

***Why “Can Women Have It All?” Is the Wrong Question, And “Lean In” Is the Wrong Answer***

**I. Let’s Play: Red Light, Green Light, 1,2,3**

- Evenings out of the house per week (assign a number to green, yellow, red light)
- Evenings at home but working on the computer
- Evenings at home but electronically tethered
- At the playground electronically tethered. (Those other parents are just scrolling Instagram and neglecting their kids. I am saving lives/souls/the Jewish community, which is an entirely different matter.)
- Vacations electronically tethered
- Refusing to take a promotion because it’ll take me somewhere dating options are limited.
- Taking a promotion even though it’ll take me somewhere dating options are limited.
- Moving your family for work when one or more of your kids really doesn’t want to go.
- Missing a kid’s siddur play for work (other parent/grandparents attend)
- We never go to weddings, dinners, etc. together any more because then neither one of us would ever be home.
- My spouse/partner and I have not had a date night in six years
- The last time a bio form asked me what I did in my free time, I wrote, “What free time?”
- I love my work. I love feeling that I’m making a difference in the world. (Is there a point at which this green light becomes yellow? Red?)
- I love my work. Sometimes, when things are bumpy on the personal front, it’s great to be someplace where I’m so appreciated.
- I can’t remember the last time I exercised
- I can’t remember the last time I read a book/saw a play/meditated
- I can’t remember the last time I got seven straight hours of sleep
- Having guests at every Shabbat meal
- Having a student/congregant/person in need move into your home
- An important person in your life says to you, “You care more about your congregants [/students/clients] than you care about me!” (If this person is 6? 36?)
- Sending your kid off to kindergarten without the requisite accoutrements (orange shirt, pajamas, candy for Shabbat party, seder plate) because you didn’t read the note.
- For the fifth time this year.

**II. What’s the Problem Here?**

1. **Sheryl Sandberg and Nell Scovell, *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*. 2013**

In addition to the external barriers erected by society, women are hindered by barriers that exist within ourselves. We hold ourselves back in ways both big and small, by lacking self-confidence, by not raising our hands, and by pulling back when we should be leaning in. We internalize the negative messages we get throughout our lives--the messages that say it's wrong to be outspoken, aggressive, more powerful than men. We lower our own expectations of what we can achieve. We continue to do the majority of the housework and the childcare. We compromise our career goals to make room for partners and children who may not even exist yet. Compared to our male colleagues, fewer of us aspire to senior positions. This is not a list of things other women have done. I have made every mistake on this list. At times, I still do.

My argument is that getting rid of these internal barriers is critical to gaining power. Others have argued that women can get to the top only when the institutional barriers are gone. This is the ultimate chicken-and-egg situation. The chicken: women will tear down external barriers once we achieve leadership roles. We will march into our bosses' offices and demand what we need, including pregnancy parking. Or better yet, we'll become bosses and make sure all women have what they need. The egg: we need to eliminate the external barriers to get women into those roles in the first place. Both sides are right. So rather than engage in philosophical arguments over which comes first, let's agree to wage battles on both fronts. They are equally important. I am encouraging women to address the chicken, but I fully support those who are focusing on the egg.

Internal obstacles are rarely discussed and often underplayed. Throughout my life, I was told over and over about inequalities in the workplace and how hard it would be to have a career and a family. I rarely heard anything, however, about the ways I might hold myself back. These internal obstacles deserve a lot more attention, in part because they are under our own control. We can dismantle the hurdles in ourselves today. We can start this very moment.

## **2. Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home*. 1989.**

### Chapter 1: A Speed-Up in the Family

One reason women take a deeper interest than men in the problem of juggling work with family life is that even when husbands happily shared the hours of work, their wives felt more *responsible* for home and children. More women kept track of doctors' appointments and arranged for playmates to come over. More mothers than fathers worried about the tail on a child's Halloween costume or a birthday present for a school friend. They were more likely to think about their children while at work and to check in by phone with the babysitter....

As masses of women have moved into the economy, families have been hit by a "speed-up" work and family life. There is no more time in the day than there was when wives stayed home, but there is twice as much to get done. It is mainly women who absorb this "speed-up."...

As a result, women tend to talk more intently about being overtired, sick, and "emotionally drained." Many women could not tear away from the topic of sleep. They talked about how much

they could “get by on”...They talked about who they knew who needed more or less. Some apologized for how much sleep they need--“I’m afraid I need eight hours of sleep”--as if eight was “too much.”...These women talked about sleep the way a hungry person talks about food.

All in all, if in this period of American history, the two-job family is suffering from a speed up of work and family life, working mothers are its primary victims. It is ironic, then that often it falls to the women to be the “time and motion expert” of family life. Watching inside homes, I noticed it was often the mother who rushed children, saying, “Hurry up! It’s time to go,” “Finish your cereal now,” “You can do that later,” “Let’s go!” When a bath is crammed into a slot between 7:45 and 8:00 it was often the mother who called out, “Let’s see who can take their bath the quickest!” Often a younger child will rush out, scurrying to be the first in bed, while the older and wiser one stalls, resistant, sometimes resentful: “Mother is always rushing us.” Sadly enough, women are more often the lightning rods for family aggressions aroused by the speed-up of work and family life. They are “villains” in a process of which they are the primary victims. More than the longer hours, the sleeplessness, and feeling torn, this is the saddest cost to women of the extra month a year.

## Chapter 2: Marriage in the Stalled Revolution

Problems between husbands and wives, problems which seem “individual” and “marital,” are often individual experiences of powerful economic and cultural shock waves that are not caused by one person or two.

The exodus of women into the economy has not been accompanied by a cultural understanding of marriage and work that would make this transition smooth. The workforce has changed. Women have changed. But most workplaces have remained inflexible in the face of the family demands of their workers and at home, and most men have yet to really adapt to the changes in women. This strain between the change in women and the absence of change in much else leads me to speak of a “stalled revolution.”...

### **3. Naomi Wolf, *Misconceptions: Truth, Lies, and the Unexpected on the Road to Motherhood*. 2003.**

All around me, it seemed that the baby’s birth was cleaving couple after couple--once equals in roles and expectations--along the lines of the old traditional gender roles. That was certainly what I experienced when my husband went back to work and I found myself with a tiny baby, staring out the kitchen window into the backyards of the suburbs, living life much as I had read about it in *The Feminine Mystique*. The baby’s arrival acted as a crack, then a fissure, then an earthquake, that wrenched open the shiny patina of egalitarianism in the marriages of virtually every couple I knew....

The women in men’s lives, too, it seemed, were sometimes touched by the shadow of Solomon’s sword as they refashioned the new family’s arrangements in directions that best suited them.

When the women I heard from described the rebalanced economy of the family's time and work after the birth of a baby, they had developed a strategy of denial to protect themselves and their families from the resentment that these unbalanced arrangements caused. Nonetheless, the resentment was there, expressing itself more often than not in quiet ways--"bitchiness," depression, sexual withdrawal, even in possessiveness of the child's affections.

I found this same quiet, stubborn knot of resentment about the division of labor after birth among many of the mothers I interviewed. I was reminded of an interview in Arlie Russell Hochschild's book *The Second Shift*, about how women who work outside the home also do the lion's share of work within it. She described one woman who tried repeatedly to get her husband to share the work; finally, in an act of capitulation or of emotional survival, she decided to simply call it fair: She kept the upstairs clean, she reported, referring to the house, and he was responsible for downstairs. What was downstairs? The garage.

The men in our group of friends and acquaintances believed expressly in women's equality. Yet according to Gottman and Silver's landmark research, men who hold such beliefs commit only four more *minutes* of domestic labor daily to the household than traditional men do. What was happening was that gradually many of the new moms were finding they had less of a say in their family lives than they had expected. Money, politics, commerce, and a quiet but forceful ambience of male privilege in our culture all helped to shift their place in their relationships towards the "less equal" side of what had been, before the baby's arrival, equitably balanced. ...

Several years later, I was walking along the crest of a hill in Oregon with my brother Aaron, in a raw new neighborhood where the trees had not yet grown in. We were getting some fresh air, taking a break from the chaotic house in to which he and his wife, Ariella, had just moved with their two young children. They had transferred themselves across the country to let Aaron have the professional opportunity of his dreams--the chance for a tenure-track job in his exciting field of research at the local university. Ariella had wrenched herself away from a happily rooted life, from her graduate studies in a field she too cared about, to come with him to a climate she abhorred and a place where she at first had no friends and could not yet find a job. Ariella is a strong, accomplished woman, no shrinking violet, an Israeli immigrant. He and Ariella love each other and have a strong marriage.

We were talking about the fact that Ariella had come with him, reluctantly, to a place so far from her own dreams in order to try to make his dreams into hers. My brother is a feminist who believes, as I do, in equal partnerships--yet both of us found ourselves taking up more traditional roles. With gentle irony, he said:

"Here's the secret, Naomi. All the husbands I know are good guys. They honestly want things to be fair in their relationships. They are hands-on dads, and they want their wives to be happy and fulfilled. But when it comes down to it, there is no way they are going to sacrifice a career opportunity."

I remember pausing in surprise at the rawness of what my brother had just shared with me; the lifting of a curtain. I remember looking out over the quiet suburb, the green plain, stopped in my tracks by this glimpse behind the scenes of so many conversations among the women I knew and later interviewed.

#### 4. Deborah Spar, *Wonder Women: Sex, Power, and the Quest for Perfection*. 2014

The result of these conflicting pressures is a force field of highly unrealistic expectations. Almost by definition, a woman cannot work a sixty-hour week in a high-stress job and be the same kind of parent she would have been without the sixty-hour-a-week job and all that stress. She cannot save the world and look forever like a seventeen-year-old model, or bake a perfect cheesecake the night before a major presentation. No man can do this; no human can do this. Yet women are repeatedly berating themselves for failing at this kind of balancing act and (quietly, invidiously) berating others when something inevitably slips. Think of the schadenfreude that erupts every time a high-profile woman hits a bump in either her career or her family life. Poor Condoleezza Rice, left without a boyfriend. Sloppy Hillary, whose hair is wrong again....She could not pull it off (snicker, snicker). She paid for her success. She. *Could. Not. Do. It. All.*

Of course she could not do it all. No one can. No one does. Yet women today are laboring under an excruciating set of mutually exclusive expectations; a double or triple whammy of hopes and dreams and desires. To be madonna and whore. Mother and wage earner. Smart but not arrogant. A leader but not a bitch. And because they can't possibly be all those things at once, women are retreating to the only place they can, the only realm they have any chance of actually controlling. Themselves.

More specifically, rather than focusing on the external goals that might once have united them, women are micromanaging the corners of their lives and, to a somewhat lesser extent, those of their children. Think about it. When was the last time a woman bragged to you--even spoke to you--about a protest she joined or a community group she had helped organize? When was the last time a woman told you about her kids' homework or her own extreme juggling? A while ago on the first one, probably; yesterday on the second. How many stories will you find in women's magazines about the pursuit of anything other than bodily or familial perfection?...

My generation made a mistake. We took the struggles and the victories of feminism and interpreted them somehow as a pathway to personal perfection. We privatized feminism and focused only on our dreams and our own inevitable frustrations.

### III. The Personal Is Political

## 1. Catherine Rampell, "Outsource Your Way to Success" *The New York Times*, November 5, 2013

Jon Steinsson and Emi Nakamura do not have enough time to do everything they need to do. They're recently tenured, highly productive rising stars at Columbia University, as well as parents to an infant. But they have a secret weapon helping them prioritize: Econ 101.

One of the oldest, if not entirely intuitive, principles in economics is comparative advantage, developed by the British economist David Ricardo in the early 19th century. As introductory econ students all learn, it explains why countries and companies ought to outsource the production of lower-value goods and services, even if they can produce them more efficiently themselves.

Even if you're faster and more effective than everyone else at a given task — fighting with the cable company, say, or folding your socks just so — you still might be better off if you pay someone else to do it for you. Why? **Because there is an opportunity cost for every hour consumed by these tedious, nonproductive tasks; there exists some higher-value activity you could be spending your time on instead.**

Steinsson and Nakamura, both economists, take the tenets of their field seriously. And so they outsource as much of the humdrum aspects of their personal lives as they can. Last year, the couple hired a personal chef. She drops off five healthful meals at the beginning of every week to reduce the time they spend cooking (they used to cook recreationally; now they'd rather spend that time with their son). They have also paid people to: build Ikea furniture for them (even though the service often costs more than the furniture itself); teach them how to use software programs and baby carriers; and load their CD collection onto their computers. ....

While it's now common, especially in cities like New York, for professionals to hire a housekeeper and pay for some degree of child care, outsourcing other activities is quite rare and even stigmatized among noneconomists. Embracing the D.I.Y. ethos is (wrongly) perceived as evidence of thrift or even moral virtue. A personal chef is the sort of luxury people associate with hedge-funders, Europeans with several surnames and oil sheikhs. Still, you need not be an heiress to benefit from paying for a personal assistant or gofer of some kind. From an economist's perspective, it's similar to taking out student loans: an investment in your future earning potential. Yet few outside the field see it that way....

There is also a strong cultural aversion to certain forms of outsourcing. Hiring people to work essentially as servants smacks of classism or insufficient self-reliance. Scrubbing your own toilet or doing your own laundry supposedly builds character, or something to that effect. And while it's certainly good to have these skills in a pinch, it's probably not a wise financial decision to use them

all the time if you could instead be engaging in other activities that improve your — and your family's — well-being....

“You have to start from a point where you say: What is necessary for me to be happy with my decision to be a working mother?” says Susan Athey, an economist at Stanford’s Graduate School of Business. “I think a lot of working mothers end up throwing up their hands in exasperation and saying, ‘I can’t live this way!’ and quit their jobs.” If parents who want to work abandon their careers before trying outsourcing all the household tasks they don’t enjoy, or feel overwhelmed by, quitting may be shortsighted. Happiness in the present, earning power in the future and familial bliss need not be in conflict....

## 2. Jodi Kantor, “Finding Satisfaction in Second Best,” *The New York Times*, September 13, 2013

Debora Spar is the president of Barnard College and the mother of three children, and yet in her spare time she wrote a book — about how women are trying to do far too much at once, using herself as a prime case study. In “Wonder Women: Sex, Power, and the Quest for Perfection,” which will be published on Tuesday, Ms. Spar argues that at every stage of life, from childhood to old age, women are straining to reach impossible standards.

“My generation made a mistake,” Ms. Spar writes. “We took the struggles and the victories of feminism and interpreted them somehow as a pathway to personal perfection. We privatized feminism and focused only on our dreams and our own inevitable frustrations.”...

**Q. In the book, you say that women have to stop trying to be flawless professionals, mothers, homemakers, cooks and athletes, and instead use a technique called “satisficing” to take the pressure off. What is satisficing?**

**A.** Satisficing is this concept in economics that jumped out at me as I was finishing the book. To satisfice is to settle for something that’s second best. I use the term warily. You don’t want to go out there and say that women should settle for second best. But sometimes second best is really good, and second best is much better than fourth best or worse. Women in particular feel if I didn’t become the top C.E.O. or perfect mother, I’ve somehow blown it.

**Do you satisfice?**

I do. I'd love to be the perfect mother to my children, but I'm not at every school performance, I'm not making them a hot breakfast every morning. I wasn't there at 8:30 this morning when my daughter left to go on her rafting trip.

**Your satisficing sounds like it still takes place at a very high level. Could you have accomplished all that you have while still letting go of things?**

I definitely think looking back that there are areas where cutting corners would have helped me be saner. I always remember one moment: I raced home from work, I was putting dinner on the table, and I was racing out the door to go to a PTA meeting. My son, who was all of 8 at the time, said, "Why are you doing this?" I looked at him and said, "It's very important to me that I go to your school." He said, "Why?" I said, "Well, I'm part of the community and this is about you and your school." And he said, "I want you home." It was one of those moments. I realized I was trying to be a perfect community member on top of being a professional and a mother, and I couldn't do it all. I stopped going to PTA meetings after that...

**Feminists always castigate women's magazines for enforcing ridiculous ideas about beauty. But your book suggests that maybe we should bring the shelter magazines under scrutiny. No one really believes that having better eyebrows will bring true happiness. But we do tend to think, wow, if I had that deck with that view....**

It's oppressive. If I could only have pillows like that. ... It's food, it's clothing, it's all the magazines that come under the heading of things looking simple. It's bathrooms that look simple and Zen-like but have to be maintained constantly. And the environmental, sustainable, organic, gluten-free movement once again ratchets everything up. Men's magazines don't seem to do this. They seem to be about things that are fun, not things you have to spend lots of hours on and then fail at.

**3. Bronwyn Fryer, "Sleep Deficit: The Performance Killer," *Harvard Business Review*, October 2006**

The general effect of sleep deprivation on cognitive performance is well-known: Stay awake longer than 18 consecutive hours, and your reaction speed, short-term and long-term memory, ability to focus, decision-making capacity, math processing, cognitive speed, and spatial orientation all start to suffer. Cut sleep back to five or six hours a night for several days in a row, and the accumulated sleep deficit magnifies these negative effects. (Sleep deprivation is implicated in all kinds of physical maladies, too, from high blood pressure to obesity.)...

People like this put themselves, their teams, their companies, and the general public in serious jeopardy, says Dr. Charles A. Czeisler, the Baldino Professor of Sleep Medicine at Harvard Medical School. To him, encouraging a culture of *sleepless machismo* is worse than nonsensical; it is downright dangerous, and the antithesis of intelligent management. He notes that while corporations have all kinds of policies designed to prevent employee endangerment—rules against workplace smoking, drinking, drugs, sexual harassment, and so on—they sometimes push employees to the brink of self-destruction. Being “on” pretty much around the clock induces a level of impairment every bit as risky as intoxication.

As one of the world’s leading authorities on human sleep cycles and the biology of sleep and wakefulness, Dr. Czeisler understands the physiological bases of the sleep imperative better than almost anyone. His message to corporate leaders is simple: If you want to raise performance—both your own and your organization’s—you need to pay attention to this fundamental biological issue....

*What does the most recent research tell us about the physiology of sleep and cognitive performance?*

Four major sleep-related factors affect our cognitive performance. ...The second major factor that determines our ability to sustain attention and maintain peak cognitive performance has to do with the total amount of sleep you manage to get over several days. If you get at least eight hours of sleep a night, your level of alertness should remain stable throughout the day, but if you have a sleep disorder or get less than that for several days, you start building a sleep deficit that makes it more difficult for the brain to function. Executives I’ve observed tend to burn the candle at both ends, with 7 am breakfast meetings and dinners that run late, for days and days. Most people can’t get to sleep without some wind-down time, even if they are very tired, so these executives may not doze off until 2 in the morning. If they average four hours of sleep a night for four or five days, they develop the same level of cognitive impairment as if they’d been awake for 24 hours—equivalent to legal drunkenness. Within ten days, the level of impairment is the same as you’d have going 48 hours without sleep. This greatly lengthens reaction time, impedes judgment, and interferes with problem solving. In such a state of sleep deprivation, a single beer can have the same impact on our ability to sustain performance as a whole six-pack can have on someone who’s well rested....

The fourth factor affecting performance has to do with what’s called “sleep inertia,” the grogginess most people experience when they first wake up. Just like a car engine, the brain needs time to “warm up” when you awaken. The part of your brain responsible for memory consolidation doesn’t function well for five to 20 minutes after you wake up and doesn’t reach its peak efficiency for a couple of hours. ...This is why you never want to make an important decision as soon as you are suddenly awakened—ask any nurse who’s had to awaken a physician at night about a patient. ...

*So sleep deprivation, in your opinion, is a far more serious issue than most executives think it is.*

Yes, indeed. Putting yourself or others at risk while driving or working at an impaired level is bad enough; expecting your employees to do the same is just irresponsible. It amazes me that

contemporary work and social culture glorifies sleeplessness in the way we once glorified people who could hold their liquor. We now know that 24 hours without sleep or a week of sleeping four or five hours a night induces an impairment equivalent to a blood alcohol level of .1%. We would never say, "This person is a great worker! He's drunk all the time!" yet we continue to celebrate people who sacrifice sleep. The analogy to drunkenness is real because, like a drunk, a person who is sleep deprived has no idea how functionally impaired he or she truly is. Moreover, their efficiency at work will suffer substantially, contributing to the phenomenon of "presenteeism," which, as HBR has noted, exacts a large economic toll on business. [See Paul Hemp's article "Presenteeism: At Work—But Out of It," HBR October 2004.]

...Sleep deprivation among employees poses other kinds of risks to companies as well. ... Otherwise intelligent, well-mannered managers do all kinds of things they'd never do if they were rested—they may get angry at employees, make unsound decisions that affect the future of their companies, and give muddled presentations before their colleagues, customers, the press, or shareholders. ...

People think they're saving time and being more productive by not sleeping, but in fact they are cutting their productivity drastically. Someone who has adequate sleep doesn't nod off in an important meeting with a customer. She can pay attention to her task for longer periods of time and bring her whole intelligence and creativity to bear on the project at hand. ...

#### 4. Lisa Belkin, "When Mom and Dad Share It All", *The New York Times*, June 15, 2008

Instead, [Marc and Amy] would create their own model, one in which they were parenting partners. Equals and peers. They would work equal hours, spend equal time with their children, take equal responsibility for their home. Neither would be the keeper of the mental to-do lists; neither of their careers would take precedence. Both would be equally likely to plan a birthday party or know that the car needs oil or miss work for a sick child or remember (without prompting) to stop at the store for diapers and milk. They understood that this would mean recalibrating their career ambitions, and probably their income, but what they gained, they believed, would be more valuable than what they lost.

There are Marcs and Amys scattered throughout the country, and the most interesting thing about them is that they are so very interesting. What they suggest, after all, is simple. Gender should not determine the division of labor at home. It's a message consistent with nearly every major social trend of the past three decades — women entering the work force, equality between the sexes, the need for two incomes to pay the bills, even courts that favor shared custody after divorce. And it is what many would agree is fair, even ideal. Yet it is anything but the norm.

"Women entering the work force changed the work force far more dramatically than it changed things back home," says Jessica DeGroot, whose senior thesis for college 27 years ago was about this conundrum and who, as the founder and president of the ThirdPath Institute, coaches families

wanting a shared lifestyle. “When I graduated, I thought things would change, if not for me, then for my children.” Her daughter, Jocelyn, is now 17, and her son, Julian, is 11.

“If you gave people a survey they would probably check all the answers about how things should be equal,” says Francine M. Deutsch, a [psychology](#) professor at Mount Holyoke and the author of “Halving It All: How Equally Shared Parenting Works.” But when they get to the part where “you ask them how things work for them day to day,” she says, “ideal does not match reality.”

Deutsch has labeled the ideal “equally shared parenting,” a term the Vachons have embraced. DeGroot prefers “shared care,” because “shared parenting” is used to describe custody arrangements in a divorce, and while “equal” would be nice, it is a bar that might be too high for some families to even try to clear. Whatever you call it, the fact that it has to have a name is a most eloquent statement of both the promise and the constraints facing families today.

“Why do we have to call it anything?” Amy asks.

Marc adds, “Why isn’t this just called parenting?”

...

**Social scientists know** in remarkable detail what goes on in the average American home. And they have calculated with great precision how little has changed in the roles of men and women. Any way you measure it, they say, women do about twice as much around the house as men.

The most recent figures from the University of Wisconsin’s National Survey of Families and Households show that the average wife does 31 hours of housework a week while the average husband does 14 — a ratio of slightly more than two to one. If you break out couples in which wives stay home and husbands are the sole earners, the number of hours goes up for women, to 38 hours of housework a week, and down a bit for men, to 12, a ratio of more than three to one. That makes sense, because the couple have defined home as one partner’s work.

But then break out the couples in which both husband and wife have full-time paying jobs. There, the wife does 28 hours of housework and the husband, 16. Just shy of two to one, which makes no sense at all.

The lopsided ratio holds true however you construct and deconstruct a family. “Working class, middle class, upper class, it stays at two to one,” says Sampson Lee Blair, an associate professor of sociology at the University at Buffalo who studies the division of labor in families.

“And the most sadly comic data is from my own research,” he adds, which show that in married couples “where she has a job and he doesn’t, and where you would anticipate a complete reversal, even then you find the wife doing the majority of the housework.”...

Which does not mean women are happy about this. There are plenty of studies of that too, and according to Blair’s research, 58 percent of women say the division of labor in modern families is

not fair to them. (Eleven percent of men, in turn, feel that the division of labor in their own marriage is unfair to them.) When couples argue, it is most likely to be about children, money or the division of labor. “Those are always the Top 3,” Blair says. “The order changes around, but the topics don’t.”

Why then does the status quo continue? “You assume people will look at relationships rationally, and if there is such inequity and such a sense of unfairness, they would end it,” Blair says. “When you look at this rationally, it is very difficult to understand why things are the way they are.”

The obstacles to equity are enmeshed and interwoven, almost impossible to separate from one another. Deutsch did a study of 150 couples who tried sharing to various degrees, and her results suggest that social norms play a large part in why so few marriages are truly equal. Choices are made in a context. It is rare that you choose something you have never seen. So men who do more around the house than their fathers and spend as much time with children as their neighbors feel that they are doing their share and their wives feel grateful to have such involved partners. That is why the single-most-predictive factor of how equal a couple will be, Deutsch says, is how equal their friends are.

Messages, loud and soft, direct and oblique, reinforce contextual choice. “A pregnant woman and her husband,” Deutsch says, “how many people have asked her if she is going to go back to work after the baby? How many have asked him?”

Looked at through that lens, what seems like an external institutional barrier to equal sharing becomes something else entirely. He makes more money than she does, so of course she should be the one to step back her career; she has a more flexible line of work than he does, so of course she should be the one to work part time. Those may seem like choices, but they have their roots in social norms.

“They weren’t born in those jobs; they chose them,” Deutsch says. What decision tree, planted decades earlier and steeped in unspoken assumption, she wonders, led him to be a surgeon and her to be a social worker? What led her to work in a field where four-day weeks are common and him to work where they are unheard of?

“It’s a chicken-and-egg thing,” she says. “Even when men and women start off with equal jobs, they make decisions along the way — to emphasize career or not, to trade brutal hours for high salary or not.”

She goes on to suggest that the perception of flexibility is itself a matter of perception. In her study, she was struck by how often the wife’s job was seen by both spouses as being more flexible than the husband’s. By way of example she describes two actual couples, one in which he is a college professor and she is a physician and one in which she is a college professor and he is a physician. In either case, Deutsch says “both the husband and wife claimed the man’s job was less flexible.”

She has a similar response to those who say that they would love to share equally but that one parent — almost always the wife — has parenting or housekeeping standards that the other cannot

(or will not) meet. Dad dresses the children wrong and diapers them wrong and sends inadequate thank-you notes and leaves the house a mess. This may look like a cranky power struggle, Deutsch says, but the dynamic, which sociologists call “gatekeeping,” also reflects social pressures.

Women, she says, know that the world is watching and judging. If the toddler’s clothes don’t match, if the thank-you notes don’t get written, if the house is a shambles, it is seen as her fault, making her overly invested in the outcome. Many women will also admit to the frisson of superiority, of a particular form of gratification, when they are the more competent parent, the one who can better soothe the tears in the middle of the night.

Deutsch says that equality in parenting should be every couple’s goal. Yet, as we all know, the nuances of relationships are complicated, built on foundations that even we may not see until we try to alter them. If your partner’s ambition is what attracted you in the first place and if his/her decision to dilute that ambition would make you think less of him/her, then this is not for you. If part of the security and warmth you feel from marriage is because of the familiarity and tradition of husband and wife roles, this won’t work for you, either. And if one of you is dead set against it or if both of you think the required regimentation that comes with equal sharing just isn’t a way to live, then Deutsch probably won’t persuade you. So go with your comfort level. But understand where that feeling of comfort comes from....

[Bill and Alexandra] are each equally likely to plan birthday parties or put the children to bed or be the parent who goes along on the school field trip. ...Less equal is their allotment of household chores. ... Most of all, she keeps the literal and mental lists....

The keeping of those lists, they agree, makes her the de facto C.E.O. of the Taussig family. “Ideally that should be 50-50,” Bill says, “but Alex is just better at that. Also, outsiders expect her to do it — we both gave the teachers our e-mail addresses, but the teachers only e-mail her.” (But of course, says Deutsch. There’s the world getting in the way again.)

Periodically they make an effort to rebalance, but it feels forced and accusatory, “too much like keeping score,” as Bill puts it.

“I’d prefer to have it unequal than spend all our time measuring,” Alexandra says.

“It’s a 60-40 split, with her doing the 60,” Bill says. “I am aiming to bring my percentage up to 42.”...

**There is one pocket** of American parenting in which equality is the norm or, at least, the mutually-agreed-upon goal. Same-sex couples cannot default to gender when deciding who does what at home. How these parents make their decisions, therefore, sheds some light on why married men and women act the way they do. They are the exceptions that both prove and challenge the rules.

“Heterosexual couples can learn from gay couples about sharing housework and child care,” says Esther D. Rothblum, a professor in the women’s studies department of San Diego State University

whose comparative study of the relationships of 342 couples — lesbian, gay, heterosexual — was published in the journal *Developmental Psychology* in January. “They are good role models.”

One standard research questionnaire for looking at the division of household labor has been a survey known as “Who Does What?” created by Philip and Carolyn Cowan, both emeritus professors at U.C. Berkeley. Respondents are asked to rate “How It Is Now” and “How I Would Like It to Be” in dozens of household and child-care tasks. Created with straight couples in mind, it was adapted by Charlotte Patterson, a professor of psychology at the University of Virginia, for lesbian parents. The study found little of the inequity that shows up when heterosexuals fill it out. (There has not been the same research attention paid to gay men raising children because only recently have gays begun adopting or hiring surrogates in large enough numbers to support a study.)

Which is not to say that lesbian mothers do not argue often over child care. But, says Dr. Nanette Gartrell, a psychiatrist with the University of California at San Francisco who has been studying lesbian families for 22 years, the arguments among those in her study sample tend to be the opposite of heterosexual couples’. While “straight parents get into the blame game about who is shirking responsibility,” she says, “lesbian moms bicker about not getting enough time with the kids,” a dynamic that can be intensified in families in which one of the women gives birth to the baby.

...

Most lesbian couples work hard to return to equal balance, however, Gartrell says. And how do they do that? More or less the way Marc and Amy Vachon did. They trade off breast and bottle feedings, share bathtime and bedtime rituals and talk out the conflicts. “We talked, and we talked, and we talked, and we talked,” says Dorea Vierling-Claassen of feeling like the odd-woman-out when her wife, Angela, was [breast-feeding](#) their daughter, who is almost 2 years old.

“We developed a wonky theory,” Dorea says of all that talking. “You need a rabid N.G.P. — nongestational parent. The N.G.P. has to push if you are going to get an equal relationship.”...

**Lesbian couples** also have a more equal division of housework. Rothblum found that it is only heterosexual mothers who do the lion’s share of housework for the family each week — between 11 and 20 hours for her survey respondents. Lesbian parents, gay parents and heterosexual fathers all look the same on paper when it comes to cooking and cleaning — they all report doing between 6 and 10 hours a week.

Both partners in lesbian couples seem to make equal professional sacrifices in exchange for this equality. That does not mean there are no “traditional” relationships — Koh works long hours and earns more money as a doctor, while Gaeta, a naturalist for the local park district, earns less and is home more. Similarly, Aizley’s partner worked full time while she was home with their daughter for several years. (The couple split up about two years ago; Aizley has gone back to work and says Soloway is still very involved in their child’s life.) But more common is the couple in which both

women “typically work shorter hours or have declined career opportunities so they can be more available at home,” Gartrell says.

Their work schedules look far more like those of Marc and Amy Vachon or Jessica DeGroot and Jeff Lutzner than like a “typical” family. Patterson found that while heterosexual fathers work an average of 47 hours for pay each week and heterosexual mothers work 24, the average for lesbian mothers, both biological and nonbiological, is about 35. Added together, both sets of families are working a total of slightly more or less than 70 hours; they just divide the work differently.

It is not clear, however, why lesbian couples split parenting more equally. “Is it because you take gender out of the equation or because women are better at sharing or because parents of the same gender see things more similarly?” Gartrell asks. “We don’t know,” and won’t know, she says, until there is equivalent data on gay men who become parents.

#### **IV. The Political Is Also Political.**

(Or, What Sheryl Sandberg Got Right.)

1. Tweet of an excerpt from an interview with fiction writer Lauren Groff in the *Harvard Gazette*, July 17, 2018:



**Ann Marie Lipinski**

[@AMLwhere](#)

Good for [@legroff](#):

**GAZETTE:** You are a mother of two. In 10 years you have produced three novels and two short story collections. Can you talk about your process and how you manage work and family?

**GROFF:** I understand that this is a question of vital importance to many people, particularly to other mothers who are artists trying to get their work done, and know that I feel for everyone in the struggle. But until I see a male writer asked this question, I’m going to respectfully decline to answer it.

[9:09 AM · Jul 18, 2018](#)



