The delicate balance between work and family [CA-BC] [1]

Women are still being told 'you can't have it all'
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EXCERPTS

Twenty-odd years ago, I was in a Women's Studies tutorial at Simon Fraser University when the professor told a personal anecdote. She was just about to embark on her PhD when her adviser took her aside and told her: "You're a brilliant scholar and you'll do well, but you know you will never marry. Are you sure you are prepared to make that sacrifice?"

At the time of the telling, my professor was tenured, married and planning to have children to boot. She had it all.

Just last month, the University of B.C. hosted a conference for top executive women who talked about their loneliness at the top. Many didn't have children or husbands, and most had dismal social lives.

And if that's not enough, a recent study reported in the journal Occupational and Environmental Medicine found high-achieving female executives were more likely to have an alcohol problem (14 per cent) than their male peers (about 11 per cent) or less successful women (four per cent).

So where is the pendulum today in this age-old debate about women and work? Can women strike a balance in the quest for personal and professional fulfillment -- particularly when professional fulfillment means top positions in male-dominated fields?

Perhaps no one better illustrates the double-shifting of two high-powered jobs than B.C.'s deputy premier and minister of children and family development, Christy Clark -- the first politician in Canada to have a baby while maintaining her job as a cabinet minister.

By all appearances, Clark has struck the balance. She has maintained her political career while still having the motherhood experience. Until recently, her son Hamish flew to Victoria every Monday morning with his mom, played in her office and nursed on command.

But appearances can be deceiving. "It has been a real struggle, no question," she said. "If I had known how hard it would be, I would have thought harder about how I would do it."

But despite the hard work, what distinguishes Clark's personal-professional blend is that she has created a space for motherhood within her workplace. Granted, she is not the first parent to bring her child to work, but she is one of a rare few at that level, in that profession.

Clark acknowledges she is being made an example for others. "The premier is trying to attract more women into politics. I'm very fortunate because he, too, wants to make this work."

And while she knows not all parents have that kind of support the fact is they should, Clark says.

"There are things government can do to help encourage more family-friendly workplaces, incentives we should be thinking about for employers, even if those incentives are just a public recognition."

Marjorie Cohen, chairwoman of the department of Women's Studies at SFU, agrees with Clark in principal, but argues that her government has been utterly regressive in terms of making workplaces more family-friendly.

She points to the elimination of the 40-hour work week. "That has had a devastating effect on families." And repealing the four-hour minimum has "been horrendous for parents who have to organize child care and are not even guaranteed a minimum of four hours' work."

Cohen stresses that instead of pointing to individual women who may or may not "have it all," we need to focus on public policy. "Otherwise, you just perpetuate this going back and forth about whether women should work. And women beat themselves up about whether they're doing the right thing."

The fact is, most women have to work. This so-called "opting out" is an option only for small elite, she says. "It speaks to our romanticization of women returning to the home, but it's not reality."

According to a 2003 survey by Statistics Canada, 72 per cent of women with children under the age of 16 are employed in the workforce and 63 per cent of women with a child under three worked outside the home. Besides, Cohen adds, to call it opting out is a bit of a misnomer given that most of these women return to work eventually -- they just have the opportunity to stay home with their young

children longer.

At the risk of sounding ever the pessimist, Cohen says that while self-employment -- taking your laptop to the playground and nursing while on the phone -- sounds like a creative solution, in fact, a lot of those businesses fail. Women put in an enormous number of hours for what works out to be very little.

Obviously, we're still a long way from finding the perfect solution for everyone, but clearly there is a desire to avoid the pitfalls of previous generations.

Today, the question of whether a woman stays home with children, goes to work, works out of the home or works part-time is less about how maternal you are or how feminist you are. It's simply about what works. And the creative solutions inspired by women juggling competing needs serve not only working moms but all women, and men as well -- not to mention employers and organizations.

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