

Mallick: Working women with kids need a workplace revolution . .. or else ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Women can't have both.

This is a rephrasing of the great slur - you can't have it all - that has stood in the way of women ever since they were allowed to be something more than housewives. It may be the great gorgeousness of motherhood - the prettiness of infants! deposits in the love bank! the ratty predictability of teenagers! guilt-based nursing for oldies! - that gets people's backs up. You can't have it all, they snarl, not the job and the spouse and the offspring.

It's nothing more than a duplicate of what working males with children want - a successful life - and it isn't greedy to want it.

Nevertheless women can't have it.

Anne-Marie Slaughter, who had a very senior job at the U.S. State Department, a helpful husband and two sons, has just written a fascinating piece in *The Atlantic* about her decision to quit her job because her life was freaking impossible, and how the working world has to change to accommodate families + female equality.

And she is backed by a huge steamroller force called demographics.

All we hear about now is the elderly and the getting-to-that-point. Medical science has given us the mixed blessing of living longer than ever in human history. This hasn't been balanced out by more babies.

From the suffering elderly - known as "dwindlers" - to retirees, we move on to a great tide of aging boomers blocking the Millennials from a start in life.

If only we women had had more babies, our society wouldn't be in this mess right now.

Slaughter quit to spend more time with her family, while noting that this phrase is regarded as the white-collar equivalent of "was fired" or "quit before he was prosecuted for embezzlement." Everyone believes there must be some deeper reason for giving up on climbing the greasy pole.

Cherie Blair, barrister and wife of ex-PM Tony Blair, this week deplored "yummy mummies," women who shun careers in favour of marrying rich. "You see young women who say: 'I look at the sacrifices that women have made and I think why do I need to bother?' " It's a deplorable and risky choice, she rightly said. But think of why they might see it that way.

Slaughter now teaches a full course load at Princeton, writes regular columns on foreign policy, is writing a book and gives 40 to 50 speeches a year. But by high-powered job standards, she is out of the running - she can tell from the ill-concealed sneers - a judgment she internalizes to some extent. But she's canny enough to analyze this.

Think of the things that made her life exhausting and impossible. One was transit, which had her getting up at 4:20 a.m. to get to work by train. Another was North American vacation standards: one day a month.

Another was "time macho," meaning your worth is proved by hours worked. I judge people by the quality of their work, not the quantity, but in upper-echelon jobs, it's not like this. Mass is a male concept. Do you disagree? I give you "billable hours," a law firm scheme designed for maximum profit but surely not for long-term creativity and productivity.

We have email time now, and video conferencing to replace expensive, often pointless trips for "face time." As for school, those hours and yearly schedules were made to accommodate farmers, yes, sodbusters. March break, PA days, summer holidays, it's all built on Little Jimmy seeding, tending and harvesting, an outdated bow to Big Farma. So let's toss that and make school year-round, provide daycare and all-day kindergarten in schools, and let men and women work without constant family stress.

If we did this, families might have two or even the elusive three children or that rare thing, four. Populations are replaced if the total fertility rate (average number of children per woman in lifetime) is 2.1. In 1959, the Canadian rate was 3.94. In 2008, it was 1.68.

If the workplace had adapted, as it has in other countries, maybe family life would be less harrowing and we wouldn't be facing the social catastrophe of going pension-light.

France has tried this, offering cash supplements to middle-class mothers willing to have a third child. France already has one of the best female employment rates in the EU, the Guardian reports, thanks to policies such as cheap daycare and transit. But even then, women in highly paid jobs balk. As Sylvie Clarke, a mother of three from Lille, told the Guardian, "I'm not sure that women in really highly competitive jobs, where presence is everything, will be tempted." Slaughter's point exactly.

Life is already horrendously difficult for women without family support or high pay or reliable jobs. But look at the top echelon. It's not that women aren't running nations, they're not even close. Slaughter quotes Facebook CEO Sheryl Sandberg: "199 heads of state; nine are women. Of all the people in parliament in the world, 13 per cent are women."

In Canada, Catalyst, working to advance women in the workplace, reports that women currently hold only 22.9 per cent of all senior management positions and, last year, only 14.5 per cent of board seats. In 2007, 79.5 per cent of mothers with school-age children worked outside the home.

This is how we live now, running on the spot, low on sleep, guilty, frantic.

This has to change.

-reprinted from the Toronto Star

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