

Articles

"Opting Out: Everyone Loses When Young Women Abandon the Workplace"

Kathleen Wu
Texas Lawyer
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So it seems the irresistible force has met the immovable object. And, for the life of me, I can't figure out exactly how to get around this one.

No, I'm not talking about hurricane preparedness or the budget deficit or the war in Iraq. I'll let our elected official figure out those doozies. The quandary I can't figure out was neatly packaged for me in late September, in two back-to-back news articles.

The first, published on Sept. 19 in *Crain's New York Business*, was hedlined "Firms Told: No Lip Service; Clients Tell Lawyers to Hire More Women and Minorities or Risk Losing Business." The second, published the next day in *The New York Times*, was headlined "Many Women at Elite Colleges Set Career Path to Motherhood."

It seems that at the same time corporate clients are demanding that their outside firms prove their commitment to diversity or else, the women America's finest colleges are grooming to become future leaders are instead setting their sights on afternoons at Gymboree and in carpool lines.

What's goin on here? Is this a wholesale failure of the women's movement, or is this really the way things are supposed to be?

Don't get me wrong: If a woman wants to stay home with her children, that should be her prerogative. It's an important job and, clearly, the most underpaid on the planet.

But what bothered me most about the Times article wasn't the fact that these young women – many still in their late teens – said they wanted to stay home with their children. It's that they didn't seem to think they would have any choice in the matter. It's just not possible, they reason, to be the best worker you can be while also being the best wife, mother, housekeeper etc. you can be.

What this tells me is that not only have our day jobs become too all-encompassing – after all, in the firm world, a 40 hour workweek is considered part-time – but we've set the bar too high in our home lives, too.

Our perfectly decorated homes have to be perfectly clean at all times, and we're expected to have a home-cooked meal with all family members present – since that's what the experts tell us will keep our kids away from drugs – at least five times a week.

Our marriages have to be scrupulously maintained, as do our bodies, with thrice-weekly aerobic, twice-weekly resistance, and at least once-weekly yoga or Pilates workouts. Then there's soccer. And gymnastics. And piano. And playdates Oh God, the playdates.

It's enough to make Martha Stewart wish she could go back to the joint just to get some rest.

It's a Shame

So, I ask again, is this really the way things are supposed to be? Wouldn't we all – and by "we," I mean women, men, children, corporate America and America in general – be better off if we could lower the bar just a teeny bit? I'm not saying firms shouldn't deliver top-notch legal services to their clients, and I'm not saying our kids should be slackers in school.

But must we measure our lives against what we see in the magazines, whether the magazine is *Fortune* or *Mary Englebreit's Home Companion*?

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Is it really so hard to have a workable, flexible schedule that allows workers – men and women – with family obligations to be able to meet those obligations while also being a valuable member of the workforce?

Does every child's birthday party have to include a massive, three-room bounce-house/obstacle course with enough food to feed an army?

The answer to all of these questions is “no.”

But rather than recognizing the futility of having to be all things to all people at all times, we, as a society, seem to keep upping the ante.

We're nuts if we don't think our college-age daughters have noticed. Clearly, as the *Times* piece reveals, they have. Instead of swimming against the tide and vowing to try to do what they can, these young women are already plotting their exit strategies, before they even start their careers.

And that's a shame.

It's a shame because, as anybody who has spent much time with teenagers lately knows, they are far brighter and far more poised than they're given credit for. If the nation could keep them in the game – even at a reduced level – these young women could be headed for the highest levels of leadership this country has to offer.

But, as the old song says, somethings gotta give. And, in this case, it seems the best option is for both sides to give a little. If the professional world can find a way to loosen the reins and allow workers a little more flexibility, women can definitely stop holding themselves to impossible standard of Norman Rockwellian homeyness.

This way, everybody wins, from firms and their clients to women and their children. The only possible losers are the folks who rent out those giant, three-room bounce-houses.