

2. There's No Such Thing as Having It All

Gender, Work, and Care in an Age of Insecurity

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Danny and his wife are committed to their jobs—his as a financial advisor and hers as a real estate broker. They are equally committed to sharing as equally as possible in the care of their young son. Danny believes children are best reared by their parents and does not want to surrender the chance to create a strong bond during his son's early years. He also believes motherhood should not imperil his wife's career, which is as important as his in securing the family's financial security. For all of these reasons, he is splitting his working time between home and office, trading off with his wife so that one of them is always home. This arrangement has made it possible to spend time with his son, but it has also left him feeling torn between the needs of his child and the expectations of his boss. Danny is proud of his efforts to share work and caregiving, but he is also beginning to wonder how much longer he can maintain this pace.

Dolores met her husband when they were both students working their way through college. After graduation, he encouraged her to continue her studies in biology and followed her to a new city, where they decided to start a family. As the years passed, Dolores completed her training and found a series of better jobs in new places, while her husband followed her. As Dolores thrived in her career, he took the jobs he could find and became the family's main caregiver for their three children. Yet despite her work success and husband's support, Dolores finds it burdensome to support the family on her paycheck alone, worries about her husband's growing frustration, and wonders how much longer her marriage can survive the financial and emotional strains.

After years of seeking a good job and satisfying relationship, Michelle seemed to achieve both as she reached her midthirties. She was appointed the director of a nonprofit agency helping the poor, and she was happy in

a two-year relationship. Then, unexpectedly, she found herself pregnant. Though unplanned, she greeted the news with hope that it would mark the beginning of starting a family. She soon discovered, however, that her partner did not share her vision of the future. He told her that he would not take responsibility for supporting or caring for a child. Aware this might be her last chance to have a child, Michelle decided to go forward with her pregnancy on her own. Today, Michelle is a devoted single mother, who relies on the help of good friends and paid caretakers to help care for her young daughter. Faced with the need to support a child and have a less demanding schedule, she has had to give up the nonprofit directorship for a less exciting but more secure and less demanding job at a for-profit firm.

Now in his late thirties, Jason lives alone and holds no paid job. Over the years, he has held a series of jobs, but these never offered a comfortable income or prospects for a better financial future. His experiences in intimate relationships have proved equally unstable, with live-in girlfriends who moved out or were asked to leave. Instead, Jason gets up every morning and goes to a local coffee house where he works on developing an app he hopes will jumpstart a career in tech. Jason is not sure whether he prefers his “freedom” to a stable job and family life, but he is convinced that he isn’t “entitled” to have a family as long as his finances remain so precarious.

The clear boundary between earning and caretaking, which once provided the core rationale for gender arrangements in American families, no longer comes close to describing the lives of today’s women and men. While many households continue to depend on a primary breadwinning father and homemaking mother, this arrangement no longer describes the circumstances of most women and men today. Consider the lives of the four people described above, all members of the generation that came of age during the gender revolution that offered them new options but no clear resolutions to the conflicts between working and caring. While Danny is endeavoring, often against the odds, to integrate work and parenting and sustain an egalitarian partnership, Dolores has unwittingly found herself in a different situation. Unlike both Danny and Dolores, Michelle is shouldering the responsibilities of both work and parenthood without the help of a partner for either breadwinning or caretaking. Finally, in contrast to all of these parents, Jason faces no obligations to a family or a job. Yet his situation poses its own dilemmas.

These four stories illustrate the variety of new patterns that are emerging in response to the financial and interpersonal uncertainties of today’s

“new economy.” The once-predominant “traditional” arrangement of homemaking mothers and breadwinning fathers can still be found, but it exists alongside a patchwork of alternative patterns like those of Danny, Dolores, Michelle, and Jason. Why has such a diverse set of approaches to work and care emerged? How do today’s women and men choose among them? And what challenges do they pose? To understand the options facing today’s families and their prospects for the future, we first need to answer these questions.

INTRODUCTION

Today's “Great Transformation” in Economic and Personal Life¹

Like the shift to an industrial system, the rise of a “new economy” is reshaping the organization of American work and family life in fundamental ways. Service, information, and technology jobs are on the rise, while manufacturing jobs continue their steep decline. The location of paid work is also changing, with employees logging on to their jobs from distant locales as work sites move out of the traditional office into the home and the coffee house. Finally, the composition of the labor force continues to transform, with the gender gap in work participation shrinking to the point of disappearing. The implications of these economic shifts for gender and family life are enormous. They mark the end of an era that demarcated clear boundaries between homes and workplaces, paid workers and unpaid caretakers, and mothers and fathers. Today, women and men alike face blurring—and typically conflicting—boundaries between work and family life.

One of the most important consequences of these changing economic arrangements is the emergence of new uncertainties in both jobs and intimate bonds. The erosion of job security is an integral aspect of the new economy, and it is reshaping work trajectories among workers in all levels of education and income. As unionization has declined, low-wage service work has grown, the pool of workers has expanded beyond national borders, the unskilled and semiskilled can no longer count on unions or local labor markets to protect their jobs or provide a predictable work path. Education offers an expanded set of opportunities, to be sure, but the white-collar jobs that accompany higher levels of education also no longer guarantee a secure financial future. Like their working-class peers, middle-class workers face a job market in which workers are increasingly “disposable” and career paths increasingly haphazard.²

On the private side of the work-family divide, a similar shift has occurred. People have far more options in their personal lives—not just about whether, when, and how to form an intimate relationship, but also whether to stay or leave a relationship. The option to end a relationship may be welcomed by those who wish to leave or rued by those who wish a partner to stay, but the expansion of the choice to leave has eroded everyone's sense that they can count on a relationship to endure. For this reason, getting married (like finding a job) no longer offers a predictable point along a steady path toward family and career building.

The rise of insecurity in work and personal life has profound implications for the gender bargain between breadwinning husbands and caretaking wives that rose to prominence in the mid-twentieth century. Since this "separate spheres" bargain depends on the assurance that men can and will provide a steady income large enough to support a wife and children, the rising unpredictability in men's and women's work and marital commitments erodes the foundation upon which it rests. Today, for example, breadwinner mothers account for around 40 percent of US households with children under 18, with one-third of this group consisting of married mothers who earn more than their husbands and the remaining two-thirds consisting of single mothers.³

Now that so many families depend on a mother's earnings, it would be reasonable to expect that work and caretaking pressures would lighten so that everyone could more easily blend and share the two. Yet the opposite has occurred. Workers increasingly sense they need to work longer and harder just to keep a job or find a better one. An ideal worker was once expected to put in 40 hours a week, but today he—or she—often needs to devote 50, 70, or more hours a week with far less assurance that these efforts will lead to financial security or a stable career.⁴ What's more, changes in caretaking norms add another layer to the pressures on workers and parents. Today's parents, and especially mothers, are expected to practice a level of "intensive parenting" that would have seemed extreme even to the full-time mothers of America in the 1950s.⁵ In fact, even though the proportion of mothers who work outside the home has grown exponentially since that time, mothers and fathers now spend more time with their children than did previous generations of parents.⁶

Taken together, the rising insecurity and increasing demands in public and private life have intensified the conflicts between work and caretaking. These conflicts reflect a deep disconnect between the realities facing ordinary people and the institutions of work and family, which have yet to recognize or adapt to these new realities. This clash between changing lives

and resistant institutions has created cross-pressures on three levels. At the institutional level, the “greedy institutions” of work and family are on a collision course.⁷ At the individual level, women and men face growing dilemmas about how to balance and choose between financial self-reliance through paid work and commitments to care for others. And at the interpersonal level, the conflicts between work and care create tensions about how to divide and share earning and caretaking.

BACKGROUND

Making Sense of Change

How are Americans responding to these growing cross-pressures? Others have offered conflicting answers to this question. One view argues that we have reached a standstill, with change not only at an end but possibly undergoing a reversal.⁸ This view points to evidence showing a stall in women’s progress at work. Not only have rates of labor force participation leveled off, but glass ceilings and walls at the workplace continue to leave most women segregated in lower-paying jobs. Surveys also show that women still do more than men at home, even though the gender gap has narrowed, and that many continue to feel ambivalent about mothers who work when their children are young.⁹ Given these statistics, it is not surprising that anecdotal stories abound about women opting out of jobs and careers to stay home and rear children.¹⁰

In contrast to the view that gender and family change has stalled and even reversed, another scenario posits an opposite picture. This view focuses on a different set of findings that appear to point to women’s growing independence and men’s declining advantages. Younger generations of women are outpacing men in college attendance, educational attainment, personal earnings, and career aspirations.¹¹ At the same time, men’s labor force participation is declining.¹² One pundit has even argued that the confusion and sense of threat this loss of status evokes signal “the end of men.”¹³ Yet whether the focus is on women’s gains or men’s losses, this scenario depicts a future populated by single adults who build solitary lives rather than lives with a lifelong partner.¹⁴ The most alarmist vision of this future sees rampant individualism replacing lasting commitments to marriage, family, and community.¹⁵

Revolutionary times are always confusing, and this period is no exception. It is thus not surprising that people will come to different conclusions about the direction and nature of change. Yet both of these views, despite their starkly different depictions of the future, implicitly assume a linear

trajectory going forward. Neither is wrong, but each is incomplete. Placing these apparently contradictory trends in a larger context reveals change that is uneven, creating cross-pressures that require new integrations of work and care without offering the necessary social supports to do so. These cross-pressures undermine earlier practices, but they do not provide new resolutions that are clear, viable, or socially accepted.

In this climate, American women and men are left to devise their own strategies to reconcile the conflicting pressures to be *both* a committed worker and a devoted caretaker.¹⁶

How are they navigating these conflicts, and what strategies are they crafting? Since uneven change has created unavoidable dilemmas that require innovative responses, we need to know the full range of strategies people are pursuing as well as the obstacles that prevent them from achieving a more satisfying and secure blending of work and care.

CASE STUDIES

Findings from Research on the Children of the Gender Revolution

To understand how people are navigating these revolutionary changes, I conducted two studies. The first consists of interviews with young adults between the ages of 18 and 32 who grew up during the last several decades of rapid family shifts.¹⁷ In wide-ranging conversations, these “children of the gender revolution” reflected on their experiences in families that underwent transitions and discussed their own hopes, expectations, and plans for the future. The second study seeks to discover the strategies people are pursuing as they attempt to build families and careers by interviewing women and men between the ages of 34 and 46.¹⁸ By drawing on findings from both studies, it is possible to construct a picture of how today’s women and men are responding to growing uncertainties in work and personal life as they attempt to cope with the conflicts between work and care.

Children of the Gender Revolution Consider Their Options What options do new generations perceive as they consider their future plans? My interviews with young women and men in early adulthood saw three alternatives.¹⁹ One, which I call “neo-traditional,” represents an updated version of what we conceive to be the traditional pattern of breadwinning husbands and homemaking wives. The neo-traditional option also stresses permanent, heterosexual marriage in which one partner specializes in breadwinning and the other in caregiving, but it also includes the possibility that a



FIGURE 2.1. Ideals and Fallback Positions of Young Adults.

mother may hold a paid job as long as she also takes responsibility for the “second shift” of domestic work.²⁰

At the other end of the spectrum, a second option stresses “self-reliance.” In this model, marriage remains an option, but it does not provide economic security or relieve a person’s need to be able to survive on one’s own. Self-reliance thus means retaining a sense of independence rather than depending on a partner for economic support.

These contrasting models echo the scenarios posited by analysts and pundits, with neo-traditionalism depicting a stall in the move toward gender equality and self-reliance depicting a move toward individualism for women and men alike. A third alternative, “egalitarianism,” contains elements of each model but diverges from each. To reconcile the seemingly incompatible goals of personal autonomy and commitment to an intimate partner, the egalitarian option emphasizes fairness, equity, and flexibility in apportioning responsibility for work and care. In this scenario, intimate partners share earning and caretaking and balance these pursuits in their own lives.

Which options young adult Americans prefer and which do they expect to achieve? As figure 2.1 shows, the overwhelming majority of those I interviewed wish to have an egalitarian balance of work and care. Indeed, four-fifths of women and two-thirds of men said they hope to create an egalitarian relationship where both paid work and family caretaking are shared. Yet most of these young adults also concluded that their options going forward are likely to fall substantially short of these ideals. Anticipating great barriers to

achieving the egalitarian option, they formulated fallback strategies. Unlike their ideals, however, these fallback positions are quite different for women and men.

Most young women—regardless of class, race, or ethnic background—said they were reluctant to surrender their autonomy in a traditional marriage and thus were determined to remain financially self-reliant. Almost three-fourths of women said they plan to build a base and independent identity through paid work in order to avoid becoming trapped in an unhappy marriage or abandoned by an unreliable partner. Young men, however, said they were more inclined to fall back on neo-traditionalism. While acknowledging a woman's right to work outside the home, men nevertheless felt a need to be a breadwinner and rely on their partner to be the primary caretaker.

These findings reveal two different divides in American life. While popular attention remains focused on gender differences, there is also a rising conflict between the ideals younger generations espouse and the options available to accomplish these ideals. Women and men appear to be converging in their aspirations, but they face large obstacles to achieving them.

Emerging Strategies of Work and Care

How are today's adults coping with the conflict between rising egalitarian ideals and the lack of egalitarian options? My interviews with women and men in their prime career- and family-building years show the emergence of four general strategies.²¹ The two most evident patterns reflect the fallback positions of neo-traditionalism and self-reliance. About a third were in a relationship where men had become the primary breadwinners and women the primary caretakers, while another third were living on their own or as a single parent.

Among those living in gender traditional families, most were "reluctant traditionals" who had originally hoped to create more equal relationships. Yet economic pressures left fathers coping with time-demanding jobs and excessive workweeks that allowed little time for domestic involvement. Mothers thus had to step up and into this void, becoming the default family caregiver even when that meant pulling back from jobs they enjoyed or dropping out of the workforce altogether. These couples conform to the image of a stalled revolution, in which the arrival of children prompts parents to divide paid work and caretaking in gender-specific ways, even when the original hope had been to avoid this outcome.

In contrast to these reluctant traditionals, another third embody the concerns of those who see a trend away from marital commitment. These sin-

gles found themselves on their own rather than in a committed relationship because they faced setbacks in their intimate relationships and often setbacks at work as well. Yet single women and men took a variety of paths to reach this destination. Many women, like Michelle (described in the introduction), became single mothers when boyfriends or husbands left them to rear children on the own. Most men, along with some women, opted to remain single and childless in the wake of unsatisfying relationships and work experiences that left them ill-prepared to take on the emotional or financial obligations of marriage and parenthood. Yet, like their traditional peers, these singles had also hoped for an egalitarian partnership at an earlier stage of their lives. They may have ultimately concluded that the costs of commitment were too great, but they did not anticipate this outcome.

If these two patterns exemplify the dual, if divergent, concerns of those who argue that the gender revolution has stalled and those who see the triumph of uncommitted individualism, they do not tell the whole story. Another third of my interviewees developed a different set of strategies. About 15 percent became “reversers,” who developed relationships in which mothers and fathers reversed responsibility for earning and caretaking, while the remaining 15 percent became “egalitarians,” who were taking extraordinary steps to resist gender divisions so they might share work and care as equally as possible.

Like reluctant traditionals and singles, the mothers and fathers who reversed responsibility for paid work and caretaking did not start out seeking this arrangement. Yet, over the years of their partnerships, the men hit roadblocks at work while the women were able to find stable—if not always inspiring—jobs and careers. What began as an agreement to share crystallized into a reversed division of work and care. Able to bring in a steady if not necessarily abundant income, women became the primary breadwinners, leaving men to take on the greater share of caretaking, as Dolores’s story exemplifies. The reversed arrangement represents a practical adjustment to the changing mix of options found in an economy dominated by service and high-tech jobs, and it is not as unusual as might be expected. In 2012, for example, 15 percent of American households with children younger than 18 depended on a married mother who outearned her husband (up from 4 percent in 1960).²²

Another pattern among my interviews also represents a new, less rigid approach to enacting gender arrangements. Unlike the reversers, however, this group comes closest to achieving the egalitarian ideal that most of the interviewees claim to prefer. Like Danny, these “egalitarians” forged relationships built on the principle of equal sharing, even when doing so meant

personal sacrifices of time, money, and sleep. It also involved significant trade-offs. For example, Danny and his wife chose to reconfigure their work schedules, knowing that these choices might endanger their future work prospects. Other egalitarian couples opted for a different choice, deciding instead to postpone or reject childbearing. In the absence of employer support or affordable child care, the commitment to equality prompted couples to devise creative strategies, but it could not provide a solution to the conflicts between work and care. Egalitarian women and men thus wondered how long they could defy the odds and sustain their ideals.

All of these patterns contain diversity, and the distinctions among traditionals, singles, reversers, and egalitarians can blur as individuals move from one category to another as their lives change in unexpected ways. Indeed, the decline of financial and interpersonal predictability suggests that most will undergo some kind of change going forward. It is also clear that none of these strategies is straightforward or easy. Each contains drawbacks, and most developed a pattern they had once hoped to avoid. Even those who were able to achieve their earlier aspirations encountered unforeseen challenges and difficulties. It is thus not surprising that most reported feeling vaguely dissatisfied and some feeling intensely conflicted. Taken together, these groups nevertheless provide a roadmap for charting the options people face and the paths they are blazing as they respond to the conflicts between work and care in today's uncertain landscape.

THE CONTEMPORARY SITUATION

Implications for the Popular Debate

Considering the full array of strategies among my interviewees, it is important to see their commonalities as well as their differences. Each strategy represents a different compromise to shared dilemmas. Yet neither gender identity nor personal preferences can explain why individuals developed such different strategies. Women and men from all social backgrounds articulated aspirations to integrate and share work and care with a life partner. Yet people traveled different paths and developed divergent commitments despite the similarities in their expressed personal preferences.

Stepping back to look at the whole landscape reveals the ways that disparate social contexts prompted people to respond in different ways to the new conflicts and insecurities of work and care. While some were able to find secure, flexible work and to build a stable, egalitarian relationship, only a small minority enjoyed these propitious circumstances. Most coped with work and family circumstances that fell far short of their ideals. In the case of

traditional and reversed couples, the partner with the more stable but also more demanding job became the main breadwinner, leaving the partner with less promising work options to take on primary caretaking duties. In most instances, men enjoyed the best prospects at work and also confronted the most intense work pressures; but when a woman's job offered more security, income, and/or advancement opportunities, she became the primary financial provider despite the cultural norm of male breadwinning. Whether the job of breadwinning fell to a man or a woman, the need for one person to hold on to a job by working long hours placed limits on the options of the other. The person with fewer opportunities at work thus became the default caretaker.

In contrast, others were unable to establish a stable relationship, although this situation had different implications for men and women. When men were unable to find secure work, they tended to avoid marriage as well.²³ Single women were more likely to face a different dilemma, either opting to remain childless or to rear children without the help of an intimate partner. While single men faced a dearth of commitments to work or care, single mothers sought ways to combine work and care on their own. Finally, egalitarians confronted a different set of options than their traditional, reversed, or single peers. Although they were able to find satisfying jobs and to create relationships with partners who were also committed to work, most found that "doing it all" did not mean "having it all." Lacking flexible career options and high-quality child care, they faced a trade-off between childlessness and exhaustion.

All of these patterns reflect different ways of organizing work and care, but each entails difficulties and sacrifices. Egalitarian strategies offer an alternative to neo-traditional, self-reliant, and gender-reversed models, but the egalitarian ideal remains vague and difficult to attain. Indeed, the variety of patterns is itself an indication that an adequate set of institutionalized supports for the preferred egalitarian pattern—including secure jobs, flexible workplaces, and child-care resources—has yet to emerge.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND POLICIES

Where Do We Go From Here?

Today's women and men say they want to "have it all," but they also believe such a goal is an impossible and even self-centered dream.²⁴ Yet the desire to blend satisfying work with a rich family life is not selfish and should not be out of reach. To the contrary, the ability "to work and love" is the mark of a healthy person, and providing the means to blend work and love is the mark of a healthy society.²⁵ Framing these desires as selfish and unrealistic is thus not just inaccurate but counterproductive. It obscures the

institutional roots of the shared dilemmas facing new generations and prevents us from discovering and developing the solutions. The first step toward creating a society that supports women, men, and children from all social classes and backgrounds is thus to jettison the idea that integrating work and care is a selfish pursuit confined to middle-class women.

The new economy has transformed our ideals but left people facing a gap between their aspirations and their options. The erosion of job security for men means that women and men must share in the work of supporting their households. Similarly, the erosion of marital security means the women cannot afford to confine their lives to caretaking alone. Amid this irreversible gender transformation, restructuring our work and caretaking institutions holds the key to lessening the work-care conflicts and pressures for everyone. Creating supports for integrating work and care means changing our work and caretaking norms as well as reorganizing our workplace and caretaking structures. Here are some immodest proposals.

First, we need to replace the “ideal worker” norm, which rewards workers who put work first regardless of life stage or the needs of their dependents, with a new set of norms that value carework and reward the “flexible worker.” A commitment to the norm of work flexibility has two implications. In the short term, it values workers’ *contributions* rather than the amount of time they put in at the workplace. In the longer run, it allows women and men alike to build work careers that allow them to take time for their families without absorbing long-term penalties.

Next, just as we need to create more flexible workplaces that value the unpaid work of caretaking, we also need to jettison an “intensive parenting” norm that defines time-intensive, exclusive devotion by mothers and (to a lesser extent) fathers as the only responsible parenting style. A “flexible parenting” norm, in contrast, would place mothers and fathers at the center of a wide network of caretakers that stretches out into the community and beyond. This more expansive vision of childrearing not only recognizes the realities facing today’s parents. It also recognizes the benefits for children when they are exposed to diverse environments and can count on the support of many caretakers as they grow up.

Changes in norms are necessary but not sufficient. Indeed, American values appear to be far ahead of the country’s institutional structures when it comes to acknowledging and supporting more flexible, egalitarian forms of work and parenting.²⁶ The challenge is to reorganize our work and caregiving structures to fit with the more nuanced views now emerging among American women and men. Employers need to restructure jobs and careers to provide their employees with the flexibility to accomplish their bread-

winning and caregiving tasks how (and when) they deem best. Flexible work and career structures would empower workers to shape their daily schedules and career trajectories to better fit the ebb and flow of their caregiving responsibilities.

We also need to reorganize the structure of care in our neighborhoods, communities, and cities. In today's economy, it takes a very large village to raise a child and any dependent—whether young, old, or disabled—who needs the care of others. Now that women are no longer able to provide this support free of charge, it is time to recognize the inherent value, economic worth, and social necessity of providing universal, high-quality, and well-compensated care for all the life stages and situations, from infancy through childhood and adolescence and into old age, that require it.

Three principles should guide the construction and implementation of these new norms and structures—gender equality in work and caregiving; integration between the workplace and the home; and support for all workers to balance earning an income with caring for others. The principles of equality, integration, and balance are as necessary as they are just. These proposals may seem unrealistic, but it is even more unrealistic to imagine we can continue to build a thriving society without them. Indeed, in lieu of institutional realignments that offer a range of egalitarian resolutions to intensifying work-care conflicts, our nation and its economy will struggle amid a patchwork of inadequate, individual strategies that leave rising numbers of our citizens facing insecurity and overload.

The good news is that popular support for these institutional supports is widespread. Recent research shows, for example, that Americans want egalitarian work and family policies and support employed mothers and caretaking fathers when their circumstances allow.²⁷ The political challenge may appear daunting, but new efforts to enact policies such as paid family leave and workplace protections are signs that Americans can overcome the stalemate, stop blaming ordinary women and men for the problems they did not create, and create new supports for blending work and care in the ways that each family deems best. The future is not preordained, and there has never been a better opportunity to overcome the stall and finish the gender revolution that can no longer be denied.

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