

What I've left unsaid: On balancing career and family as a woman of color ^[1]

Author: Martin, Michel

Source: National Journal ^[2]

Format: Article

Publication Date: 26 Jul 2014

Issues surrounding child care and caregiving in general are problems that affect millions of us, from all walks of life, and they require incentives and education and enforcement - all matters that public policy is supposed to address. What other vital social function is so necessary, yet so randomly acquired, so lacking in standards for the many who need it, yet so wildly expensive?

EXCERPTS

I thought the telephone interview was going so well: The woman was mature, had taken care of kids of different ages, and even (bonus points!) had experience with twins. We seemed to be on the same page about things like activities and discipline, and she had family in the D.C. area, which was why she was looking to make a move from the Midwest. I was researching flights and checking our frequent-flier accounts to bring her to town to meet us in person. Then she emailed me back with one more question:

What race are you?

Excuse me?

She told me she wouldn't be interested in working for someone who wasn't white, and when I told her I found her attitude bizarre in this day and age, she explained that she thought mine was. She had only ever worked for white people, she only wanted to work with white people, and what was wrong with that?

I've had reason to think about this incident many times over the past two years since I read and-in my role as host of NPR's Tell Me More-reported on Anne-Marie Slaughter's powerful essay for The Atlantic, "Why Women Still Can't Have It All." In that piece, she explained how, as the State Department's first woman to direct the Office of Policy Planning, she came to feel that she had been part of a conspiracy of falsehoods about what it really takes to be an effective parent and high-level professional at the same time. Anne-Marie made very clear that, after a career in foreign policy in which she rarely if ever had occasion to talk about her personal life, she wanted to lay out her own personal struggles, hoping it would make a difference. And I think it has made a difference. But my question is, for whom?

While she explained that she had written the piece for "her demographic" of "highly educated, well-off women who are privileged enough to have choices in the first place," I strongly believe that the issues she raised matter to women and families far beyond that demographic. Unfortunately, in the conversations I've seen about and around the piece-in online forums and at planned events, even those in which I've been asked to play a part-the discussion too often ends where it began: with privileged, mostly white women at the forefront. And that means issues disproportionately faced by women of color are pushed to the margins again and again.

Let's be clear: Women of every background face challenges when they try to balance careers and families, not least of which is the expectation that they should feel guilty for working outside the home even when they have no choice. But women of color often face additional pressures that white women are far less likely to encounter.

Some of those pressures are rooted in economics and are more frequently faced by low-income women; others are applicable across the income spectrum. Together, those challenges boil down to a simple reality: Race matters, including in the responsibilities of family life-particularly taking care of the young, the old, and the sick-that still fall mainly to women.

My encounter with the racist would-be babysitter was just one example but an instructive one-even to me. It happened in a year when my child-care arrangements fell apart with little warning, when the woman I had relied upon since the kids were a few weeks old chose to leave the area because of her own family's health needs. By the end of the year I had filled out six W-2's as I cycled through one arrangement after another-very often due to clashes over racial attitudes I couldn't tolerate or correct, such as comments about my daughter's "good hair."

Thankfully, a New York Times report that same year-2006-let me know I was not alone: "Like hailing a cab in midtown Manhattan, searching for a nanny can be an exasperating, humiliating exercise for many blacks, the kind of ordeal that makes them wonder aloud what year it is," the piece explained. It's only fair to note, as the article did, that many of the nannies who refused to work for black parents were also black. (That wasn't the case with the woman who refused to consider working for me; she was white.)

Certainly, being confronted with a racist potential babysitter won't top most people's lists of most challenging life moments. It doesn't even

top mine. But the incident was a painful reminder that for women of color—including women who are as privileged as I am, working in the same kinds of high-pressure circles—questions about work and life and career can be far more complicated than for similarly situated white women.

What has made a trying situation even more painful is the sense that our story is not worth telling. Too often in my baby-boomer generation, women of color have had to fight our way into conversations that should have included us to begin with. That needs to change. It needs to change because while we have many experiences that are similar to those of our white colleagues, we are also living with realities that are very different. I believe that if those conversations had taken place, had been truly inclusive, and had considered a broader array of life experiences, we would all be further along than we are now in addressing so many of the things that, for many women, make life more difficult than it needs to be.

I AM NOT a women's-studies scholar, but my reading of history suggests there has always been a divide between white women activists who have seen a connection to the concerns and struggles of women of color, and others who don't think about it or couldn't care less, such as the organizers of the historic 1913 suffragist march on Washington who insisted that black women march separately at the back (which Ida B. Wells, a journalist and antilynching activist, refused to do, by the way).

This is amazing to me because we cannot fully understand, let alone solve, the important issues around women, work, and family in America without acknowledging the important role that women of color have played in that history. From America's earliest days, the story of women of color has been the story of working women: enslaved Africans who picked tobacco and cotton, indentured Japanese and Chinese women who cut sugarcane, Latina farmworkers who have gathered the food the nation eats, women of every race who have done domestic work.

While a majority of American women of all races now work outside the home, black women are more likely to be in the paid labor force than women from any other group, and to stay in it longer (recent demographic trends suggest that Latinas are more likely than women of other backgrounds to be stay-at-home mothers). Women of color are a major presence in the kinds of jobs that we think of as "women's work"—nursing, teaching, housekeeping, and other forms of caregiving. And women of color play major roles in some of the workplaces that are still predominately male—such as the U.S. military. Nearly 40 percent of all enlisted women in the Army are African-American, and overall a third of the women in the active-duty force across the services are minorities. It really shouldn't surprise anyone that the first military woman to become White House physician and to head the White House medical office, Dr. Connie Mariano, is a Filipino-American; or that the first woman to lead the Army's prestigious Drill Sergeant School, Command Sgt. Maj. Teresa King, is African-American; or that the first female four-star admiral in the Navy, Vice Adm. Michelle Howard, is African-American as well.

I am part of a transitional generation: We are rarely the first woman or even the first minority woman to do some job or another, but still too often we are one of the very few. Like Anne-Marie Slaughter, I've never been subjected to the crotch grabbing, the shoved-up-against-the-locker-and-groped kind of harassment, or the overt belittling of my qualifications and aspirations that so many of our predecessors had to face—even women who are just a few years older than I am. I have always been grateful for women in my chosen field who fought to open doors I got to walk through and who took time to mentor and inspire those of us who were coming behind them. I have had women of all races to look up to at every place I've ever worked—women who fought for assignments and pay equal to their talents, and managed either to raise children or to take care of elderly relatives, or both, despite the difficulties inherent in doing so in our demanding, extremely unpredictable business.

Because of these trailblazers of different backgrounds I have been able to see clearly that there are many things that white women and women of color have in common in their efforts to rise professionally—one of the most obvious being the biological clock. PepsiCO CEO Indra Nooyi talked at this year's Aspen Ideas Festival about how, for women, "the biological clock and the career clock are in total conflict with each other. Total, complete conflict." This is, of course, equally true for white women and women of color. And I have had plenty of experiences in my own career that have reflected this problem. There was, for instance, the time my boss sent me, while I was still breast-feeding, on an assignment to a city that was threatened by an ice storm. When the ice storm did hit, our small, crowded plane had to circle and I was stuck for hours with no place to use my breast pump. After we finally landed and I could make my way to a restroom to pump, on the verge of hysterics because I was in so much pain (anyone who has nursed a baby will know what I am talking about; and if you haven't, well, trust me, it hurts), I called up and said I was going to quit—only to have the producer on the phone, another mother of young children, calmly listen to me rant, send me home, and decline to pass on the message.

THESE ARE ISSUES that affect all women who work outside the house—truly, anyone in a caregiving role. Still, though, I would tell you things are different for women of color. They are different for reasons that are small and nuanced, and for reasons that are big and consequential.

Let's start with one of the smaller things: the invisibility of women of color who are ambitious and who are parenting or caregiving at the same time. It has changed some over the decades—The Cosby Show was a pioneer in this—but in my experience women of color have often been shown in entertainment as either mothers and caregivers (Good Times, Modern Family) or as ambitious and striving (Scandal). Rarely are they shown as both.

It isn't just the entertainment industry that does a poor job of depicting women of color and their full range of experiences; journalists should take some responsibility for this as well. One former TV boss of mine used to talk about getting a "white guy in a suit." The thinking was, if you wanted to show that whatever you were reporting on was a universal issue, you needed to go find a "white guy in a suit," either as the subject of the story or even to tell the story. I am sure he meant well, but a consequence of this thinking has been to maintain the status quo of making white men's experiences the standard to which all others are compared.

A deeper set of challenges has to do with the economic realities of the times we find ourselves in-which bump up against the social expectations we have of ourselves. These problems can affect white women too, but there is no doubt that they are disproportionately experienced by women of color. One of my frequent guests on Tell Me More over the years has been my friend Danette Tucker, who is known as Dani. She's been a supervisor at a supermarket, a production assistant on a news program, and an administrative assistant. She now runs her own fitness business. Her candor and openness about her life-including family crises that upended her ability to finish college, bouts of homelessness, and her tough-love approach to parenting-have made her one of our most popular guests. On one program, she told us about how she had to send her then-5-year-old daughter and then-9-year-old son to school on a route that involved two city buses and a Metro train ride across town because, after she separated from the children's father, she couldn't stay in the same home, couldn't afford to miss work-which was at the other end of the city-and didn't feel she could transfer the kids to a different school since it was so close to the end of the school year. One day into the third week of this incredibly stressful experience, a sympathetic school secretary saw her children hiding behind a tree, waiting for the bus, and offered to escort them home. When Dani told this story on Tell Me More, for weeks afterward people stopped me on the street to tell me how it haunted them.

Then there is the woman I hired to help me at night in the first few weeks after my twins were born, when my husband was beginning the first of a series of lengthy trials out of town for the better part of a year. One day she came late from her job as a charge nurse at a nursing home. She was late because she had to assist one of the new nurses on her unit, a woman on her second day of work who had seemed to be having a heart attack, but was in fact having an anxiety attack. The reason for her panic? On her very first day of work, the day-care center that was taking care of her son had left him in his infant carrier, while failing to adequately feed him or change him. But fearing she would be fired if she took time off to find a better place, this nurse took her baby back to the same day-care center, went to work for her second day, and promptly fainted from the stress and fear. To those who might ask all the usual questions-why was she working, why didn't she just stay home until the baby was older, and so on-her supervisor told me that the woman, a first-generation African immigrant, was married, with an advanced degree, and was working to allow her husband to finish his degree. She was, as the supervisor told me, doing everything "right"-but it was not enough.

This is not just a problem for minority women, of course: Elizabeth Warren's memoir gives a candid description of how draining the search for child care can be. Warren describes how, at the beginning of her law-school teaching career in Houston, she arrived at a day-care center to pick up her son and found him with a soggy diaper and a listless expression. It's as heartbreaking to read as it must have been to experience. In her case, though, a beloved aunt and her parents were able to move nearby to help.

What's different for so many black and brown women is that they are far less likely to have the resources to find solutions-if for no other reason than the fact that their pay, on average, is so low. While it's widely known that American women who work full time make 77 cents for every dollar paid to a male counterpart, the gap is even more dramatic when you factor in race. According to a new report by the National Women's Law Center, African-American women who work full time, year round, make just 64 cents for every dollar paid to a white non-Hispanic man. You might be tempted to think that this is comparing apples to oranges-a home-care aide with a surgeon-but you would be wrong. The study says African-American women working as physicians and surgeons make 52 cents for every dollar paid to their white non-Hispanic male counterparts (as compared with 71 cents for women physicians and surgeons overall, according to a different study). Meanwhile, African-American women working as personal aides make 85 cents for every dollar paid to their white male peers (as opposed to the 95 cents made by women overall, according to another study).

The consequences of this gap are enormous and obvious. Less income means less ability to pay for the kinds of support necessary to work at any level, let alone an elite level. Less income means accumulating fewer assets, which in turn affects the ability to help offspring create wealth, gain education, or provide support in old age. This reality, coupled with the fact that African-American women are less likely to marry than white women are, has particularly important consequences, as they are also less likely to have the benefit of a spouse's income, let alone the benefit of his (or now her) emotional support. All of this contributes to the shocking statistic that women of color between the ages of 36 and 49 have, on average, \$5 in assets compared with white women's \$42,600, according to a report by the Insight Center for Community Economic Development.

Over and over again I have bumped up against this difference in "cushion," and time and again I have been struck by how even well-educated people are oblivious to its consequences. For example, in recent years, as the recession has taken hold, people have sent me books they've written on how to make do with less, or how to live on a teacher's income, or how to recover from divorce. These books, most often written by middle-class whites, have had this recurrent message: Borrow from relatives until you get back on your feet. While the people of color I know have many, many strengths-including resiliency, pride, and often a spiritual foundation to take them through hard times-what they do not have are relatives from whom they can borrow significant amounts of money.

Going back to the question of how to manage work and life: There's been a new focus recently not just on the consequences of low pay but also on the issue of unpredictable work arrangements that deny employees consistent schedules. There is also the question of paid leave versus unpaid leave, and that is an issue particularly for Latinos, who are far less likely to have jobs with paid leave than are either white or black workers. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, only 43 percent of Hispanic workers, both women and men, work in jobs with any paid leave, compared with 60 percent of black and white workers.

Some have argued that part-time work is the answer, but the difficulty of arranging child care around these kinds of schedules has been little discussed until very recently, after a spate of distressing news stories about child neglect. Is it any wonder, given all the challenges women of color face, that so many of these disturbing stories involve minority women, and for the most part single mothers? Women such as Shanesha Taylor of Arizona, who was arrested for leaving her children in the car so she could go on a job interview; or Adrianne Tijuana Johnson of Florida, who had her children stay in a storage unit while she searched for affordable housing; or Debra Lynn Harrell of South Carolina, who was arrested for allowing her daughter to play at a nearby park while she worked her shift at McDonald's. In this last case, a

bystander called police, and the mother was charged with "abandoning" the child.

And that leads to another profound issue for women of color: the punitive response of law enforcement and other authorities when child-care arrangements break down. When we talked about the story of the South Carolina woman on my radio program, none of the diverse panel of guests believed that a white mother with a similar scenario would have been arrested and charged with abandonment. I am sure there are people who will argue that point, but the data are very clear: When it comes to contact with law enforcement, again, race matters. One story we reported early in the history of Tell Me More was about an intensive study of foster care in a Michigan jurisdiction whose social workers—courageously, it seems to me—allowed researchers to document every placement and every removal. What they found was striking: Black children were far more likely to be removed from their homes under the same circumstances where white families got resources to help them stay together.

I have a theory that all of this is one reason so many black women are defensive about Michelle Obama's decision to prioritize her family life, even as some white feminists criticize her for failing, in their view, to use her platform more aggressively. Apart from a feeling of simple racial pride, I think it's something else: a feeling of relief and sympathy that at least one of their community, broadly defined, has the opportunity to protect her children, to cherish her family life, and to even have some personal time to shop and exercise and look good.

THERE IS ANOTHER aspect of minority life that white people often do not seem to share or understand: the intense connection to and sense of responsibility for people apart from one's own birth family or even children. It's been my observation that minorities are more likely than whites to be involved with or take financial responsibility for people other than their own children and parents—say, the children of siblings, or even close friends of their own children. Such support can include everything from buying school supplies or paying for tutoring to actually raising a child for an extended period of time. In my own circle of friends and acquaintances, there is a woman who has financially supported a nephew off and on for years, through bouts of his mother's struggle with mental illness; there is another who has taken just about every one of her large circle of nieces and nephews on college visits; there is another who regularly uses her vacation to offer relief to a niece with a special-needs child.

These stories are not unusual; indeed, there is such a strong cultural expectation of this kind of family involvement that African-American and Latina celebrities are frequently slammed for "abandoning" their families when they refuse. And this is, I believe, one reason the well-worn grooves of the debate about work and family life seem so irrelevant to so many people of color. Front and center in their minds is making partner at the law firm, but also making sure that a family member's car doesn't get repossessed. Front and center in their minds isn't just getting a bigger house, but also keeping their parents' home out of foreclosure. Front and center in their minds is not just getting what they want, but also being sure that others in their circle have what they need. What's different, in short, for so many minority women, is that they cannot help but see themselves as a part of something larger—perhaps because they know there are obstacles in their lives and the lives of their family members that no amount of "grit" will overcome. In my own life, my anxiety about managing work and family has been continually exacerbated by the feeling that I couldn't talk about it, a feeling that was reinforced whenever I did try to talk about it. (In case you are wondering, my search for a babysitter did eventually bear fruit: I put out a distress call on my neighborhood listserv, and one of my neighbors referred me to a woman who had just closed her licensed day-care center. She's been with us ever since.) One reason I am so disappointed about the cancellation of Tell Me More, which will have its last broadcast Aug. 1, is that the show has allowed me to prioritize these discussions on my own terms. It has been a place for women from all backgrounds to tell their own stories, and discuss what it really takes not just to survive but thrive.

When it comes to the difficult questions of family and work, the silence and the distance between women of different backgrounds and ethnicities must end. Our problems are often different, but we need to seek solutions together. This is not an argument for a particular strategy or political philosophy, but it is to say what seems obvious to me: that issues surrounding child care and caregiving in general are problems that affect millions of us, from all walks of life, and they require incentives and education and enforcement—all matters that public policy is supposed to address. What other vital social function is so necessary, yet so randomly acquired, so lacking in standards for the many who need it, yet so wildly expensive?

Women of color have a long history of making a way out of no way, of rising out of circumstances many would consider impossible, of finding hope and purpose in the most difficult circumstances. Surely these are strengths that should be brought to bear on these issues, and surely there is a way for white women to join us in this struggle. There is a saying that is popular on some college campuses right now: Check your privilege. As I understand it, it's mainly aimed at advantaged white people who are being admonished to recognize their advantages, especially ones they take for granted. I won't presume to speak for all women of color so I will speak for myself: I don't care about that. I don't want your pity, and I can't use your guilt. I don't want my white female colleagues to "check" their privilege. I want them to use it—their networks, their assets, their relationships—to form a united front with women of color, and to help improve things for all of us.

Region: United States ^[3]

Tags: diversity ^[4]

work/family balance ^[5]

Source URL (modified on 27 Jan 2022): <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/14/07/what-ive-left-unsaid-balancing-career-and-family-woman-color>

Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/14/07/what-ive-left-unsaid-balancing-career-and-family-woman-color> ^[2]

<https://www.nationaljournal.com/s/72809/balancing-career-family-woman-color> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7865> [4]
<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/diversity> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/workfamily-balance>