

# Still trying to "have it all" in Sweden <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS:

I admit it: I'm a woman, I'm a mother and a wife, and I want to have it all.

This statement has become border-line sinful in the current debate re-ignited by Anne-Marie Slaughter's article in *The Atlantic*, which hinges on several questions: Do women really want it all? By having it all, will we be happy or just plain exhausted employees and guilty mothers? And is it fundamentally even possible, let alone desirable, to have it all at the same time?

In the barrage of follow-up commentary and media postulation on this topic, one country is repeatedly identified as a place where it's as good as it gets: Sweden.

Nine months ago, my husband received the honor of a lifetime when he was appointed the U.S. Ambassador to Sweden by President Barack Obama. I must state here that I do not speak for the U.S. government whatsoever, nor do I speak for Swedish women or Sweden in any form.

We arrived in Stockholm in the crisp darkness of November with our tantrum-ridden two-year-old daughter in tow. Despite the immense excitement and dreams of reaching out and making a difference, I also carried with me a biting anxiety: How was I going to balance this challenging new role while also being present at one of the most formative periods of my daughter's life? Could I be the supportive wife, inspired activist, dedicated supporter of the U.S. Embassy community, and perfect mother all at once?

It's been exciting to learn more about Sweden. This Scandinavian country of about nine million inhabitants has one of the most comprehensive and generous childcare policies in the world. Sweden boasts the highest number of working mothers in the workforce with 73 percent of women employed, just three percent below the male employment rate, according to the OECD.

There are more female Swedish Ministers in the national government than male, and even the Minister of Defense (a former Swedish Navy officer, specializing in aquatics) is a woman. Minister Karin Engstrom is only one of two female Ministers of Defense in Europe, the other being in Lithuania.

Essentially, a family has a baby and both parents are granted 16 months paid leave per child. At roughly two years old, the child is then eligible for basically free, high quality childcare, from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., a full workday. The paternity leave can also be saved and used at anytime within an eight year period of the child's life, and can be parceled out. And yes, most men do take their full paternity leave. It is a badge of honor and largely non-negotiable within the marriage.

The Swedish culture is rooted in the concept of "lagom" -- which means "balance" and moderation. Time on the weekends, evenings and holidays is fiercely protected for family and the omnipresent BlackBerry usually finds itself darkened and powerless during those periods. In America today, we are working harder and longer than ever with little reward. As a recent arrival to Sweden, I was surprised by how little Swedes email and text pertaining to professional matters on the weekend!

I find the young generation in Sweden is particularly committed to work-life balance, and the principle of not letting their work define their identity. This is also an American phenomenon. U.S. Millennials of both genders rank work-life balance a priority above pay when choosing a job, according to a CNN Money survey, and also have more evolved views on partnership within the home. In 2008, 56 percent of men said they do at least half the cooking, up from 34 percent in 1992 and 49 percent of men said they take most or an equal share of child care responsibilities, up from 41 percent in 1992, according to research the Families and Work Institute released in March 2009.

Finding a healthy balance in life is becoming more difficult in a tough job market and exceedingly competitive global economy. But for some, "balance" is not an option.

I grew up with a mother who didn't choose to "have it all" but was instead forced to do it all. My parents immigrated to Chicago from Poland with nothing and worked tirelessly to build a life for me. Perhaps having a mother who was largely absent from my childhood was part of the reason I decided to have a child in my mid-20s, even before I had firmly established my career. Coming of age in the 1990s, it was a given that I as a woman was equal to any man and deserved the same opportunities. I thought it would be easy to have both career and family. Almost four years later, I still struggle on a daily basis to have it all.

But I have found that for me, living in Sweden has brought me a little bit closer to personal equilibrium. Through initiatives of the U.S. Embassy in Stockholm that focus on promoting women's empowerment in business and leadership, I have been able to meet so many accomplished women, both Swedes and the inspiring females in the U.S. Foreign Service, who have given me incredible advice and who are,

simply put, incredible professionals and people.

All of these women have taught me one thing: it's not the resources or government policies that advance women; it's developing your own life path and having the confidence to trust yourself and believe in your own decisions. Women's empowerment is not about having every opportunity; it's about having the right to choose and define your own way.

Yes, our daughter is enrolled in a Swedish daycare system and I have time to write, work and be very active. I recognize the unique privilege of that and am thankful for it every day, especially because I know what it's like to grow up with nothing. But it's finally finding my voice and discovering the courage to use it that has made my experience in Sweden so formative for me personally.

Sweden is certainly not perfect. Women's wages remain approximately 15 percent below those of men, according to the latest report in 2008 by the OECD. Some of my Swedish friends say women have a difficult time breaking into the highest echelons of the corporate world and the private sector. They say they feel that American women have truly been able to shatter the glass ceiling, and develop a more authentic leadership style where they're allowed to be assertive and demanding just like men.

There is a renewed focus on the working mother in American society today, and that's incredibly productive for the overall dialogue of women's empowerment. American principles and practices of openness, tolerance and a celebration of diversity propel women forward in a way that is not as pronounced anywhere else in the world. In the end, in both societies, America and Sweden, there are values, infrastructure and resources worthy of closer study and perhaps emulation when it comes to empowering women.

I'm so proud to be an American living in a foreign country, and I treasure the ability to convene strong women to continue this important dialogue. We will all never agree on the "having it all" debate." But let's agree it's the debate that really matters. Women speaking out, sharing their struggles and showing the younger generation that it's okay to falter and be frustrated, as long as you never give up on your dreams.

-reprinted from the Huffington Post blog

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