

Rethink what you "know" about high achieving women ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

As researchers who have spent more than 20 years studying professional women, we have watched with interest the recent surge in attention paid to women's careers, work-family conflict, and the gender gap in leadership. Among the most visible contributions to this public conversation have been Anne-Marie Slaughter's 2012 Atlantic article "Why Women Still Can't Have it All" and Sheryl Sandberg's book *Lean In*, both of which ignited fierce public debate.

A lot of ink has been spilled on these topics, and both individuals and organizations have focused on gender gaps in business and other sectors. Can anything more be said? The 50th anniversary of the admission of women to Harvard Business School's MBA program inspired us to find out—specifically, to learn what HBS graduates had to say about work and family and how their experiences, attitudes, and decisions might shed light on prevailing controversies.

We trained our analytical lens on these graduates for two reasons. First, attending a top-tier business school is a reasonable indication of high levels of achievement, talent, ambition, and promise, and by looking at men and women who graduated from the same school, we had a level playing field for gender comparisons. Second, HBS graduates are trained to assume leadership positions, so their attitudes and experiences—interesting in their own right—shape the policies, practices, and unwritten rules of their organizations.

Harvard MBAs value fulfilling professional and personal lives—yet their ability to realize them has played out very differently according to gender.

We surveyed more than 25,000 HBS graduates altogether; in this article we focus on MBAs, by far the largest proportion. Because we are primarily interested in the experiences of those who are still in the workplace, we report on Baby Boomers (ages 49–67), Generation X (ages 32–48), and Millennials (ages 26–31), also known as Generation Y. What our survey revealed suggests that the conventional wisdom about women's careers doesn't always square with reality.

Do Men and Women Want the Same Things? The highly educated, ambitious women and men of HBS don't differ much in terms of what they value and hope for in their lives and careers. We asked them to tell us how they defined success when they graduated from HBS and how they define it now, and they gave similar responses. Career-related factors figured prominently in their early definitions of success: Men and women mentioned job titles, job levels, and professional achievements at roughly the same rates.

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