

## Marriage and the Marketplace: Dual-Career Couples in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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“My husband and I always talk about how we should write a book on making dual-income families work, but we just don’t have the time!” – Chief Financial Officer, U.S. energy company

Are “power couples” a myth?

If not, how do they make it work?

The corporate wife of the 1950s—Betty Draper hosting dinner parties for her husband’s clients—is no more. Dual-career couples in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, do not and should not manage their careers like two autonomous individuals. Spouses still fulfill many roles in each other’s career path, whether through emotional support, practical help at home, advice, an expanded social and publicity network, and so on. Today’s couples have more options in how they combine work and family life, but fewer role models. This paper will discuss the definition of “dual-career couple,” five strategies couples use to balance work and family life, the role of culture, and the different nature of career tradeoffs for men and women.

In early 2014, 68 students in the Harvard Business School course “How Star Women Succeed” interviewed executives for a class project similar to those conducted in the HBS course “Managing Your Own Human Capital” and the 2013 “How Star Women Succeed” course. The aggregate insights from these interviews have provided a unique portrait of how the business world looks from the inside, to those men and women who are trying to build rewarding careers in an ever-changing environment, and formed the basis for a *Harvard Business Review* cover story on the strategies top leaders use to manage work and family life.

Students were allowed to customize the interview questions to their particular interests. “Dual-career couples” was not one of the suggested lines of questioning, but many of the guest speakers and case protagonists in the class had talked about the importance of choosing the right partner. In particular, the “Claytons,” a high-powered African-American dual-career couple who were case protagonists, were an exceptionally popular pair of speakers. Between the importance that class guests placed on marriage and the fact that many MBA students are in the formative years of choosing a spouse or starting a family, the topic was reflected in many of the interviews. The theme of dual-career couples was one of the six most common topics, emerging as a major theme in 19% of papers and a minor theme in 37% of the papers.

Students’ top three paper themes all had relevance to the topic of dual-career couples. The most popular theme was “Managing Your Own Human Capital,” or how executives assess their strengths and weaknesses, elicit feedback, and develop their careers. Both the 2014 interviews and those from earlier years have made it clear that the support and feedback provided by one’s spouse is a key element, for married executives, in managing their human capital. As the “Manage Your Work, Manage Your Life” article pointed out, “The pressures and demands on executives are intense, multidirectional, and unceasing. Partners can help them keep their eyes on what matters, budget their time and energy, live healthfully, and make deliberate choices—sometimes tough ones—about work, travel, household management, and community involvement.”<sup>1</sup> The second most common theme was “Relationships &

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<sup>1</sup> Boris Groysberg and Robin Abrahams, “Manage Your Work, Manage Your Life,” *Harvard Business Review* (March 2014): p. 65.

Networks”— some of the interviewees found that their spouses’ professional or community networks significantly enhanced their own. The third most frequently occurring theme was “Success in Work and Life,” or balancing professional and personal life, which is clearly relevant to any discussion of dual-career couples.

Married interviewees of both genders, for several years now, have stressed the importance of a good marriage to a successful life. In these series of interviews, however, women executives frequently emphasized that the choice of a partner was one of the most important *career* choices that a woman could make, as an unsupportive spouse could restrict their options. “Behind every successful working woman, there is a supportive husband,” the female vice president of a U.S. office supply company stated. “From the beginning, I knew [my husband] was going to be accepting of a partner who was going to be more successful than he was, explained a European real estate executive. “He’s self-employed and works at home. I wouldn’t be able to have my career without him. We both clean, we both cook—our kids see us as equals.” These women’s words echoed those of Facebook CEO Sheryl Sandberg, who wrote, “I truly believe that the single most important career decision that a woman makes is whether she will have a life partner and who that partner is. I don’t know of a single woman in a leadership position whose life partner is not fully—and I mean fully—supportive of her career. No exception.”<sup>2</sup>

Students were urged by many executives to consider marriage in the broader context of their life choices. One student wrote, “When choosing their partners, women did not simply attribute finding the right person to luck or love. Their decision to marry/commit ... was a very careful, conscious one where they seriously considered whether a man would be able to support a ‘star woman.’” A Latin American banking CEO argued for a strategic approach to marriage, saying “Choosing a partner is not a raffle/lucky draw. You must think about how this will affect your life in years to come and what kind of life you want to live.” Such advice can sound utilitarian when baldly stated. The intent, however, is not to dismiss the importance of romance or attraction, but to emphasize the notion of the spouse as a life partner, the person with whom you plan to achieve your joint and separate personal and professional goals.

### **What Is a Dual-Career Couple?**

Defining “dual-career couple” is surprisingly challenging. “Career” is not as straightforward a term as it may seem—is a “career” defined by a job title? Earned income? Time spent working? Many of our couples did not fit easily into either the “single earner” or the “dual career” category. Couplehood, too, is a dynamic term. While the majority of our sample are married and heterosexual, not all couples are. As marriage rates fall worldwide, many partners in life and even childraising are choosing not to marry. Meanwhile, while persecution of homosexuals continues in some countries, many countries are embracing equal rights, and same-sex couples can now marry in numerous parts of the world.

### *Marriage Trends*

Marriage (and reproduction) rates are declining worldwide in developed countries. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development noted that the marriage rate had a “noticeable decline ... since 1970 in almost all OECD and EU countries.” Of 38 countries profiled only one, Sweden, had approximately the same marriage rate in 2009 as in 1970.<sup>3</sup>

Within the United States, the number of never-married adults is higher than it has ever been. According to the Pew Research Center, 20% of adults over the age of 25 have never been married, and singles now make up more than half the adult population, an unprecedented development. Americans are marrying

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<sup>2</sup> Sheryl Sandberg, *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (New York: Knopf, 2013), p. 110.

<sup>3</sup> Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2014) “SF 3.1, Marriage and Divorce Rates,” [http://www.oecd.org/els/family/SF3\\_1\\_Marriage\\_and\\_divorce\\_rate\\_Jan2014.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/els/family/SF3_1_Marriage_and_divorce_rate_Jan2014.pdf), accessed January 5, 2015.

later, and increasingly choosing to cohabit and/or have children without marrying. The Pew survey estimates that about a quarter of the never-marrieds ages 25-34 are living with a partner.<sup>4</sup> CNN reported that “If the current pace continues, more than 30% of Millennial women will remain unmarried by age 40, nearly twice the share of their Gen X counterparts, according to a recent Urban Institute report.”<sup>5</sup>

Beliefs as well as behaviors are changing. The Pew data showed that Americans are divided about the role of marriage in society, with 46% of adults agreeing that “Society is better off if people make marriage and having children a priority,” and 50% agreeing that “Society is just as well off if people have priorities other than marriage and children.” Young adults are the most likely to agree with the second statement, which implies that these trends may continue for some time. And even so, the U.S. may even place a relatively high value on marriage compared to similar countries, as noted in the *Journal of Marriage and Child Wellbeing*:

Not only is marriage stronger demographically in the United States than in other developed countries, it also seems stronger as an ideal. In the World Values Surveys conducted between 1999 and 2001, one question asked of adults was whether they agreed with the statement, “Marriage is an outdated institution.” Only 10 percent of Americans agreed—a lower share than in any developed nation except Iceland. Twenty-two percent of Canadians agreed, as did 26 percent of the British, and 36 percent of the French. Americans seem more attached to marriage as a norm than do citizens in other developed countries.<sup>6</sup>

Biology and human nature do not change quickly, but social conditions can, and people will quickly adapt their behavior to it. The question of “why is marriage (and childbearing) declining” is one that will keep researchers and pundits employed for decades, and to look for a definitive answer is a fool’s quest. However, what seems clear is that marriage as a legal and social institution is no longer meeting the needs of many people. A broadside in the *Washington Post* on Japan’s plummeting marriage and childbirth rates makes a case for that country as an exemplar of what happens when marriage no longer appeals:

Japanese women, for their part, often avoid romantic relationships because Japanese laws and social norms can make it extremely difficult for women to have both a family and a career. Japan is extremely unusual in that it is highly educated and wealthy but still has some of the worst systemic gender inequality in the world; it has a European-style economy but South Asian social family mores. Professional women are stuck in the middle of that contradiction. It’s not just that day-care programs are scarce: Women who become pregnant or even just marry are so expected to quit work that they can come under enormous social pressure to do so and often find that career advancement becomes impossible. There’s a word for married working women: *oniyome*, or “devil wives.” Because they’re forced to choose, inevitably lots of women who might otherwise have a family and a job are only seeking the latter.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Wendy Wang and Kim Parker (2014) “Record Share of Americans Have Never Married: As Values, Economics and Gender Patterns Change,” Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center’s Social & Demographic Trends project. <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/09/24/record-share-of-americans-have-never-married/>, accessed January 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Tami Luhby, “Millenials Say No to Marriage,” CNN.com, July 20, 2014, <http://money.cnn.com/2014/07/20/news/economy/millennials-marriage/>, accessed January 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew J. Cherlin, “American Marriage in the Early Twenty-First Century,” *Marriage and Child Wellbeing* 15, vol. 2 (Fall 2005) accessed online January 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Max Fisher, “Japan’s Sexual Apathy Is Endangering the Global Economy,” October 23, 2013, *Washington Post Worldviews*, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2013/10/22/japans-sexual-apathy-is-endangering-the-global-economy/?tid=hybrid\\_1.1\\_default\\_strip\\_2](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2013/10/22/japans-sexual-apathy-is-endangering-the-global-economy/?tid=hybrid_1.1_default_strip_2), accessed January \ 2015.

### *Types of Dual-Career Couples*

Some of the executives who were interviewed had single-earner households. Many of the men, and quite a few of the women, had spouses who stayed at home, took primary responsibility for the children and the household, and did not seek paid employment. There were also couples on the opposite end of the spectrum: executives married to other professionals with full-time jobs.

In the U.S., women's participation in the family economy has grown over the decades. The percentage of women in dual-earner marriages who out-earn their husbands has gone from 19.2% in 1990 to 23.3% in 2000 to 28.1% in 2011. The median percentage of family income contributed by wives has slowly risen from 26.6% in 1970 to 37.6% in 2010.<sup>8</sup> The percentage of mothers who are either unmarried or who earn as much or more than their husbands has gone from 11.7% in 1967 to 41.4% in 2009 (reflecting, in part, a sharp rise in single motherhood). In 2009, the majority of mothers—63.9%—contribute at least 25% of the household income.<sup>9</sup>

Quantitative data were not gathered on the 2014 interviewees, but in 2012 we surveyed 82 senior executives, 58 men and 24 women, attending a leadership course at HBS from 33 countries in Africa, Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and North and South America. Women were less likely to be married—only 70% of the women compared to 88% of the men-- and had fewer children than the men, an average of 1.67 children compared to 2.22 for the male executives. Sixty percent of the male executives had a spouse who did not work or worked part time, while only ten percent of the women did.<sup>10</sup>

Our 2014 data set is unique. Students in the 2014 “How Star Women Succeed” class interviewed 843 executives—784 women, 57 men, and two whose gender was not known. Over half the sample—437 interviewees—were from the U.S., with 47 other countries represented as well. The interviewees' job titles were primarily at the C-suite, board member, vice-president, and partner level. Multiple industries—including but not limited to energy, retail, professional services, health care, and information technology—were represented.

Our sample is non-representative in many ways, but looking at the “non-typicals” can lead to valuable insights. These interviews with an extraordinarily high-powered sample of women in the business world gives us a picture of how far equality has, and has not, advanced. They tell a story of what high-achieving women's careers and marriages look like. The problems experienced by our sample cannot be ameliorated by better education, more money to throw at household crises, or spouses trying harder. These are already the most elite, advanced, resource-rich couples out there. Many of their dilemmas are structural.

### *Female Breadwinners*

While single-earner households may share certain commonalities, families in which the primary breadwinner is female face particular challenges. Female breadwinners cope with supporting a family in a labor market that may be skewed to male workers. At the same time, men who take on the role of primary caregiver to children may be disadvantaged socially compared to women who take on the same role. And both male homemakers and female breadwinners face the constant, low-key but never-ending pressure to

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<sup>8</sup> These data are adapted from an April 2013 Report from the Catalyst Information Center:

<http://www.catalyst.org/knowledge/do-women-outearn-men-united-states-facts>, accessed January 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Heather Boush and Jeff Chapman, analysis of Miriam King, Steven Ruggles, J. Trent Alexander, Sarah Flood, Katie Genadek, Matthew B. Schroeder, Brandon Trampe, and Rebecca Vick. *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, Current Population Survey: Version 3.0*. [Machine-readable database]. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Groysberg & Abrahams, 2014.

explain their family's choices. The extent of these challenges is largely a product of culture (national, industry, and organizational), which will be discussed later on.

Many female executives, particularly those whose husbands stayed at home or had less stellar careers, spoke of the unending task of explaining themselves to people, fighting negative stereotypes, correcting assumptions. This kind of work—some psychologists call it “narrative management,” or telling your story in a way that makes appropriate social sense—can take a significant emotional toll. The vice president of a U.S. hospital talked about how other parents always sent invitations to her children in care of her, despite the fact that her husband managed the children's social lives. The Chief Investment Officer of a North American university mentioned the frequent question “Who's looking after the kids?” when she would travel to a conference. Not only was that not a question that would be asked of a man, but the straightforward answer—“their father”—might be considered overly political or confrontational. At least one student decided to start bracing herself for narrative-management tasks early on, writing “It will be important for me to remember this bias throughout my life, especially if my more traditional family (read: Mom) begins pushing societal norms on me if my husband and I decide to hire a nanny or have my husband stay home and raise the children.”

The narrative-management task falls on the entire family. One student wrote that one of her interviewees, a vice president in a U.S. energy company, said that her “husband also told her many times that his peers would often ask him about what it is like to have a working wife with more concern than admiration. “They would say things like, ‘Wow, she must make even more money than you in certain years, that must be hard,’ and my husband would say, ‘Actually, it's great!’” A Canadian energy company division president noted the difficulties her husband had in social relationships with men and with women:

It's a lot harder for a man to be a trailing spouse in more ways. If you're a man who isn't working, you've done something bad. They always assumed we were there for his job. They would always ask “Why does she make you do that?” Others didn't know how to react and would just leave... My husband is very extroverted and social, and the only people around were stay-at-home moms. While they were happy to have coffee, he would get a call the next day from the person saying, “I have to back out.” He figured that their male partners were uncomfortable [with them] meeting a man alone. I felt like I needed a sign that said, “Be my husband's friend. He doesn't want to sleep with you.”

### *“Career and a Half” Couples*

Not all families fit neatly into the categories of dual-career or single-earner, however. Many couples have what might be called “one-and-a-half” careers. In these families, the partner of the interviewed executive works part-time, or on a project basis, or in a self-directed career pursued more for personal satisfaction than for economic gain. One interviewee's husband “had left the corporate world and taken up nature photography as a job.” A U.S. oil company president said that his wife “quit her job a long time ago—the level of income I was bringing in freed her up to do what she was passionate about—community service.” In one same-sex couple, the non-executive partner was described in the student's report as both “stay[ing] at home” and as having “her own freelance consulting business.” The consultant had deliberately stepped back her career because her partner “has not seen many examples of dual-career couples making it work with children.”

The one-and-a-half career pattern—acknowledgement that family life is hard to sustain along with two “explosive” careers, as one interviewee called them, and a “nonworking” spouse who nonetheless retains professional identity and earning capacity—was a frequent one. The fact that a lesbian couple found the career-and-a-half model the most workable one suggests that the decision to have a breadwinner and a

supporter may have more to do with simple logic and the number of hours in the day than with innate sex differences or societal gender roles. One of the male interviewees, a U.S. government writer, was committed to feminism—in his interview, he discussed female guilt, appearance norms, the expectation of women to change their names after marriage, and many other things most male interviewees rarely mention—but still said, “I don’t think it’s possible for both parents to be focused primarily on career. One of them must make the family a priority.” A childless female vice president of a European law firm pointed out that “In a two-career family, the woman doesn’t have too much time for herself since she’s either doing job, kids, home logistics.”

In career-and-a-half relationships, part-time consulting was a popular option for the non-executive spouses. This allowed them to continue using their professional skills and network while permitting flexible hours. Many at-home spouses managed their family’s investments, as in the case of a Middle Eastern tech executive whose husband, also from a technical background, researched and invested in startups. These spouses might bring in significant income, but they are nonetheless viewed by their partners, and presumably view themselves, as the primary caretakers around the house, the person who can be available when children or plumbers call. Often, they had careers that could be scaled up or down in a way that corporate positions often cannot (e.g., a therapist who can see more or fewer patients), and allowed for considerable control over one’s schedule.

Even fully dual-career marriages did not appear to be equal in a 50/50 sense, as far as careers were concerned. Many such couples had a primary worker, whose career demands took precedence, and a secondary worker, who might have a successful career but who would be the one to make sacrifices when necessary, such as turning down an overseas assignment or limiting work hours. One student wrote of a childless couple whose career hierarchy—“He has a following role and I have a leading role”—was decided when the woman was offered an international assignment. Her husband had recently made partner at his law firm, but agreed to move with her and take on primary responsibility for the home. The division director of a European real-estate company executive said, “My husband is okay with making less money than me. From the beginning, I knew he was going to be accepting of a partner who was going to be more successful than he was. He’s self-employed and works at home. I wouldn’t be able to have my career without him.” An executive at a U.S. data-processing company describes the decision she and her husband made: “He decided to make my career a priority. He got opportunities as well but we decided to bet on mine. He is successful but he couldn’t aspire to senior roles because I couldn’t follow him.” The deputy chief executive of European electric company told a similar story: “If his career had taken off, I would have stepped down but the unit [couple] made a decision together about which career would have the most economic benefit.”

#### *What Makes the Difference? Children and Geography*

If a couple starts out with the intention of being equally employed, what changes that situation? Often, children. Even some of the dual-career and career-and-a-half couples in our interviews had gone through a period of being single-earner household. Usually, these periods were driven by the birth or special needs of a child. One Middle Eastern banking executive explained that his wife had intended to continue working through her pregnancy until she “had to go on bed rest starting in week 22 and couldn’t do anything. Men will never have to go through that.” The most common reason that couples wound up in single-earner situations, or needing to make serious career compromises and tradeoffs, is because of the needs of their children. As the vice president of a retail chain recounted, “We have a child with psychological problems and my husband left his job to take that load. At first, we thought it would be a year or two.” It was more.

The other major reason that relationships become “unequal” over time (at least in terms of the two partners’ career status) is because of geography. Without children, household responsibilities aren’t enough to keep a

high-earning husband or wife out of the workforce. However, when Partner A must relocate regularly in order to move up the corporate ladder, Partner B has difficult choices to make. Many couples, in order for both parties to continue in their careers, had commuter relationships at one point. One couple split between Vancouver and California; others, less lucky, wound up in Canada and Germany, or the Netherlands and Russia. Those who considered long-distance relationships an unacceptable relationship compromise would have to be willing to compromise on their career ambitions, instead.

Children and geography intersect, of course, which makes work-and-family choices even more complicated for dual-career couples with children. Many executives—in these interviews and other interviews and surveys we have conducted—express strong feelings about where they want to raise their children. This may be a desire to expose them to new cultures, or to give them the stability of not moving, or to raise them near family. This last is something many of the women executives recommend, as a way of creating a support system. “Child care was a top priority so we lived near family and built a community around us,” the president of account services for a financial technology company said. “Without the support system I couldn’t have survived.” “You can’t replace that kind of child care. No one will love your child more than a grandmother,” noted the vice president of a U.S.-based bank.

### **A Family Is a Team: 5 Success Factors**

The married executives who talked about their relationships—whether in single-earner, dual-career, or career-and-a-half marriages—gave similar advice about what works for couples trying to balance marriage with life’s other demands. Much of this advice boils down to a simple yet profound rubric: A family is a team. Act like it.

What is a team? According to Richard Hackman, author of *Leading Teams*, teams have the following attributes: a task, clear membership criteria (it is obvious who is on the team and who is not), autonomy and authority to manage their work, and membership stability. A married couple, with or without children, fits all these criteria. A good team, Hackman noted, would do three things: serve stakeholders, become more effective over time, and provide each member with “a good measure of personal learning and fulfillment.”<sup>11</sup> Define “serve stakeholders” as “effectively manage relationships with children, business stakeholders, and members of the community,” and these three actions, as well, are the hallmarks of high-functioning marital life.

Nearly all the executives interviewed about family life, regardless of the structure of their own marriages, endorsed the notion of the couple as a team. The CEO of a U.S. chemicals corporation, for example, said that he and his wife evaluated any business opportunities by asking “Is this a career move that benefits the couple as a whole?” The CEO of an American consulting company explained how the lack of this kind of team mentality ended her first marriage: “You have to be on the same team as your husband. My ex-husband was very competitive, even to this day. He was tickled pink when I quit my job.” In family life, a win for one needs to be experienced as a win for all. A spouse’s bonus or promotion should be considered a chance for the entire family to enjoy more wealth, security, or travel. If it is experienced as a “win” for the individual executive at the expense of the needs of the marriage or the family, disharmony will result. An article about academic dual-career couples noted that “The ‘trailing spouse’ syndrome can be another source of relationship stress. If one partner experiences significantly less professional success than the other, especially if that partner has made significant sacrifices for the sake of the other’s career,

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<sup>11</sup> Richard J. Hackman, *Leading Teams: Setting the Stage for Great Performances* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), p. 23.

resentment can build.”<sup>12</sup> Long before a relationship gets to this point, a couple should be able to discuss alternate career strategies and life goals. Two academic careers in the same town may not be possible, but two engaging, lucrative knowledge-work careers very well might be.

While the marital team may—one hopes!—remain a stable dyad over time, the team’s work of home and career management is constantly in flux. Following on Hackman’s work, Amy Edmondson argues for “team” as a verb, writing that teaming is “a dynamic activity, not a bounded, static entity. It is largely determined by the mindset and practices of teamwork, not by the design and structures of effective teams. Teaming is teamwork on the fly.”<sup>13</sup> This is the kind of active, constant “teaming” that the executives in our interviews recommend. We have identified five major practices of the successful couple/family: sharing values, maintaining clear but not rigid roles and responsibilities, offering emotional support, sharing time and space, and managing external factors.

### *Sharing Values*

When executives were asked what is important in a marriage, one phrase that came up over and over again is “shared values.” They all agreed that sharing the same values as your spouse is fundamental not only to mutual respect and friendship, but to the practical necessities of running a household together. Busy couples cannot always consult with each other before making decisions. Whether dual-career or single-earner, each partner will have to make choices that affect the family without necessarily being able to check in with the other. When your spouse has to operate independently from a remote location, you want to know that they’re guided by the same principles you are.

Couples that share values can resolve conflicts more easily. Conflicts are inevitable when teams—marital or work teams—are managing complex and ever-changing tasks. When values are aligned, conflicts are about tactics—the how and the when, not the why or the what. These are the kind of disagreements that can be resolved with logic and evidence. Conflicts can become heated when seemingly straightforward disagreements are actually based on values. When seemingly mundane issues blow up into large arguments, it is often because there is an underlying values conflict.

Shared values can also help a working couple prioritize among the various responsibilities and opportunities they are faced with. For example, a principle many dual-career couples adhered to was “double-dipping.” If a household chore could double as a hobby (cleaning toilets never qualified, but home repair, cooking, and gardening did) or as a chance to relax with one’s spouse or teach one’s child a valuable skill, executives would take it on. If not, they would outsource it. Frequently, housework was undertaken to teach children responsibility. Just as a team leader needs to delegate both for her own sanity and the development of her team members’ skills, so does a parent. Typical terms people used to describe their family’s values included “helping culture,” “transparency,” and “everyone is equal.” A European executive with an aluminum company put it this way: “Normally, my wife does [housework], but when I’m home, we do things together. There are no real rules, but everybody is helping everybody. Even the youngest at seven years old knows to put dishes in the dishwasher.” “Make chores family activities. A working mother cannot do it all, and the added benefit is that my boys learn how to pitch in and cook in the kitchen with me,” advised a European executive with a chemical company.

### *Maintaining Clear (Not Rigid) Roles and Responsibilities*

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<sup>12</sup> Etienne S. Benson, “Dual Career Couples,” American Psychological Association, <http://www.apa.org/gradpsych/2006/01/couples.aspx>, accessed January 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Amy C. Edmondson, *Teaming: How Organizations Learn, Innovate, and Compete in the Knowledge Economy*, (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2012). Accessed online January 2015.



Along with *shared values*, happily married couples have *separate responsibilities*. Interviewees found it easy to say who in their household was responsible for what—who is the primary caregiver, who makes dinner, who handles the money.

Having a default division of labor keeps the household from dissolving into endless discussion every time a decision is to be made or a chore to be done. Without it, as female U.S. banking vice president put it, “Your whole life is a negotiation.” Even when housework is outsourced, as it often is in dual-career families, someone still needs to manage the vendor or service workers and the scope of the jobs. Dual-career couples didn’t so much divide the physical labor of their households as much as they did the labor of being in charge.

How do dual-career couples decide how to divide their household labor? Sometimes it is based on job conditions, as in this student’s description of a dual-career couple with one child: “Because Joe’s work offers him control over his schedule and environment, Joe takes on more of the household work than does his wife. He views this as his way of contributing, while his wife’s contribution has more of a financial flavor. When it comes to parenting, though, responsibilities are certainly shared.” Interviewees often noted that one partner simply cared more, or had a greater need to be in control, of particular areas. A typical comment from an American consulting CEO exemplified this perspective: “He’s a foodie, and I could eat cereal every single night, so he does all the cooking and grocery shopping.” She cared more about a clean house, and took the lead in that area, which may have meant engaging a housecleaner.

Note that the purpose of clear roles and responsibilities should be to make home life easier, not to constrain either party or create yet more expectations to meet. The kind of work a dual-career couple engages in—balancing home chores and long hours at the office, maintaining a social life, raising children or helping aging parents—mean that problem-solving is a way of life. When this is the case, it is crucial to develop a flexible style in which different solutions can be tried, tweaked, and discarded as necessary. A learning team seeks to minimize confusion and miscommunication, but, crucially, does not pathologize these occurrences, or seek to place blame when they occur. Rather, figuring out what isn’t working and trying something else is, itself, considered the “win.” Many of the executives we interviewed spoke about arranging their home-work balance in many different ways before hitting on a solution that worked—at least until the next international assignment was offered, or the next child was born. “You can always change it. If it’s not working, change it,” said the president of a U.S. management company. “You can’t always plan everything in advance. Cut yourself some slack.”

Besides efficiency, another benefit of clear roles and responsibilities is that it facilitates gratitude between spouses. “You have to be supportive and understanding of how much the other person contributes to your marriage,” noted the female Chief Accounting Officer of a U.S. technology company. Executives whose spouses had left the workforce entirely, or stepped back their careers, almost universally expressed gratitude and a sense that their own accomplishments would not have been possible without their spouse’s sacrifices and work on the home front. In single-earner or career-and-a-half couples, the spouse who is not the primary wage earner often claimed a particular role or semi-serious job title, such as financial advisor or even Chief Family Officer.

The married executives we interviewed, male and female, whether their spouses work or not, understand that household labor is *labor*. A clean house, a lively social calendar, and a well-monitored retirement package don’t just happen, but require ongoing initiative, follow-through, and problem-solving. One male European banking executive even carried this belief through to his work life, advocating hiring mothers who were looking to return to the workforce because, “Someone who takes care of a family, that’s a big management responsibility, they have shown what they can do.”

### *Offering Emotional Support*

Many interviewees spoke of their spouse's emotional support for their career. This emotional support can come in many forms—some people want a fresh perspective, others sympathy, others want insightful questions and savvy advice. The CFO of a North American food retailer finds her husband to be her best confidant when making career decisions: "My career moves are more emotional, less planned or calculated. I go on gut feel. I make most decisions with my husband. He understands the industry and what makes me happy, and is more analytic. I couldn't talk to my coworkers about it." "Having good support at home is not having someone who does your laundry anymore," said the female CEO of a European health-care company. "It is to have someone who is experiencing the same management problems as you."

Interestingly, interviewees had strong, but divergent, opinions on the desirability of having a spouse in the same or a similar career field. Some couples attributed their marital success to having a deep understanding of each other's work worlds. "Working together enhanced our relationship," said one woman who is head of a financial information systems company. "Our oldest son is an entrepreneur. I feel like part of the reason he could go be part of a startup is because he listened to our conversations about work." Another couple met when he was her IT client; she offered him a job with her company, and later they married.

Others preferred to have a spouse who was not involved in the same career or industry, feeling that it could lead to competition. Executives who seemed unconcerned with competition still frequently expressed that home should be a place away from one's work, and that endless shop talk with one's spouse was not a desirable thing. "You don't want the circle [of couplehood] to become just a place to rant," a male partner in a South American investment firm dryly noted. Both models, apparently, can work. It seems reasonable to assume that people either make a deliberate choice to marry within or outside of their professional milieu, depending on their preference—or, alternatively, that a generally satisfied spouse can easily spin a post-hoc story about why his or her particular marital setup is clearly the best.

People who feel psychologically safe are unafraid to admit their mistakes, to speak up when they don't understand, or to take risks. Many executives, in this year's reports and previous years as well, have credited their spouses with giving them the courage to take a business risk—from asking for a raise to starting their own company—suggesting that the psychological safety that they feel at home carries over into their careers.

The emphasis on psychological safety and the importance of rewarding communication led one student to make a serious life choice, as she related in her writeup:

This semester I got out of a 10-year-long off-and-on relationship ... Both of us were very similar people—Type A, aggressive about our careers, outgoing and opinionated, and over the last few years our paths had started digressing to the extent that we couldn't be the right support system for each other. We didn't help each other through work and he wasn't the person I first called when I needed advice. Not only did we not have the complementary skill sets, he wasn't my sounding board to get me through a tough spot.

### *Sharing Space & Time*

The executive quoted at the beginning of this article—the one who wanted to write a book about dual-career couples with her spouse, but couldn't find the time—acknowledged, one of the most difficult

challenges for dual-career couples. “I think especially because [my husband] and I do such a good job of making sure we share the responsibilities—it involves a lot of dividing and conquering and as a result we don’t see each other,” a female doctor in the U.S. said. The Chief Compliance Officer of a U.S. financial group recounted that she and her husband share office space at home, so they can at least physically be together while working: “Sometimes just to be in each other’s space is enough to get you through the crazy projects and the late nights.” A couple with busy schedules, who generally get along, can easily find relationship maintenance slipping to the bottom of their to-do list. The Chief Diversity Officer of an international professional-services firm criticized that habit in appropriately businesslike language: “If you don’t invest in/appreciate your relationship then clearly you’re not valuing it properly, and it will lose value,” she observed.

Several male executives noted that creating technology-free time was a valuable practice. One European executive with an aluminum company noted that at home, there was “No use of laptop. No phone ... Breakfast and dinner are together as a family. So all the time is family time.” Similarly, an American energy CEO noted, “When I’m awake, I’m thinking about the company. Unfortunately, this means my wife gets the short end of the stick”, but he still managed to spend 30 minutes of “disconnected” (i.e., no phone or laptop) time with her every day. A European banking chairman said that for him, “One day in the weekend is family time and there must be a huge crisis to give that up” before noting that “this world is nonstop crisis.” Of course, “quality time” isn’t just for the couple. A European female engineering executive speaks of her getaways with her adult children: “We go on ski trips together, rent a little cabin, and lock out the rest of the world. I think it’s very important to spend time alone with just your family. I get to know my children better outside of our hasty day-to-day lives.”

### *Managing the Externals*

Dual-career couples who want to maintain that status need to manage their job choices strategically. Several interviewees described early job situations as forcing their hand. “When I was 26 years old and in the Air Force, I was forced to choose a relationship path or a career path,” the female division president of an energy company said. “In the military, you’re required to move with your job, every two to four years. If you’re in a relationship and they can’t move with you or can’t do long distance, well, that’s not going to work.” The senior finance director of a U.S. entertainment company spoke of the unaccommodating culture of one of her first jobs: “When I had my first child, it was a challenge ... They were not supportive of executives in dual-income relationships. Most people had a stay-at-home spouse, and that was the only way it could work. My husband and I weren’t willing to do that. For my priorities in life, it is really important for me to be at a company that is family-friendly and supportive and understanding of parents.”

For both women, these were situations that brooked no compromise. One chose career over relationships, and remained single; the other left her job rather than attempt to change the nature of the corporate culture—or the nature of her dual-career marriage.

Other people may find that conflicts or compromises between work and family arise later in their career, or present themselves more subtly. In any case, maintaining portability—the ability to change jobs and maintain high performance and success—while key for everyone in today’s fast-churning business world, is even more key for members of dual-career couples, whose jobs may be affected by their partners’ labor market conditions as well as their own. Keeping your skillset broad and transferable, your resume up to date, and your networks active is crucial. (Particularly, interviewees who had taken time off for family reasons made a concentrated effort to stay engaged in their field through whatever means possible—LinkedIn and Twitter, professional conferences, occasional freelance work—until they could return to full-time employment.) Our interviews and other sources on dual-career couples also suggest three main things to keep in mind: industries differ, timing matters, and commuting is a waste.

## Industries Differ

Almost the entirety of our sample came from the corporate world, and were speaking to the challenges and circumstances of international business. But there are many different career paths, and couples may find that even two “explosive” careers can coexist in some professions or industries easier than they can in the C-suite. Politics, media, and the entertainment industries are all famous for “power couples” whose careers complement each other. Academia, by contrast, is notoriously difficult for married couples because jobs are both extremely scarce and geographically dispersed, sometimes taking a couple into rural and less-populated areas where there are few good jobs outside the university. All high-powered careers have heavy workloads, but industries and jobs differ greatly in terms of

- The amount of control workers have over their schedule, including the predictability of the schedule and face-time norms.
- Travel requirements.
- Mobility requirements. Some jobs require constant moves, other careers (such as academia) begin with frequent moves, and then settle permanently. Some industries are tied to a region, city, or even neighborhood (Wall Street), while others are distributed across the country or globe.
- Public-image and social norms, including norms around collaborating with spouses.
- Scalability. Some jobs can be ramped up and down while others cannot. A lawyer can take fewer clients or an actor fewer roles, but there are no part-time jobs in the C-suite.
- General availability of jobs. Is this a growth industry or one where there are more candidates than positions?

Individuals and couples who want to combine two careers with a vibrant family life would do well to consider how their industry or job would rate on the criteria above.

## Life Cycles Matter (Yours and the Company’s)

Industries differ, but even a given company is a different animal on its IPO than it was on its incorporation. While startups require endless energy, they can also be more flexible. The president of a U.S. solar-energy company got pregnant “a few months after starting the company ... when there are fewer people and fewer projects, things are more controllable. I could work out of the house or bring the baby to the office.” For women in particular, it may be easier to shape a nascent corporate culture into one that values diversity and balance, than to engage in the uphill battle of changing an established organization.

Individuals, as well, have life cycles that should be considered strategically. The CEO of a U.S. toy company agreed with Sandberg’s “Lean In” thesis when she pointed out that “The secret is working incredibly hard in the beginning of your career so that by the time you have kids, you’re high up enough that you can craft a flexible schedule.” Couples can also benefit by paying attention to timing, particularly in regimented industries with hiring seasons and lockstep promotions. An article on the American Psychological Association website advises academics to consider “staggering your careers by a year or two,” to avoid competing for the same jobs.<sup>14</sup>

Part of being aware of timing is developing a sense of what dissatisfactions are temporary and which are not. Managing one’s career—particularly in the complicating context of a relationship—requires trusting your gut while not making rash, emotion-driven decisions. This, clearly, is a difficult line to walk, which is surely why our executives so value the perspective and support of their spouses. Interviewees spoke of

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<sup>14</sup> Etienne S. Benson, “Dual Career Couples.”

many intuitive decisions, some of which did not make sense “on paper,” that contributed to their ultimate success and happiness. However, they were just as firm on the need to plow through, occasionally, and put up with boring or frustrating circumstances in order to get the ultimate reward. “Being an associate can be awful. It’s long hours for demanding clients and the work is not always as interesting as when you get to the top,” the vice president of a medical-supply company noted. Before making a major life decision, give serious thought to whether the dissatisfaction is substantive, or simply reflects a bad moment or season.

### Commutes Are Wasted Time

Much of the advice our executives have given over the years, especially women speaking about work-and-family issues, has to do with taking a big picture or long view of one’s career. “A career is a marathon, not a sprint,” is a truism cited by too many interviewees to attribute to any one in particular. However, within all that big-picture thinking and it-depends-on-your-situation advice, there is one universally agreed-upon, concrete recommendation: Reduce your commute. A European executive describes her choice to work close to home: “I looked at the train schedule and it was not going to be a good life for me to be on the 7:30 train. I only see my kids during the week about 1.5 hours a day and I work one mile away—I wouldn’t even have that if I were commuting.” Another European financial services watchdog agency executive makes the time useful: “I take conference calls while I’m commuting.” Time spent at work is valuable; time spent at home is valuable; time spent in the community is valuable. Time spent driving down highways, boulevards, or autobahns is not. The British Office for National Statistics validates these subjective impressions in a 2014 study finding that

Holding all else equal, commuters have lower life satisfaction, a lower sense that their daily activities are worthwhile, lower levels of happiness and higher anxiety on average than noncommuters. The worst effects of commuting on personal well-being were associated with journey times lasting between 61 and 90 minutes. On average, all four aspects of personal well-being were negatively affected by commutes of this duration when compared to those travelling only 15 minutes or less to work.<sup>15</sup>

### **The Role of Cultural Context**

Regardless of how competent, communicative, and committed a team may be in work or life, their effectiveness will be helped or hindered by their environment. Culture can make the lives of dual-career couples easier or harder in two separate, but related ways: the level of practical help families receive, and the prevailing notions about gender and work.

Interviewees from northern European countries with generous parental leave, childcare policies, and national healthcare did not report the same level of conflict as working parents from other countries. One student wrote that a Swedish interviewee (a retailing CEO who had been educated in the U.S.) “noted that the country as a whole found it largely shocking that Americans were still wrestling with these issues [of balancing work and family] when the solutions that worked in other countries were so clear.” Another student wrote, “American executives had a different perspective about their careers than the European ones. The former were less likely to take time off in their careers and seemed more stressed.”

Statistics back up these observations. In recent years, U.S. women’s participation in the labor force has leveled off, though it has increased in other countries. This trend among the educated white-collar female workforce is often portrayed as an “Opt-Out Revolution” (as a high-profile 2003 *New York Times Magazine*

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<sup>15</sup> Office of National Statistics, “Commuting and Well Being 2014,” February 12, 2014, [http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171766\\_351954.pdf](http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171766_351954.pdf), accessed January 2015.

article called it).<sup>16</sup> However, rather than reflecting women's preferences, the lower rates of female workforce participation are in fact the result external factors. The United States has weaker work-family policies than any other country of similar economic and political development. Americans also have lower levels of health care coverage and work longer hours than citizens of most developed countries. Hence, women are not so much opting out of the workforce as they are being nudged out (and dragged toward home by their husband's work hours and inadequate social support) and rationalizing the choices after the fact. Analyzing these trends in 2013, historian Stephanie Coontz wrote, "Today the main barriers to further progress toward gender equity no longer lie in people's personal attitudes and relationships. Instead, structural impediments prevent people from acting on their egalitarian virtues, forcing men and women into personal accommodations and rationalizations that do not reflect their preferences."<sup>17</sup>

That northern Europeans would seem enviable is unsurprising, but several interviews also mentioned that even more traditional cultures not typically associated with female advancement had their upsides. In Asian and Middle Eastern cultures, for example, it is much more of a norm that grandparents will help with children, and that even a moderately prosperous couple will employ household help, as one student wrote:

In the Middle East, it is in some ways more difficult to achieve professional and personal success and in other ways it is easier. It's more difficult because of the following two ideas: a) it's only polite for women to be less successful than their husbands and b) the home and children are almost exclusively the responsibility of the woman. On the other hand, family ties are stronger in the Arab world than they seem to be in the western world. In the Middle East, grandparents are often involved in helping share the burden of raising children. It is perfectly acceptable for retired grandparents to spend their days caring for their grandchildren while the parents are at work. Also, having help at home is the norm and is largely affordable, which greatly alleviates the work of maintaining a home.

Students whose interviewees came from many different cultures often wound up feeling that women in the U.S. and similar countries have the worst of both worlds, with little government infrastructure in place to help families, and a strong cultural belief in individualism and doing everything yourself.

The infrastructure and the ideology are not independent of one another. Government-provided childcare and generous parental leave for both sexes is not only practically helpful, but reflects and creates a cultural context of childraising as a gender-neutral, too-big-for-one-person job. In the words of one student: "While I have intellectually understood the importance of high-quality childcare in enabling women to effectively continue to work while raising children, I had not realized the power of these institutional structures to so radically change a cultural narrative and equalize the experience of men and women in the workforce."

### **Men Do Not See What Women See**

Conflicts between work and home—whether to have children at all, whether to downsize one's career, whether to ask one's spouse to do so, whether to leave the board meeting for the soccer game or vice versa—are visible and salient to women in a way they are simply not for men. As students wrote time and again, women live in a far more fraught world than their male colleagues.

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<sup>16</sup> Lisa Belkin, "The Opt-out Revolution" *The New York Times Magazine*, October 26, 2003, p. 42.

<sup>17</sup> Stephanie Coontz, "Why Gender Equality Stalled," *New York Times*, February 16, 2013, p. SR1.

Recent data gives even more weight to this impression. Robin Ely and her colleagues recently published a survey of decades' worth of HBS graduates. Relative to their male classmates, Boomer and Generation X female graduates reported less career success, less career satisfaction, and less of a belief that work and family can be successfully combined. Even more disturbing was the degree of disconnect between male and female graduates on questions of career and family. More than half the Gen X and Baby Boom men said they expected their career to take precedence over their spouse's career. The vast majority of women, however, expected equality. About three-quarters of the men and half the women expect women to do the majority of child care. Among Millennials, there were somewhat less traditional attitudes, but the discrepancy between men and women persisted. Half of Millennial men expect their careers to take precedence, while only a quarter of Millennial women assume their partners' careers will take precedence.<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps this disconnect helps explain why most of the female executives, if married, had distinct memories of deciding that they would not step back in their careers, or of a discussion with their spouse about who, if anyone, would scale down if need be. The following description from a female energy company vice president, though more detailed than most, is not atypical:

We did spreadsheets to come to the decision for him to be a stay-at-home dad. We knew we wanted two to three kids ... He felt really strongly that we should have a parent at home, and I was more open to nannies or daycare. Because he felt so strongly about that, I spent a lot of time listening to what he was really worried about. His earning potential was pretty much as far as it was going to go, and mine was much higher. I told him: Tell me what vacation looks like in five years? Where do you want to live? What hobbies are important? He wanted things like boating, fishing, and a lake house. So I showed him the spreadsheet and what it looks like over five to ten years when I stay home, here's what it looks like if you stay home. If I stay home, we will have to make life changes—smaller home, smaller boat. If he stayed home, we wouldn't have to change lifestyles as much. I kind of let him pick ... He tells me now that it's been the right decision. He is 80% of the equation for me being successful at work.

No male executive spoke of these decisions with such a level of detail. In fact, most of the men interviewed had little to no memory of how the decision for one person to be the sole or primary breadwinner came about. As one student wrote,

Both the men I spoke with talked about how they hadn't wanted their wives to quit working but somehow they did ... when the women talked about how they had chosen to go forward in their careers, they talked about how they had a lengthy discussion with their partners about which person should be moving forward and what made sense economically. For the men, it was said in a much more matter-of-fact tone that they would be pushing forward in their careers and their wives would follow.

Another student pointed out that the narratives of the men she interviewed were both simpler and more self-serving than those of the women:

While both men and women professed to making career decisions based on "the common good of the couple," ... none of the men described actually making a career sacrifice on behalf of either their partner's career or the situation of the family. The discussion of what was best for the partnership/family always resulted in the decision that favored the male executive's career over

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<sup>18</sup> Robin J. Ely, Pamela Stone, Colleen Ammerman, "Rethink What You 'Know' About High-Achieving Women," *Harvard Business Review* (December 2014): 101-109.

anything else. This discussion was quite different for the female executives. Many professed to facing a very similar career inflection point as the men, but the description of the family discussion was fraught with guilt, feelings of inadequacy as a mother or wife, and profuse empathy for the partner's career situation.

The executive director of an Australian law firm expressed that he had “an admiration for people who try to do both, but our lives have become much easier since that decision [for his wife to quit working] was made. There's no longer the constant tension of balancing each other's obligations.” Both his detachment from the details of his wife's decision, and his relief, were quite typical of the men whose wives had left or significantly downsized their careers.

There is no cultural conflict between being a good man and a careerist—quite the opposite, in fact. As noted above, men who step back their careers to take care of children often got a less-than-warm reception from others. Within the ranks of the full-time employed, however, acting like a father may be more acceptable than acting like a mother. The division president of a U.S. insurance company noted that for senior men, leaving the office to do things with their children was announced with pride; women “felt guilty about it, like they were fulfilling a stereotype.” There is a cultural script to make women feel guilty no matter what choice they make.

### **Perfectionism & Expectations**

Women still feel a conflict between femininity and work. One Middle Eastern student wrote that when it comes to working women in her culture, “Men don't care that much about women's success. Their attitude is that a woman's work should be almost transparent. She still has to be the perfect wife. The woman has to find the magic formula to be the perfect mom, perfect wife, and the model employee.” That word “transparent” is key. Many women—not only in the Middle East—are socialized to believe that success should look as though it comes without effort. Being a hard-driving professional acceptable only if your children eat home-cooked meals, your house is spotless yet reflects your personality, and your makeup is flawless.

Accepting lack of perfection is a major hurdle for women. “There really has to be a ‘good enough.’ I've watched people drop out of the workforce because the standards at work, even more for family, are impossible,” said the global head of a U.S. I.T. firm. The Chief Diversity Officer of a professional services firm pointed out

It's easier for men to achieve because they have lower expectations for themselves on the personal side ... For men, their purpose is to work and provide for the family. They're not fraught when all the moms go to an after-school meeting and you can't go because there's a client meeting ... They're not judged, where for me, women are judged. I had to give myself permission, forgiveness, acceptance, approval to not do my absolute best at every single thing.

Again and again, the female executives told the students that shame, guilt, and perfectionism were demons that *must* be slain before the students could hope to achieve their potential. Sometimes this demon-slaying is a purely psychological process. For a woman in a traditional culture, a non-traditional marriage, or one who otherwise refuses to go along with domestic or cosmetic norms, staying free of gender-based shame is a lifelong task that requires pushing back, sometimes quite strongly, on other people's expectations. “Women are really hard on themselves. If you make a mistake, be forgiving. Make mistakes and try again,” a female executive with U.S. accounting and consulting firm advised.



It is almost impossible to overstate the extent to which the men and women in our sample appeared to be experiencing different realities when it came to work, family, and guilt. Women live in a world where other people—men and other women as well—feel free to demand our attention, critique our bodies, and second-guess our desires. Women are taught in many ways, big and small, that our choices and selves are subject to the approval of others. “As women, we have a feeling that we must please everyone, and perform,” said one division president of an insurance company. “For me personally, the gender piece comes in my level of guilt,” the vice president of a U.S. hospital acknowledged. Quite a few recognized that women are guilty of policing each other: “Women judge each other’s priorities too much without knowing the full picture or understanding the full context,” noted a North American consulting partner.

Men simply do not receive these messages. As a result, perhaps, the male executives interviewed seemed immune to the kinds of self-doubt that the women had to painstakingly train themselves out of. Some of them were aware of this discrepancy. One man, the Chief HR Officer of a U.S. financial corporation, who considered himself “a great American success story” noted that the ability to present one’s self so confidently was a necessary business skill in the U.S., but that women and racial minorities could find such self-promotion difficult. A U.S. government writer, a man, pointed out that “Expectations of women are still starkly unfair. Not to generalize, but women are still expected to be the cooks and household engineers even when they work as much and as hard—even more so—than their male partners.” A male European financial executive who has done extensive diversity work decried tokenism and perfectionism with a vivid example: “Condoleeza Rice is an anomaly because she got her first degree at age 14. We need to focus on normal people.”

Many men, however, seemed unaware to the difference in men’s and women’s experiences even when their statements should have caused some dissonance. The male CEO of a U.S. energy company, for example, considered himself a supporter of women in the workplace and stated that men needed to pull their weight at home: “It makes no sense that women have to take time off to take their kids to the doctors. Men should step out of meetings and take care of kids too” while acknowledging that the amount of time spent caring for his own son ranged from five percent of his time to zero.

## **Conclusion**

Our interviews suggest that dual-career couples who do well manage their lives wisely. They negotiate career tradeoffs, or decide on a primary-and-secondary strategy, with a view toward maximizing quality of life for the entire family unit. They divide their household responsibilities and make career decisions with the same strategic allocation of energy and expertise that they use to manage their companies. They express appreciation for each other’s work in and outside the home, and communicate well.

When we look at areas where couples can improve, what we see is that for greater gender equality at home and at work, *women need to narrow their focus and men need to widen theirs.*

Over and over again, our executives noted that women can only succeed on their own terms, that seeking to fulfill cultural pressures to be a productive worker and perpetually available mother with a house and hairstyle that are camera-ready at all times is a recipe for madness. Women must learn to deliberately ignore and resist pressure to excel in areas that they don’t personally value.

Women’s guilt over imperfection would seem to drive a fair amount of inequality on the home front. This statement from a female European engineering executive is typical: “I do more of the housework. I feel guilty if the house isn’t perfectly tidy, but my husband doesn’t. So I end up cleaning up before he does.” Another student wrote of one of her male executives that “[H]e does find that his wife is responsible for more in the household than he is and is not quite sure why.” This is undoubtedly what such guilt-driven behavior looks like from the other side—but would any decent manager note that work was divided

unfairly in a team and simply declare it a mystery beyond his capacity to grasp? Men who care about gender equality need to widen their focus to encompass the amount of unpaid labor that goes into making a comfortable modern life.

The crux of the matter appears to be the deep-seated, almost unconscious belief of both men and women that women are responsible for the home. One student wrote, “Some women executives also felt that the change not only begins with men taking a more proactive role with their families but with women learning to ‘let go’ and *asking* men to take on more responsibilities, especially when it comes to children” (italics original). A female Australian general counsel noted that “Women are often the ones doing the family planning. Husbands execute.” This principle was illustrated by a student who described one couple’s division of labor: “When the kids were younger, she was the logistics person: knew who was supposed to be where when. He was the one who got them there—execution.” The director of investor relations for a North American aerospace company pointed out men’s lack of engagement in running a household: “Even if [men] do help out in the housework, just saying ‘help out’ really describes [it]. They never take full responsibility for something that is not their job.”

Consciousness-raising has its place, but the questions faced by dual-career couples cannot be solved by individuals or families alone. The fact that many couples start off dual-career and wind up single-earner means that talent is being lost. Many people, men and women, find the “work habit” an easy one to kick once they are initially pushed or pulled out of their workplaces. A stark division reveals itself between countries that are committed to gender equality and government aid to families; countries that maintain traditional gender roles where grandparents and extended family pitch in; and egalitarian but individualized countries where women (and men) are supposed to support and raise families entirely on their own. It is clear what practices enable both adult members of a family to contribute to the labor market. The problems that dual-career—and single-earner, and career-and-a-half—couples face require conversation at the level of C-suites and government agencies. Is full adult employment desirable—to either individuals, or their nation’s GDP? How should the work of caretaking, traditionally done by women for free, be rewarded? How do we keep the best-educated and most productive people in the workforce, while simultaneously ensuring high-quality care for children and the growing population of elderly? How can traditional cultures move toward greater gender equality while still retaining strong national identity?

## Sidebar: What Should Couples Discuss?

An initial draft of this paper featured the following “Areas for Couples to Discuss.” After further writing and reflection, this list, while comprehensive and good, seems a bit naïve. Couples are discussing these issues. And many of the issues are the sort that people can’t predict how they will feel, not until they are in the situation. (Whether the questions are about work or home life, executives of both sexes are fond of telling stories of decisions they found themselves making that they never, previously, would have believed themselves capable of. There is very little point to a couple trying to predict and plan for every eventuality.) Nevertheless, we offer it here as a starting point for discussion, and an overview of the kinds of issues that all couples—single-earner, dual-career, or somewhere in between—grapple with in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century global economy.

### The Basics

- Money
- Geography (where to live, how much travel is acceptable, would overseas assignments be a possibility, is a long-distance relationship ever an option)
- Children
- Extended family and parents (can extended family give help with children, would it be acceptable for elderly parents to live with the couple)
- Career/industry requirements

### The Advanced

- Is home a refuge from work, or is work/life integration preferable?
- What kind of social/public life is desired? How much time does the couple want to spend entertaining, doing volunteer work, traveling, or attending arts events? How will such things be managed?
- What kind of public image does each spouse want/need, and how can the other enhance that image?
- If either partner cannot achieve their most-desired career goal, what are acceptable alternatives that would create the desired lifestyle for the family? What kinds of portfolio-balancing activities does the relationship make possible? (E.g., one spouse’s reliable corporate paycheck may make it possible for the other spouse to take on a risky entrepreneurial venture—can one partner explore while another exploits?)