

Lean In's Biggest Hurdle: What Most Moms Want

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Academia is replete with efforts to help women advance in their careers by encouraging more equal patterns of male and female parenting and work. Several of these efforts have been striking failures.

For example, gender-neutral tenure-extension policies at the nation's 50 leading economics departments hurt female faculty. Rather than leveling the playing field, [one study](#) by a group of economists found that they "led to a 19 percentage-point rise in the probability that a male economist would earn tenure at his first job. In contrast, women's chances of gaining tenure fell by 22 percentage points." The study suggested that many men had used the stopped clock to conduct research, while the women concentrated on parenting duties.

Similarly, my own research (with my son Christopher) on gender-neutral parental leave [found](#) that fathers on the tenure track did less infant/toddler care than mothers on the tenure track, even if the men took parental leave after the child's birth and the women did not. Moreover, when new parents were asked who did more when it came to 25 specific infant and toddler care tasks, on average, the spouses of the male professors did all 25 more often, while the female professors did all 25 more often than their spouses. These findings likewise imply that gender-neutral parental leave may give male faculty an extra boost toward tenure: the temporary break from teaching and other academic tasks allows them to devote more time to research—time that their female counterparts devote instead to their children. One explanation for these findings could be that in the parental leave study, the female professors reported that they enjoyed doing most of these tasks, and they enjoyed them more than their male counterparts.

Ignoring the stronger female inclination to nurture seems certain to thwart feminist efforts well beyond academia. Sheryl Sandberg's 2013 book *Lean In* has spawned lasting initiatives meant to [spur the progress](#) of women to positions of power in major corporations. To the same end, late last year, 27 CEOs of major corporations [joined a new organization](#) that seeks "gender parity at the top of major companies by 2030."

Such efforts should benefit the many women, mothers included, who want full-time work and aim to rise to the top in their professions. Yet, as this essay will show, most women who have dependent children *don't want* to work full-time, much less to put in the hours required of corporate titans. We should listen to these women, too.

Initiatives aimed at changing historic male and female parenting and work patterns are based on the view that these historic patterns are socially constructed. But pregnancy and childbirth are not gender-neutral activities. They are biologically constructed and can be exhausting. Pregnancy is often accompanied by nausea and fatigue, and two different studies [found](#) that six months after giving birth, more than 75 percent of mothers have not achieved full functional status.

Even the roots of gender differences in parenting run deeper than societal norms and go beyond the simple fact that it is women who breastfeed. Women's [greater inclination](#) to [nurture](#) infants and toddlers is also rooted in hormones and in brain structure. Women's bodies have more receptors for the [nurturing hormone oxytocin](#) than men's, especially [in pregnancy and during breastfeeding](#). More recent imaging research shows that [mothers' brains change](#) during pregnancy and after birth in ways that seem to increase their "emotional attachment to their babies."

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Evolution, too, helps explain the sex differences in nurturing inclinations. Helen Fisher [puts it this way](#):

Surely ancestral women . . . needed to coordinate emotionally with their young. Those who suffered when they

saw a sick or unhappy infant devoted more time and energy to keeping this child alive. Emotionally attuned mothers raised children who were well adjusted. These children disproportionately lived—gradually selecting for women’s superior ability to express sadness, pity, empathy, compassion, and other nurturing emotions.

But women don’t nurture children only out of anxiety and guilt. They also tend to enjoy it. In 2004, [a 60 Minutes feature](#) on highly educated, stay-at-home mothers attracted attention, in part, because the women seemed so happy with their choice.

Anne-Marie Slaughter has accomplished as much in her career as any woman of her generation. From a professor at Harvard Law school to President and CEO of New America, she has gone from one important position to another. But she may be best known for her 2012 *Atlantic* article, “[Why Women Still Can’t Have It All](#).” After its publication, according to [one official biography](#), it “quickly became the most-read article in the history of the magazine and helped spark a renewed national debate on the continued obstacles to genuine full male-female equality.”

A year later, dismayed by the increasing numbers of highly-educated women in their twenties who were declaring that they never wanted to have children, Slaughter [took to The Atlantic](#) again to emphasize the “sheer delight, pleasure, and wonder that child-rearing often affords” before concluding that “having children is the best thing I’ve ever done, by a mile.”

Slaughter’s thinking has continued to evolve. Just last year, the *Washington Post* [reported](#) that she has had “some pretty significant changes of heart.” As the *Post* reports: “When people say, ‘I’m home with my kids,’ I say, ‘You’re doing really important work,’ and I mean it,’ she says. ‘Whereas before, I was the classic woman that said, ‘Oh, what a pity.’ Like, ‘You’re not doing the real thing.’”

One can’t read this interview without seeing how hard it has been for Slaughter to have spent so little time with her children. She vividly remembers the “deep dismay” she felt the first time her child woke up at night and called for daddy, not mommy. Her sons are more likely to call her husband rather than her for advice or to share some good news. Looking back, she says:

Knowing what I know now, I wish I had taken one day a week when they were between 0 and 5 to be with them. I could have said, ‘Every Friday, instead of daycare, every Friday is a mom day.’ We would have done fun things. It would have mattered. And it would have been a pleasure for me.

Many young women seek Slaughter’s advice and mentorship. Her advice: “Don’t drop out, defer.... If you keep your hand in the workforce while you are devoting more of your time to care, it will be easier to ramp up than to get back in.”

That sounds a lot like part-time work to me. To be sure, Slaughter would likely give similar advice to men should they ask, and she would prefer to see an increase in the time men spend caregiving.

But differences in the inclination to nurture can help us understand why women are more torn about work-family issues than men, and why mothers are much more attracted to part-time work than fathers. In a [2013 Pew poll](#) on modern parenthood, mothers with children under 18 were far more likely than fathers to say that ideally, they would work part-time or not at all. In 2015, Gallup [reported similar findings](#).

The Pew findings show that the higher the socio-economic status of their families, the more likely mothers were to prefer not to work full-time. Elizabeth Becker and Cotton Lindsay note that the most intelligent married women work less than other women outside the home; they think assortative mating [best explains](#) the underrepresentation of female workers among top earners. That is, the brightest women marry the brightest men, who usually make very good incomes. When these women have children, they are *more* likely than other women to drop out of the labor force or cut back dramatically on paid work outside the home. When a husband’s high income allows women to arrange their work-family choice in the absence of significant financial constraints, bright women especially choose to spend more time with family.

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More recent research shows that even now—when more women are obtaining college degrees than men—women still marry men whose income exceeds their own. Indeed, the tendency for women to marry up in income is *greater* when the wife's education level is higher than her husband's [than when it is lower](#).

Additional recent research by Joni Hersch [shows that](#) “Married MBA mothers with a bachelor's degree from the most selective schools are 30 percentage points less likely to be employed full-time than are graduates of less selective schools.” Hersch believes that “Graduates of elite institutions are likely to have a greater range of workplace options,” so inflexible workplaces cannot explain her research results. It seems choice could. Since very bright people tend to marry each other, women with bachelor's degrees from selective institutions are more likely to marry men with better incomes, which allows them to spend more time with their children without a huge financial sacrifice.

Would similar patterns hold in academia? The work of a team of researchers led by Camilla Benbow and David Lubinski suggests the answer is yes. They have published a series of important articles following children with high aptitude for science and math into their 30s. Many have ended up in research, often at universities. Among other things, Benbow and Lubinski investigated how much these talented Americans would [be willing to work each week](#) if they could work at their ideal job. On average, the men in the study were more willing to work 50, 60, or 70 hours a week at their ideal job than the women. The women were more than four times as likely as their male counterparts (30% versus 7%) to want to work less than 40 hours a week—even if they held their *ideal job*.

These talented men and women held some different values and interests when they were young teenagers. And their values were [still different in their thirties](#): “Men as a group valued full-time work, making an impact, and earning a high income, whereas women as a group valued part-time work more often, as well as community and family involvement and time for close relationships.”

What might be done to help women in academia while enabling them to maintain the significant day-to-day time with their children many desire? One suggestion is to create [half-time tenure-track positions](#) available to both sexes. But such a policy might end up benefiting male professors more than female professors. The previously-mentioned parental leave study found that spouses of male professors worked a median of about 8 hours a week, while spouses of female professors worked about 35 hours. The wives of male faculty are unlikely to object if their husbands' “half-time” careers become full-time in practice if the additional time they allocate to research boosts their chances of tenure. Female faculty in a half-time role, who can seldom rely on a spouse to do the majority of childcare and housework, are unlikely to enjoy the same benefits.

Instead, what universities could do is discontinue their gender-neutral parental leave and tenure extension policies. If this requires legal changes, work to make them. Preferential treatment of women is justified even if one considers only the requirements of pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding. It would certainly be reasonable to grant only female professors a semester of paid leave after the birth of a child. Male professors in highly unusual situations could petition for exceptions to this general policy.

Universities could also create some better-paid, more interesting part-time teaching and research positions with five-year contracts. These should be available to both women and men, but I would predict that a disproportionate number of women would end up in these jobs because a higher proportion of talented women than men will want part-time jobs.

Some years ago, a Harvard Ph.D. student in economics told me that Harvard would pay for full-time daycare for her baby, but she did not want to put her baby in daycare. She asked that the university, instead, provide a research assistant to do coding (a much cheaper proposition than full-time daycare) so that when she had time to work, she could do thinking and analysis. They refused. Given women's preferences regarding work and family,

and the public's belief that parental care is [best for babies](#), this sort of refusal is unfair to mother, child, and society.

To help women thrive and achieve happiness as they see it, we must first acknowledge that most mothers—inside or outside academia—want to avoid full-time work, at least while their children are young. Proponents of “leaning in” have no reason to believe they speak for most women or that they have a better understanding than women themselves of what’s good for them. Why not try to accommodate the life preferences women in fact have?

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