

Chapter Five: Helping Mom with a Real Choice

When Elaine Chapa's first child was still a newborn, she was sent to serve on a Chicago-based task force, a career-making opportunity that had the potential to be a family-wrecking experience. Elaine, an executive at a building materials firm, would be living out of a hotel room for six months. It was not the kind of dreamy "What To Expect In Your First Year" kind of situation.

For most workers – male or female – such a situation would present a stark choice: family or work. But not for Elaine. Her husband, Jim, had made the choice to stay home to support his wife's career. And he was committed to seeing to it that Elaine excelled in the work world – without having to walk away from her family life.

He didn't just accompany his wife to the airport as she left for her Chicago sojourn; he – and baby daughter – accompanied Elaine on the airplane and lived out of the hotel room for months.

Elaine described her joy: "I was thrilled with the opportunity, but was worried that I would be required to spend every other week away from home. I would have said no, but Jim realized the importance."

They roughed it in a hotel room for those long months, bringing a deep-fryer along to sterilize bottles. "In the beginning," she recalled, "Jim was leery of venturing out of the hotel. By the end of our six-month stay, Jim could be found down at the waterfront at a local restaurant, having lunch, feeding Kayla and enjoying Chicago."

Elaine said Jim has "continued to step up" as her responsibilities have grown. And she sees a connection between Jim's growing responsibilities at home and hers at work. "The fact that I don't have to say, 'I can't be at the meeting, go out of town, stay late' makes it less easy to discount me when it comes to deciding whether or not I am a team player."

Elaine's story underscores a fundamental truth: women who have husbands that free them from the major demands of running the household are more likely to be running businesses and organizations.

In 2002, Fortune Magazine brought together nearly 200 women from the highest tiers of the business world. Of those women, 30 percent said they had a househusband at home. By comparison, a scant half-percent of other American families are led by a man who stays home full time.

And the connection between high-powered female exes and at-home hubbies is no coincidence. In today's hyper-competitive business environment, advancement is both a function of work quality and work quantity. Elaine's hours are utterly incompatible with carpooling, grocery shopping or loads of laundry.

Elaine is one of the lucky women who had the choice to aggressively pursue her career. Few mothers make it to the rarified heights of corporate America. Though business schools are handing out degrees to men and women at roughly the same rate – and have been for decade – the number of women in the most powerful positions in business totals 6 percent, according to Fortune. And only 1 percent of Fortune 500 chief executive offers are women. Clearly, the hole in the glass ceiling remains small.

Why have so few women managed to convert their ambition and education into positions of authority? In great part, it's because most women are never able to leave the bulk of the household responsibilities behind. Women with MBAs are 15 times more likely to be working part-time than men with similar degrees, according to Catalyst, a group that analyzes women in business, a reality that often bars ascent to the top rungs of the corporate ladder for a great many of these women.

And only 29 percent of those masters-wielding women say that they've been working continuously since they graduated, suggesting that they took time off for family reasons. It's the same in law; 35 percent of women have worked continuously since graduation. Men are twice as likely to have kept their nose to the corporate grindstone.

That doesn't seem to be changing. Nineteen percent of female gen-Xers told the Catalyst survey-takers said they believed they'd be working part-time in the next five years. The rate of their male peers who believed the same thing: 2 percent.

Once off the fast track – and onto the unfortunately labeled “mommy track” – it becomes exceeding difficult to get back on. Men, who by and large don’t ever leave the workforce or work part-time, don’t encounter the same hurdle. A scant one in four women believes that flexible hours can be used without career damage.

In fact, those men are likely to have another significant advantage over their female counterparts: a stay-at-home spouse. The National Science Foundation has been tracking 160,000 Ph.D recipients in sciences and engineering to see what becomes of those individuals who made such extraordinary academic sacrifices.

The timetable for such a degree can run nearly a decade, when post-doctoral work is considered, making the field notable for the extraordinary commitment required. But concern has been raised that few women are making it to graduation day, and even fewer are finding professional success. Science and engineering graduate school graduates are now split about 60-40, men to women. But only 24 percent of working engineers are women.

A glance at the NSF’s family demographics offers a compelling explanation: most men – and almost no women – have their spouse running a full-time support system at home.

A scant 18 percent of women said that their husband worked less than full time, suggesting that family responsibilities were – at best – shared in the overwhelming majority of those households.

In contrast, most men surveyed had a wife who worked part-time or, more commonly, stayed out of the job market entirely. Given the demands of the profession, it’s not altogether surprising that men, who generally have a household manager at home, are better represented by the women, who generally live in a two-worker household.

Similar results have been seen in business, law and elsewhere in academia. At Princeton, a scant 12 percent of tenured professors in engineering

and the natural sciences are women, despite a sex ratio of graduate students that is reaching ever closer to parity.

In an attempt to determine why so few of those female Princeton professors were earning tenure, a university task force stumbled onto a staggering find. A survey of both tenured and untenured faculty in fourteen departments failed to find a single woman with an at-home husband, while almost 28 percent of men had an at-home wife. And men were far more likely to have a spouse working part-time, too.

The impact is unmistakable. But not only are women being effectively barred from the higher levels of American business and academia, but they're well aware that it is family responsibilities are holding them back. Women in business are 40 percent more likely to scale back their career ambitions than men, according to Catalyst. The rationale for a majority of those women: "the sacrifices I would have to make for my family life."

The bottom line: high-powered, well-educated women play by a different set of rules than their male colleagues, and those rules are based in large part on a single, crucial factor: men are far more likely to be relieved of home responsibilities by their spouse than women are.

Change that equation – get more fathers to take the option of staying home seriously – and suddenly there becomes room for a barrier-busting revolution in the way men and women view the workplace.

I'm not advocating that all women – or even most women – ought to take on the alpha-worker role in a family. The sacrifices demanded to reach the upper echelon of any professional career, be it in business, in media, in medicine, are frequently in direct conflict with family regardless of the prospective executive's sex.

Instead, I write this to underscore the reality women who want to explore those professional boundaries face. Success in the workplace, for women as much as men, is generally rooted in stability in the home. There is no such thing

as the Supermom: a mother could be an everywoman in the home and a nose-to-the-grindstone model employee at the same time. And there's no Superdad, either.

Of course, that pressure on working women to balance work and family is driving some working women in the other direction: out of the workforce.

A subset of those women – high achievers who could stay in the workforce if they wanted to – were profiled by the New York Times' Lisa Belkin in 2003 in a much-talked-about story titled "The Opt-Out Revolution." The piece's thesis was compelling: smart, rich, well-educated women were deciding it was more important to judge success in family terms than in work terms.

The article assumed that because each woman profile had never experienced career-limiting discrimination, that the choice to stay home was pure, that there was no glass ceiling driving the women into the home.

But that's an assumption that is being called into question by researchers of work/life conflict. The Families and Work Institute, in their 2002 National Study of the Changing Workforce, makes clear that there is a "social glass ceiling" that exists even without discrimination.

"We, as others, believe that impediments to women's advancement are not impediments erected by employers," the study says, "but also social and cultural impediments that are pervasive in our culture."

The women Belkin quotes tend to have bought into those social and culture beliefs regarding the differences between men and women. One goes so far as to proclaim "It's all in the MRI," suggesting that what goes on in the brains of women can't possibly be happening in the brains of men. But there is no such MRI study.

When Belkin turns to anthropologist Sarah Blaffer Hrdy to bolster that point, Hrdy instead issues a stern warning: "... to turn that into dogma -- women are caring, men are not, or men should have power, women should not, that's dangerous and false." And with that, Hrdy vanishes from the piece, which goes on to blithely trumpet that "dangerous" dogma.

What's more, the husbands of the "Opt-Out" revolutionaries are never quoted on whether they would be willing to share with the childrearing. We're led

to assume they're not, leaving wide-open the question of whether women who opt-out really had a full range of choices when it came to work, family and childcare.

It seemed likely that they were missing at least one option: the possibility that their husbands could provide some – or most – of the childcare.

If those women ever harbored the dream of continuing to work while their husbands cut back or quit altogether, they could hardly be condemned for abandoning that dream. Fathercare remains the mirage of childcare options, an oasis from work/family pressures that tends to vanish as most women give birth.

One survey of working women, polled about their childcare preferences when they were still pregnant, found that a majority said they'd prefer fathercare to any other arrangement compared. Six percent backed paid day care. But a year later, 39 percent of children were in paid day care, almost twice the number of families in which dad was providing the majority of the child care. The title of the study report published in a leading family-research journal? "You Can't Always Get What You Want."

It shouldn't have to be that way. And for some women, it isn't.

The document that best captures my wife's accomplishment in law school is not her diploma, with the words "summa cum laude" etched across it in perfect script. Nor is it her transcript, which notes that she graduated with the third-best grade point average. The best evidence of her success is a photo clicked as she walked across the stage to receive her diploma.

One hand is outstretched to shake the hand of the dean of the law school. In the other hand, she clutched our denim-clad nine-month old baby, who entered the world two weeks before the beginning of Beth's final year of school.

Having a baby at that point in law school was something of a risk. She had lined up both a one-year, post-graduate clerkship as well as a firm position in the year following the clerkship. That career progression was predicated on

everything going smoothly: graduating on time, showing up at the courthouse three months later, reporting to the firm just days after her clerkship.

To her credit, she didn't miss a beat. She plowed through school, our daughter and I sometimes in tow, camping out in the law review offices or the nearby coffeeshop for post-class smooches.

She was a first-class mother and a one-of-a-kind law student. When she had to cram, she had the freedom to disappear for hours at a time. When her workload at the courthouse waned, she'd rush home, grab Clio and spend the rest of the daylight hours at the playground.

And we're not the only ones catching on to attractive idea of flexible gender roles. Increasingly, on college campuses, women are recognizing that the full-throttle pursuit of career goals and full-time parenting may well be mutually exclusive. These are not women who don't want to have children, but they want to know that a decision to raise a family won't impact their aspirations alone.

In an article in the Christian Science Monitor that compared the women of Wellesley in 2003 to the women in Wellesley fifty years before – the setting for the Julia Roberts movie “Mona Lisa Smile” – one student, Ashley Baker, boldly announced that they were determined to change the workforce with “day-care benefits within large corporations, and have lots of stay-at-home dads.”

Baker's friends were already planning to make that a reality; one law-school-bound peer told Baker she was already looking for a mate ready to put fatherhood ahead of career: “I hope my boyfriend is prepared to be a stay-at-home dad because I'm going to be busy as a lawyer.”

At the same time, many wives with husbands at home have been demanding the kind of flexibility that the men in chapter 4 have been searching for. Mary Steinmark is an advertising executive in Atlanta, and her husband Andy, who decided before their first pregnancy that one of them would stay home. And economically, Mary said, there was no question: she would be the one to work.

But Mary's job, which consists of regular 12-hour days, job also had a key advantage over Andy's long days as a civil engineer: her schedule allows her to sneak out.

"I love my job," she said. "I come to work at 7 a.m. every day, even though I don't need to be here until 8:30 a.m. I love doing what I'm doing. I love my clients. I love dealing with people. I do miss my son. But the nice thing about doing what I do is that yesterday, I made it to a swim lesson at 11:30 a.m. I can rearrange my schedule and go to his doctor's appointments. It's nice that I have that flexibility."

On paper, there ought to be no difference between male professionals and female professionals. Across the board, the number of new workers entering America's most-respected and highest-paying occupations are well balanced. Women make up the majority of medical school applicants and are within a hair of being a majority in the nation's law schools. And those prestigious graduate programs are merely catching up to the reality in undergraduate colleges, where 57 percent of degrees now go to women.

And those new workers are protected by an honorable tradition of law that dictates that gender can't be a factor in who gets hired, fired and promoted.

The encouraging news is that for many of those women, there really is little difference between their position in the workplace and that of their male colleagues. Studies have shown that unmarried professional women are keeping up with the pay of their unmarried male colleagues, helping to close the stubborn pay gap between what a man makes and what a woman makes for doing the exact same job.

For women of a certain age and status, gender matters less now than it ever has: a 30-year old woman without children makes 90 percent of what her male counterpart makes. That's still a troubling gap, but it represents a massive move in the right direction from the 58 cents on the working man's dollar that

women made in the early 1960s, when President Kennedy signed into law the Equal Pay Act.

But those gains haven't been spread evenly. Once married with a family, the pay gap emerges again. Fathers with a clan of little ones at home are by and large rewarded in the marketplace, with earnings that average 10 to 15 percent higher than other men. Mothers, in contrast, are punished. A mother's wages remains mired at about 75 percent of the wages of a man in a similar position.

The economic rationale is as simple as it is disturbing: mothers are assumed to be lousy workers, their heads always somewhere else. A worker who needs to take an hour here or there to go to the pediatrician or who dashes out of the office at the stroke of 5 p.m. to dash to the daycare center, the theory goes, is far less valuable than one who remains in the office for 10, 12 or more hours a day.

And, goes the stereotype, that super-worker is much more likely to be male.

Beth felt that even before she gave birth. While still pregnant, peers asked her if she would leave law school. Career advisors suggested she steer clear of any family discussion when speaking with recruiters. And it was widely assumed that when she left school – if she made it – she'd immediately hop on the part-time mommy track.

Destroying that stereotypes begins with the demolition of the idea that the last one to leave the office at the end of the day, by definition, the best worker. Studies have shown that employees working shortened shifts often experience such a boost in productivity that it more than makes up for the reduced time behind a desk. As at home, quality can be more important than time.

But even more damaging is the assumption that it's women alone who are responsible for tending to the home fires. The statistics on men's contributions at home are unambiguous: fathers – regardless of their employment status – are

doing more and more. And not only are they not losing ground in the workforce, they're actually earning more money. There's a double-standard at work.

That double-standard is born of an outmoded world view, one in which the men are the sole inhabitants of the work sphere and the women the sole inhabitants of the home sphere. But that's less true now than anytime in post-industrial history. And even a conservative Supreme Court has made an effort to dismantle that outlook, writing in 2003 that "at least where stereotypes are considered, the notions that mothers are insufficiently devoted to work, and that work and motherhood are incompatible, are properly considered to be, themselves, gender-based."

Just ask Mary Stenmark's employers. "The people I work for all have kids and they know that as long as you're doing your job and you're making your goals ... they don't have any problem with you not being there at 5:30 p.m. if your son has a baseball game."

Stenmark was put on pregnancy-related bed rest within days of a large promotion. Her boss's message: take it easy. And Stenmark has paid back that kindness. "This makes we give him more back," she said. "Now I'm firing away."

For every dad that becomes more involved at home – be it through househusbands or working fathers who keep family as the highest priority – the crack in stereotypes the punish women in the workplace for being women gets bigger and bigger. In the end, that benefits all working women, allowing employers to view them as the law says they should: no differently than men.

There is an ugly flip side to any effort to reassign gender roles at home and in the workplace. The typically male conception of the "ideal worker" has evolved over the last two decades, and dedication to a company is measured in hours worked in a week, not years worked in a career.

Without a doubt, at-home husbands can give their wives a boost into the corporate – or legal or medical or academic – stratosphere, a pressure-filled atmosphere of long hours, high expectations and hard work. But at the same

time, women in those positions are likely to feel a tug back to their families. Unlike men, raised with the expectation that work should come first, women often desire greater balance in their lives. And that's a tough desire to reconcile with work demands, regardless of sex.

Just ask Beth. While she's unequivocal that having a support at home helped her drive through law school, land a coveted federal clerkship and then an exclusive slot as an associate in one of Washington, D.C.'s largest firms, she is angry at the compromises she is now being asked to make.

As the pressure on her to ensure her client billing meets the firm's expectations, she feels she's seeing our daughter less and less. Adding that to the inevitable out-of-town trips, sometimes stretching over weekends has degraded Beth's quality of life. She's caught in a catch-22: she can try to dial back to shorter workweeks – 40 or 50 hours instead of 60 or 70 hours – and forfeit any hope of advancement or she can put in the time and risk missing the chance to give even a goodnight kiss.

That's hardly a choice at all.

Now if the growing ranks of at-home fathers and executive women can manage to slowly unwarped work culture, if people like Beth and Elaine Chapa manage to stick around long enough to change corporate cultures and worker expectations, we could be on the brink of a work/family revolution. But if both men and women with at-home spouses are expected to work themselves silly simply because there's someone else at home with the kids, the additional choices won't bring families any closer to balance.

Ironically, getting men to leave the workforce to stay home with their children helps another group of "working" women: stay-at-home mothers. As Ann Crittenden lays out in her book "The Price of Motherhood," at-home mothers have historically been given short shift by the government, by working women, by their husbands and by society at large.

One woman tells Crittenden at her shock of going from a well-paid job as a copyeditor to an at-home parent, not realizing the yawning gulf between how people viewed her newspaper job and how they viewed her choice to be an at-home mother, a job she calls “a thousand times as important.” “Suddenly, you back in a female world. It’s a shock,” she tells Crittenden. “Raising children is still part of a low-status world.”

The fact that parenting is both considered a “female world” and a “low-status” world shouldn’t be surprising. The U.S. government has established that at least part of the persistent pay gap between the sexes flows from the truth that professions comprised mostly of women tend to pay less than professions comprised mostly of men.

The tantalizing suggestion is that pay parity – as well as status parity – may follow gender parity. With more men pitching in alongside women in fields such as nursing and midwifery, there’s progress being made.

Boosting the numbers of at-home fathers can help turbo-charge that move toward status parity for at-home mothers. Right now, a woman’s decision to staying home with the children is seen as a default decision of a family that celebrates parentcare and wants to avoid daycare. In short, the “choice” for mom to stay home isn’t really a choice, it’s an expectation, an almost-inevitable consequence of putting family first.

By viewing the decision to stay home as natural or expected, society de-emphasizes the extraordinary nature of that choice. Women today have opportunities that were rare a generation ago and unheard of a generation before that. I tell my daughter that she can grow up to be anything she wants to be, and I firmly believe that I’m telling her the truth.

When women decide to stay home, they are making a conscious decision to put professional aspirations on hold to tend to their family. They have made a sacrifice. But the mothers I know who are staying home aren’t seen as women who purposefully stepped off the fast track. They’re seen as simply fulfilling their duty.

In contrast, I’m constantly lauded for staying home with my daughter. The people I meet at the tumbling class or the YMCA are acutely aware that I could

be doing just about anything else, but that I instead elected to be the primary caregiver. In short, I'm afforded much a higher status as a person because there's no assumption that I'm doing the job of parent because I had no other option.

I get "Good for you!" an awful lot. "What a wonderful choice," comes up, too. "Your daughter will thank you for this someday." The praise is absurd; I've made the same choice as generations of mothers, and I don't claim to be a perfect parent. I get the credit simply because I'm a man.

That is, of course, blatantly unfair to my at-home mom peers who have made exactly the same choice I have, under exactly the same circumstances. It is my fervent hope that swelling ranks of at-home dads will begin, slowly, to change the assumptions about all parents.

I wish the choices of my neighbors – women like the whip-smart interior designer raising three boys and the crack political operative staying home with her daughter – prompted cheers from the same people who stop me on the street to offer me undeserved compliments.

And hopefully, a flood of at-home fathers will make that more possible, in part because the "field" of at-home parents would get more varied, and in part because men staying home will demand that parenthood be held in higher regard. And I'm not the only one with that dream.

"One of my fantasies is that when we get a certain mass of men doing it, then we'll really see some change," Crittenden told me. "Men won't put up with the kind of lack of appreciation and understanding that women have put up with for so long. I just can't wait till guys start demanding stuff."