



Sex and the Working Mom

At one of the companies with which I work there is a legendary story about work life balance.

The firm’s most senior line woman was asked to join a newly constituted high-level diversity committee, which included the company CEO. One of the hurdles that was holding women back, everyone agreed, was the high degree of transcontinental travel required of executives in the uppermost echelons, who had to attend a variety of global and regional meetings. Asked about her experience, she told the high-level group: “Let me tell you what diversity means to me. My husband told me ‘there will be sex in this house at least once a week, whether you are here or not.’ ”

As politically incorrect as the anecdote may seem, it speaks to a reality that is rarely if ever broached in the current, raging work-life balance debate. From [Anne Marie Slaughter’s viral Atlantic piece](#) on why women still can’t have it all to the large array of [books](#) on the “[opting out](#)” phenomenon, relationships with partners are rarely mentioned, except with regard to their role in household and child rearing duties. A less discussable set of issues — sex, intimacy, the role that partners play in helping each other grow and develop, personally and professionally — is somehow off the table.

Yet in private conversations women talk about how juggling kids and work affects their intimate relationships. In my interviews, executive women uniformly described the same work pattern: Get up early, get the kids off to school, go to work, come back for dinner with the family, get the kids to bed, get back online for a few hours, fall into bed exhausted. Repeat again the next day unless travelling. What could get squeezed out of that routine?

Recent studies in France (where I live) describe the rise of the “[hub decider woman](#),” who not only works full time but also manages all family decisions and logistics, including those involving her partner’s kids from an earlier marriage and her aging parents. She often works an extra shift helping out her partner professionally, providing behind the scenes counsel, organizing dinners at home, accompanying him to professional events, and doing editing and bookkeeping and the like. The “hub decider” doesn’t feel guilty about not devoting more time to her children, the studies show. Rather, she is worried about neglecting her personal life.

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One woman I know recounted how her relationship with her partner suffered when they adopted a child. She had a busy career; the child needed her attention and her partner felt displaced. She told me “I don’t think it’s hard to combine kids and career. But, it’s really hard to do kids, career and a husband. One of the three invariably gets the short shrift.” One of her friends, she told me, gave up a high-powered career when she remarried. Her first marriage failed because of the demands her job placed on her time. She resolved to make her relationship the priority the second time around.

Two different career stages for women in particular have built-in fault lines from a life partner standpoint (they also happen to be the two points when companies complain about losing their high potential women): In mid to late 30s, after having kids, when the woman is scrambling to get her career back on track but the children are still small and physically demanding. And, from the mid 40s on, when the kids are older but more demanding emotionally (think Slaughter’s 14-year old), aging parents require more attention, and the push for a more senior role or career switch requires more travel, attention and investment. All this coincides with the partner’s parallel push to reach a higher level professionally or, as is more frequent these days, to change careers, and thus, [have a greater need for support](#), not to mention biological changes on the woman’s part that affect intimate relationships unless they’re dealt with head on.

Why is none of this part of the conversation? Should it be?

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