thus needs to insure that everyone—including people of all genders, class positions, and family circumstances—has the opportunity to forge a more equal, blended, and secure division of work and caregiving.

KEYWORDS: breadwinning; caregiving; family; gender; new economy; work.

INTRODUCTION

Since the outset of the gender revolution, deep-seated debates have roiled American political discourse about how to combine earning a living and caring for children and other dependents. The substance of these controversies has shifted over the decades, but like a game of whack-a-mole, new disagreements continually emerge even when earlier ones show signs of fading. In the earliest stages, even declaring that a revolution was underway was controversial. While some analysts argued that the unprecedented rise in women’s labor force participation represented the emergence of a “subtle revolution,” others dismissed this development as a temporary blip that would soon revert to past patterns as middle-class women found that pursuing a sustained work career inevitably clashed with caring for offspring.³

¹ An earlier version of this article appeared in a Council on Contemporary Families briefing paper entitled “Parents Can’t Go It Alone: What to Do for Parents to Help our Next Generation,” edited by Barbara J. Risman. <https://contemporaryfamilies.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Parents-Cant-Go-It-Alone-Symposium-2019-Full.pdf>.

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³ In 1970, an edited volume titled *The Subtle Revolution: Women at Work* marks one of the earliest efforts to examine the significance of women’s rapidly rising entry into the paid labor force (Smith 1979). By 2003, however, a controversial cover article published in *The New York Times Magazine* declared an “opt-out revolution” was sending college-educated women back to a life of domesticity (Belkin 2003).

Five decades later, the debate about whether the rise in women's employment represents a major social transformation or simply a tweak in the long-standing arrangement that holds men responsible for breadwinning and women for caregiving still lingers.⁴ Even though women's employment is undeniably integral to the twenty-first century economy, the rise in their labor force participation has stalled—albeit at a much higher level—and they continue to hit glass ceilings at work and to perform the lion's share of caregiving at home.⁵ In this context, it might be tempting to conclude, as the saying goes, that *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. After all, even after decades of research demonstrating the benefits that employed mothers offer their families, we are still debating whether or not it is harmful to children when their mothers go to work.⁶

Yet contemporary shifts in how work and private life are organized have added a major new dynamic to the still unfolding gender revolution. At work, the erosion of the “standard employment relationship” means that vast swaths of salaried and wage-earning men cannot support a household on their own.⁷ In personal life, the rise of more diverse and fluid family forms has also undermined the assumption that marriage provides a permanent haven where women can depend on a partner for financial stability. Taken together, these trends have converged to create a social landscape in which close to two-thirds of mothers now serve as a household's sole or co-breadwinner and more than 70% will serve as a family breadwinner in their first 18 years of motherhood.⁸

Amid these massive demographic, social, and economic shifts, controversies about women's employment persist, but they share the headlines with additional concerns. Now that most women can no longer serve as their family's full-time caregiver, who will rear our children and how? And now that most men can no longer claim a special status as their household's primary earner, what does it mean to be a man?⁹ The rise of concerns about both a childcare crisis and a crisis of masculinity reveal a failure to address the challenges posed by the gender revolution. They also indicate new forms of backlash against the principle of gender equality. Like the proverbial canary in the coal mine, they signal that the gender revolution—and the unease it creates—has moved to a new stage. If concerns about a stall in women's

⁴ Even though single, working-class, and poor women have held paid jobs since the rise of industrialism, the emergence of women's demand for full-participation and equal opportunity beyond the realm of domesticity, especially among middle-class mothers, represents something new.

⁵ For an overview of the current state of the “uneven and stalled” gender revolution, see England et al. (2020) or Hummer (2021).

⁶ “Family values” traditionalists continue to claim that women—especially middle-class women—and their children are both better off when mothers stay home. Yet in an obvious, if often overlooked contradiction, these same groups also argue that women who depend on government support should be required to hold a paid job.

⁷ A major aspect of the “new economy” is the decline of the “standard employment relationship” with “nonstandard work” that “carries no assumption of continued employment,” in contrast to the once standard employment relationships that carried the expectation that “employment will be at least open ended with an indefinite future, if not ‘permanent.’” (Kalleberg and Marsden 2015).

⁸ See Glass et al. (2021), Glynn (2019), Fry et al. (2023). Glynn reports that 41% of mothers share breadwinning with a partner and 23% are the main breadwinner for their family.

⁹ Pointing to the erosion of men's earnings and their drop relative to women in educational attainment, Strasser (2023) states in a recent New York Times newsletter that “the crisis of masculinity, as it's often called, is something of a hot topic right now.” The accompanying article, entitled “What Does Healthy Masculinity Look Like,” declares that “men are struggling by most measures.”

progress seem inconsistent with worries about a decline in men's status, they actually reveal that a more complex and multi-layered social landscape has emerged. Uncertain employment prospects face contemporary workers, including men whose college-educated and unionized fathers could depend on a steady job. Equally uncertain caregiving options constrain contemporary parents, including middle- and working-class parents who were reared by home-centered mothers. These widespread economic and family transformations pose unprecedented challenges for women and men alike.

Given the scope and contradictory shape of these shifts, it is no mystery why people continue to argue passionately about the gender revolution. Americans cannot agree on what is happening, much less on what to do about it. The resulting political stalemate has only grown more intense, making a humane collective response seem even more elusive. To address this stalemate, a necessary (if not sufficient) step is to gain a clearer understanding of the different ways these insecurities and work-care conflicts are playing out in the lives of new generations of workers and parents.

With these questions in mind, I conducted face-to-face depth interviews with 120 (self-identified) women and men between the ages of 33 and 47—the period of life when the challenges of building work and family ties reach their peak.¹⁰ To understand how these changes are unfolding in contexts at the cutting edge of change, the interviews took place with mid-life adults living in two central locations of the new economy: the Silicon Valley area, stretching from San Jose in the south to the East Bay and north of San Francisco, and the New York metropolitan area, including center city, outer city, and suburban locations. These large geographic areas yielded a diverse group of informants. Equally divided between self-identified women and men, they came from varied racial, economic, and educational backgrounds. They were also living in diverse family arrangements, including singles, cohabiters, and married couples.

FINDINGS

My interviewees recounted varied and complex experiences, but they could be distilled into four major patterns of response to the pervasive conflicts between earning a living and caring for others. At one end of the work-care spectrum, close to a fifth (18%) of the participants had adopted what can be termed a “hyper-traditional” arrangement that emphasizes fathers who were putting in excessively long workweeks and mothers who were engaged in extremely time-intensive parenting. Concerns about job security prompted husbands to work long days, nights, and weekends to assure their employers of their outsized commitment to their jobs. In a parallel way, wives held themselves to a vague standard of “intensive parenting” by devoting their utmost attention to child rearing.¹¹ Although these mothers and

¹⁰ The participants all identified as either a woman or a man, with one person identifying as a transgender woman.

¹¹ Ishizuka (2018) reports that intensive parenting standards are not confined to the middle class.

fathers felt overworked in their separate spheres and deprived of time on their own or together as a couple, they did not believe they could risk doing anything else.

At the other end of the spectrum, almost a quarter (23%) opted to “sidestep the conflict” by remaining single and childless or, in the case of some fathers, by remaining uninvolved with any offspring in the wake of a breakup. About as many women as men followed this path, but for different reasons. The men were typically unable (or unwilling) to find steady work and consequently concluded they could not afford to take on the financial and emotional responsibilities of marriage and parenthood. The women, in contrast, valued work and personal autonomy too much to compromise their goals by taking on the demands of caring for a husband and children. In short, while the hyper-traditional couples recreated traditional gender patterns in a more extreme form, these “sidesteppers” opted to preserve their independence by foregoing family caregiving commitments. These two groups developed opposite responses to the same dilemma: how to manage the conflicts between paid work and caregiving in a world that demands an over-commitment in each.

Yet these groups account for only 41% of my participants. More than a quarter (28%) of the informants lived in relationships that depended on a mother’s earnings even though she remained the primary caregiver. These dual-earner couples “defaulted to her” when it came to caregiving. Although they relied on a woman’s earnings as much (and sometimes more) than a man’s, she was still expected to provide the bulk of caregiving. Such couples exemplify the continuing unevenness and inequalities in the contours of gender change. While the decline of men’s ability to provide a “family wage” left these couples depending on two incomes, the persistence of pervasive norms and structures of mothers’ caregiving left these women responsible for domestic work. These women did not so much “have it all” as they “did it all.”¹²

Carrying the load for both breadwinning and caregiving left most of these women feeling tired, disheartened, and unappreciated, but they were not alone in their frustration. Many of the men in these relationships also expressed frustration, saying they wished to be more involved in caregiving but feared that taking the necessary time would endanger their job security and long-term work prospects. What is more, these fears are not misguided. Although workers of any gender are likely to encounter pushback and suspicion if they take time off from their jobs for any reason, men—especially professional men—who choose to pull back even slightly to engage in carework at home face especially severe penalties.¹³

Many of my informants, however, did respond to work conflicts by adjusting in one way or the other to the gender order as they found it. The remaining participants (31% of the sample) were attempting to pioneer new work-care arrangements by seeking equality in their relationships and a blend of work and caregiving in their personal lives. These “egalitarians” placed a high value on collaboration in all aspects of their intimate commitments, but the lack of clear institutional supports

¹² Needless to say, the work-care strategies of this group illustrate the processes that produce a “second shift” for women (Hochschild and Machung 1989).

¹³ Williams et al. (2013) document what they call a “flexibility stigma,” and Pedulla (2020) demonstrates that employers view men who take a timeout from paid work with more skepticism than women who do the same.

left them searching with varying degrees of success for their own pathway. Forty-five percent of this group (or 14% of the entire sample) decided to avoid the difficulties of equal caretaking and preserve all their extra-domestic commitments by forgoing parenthood altogether. Like many of their childless, single peers, they looked to relatives, friends, and pets to build important but less time-intensive intimate ties. Yet the majority (55%) of this group (or 18% of the whole sample) engaged in strenuous efforts to share work and caregiving equally and to strike a balance between the two in their own lives. Doing so meant limiting their working time, even at the risk of endangering their financial prospects and foregoing sleep and personal time, in order to share caregiving. Absent institutional supports for such arrangements, including family-support policies at work and affordable childcare in their communities, they had little choice but to follow a path of *most* resistance. These obstacles left many of these work-care egalitarians wondering how long and at what cost they could sustain their efforts.

Taken together, the broad range of these patterns should remind us not to overgeneralize about the current state of the gender revolution. Possessing different resources and confronting different constraints, my interviewees responded in a variety of ways to the conflicts between securing a satisfying, secure work career and caring for others. Indeed, despite the variety of responses, they all faced a similar set of dilemmas and pressures. Rising job insecurity has upped the ante for workers, forcing many to choose between putting in excessively long workdays (and weekends) or risk losing their jobs and threatening their family's financial security. On the home front, concerns about their children's welfare have similarly upped the ante on child rearing, creating a sense that only constant parental devotion can protect their children as they grow to adulthood and prepare for the uncertainties that lie ahead.

Since all of these strategies involved significant trade-offs, they all generated some degree of dissatisfaction. But the degree and type of dissatisfaction differed across the four patterns as well as between women and men. As Figure 1 shows, only 45% of hyper-traditional women and 50% of hyper-traditional men preferred their current work-care arrangement. Regardless of their gender, at least half of the hyper-traditionals disliked the division of labor that left them over-investing in one sphere and excluded from the other. In contrast, both those who sidestepped the work-conflict by remaining single and childless and those who relied on a woman to do it all produced stark gender divides in people's level of satisfaction. Among the "side-steppers," almost six out of ten (58%) of the women preferred their current arrangement to the other alternatives, while only 27% of the men agreed. The "defaulters" who relied on two incomes but left her with the bulk of caregiving reversed this pattern. Only 18% of women, compared with 53% of men, expressed a preference for their current arrangement. While it is not surprising that women in this group were more dissatisfied, it is notable that many men also expressed preference for a different arrangement. Finally, only for the "egalitarians" did the vast majority prefer their current arrangement. While acknowledging the daily and long-term challenges they faced, 88 percent of the women and 81 percent of the men found an egalitarian arrangement preferable to other alternatives. At the same time, 44% of this group found that sustaining equality depended on foregoing parenthood and

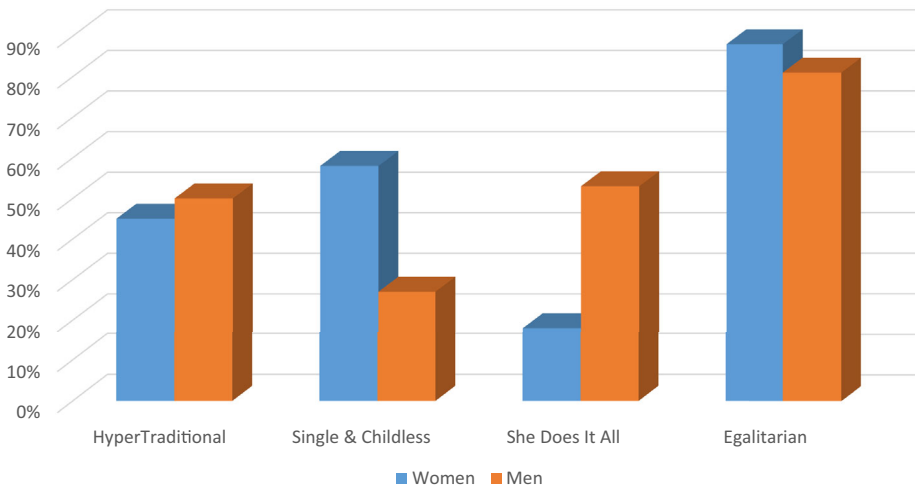


Fig. 1. Percent who prefer current work-care arrangement, by gender.

the attendant decision about how to allocate caregiving (and only some members of the childless egalitarians group expressed dissatisfaction).

Among those who were dissatisfied, what kind of work-care arrangement did they prefer? Despite the challenges facing the egalitarians, most in the other groups were more likely to prefer it. Figure 2 shows that over half (55%) of the hyper-traditional women and half of the hyper-traditional men would prefer a more equitable balance in their lives and more equal sharing in their relationship, with most women hoping to rejoin or strengthen their labor force involvement and most men

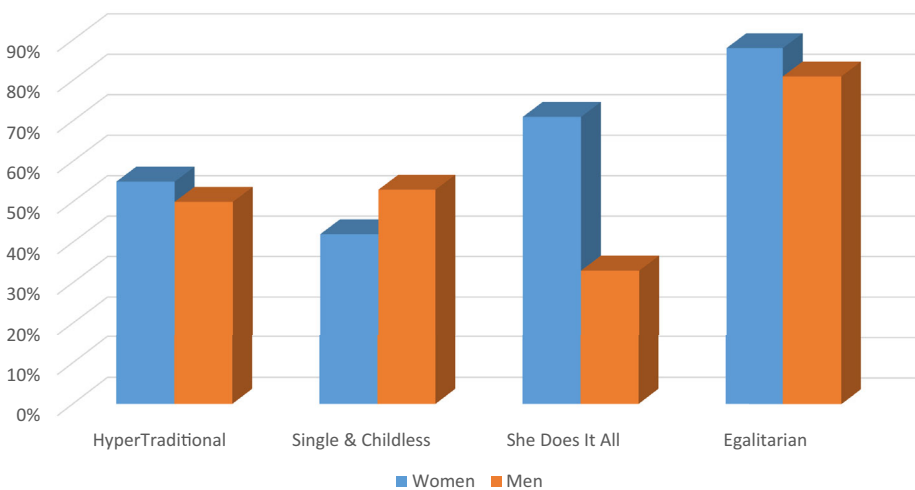


Fig. 2. Percent who prefer egalitarian sharing, by current work-care arrangement and gender.

wishing they could become more involved in parenting. Similarly, 7 out of 10 women who were “doing it all” aspired to share caregiving, and a third of the men who relied on their partner to do it all agreed—most often citing that more equal sharing would enrich their relationships with partners and children. Over half (53%) of the single men also aspired to establish a committed relationship where work and caregiving were shared, with the rest divided between those who preferred to remain single and those who wished it were possible to become a primary breadwinner with a caregiving partner. Indeed, the only group that did not mostly aspire to egalitarian sharing were single, childless women (at 33% preferring equality). Not only had they made peace with their situation, but they had also come to prefer their autonomy.

However much the experiences of these women and men varied, they all faced the collision between demanding jobs and their caregiving standards. Given the realities of a social and economic landscape that relies on women workers but fails to offer adequate childcare or widespread job security, every work-care strategy is bound to pose difficult trade-offs between two of life’s most fundamental activities. Gender may shape the specific nature of these trade-offs, but everyone must pay some kind of price.

DISCUSSION

How can and should we move forward from this stalemate? Clearly, it is neither possible, nor for most people desirable, to shore up an outdated system that relies on women to fill the void created by the absence of collective supports for blending work and caregiving. The deeply anchored changes in both economic and private life render efforts to dismiss the extent of change or turn back the clock doomed to failure. Continuing to confine the measure of a man’s worth to his breadwinning ability and a woman’s worth to her willingness to become a selfless caregiver is neither just, humane, nor workable for the vast majority of twenty-first century workers and families.

In the search for adequate ways to address these conflicts, we can begin by reframing the terms of the work-care debate. It is time to jettison the tired lens of “having it all”—a frame that sees earning and caregiving as incompatible goals and the people (read women) who seek to do both as selfish and unrealistic. This frame narrows our vision by focusing on women alone and seeing work-care conflicts as a middle-class problem. Women across the class spectrum continue to bear the burden of “balancing” work and caregiving. And men in equally diverse social positions face increasing exclusion from the intimate ties of family life—either because they must work long hours to protect a job or because they cannot find a job that provides enough to support others. The only workable way forward is to build work and care-taking institutions based on the twin principles of gender justice and work-care integration.

Concretely, these principles imply a range of social policies to protect workers and support caregivers. Amid a transformed labor force, the nation needs a new set of policies that protect workers from lengthening workweeks, caregiver

discrimination, and unpredictable job losses. No worker should be forced to choose between keeping a job their family depends on and meeting their caregiving responsibilities.¹³ Amid a transformed family landscape, parents and prospective parents need access to a wide range of child-caring institutions that augment and complement the essential carework they provide. Only equal work opportunities for women and equal caregiving rights for fathers can ensure that every household can rely on a livable income and the support of involved caretakers. The new realities facing twenty-first century workers and families make it clear that the flourishing of our families, communities, and workplaces depend on nothing less.

The rise of new forms of economic insecurity, coupled with the fading of an always fragile gender bargain that depended on women's unpaid caregiving in exchange for men's financial support, represents a social transformation as foundational as the transition to industrialism that began more than a century and a half ago. A shift of this magnitude calls for structural and cultural realignments as vast as the new realities they must address. These realignments are bound to trigger social controversy and division. Yet doing nothing is bound to engender even more acrimonious disagreements about what constitutes gender justice—and even whether that is a desirable goal. Judging from the experiences and outlooks of my interviewees, the most effective way forward is to give everyone—including people of all genders, class positions, and family circumstances—the opportunity to forge a more equal, blended, and secure division of work and caregiving.

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¹³ When the Fair Labor Standards Act established the norm of the 40-hour workweek in 1938 by requiring employers to pay overtime to selected groups of wage workers, it largely excluded salaried, freelance, and domestic workers who now comprise a majority of the labor force.

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