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by Bobbi Thomason

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Tom Werner/Getty Images

The past two years have brought a deluge of headlines about the pandemic's toll on working mothers, who are shouldering the majority of domestic chores and child-related tasks. Working moms are not OK. Working moms are reaching the breaking point. Working moms are struggling. Indeed, American mothers are on the brink.

After each article appeared, my social media feeds would explode with comments such as, "My husband does 50% of the work taking care of

our two kids.” Then would come the chorus: “Yes! My husband is a 50-50 partner too!” And finally the kicker: “Why don’t women just demand that their partners do their share?”

A few years ago I might have chimed in too. Now I just think to myself, “Those lucky women have probably never gone through a divorce.”

“Demand a 50-50 partnership” is a compelling rallying cry. Research shows that if professionally ambitious women can’t find a supportive partner, staying single is better for their careers. Once in a relationship, however, it takes more than splitting dishes, loads of laundry, and bedtime stories for dual-career couples to navigate a successful life together. INSEAD professor Jennifer Petriglieri’s research finds that dual-career couples who thrive together at home and individually at work dive into psychological and social issues in deep conversations to come to agreement. They discuss power and control, hopes and fears, and expectations about the roles partners should play in each other’s lives.

But being in what Petriglieri calls a “couple that works” is elusive for many women. It was for me. Expecting my husband to value my career as much as his own cost me a three-year divorce and custody battle, entailed a liquidated retirement account and a pile of debt to finance the litigation, and continues to mean regular periods of time apart from our young daughter as a part of our custody schedule.

I wasn’t naïve. I’m a gender scholar who wrote my dissertation on female executives. I’ve consulted for LeanIn.org, an organization that led the “make your partner a real partner” charge. I teach negotiation to MBA students and executives.

And my mistake isn't unique. Today's educated and ambitious women may be looking for true partners, but they aren't necessarily finding them. A survey of Harvard Business School alumni found that most women expect to be in egalitarian marriages, but the majority of men expect their own careers to take priority.

Management professor Beth Livingston has found that if wives so much as initiate a negotiation for their jobs to take priority, it can result in backlash in the form of less emotional support from their husbands. The situation is just as bad or worse when women are the primary breadwinners. Studies document that when a wife outearns her husband, she spends even more time on household chores, her husband does not necessarily respect her career, and she is more likely to become the victim of his physical aggression. Couples in which the wives earn more are less satisfied with their marriages and more likely to divorce.

The profound emotional toll of leaving a marriage or partnership is hard to measure, but the financial and professional costs are easy to quantify. Women's household income falls by an average of 41% after a divorce, more than twice as much as men's income does.

A career-supporting romantic partner is a wonderful thing for those who have one. But many women with demanding careers do not.

In the absence of corporate or government policies that support working mothers in the U.S., my own research suggests that women rely on a network of parents, in-laws, siblings, friends, and children. It is this wider network — particularly in cases of unsupportive spouses — that determines the professional paths women will take. When these people amplify a husband's expectations that his wife should fill traditional caregiving roles and prioritize his career, women move from the fast

track to the mommy track, passing up promotions and leaving their powerful jobs.

By contrast, when women have individuals in their networks who offer them logistical and emotional support, they are more likely to stay in their careers and on the path toward executive positions — even if that entails the difficult choice of leaving their marriage or romantic partner. Such women rely on hired help and extended family — as one executive told me, “an army” — to help raise their children and keep their houses in order. They also receive emotional support from friends and family: reassurance that it’s OK to hire another caregiver, or a willing ear when the need arises to talk about gendered hostility at the office or the chronic exhaustion of leading a company.

Indeed, I could not have navigated the litigation or aftermath of my divorce without my parents, who moved across the country to help with child care; colleagues, who covered my classes when I had to be in court; coauthors, who moved research forward when I could not; a virtual writing group, which offered community and accountability; and so many mom friends, who created a home that extended beyond the four walls of my house.

It’s never easy. But the experience of navigating a work-family conflict can result in more empathy and proactive support for other women. Recent research on work-family enrichment finds that becoming a mother enhances how women relate to others at work. In one study, led by Pepperdine professor Dana Sumpter, women described how having a baby, returning to work, and caring for a young child grew their relational capabilities, such as networking and relationship building. This means that women are not only more compassionate and understanding toward their peers but also better at their jobs.

Organizations can foster such support by encouraging peer groups and employee resource groups. These are constructive spaces, offering women opportunities to connect with one another, build skills and coping strategies, and support one another to sustain their efforts to combine work and family.

Unequal partnerships are not always foreseeable or easy to avoid. Once a couple is enmeshed, both staying and leaving can bring deep suffering. So let's stop blaming women. A working mother without a supportive spouse is struggling enough; she doesn't need peers proclaiming that they've figured it out and suggesting that she could too if she were smart enough or feminist enough or knew how to ask.

Instead, as this new year begins, we can all resolve to be a part of a more supportive village – lending a hand, listening after a hard day, and cheering working moms on to make their career and home life dreams a reality.

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