



International  
Magazine



## Work Versus Family

**American women have never had more freedom to choose their life paths. But with choices comes pressure - and options.**

By Melanie Kaplan

March 2005

Meredith McGroarty sometimes feels like she's living two different lives. At 26, she lives in New York City and is surrounded by single, career-oriented women. But in her Pennsylvania hometown, many of her childhood friends are now full-time mothers who have chosen to live in the same neighborhood as their parents. "When I go home, I'm sometimes regarded as a bit capricious by some members of my family," she says. "But in the

city, many women don't get married until their late 30s, so my lifestyle is not at all strange, and I feel no pressure to settle down."

Across America, as they have for decades, young women are trying to find some balance on the teetering seesaw of work and family. But today, these women have even more choices, and many of them are designing lives that include both careers and children. Most importantly, they realize that work-family is not necessarily an either-or situation.

"Women are assaulted by extremely polarized choices: Be a mother and drop your career; or have a career and forget a family. These extremes are utterly unrealistic," says Margaret Heffernan, who lives in England and authored a book about juggling work and home. "The fact is that most women have both careers and families."

Few women today feel like they need to sacrifice a career for a family or put off having children indefinitely for a career. Employers have learned that they need to provide flexible work environments to accommodate working mothers. At the same time, young couples have developed more realistic outlooks on marriage and parenthood, men have taken on more active roles in child-rearing and household chores, and entrepreneurship has become a rewarding and practical option for women who want to create their own schedules. Experts agree that the seesaw is more balanced than it's been in the past.

"The pendulum has swung to a comfortable, practical middle," says Debbie Mandel, a stress management specialist in Lawrence, N.Y. She says American women now have choices and tend to feel good about the decisions they make rather than second-guessing them or being embarrassed about their chosen path. "You know when you are in balance with home and work," she says, "when you feel happy."

### "Opposing Pressures"

But getting to that happy spot remains the ultimate challenge for many young women. McGroarty, who enjoys her single status in New York, says that today's women are free to pursue a career and to live on their own before starting a family, but despite the changes from past generations, she says, "the same old worries still exist under the surface." She says many women in America embrace the independence of the female characters on "Friends," but at the same time, they worry endlessly about finding a husband.

Another 26-year-old, Nejla Liias, says she feels "opposing pressures" from society. "First, I feel pressure from my own family to start a family. They ask quite frequently about marriage



New York society is focused on careers. People are single until well into their 30s and are waiting longer to get married and start a family."

Because of such pressures, Elizabeth Mitchell, 22, says that it's important for young women to know what they want: "That way, you can't be pushed in any direction." Bria Slade, 20, of Pittsburgh, Pa., says it's easy to be pressured by friends and family members, and that's all the more reason young women should know what they want and follow their own hopes and dreams. "Only you know what's good for you, and you have to make that decision for yourself. Whether it be starting a family, a career or even both, just be the best at whatever it is [you] decide to do."

Even as women celebrate liberation and a world of opportunities, experts agree that these choices can be complicated and confusing. No matter what the decision, one of the best things a young woman can do for herself is think about tangible ways she can invest in her future. She can develop her work skills and learn from other professionals in her field, so if she wants flexibility in the future, she will have already built up a strong skill and income level. And on the personal side, Melissa McFarlane, co-founder of Electric Kites, a Los Angeles-based life coaching company, suggests surrounding yourself with a strong support system. "Women," she says, "thrive on support."

### Finding That Balance

One of the most important changes in the work-family arena is that women have become more creative in designing a satisfying life, says Patricia Roehling, co-author of "The Career Mystique." She says solutions range from depending on relatives for childcare to staggering work hours with a spouse. "The most common solution," Roehling says, "is for women to cut back, temporarily, on their career. This may be as extreme as taking an extended leave, or it may be as minimal as turning down an assignment that requires travel."

In some cases, men cut down their hours or decide to stay home with the children. No matter what the arrangement, Roehling says, it can be successful if it is consistent with the needs and goals of the couple. "One thing is clear," she says. "The rules are changing. There is no standard answer to finding work-family balance. Each couple strikes their own balance."

Anne Willoughby, of Washington, D.C., knew when she married at 24 that she would someday balance a family with her career. Now 30, Willoughby and her husband have two children, and they take turns staying home if a child is sick. "Fortunately," she says, "neither one of us feel like we've compromised our careers for our family or vice versa."

Entrepreneurship is an increasingly attractive option for young women, says Victoria Colligan, founder of Ladies Who Launch, which produces weekly e-mails about women starting their own businesses. She says women own 10.6 million businesses in the U.S. today and that they are starting businesses at twice the national average. "This tells us a lot," Colligan says. "Women are looking for flexibility and fulfillment in their lives. Most people who start a business don't do it for the money. They do it because they want to do something they're passionate about, or they want flexibility and independence." Even without starting a company, many women are taking control over their work schedules by freelancing or consulting.

Although it may seem like starting a business and a family at the same time is a recipe for disaster, Colligan says it makes sense for some. "You can work early in the morning or at naptime, [then you] shift gears when the kids get older," she explains. Also, she says, many women become clearer on their goals after they have children. "When people say they're afraid to start a family, I tell them when I had my first child, that's when my business became clear to me." Today, Colligan has two children and says she couldn't be happier with the way she's structured her life. "It's chaotic," she says, "but it's very productive and fulfilling."

The idea of one or the other - work or family - is outdated, she adds. "It depends on what you value in your own life. Most women value a balance - work that's fulfilling plus time with their children."