

The stress in women's lives [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Women have never had it so good -- or have they? A report released last week by Statistics Canada shows that women are taking off their aprons and picking up their briefcases at an increasingly rapid rate. They are better educated, earn more money, and have climbed higher up corporate and professional ladders than ever before.

As Margrit Eichler, a gender studies expert at the University of Toronto, told The Globe's Margaret Philp, "Women have taken on men's roles." But this success has not come cheaply or easily. According to Women in Canada 2000, a gender-based statistical report, they are twice as prone to depression as men, much more likely to take medication and, if married with children and jobs, far more likely to feel time-stressed than their male partners. Women have clearly made the connection between schooling and success in the marketplace. They now account for most of the full-time students in Canadian universities, up from 37 per cent in 1972-73 to 55 per cent in the 1997-98 academic year.

Not only are women staying longer in school, they are joining the paid labour force at an increasing rate. Last year, 55 per cent of all women 15 and over had jobs, up from 42 per cent in 1976.

These aren't just any jobs. Women are making their presence felt among the managerial and professional classes, making up 49 per cent of business and financial professionals and 47 per cent of all doctors and dentists.

These achievements have come at the cost of making hard choices. The need to earn money and the fear of losing hard-won educational and employment goals have meant that women with young children are racing back to the paid workplace. By 1999, 61 per cent of women with children under 3 were employed. That is more than double the number of working mothers in 1976.

In taking over men's roles, women have not reduced their traditional family and social responsibilities. The issue of whether men refuse to do their share, or women refuse to let them, can be debated, and frequently is, at the dinner tables and in the bedrooms of the nation. The fact remains, however, that women still do more child care, elder care, housework and volunteer work than men. In 1998, women with jobs and children spent 90 minutes more a day doing unpaid work than their male partners.

They are also far more likely to have custody of children after divorce or separation. There were 945,000 families headed by female single parents in 1996, almost double the 1971 figure.

Feminism promised women that they could have it all. The reality for many of them is that they have ended up doing it all. A typical male CEO, according to a Catalyst study published earlier this year, is male, married and over 50. Half of them have partners who don't work. In other words, the success of the typical male CEO is based on the premise that there is a complete support system on the home front. By contrast, 76 per cent of female executives who participated in the Catalyst survey were married, 65 per cent have children and 87 per cent contribute at least half of the household's income.

Given those numbers, is it any wonder that women are feeling stressed?

Women are not going to give up their jobs. Too many people depend on them to bring home the family bacon. That being the case, the most telling figures in the Statistics Canada report belong to daycare -- specifically, the lack of it. In 1996, there were 900,000 families in Canada with at least one pre-school child, but only 300,000 spaces in licensed daycare centres.

The best way to make a real difference in women's lives is to ensure that their children are well cared for in daycare centres that are affordable, flexible, safe and stimulating. Quebec has led the way in introducing a limited universal daycare program to working parents, and British Columbia is catching up with its own program beginning in January. These are initiatives that other provinces would do well to emulate.

-Reprinted from The Globe and Mail

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