

'Having it all' was never the point: On the Atlantic's cover story ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

My Twitter followers already know that I'm profoundly unimpressed by the latest cover story from the Atlantic magazine titled 'Why Women Still Can't Have It All.'

The piece, written by Anne-Marie Slaughter, explains why she left a job at the State Department to return to her tenured position at Princeton.

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Slaughter then goes on to extrapolate that women can't 'have it all,' that is full satisfaction and success in their work and home lives. That's because, she says, workplaces don't allow enough flexibility for women to make time for their children. And women, she claims, are inherently more committed to being with their children than men, so marriages in which men do the lion's share of parenting will still leave women feeling emotionally unfulfilled.

There is so much that is wrong with this argument:

1. Slaughter's article is written from a vantage point of extreme privilege. Most women aren't making choices - they 'do it all' because there is no other option. Most women and men would regard a tenured job at Princeton as a high-powered full-time career; Slaughter sees it as a form of settling after giving up her State Department gig. The idea that this is a woman who doesn't 'have it all' is hard to swallow.

2. Then there is the essentialism of her claims about the need to make the economy more flexible for women. Women, she says, should not have to see success as meaning working round the clock; women should be encouraged to take more time off. But men, it seems, should be allowed to go on as they have been, working nights and weekends and rarely seeing their children. Because, Slaughter says, it will bother fathers less to have their spouses or a nanny looking after their kids than it will bother mothers.

This is the kind of claim that demands data, and Slaughter has none. She doesn't make room for women who don't want children at all, or acknowledge that a great many men hate the pressure put on them to be breadwinners only and fear the ridicule that comes from suggesting they might want to do more parenting.

3. Her proposals are weak. The idea that more women in public office will lead to a dramatic change in economic policy for women is a nice thought, but it's not necessarily true. The suggestion that mandating more parental leave will help is naïve: either only women will take it, furthering the achievement gap at work, or men will take it too, but might use it as a sabbatical to advance their careers or take a vacation, not to focus on parenting. This is one of the many cases where cultural change cannot be simply legislated.

4. But, what perhaps bothered me most about the piece, was Slaughter's narrow understanding of what feminism is. She claims that feminism promised women the following: the ability to have a completely unencumbered, full-time career and a completely involved, cook-dinner-every-day experience of motherhood without making any compromises. This is a straw man.

She counters it with an equally bogus vision of what feminism is: that we validate whatever paths women choose as feminist choices because women make them. This isn't feminism, because it does nothing to advance the lot of women overall.

Here's what I mean: Slaughter seems blissfully unaware of the consequences of an economy in which some or many women push for greater flexibility and opt to work fewer hours, but men do not. As I've written before, the individual choices of couples where women stay home some or all the time have the aggregate effect of dragging down wages and professional success for women generally.

Feminism is about equality. Repeat that until it sinks in.

Feminism means giving women equal opportunity and fair pay at work. It means a world where taking time off to be a parent is considered equally legitimate for men and women. It means, fundamentally, a world in which men and women have equal access to the full spectrum of human experience.

It does not mean making a world in which each woman does everything at once, the 'have it all' fantasy. It does not mean making a world in which each woman does whatever she wants without consequence, the choice fallacy. It means making a world in which each individual (male or female) can make their own compromises (and life will always involve compromises) without taking away opportunities from others.

That is a radical, utopian vision, to be sure, but it is not the utopia Slaughter claims feminism sold her, or the one she would like us to replace it with.

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