
Explaining the Persistence of Gender Inequality: The Work-Family Narrative as a Social Defense against the 24/7 Work Culture

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February 11, 2022

Women's Stalled Advancement and the Work-Family Narrative

- Women's gains in attaining positions of power and authority slowed in the 1990s and have stalled completely in this century
- In professional service firms, women hover at around 15% to 20% of equity partners
- The pervasive explanation:
 - High-level jobs demand long hours
 - Women's family devotion precludes their putting in the hours
 - Their careers suffer as a result

Research Setting and Data

- Mid-sized global consulting firm (1,000+ employees)
- Concerned about women's underrepresentation in senior ranks and about turnover
- Data:
 - Interviews with over 100 women and men in all consultant ranks (taped and transcribed)
 - Observations
 - HR personnel data
- 18 months

Initial Findings

- Virtually all interviewees invoked the work-family narrative
- Disconnects from reality:
 - Equivalent turnover rates for women and men
 - Men, too, suffer
 - Women who took accommodations failed to advance
 - 24/7 work is unnecessary
- Our explanation for women's stalled advancement:
 - The crushing culture of overwork
 - Unnecessarily long hours detrimental to everyone
 - But women disproportionately penalized because they take accommodations

Leaders' Reactions

- Pointing out these disconnects and offering our more nuanced, data-drive explanation fell on deaf ears
- The engagement effectively ended
- Question:

Why does the work-family narrative have such a powerful grip?

Our Emergent Hypothesis

The work-family narrative is so pervasive and tenacious because it feeds into an elaborate system of social and psychological defenses

These defenses help women and men fend off anxieties arising from the demand for long work hours

Return to the Data

- **Data:**

- Not just *what* participants said but *how* they said it, e.g.:
 - *Hesitations, stumbling, abrupt shifts, striking metaphors, equivocation, deflections, incoherence, contradictions*
- Signals indicating content is potentially conflicted and warrants attention

- **Findings:**

- Unconscious emotional conflict and ambivalence
- Set the stage for unconscious protective measures, in the form of psychological and social defenses, to kick in

Psychological and Social Defenses

- *Psychological Defense – gender-based splitting, projection, and projective identification*
 - Key parts of being a whole person “*split*” into two: committed parent/committed worker
 - Committed parent role “*projected*” onto women
 - Committed worker role “*projected*” onto men
 - One unconsciously *identifies* with those who enact the disowned—split-off—parts of themselves, deriving emotional gratification from those enactments
- *Social defenses – features of organizational life that members collectively and unconsciously create to bolster their defenses*
 - The firm’s work-family narrative and accommodation policies
- **Upshot:**
 - Gender roles taken as natural and inevitable
 - The 24/7 work culture is incontestable

Men: An Illustration

I believe deeply in my heart and soul that women encounter different challenges. There's the collusion of society that it's the woman who takes the extended maternity leave, and there are some biological imperatives, too. When my first child was born, I got to carry her from the delivery room to the nursery. It's almost like I could feel the chemicals releasing in my brain. I fell so chemically, deeply in love with my daughter. I couldn't imagine a world without her. I mean here it was in [just] the first eight minutes of her life. So I can understand, "How can I possibly give this up and go back to work?"

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Men's Psychological Resolution

- Men comply with the work-family narrative, setting up women as the bearers of psychological distress
- **Illusion:** A fulfilled life as a committed worker
- But the defense is a Band-Aid
- **Reality:** The on-the-ground, relentless demands of family

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Women's (Lack of) Psychological Resolution

- Women fail to fully comply with the work-family narrative
- Can't reap its psychic benefits as a social defense
- Unwilling to give up their career aspirations, women remain caught in the dilemma
- Constantly reminded that they are in in the wrong place by being at work instead of at home

Push Factors

- **Women seen as lacking competence in selling**
 - **His style:** He'll walk into an executive meeting and say. . . “Okay, you want to achieve this. . . . It’s going to take an organizational intervention, an innovation. . . a broader corporate strategy. It’s going to be a multi-year program, let’s just be very clear. That will be . . . about \$15 million over two years. Are you tracking, are you with me?”
 - **Her style:** I walk into a client, I check in. I like to be friends with them. . . I tend to say, “Here's what I heard you saying, your agenda.” . . . And I start to build, and then I hope that they get to this delightful conclusion that this is going to be a \$15 million program.
 - **Advice:** A senior partner said, “You're a great relationship builder. [But] don’t over-rely on it. . . . You don't want anybody here to think you don’t have a lot going on between your ears.”
- **Success for women equated with bad mothering**
 - Senior women condemned as bad mothers.

Conclusion

- What holds women back?

Not some unique challenge of balancing work and family demands, but a general problem of overwork deep-rooted in unconscious psychological and social defenses in which both women and men, managers and employees, collude

- What can be done?

A whole-scale reconsideration of our **beliefs about work** and our **beliefs about gender**