

RELEASE IN PART  
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**From:** Mills, Cheryl D <MillsCD@state.gov>  
**Sent:** Wednesday, June 27, 2012 11:55 AM  
**To:** H  
**Subject:** Fw:

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**From:** Sheryl Sandberg [redacted]  
**Sent:** Wednesday, June 27, 2012 11:32 AM  
**To:** Mills, Cheryl D  
**Subject:**

This is my personal favorite

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**From:** Sheryl Sandberg  
**Sent:** Tuesday, June 26, 2012 4:26 PM  
**To:** 'Stephen Paul'  
**Subject:** this is the best article, in my view that anyone wrote

## It's Time to Abandon "Have It All" Rhetoric

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By Sharon Poczter



Perhaps the mark of these “superwomen”, such as Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook's COO, is that they did not let themselves become confined to others’ metrics of success and were not inhibited by a fear of failure. (Photo credit: Wikipedia)

While the recent article by Ann-Marie Slaughter in the *Atlantic Monthly* “[Why Women Still Can’t Have it All](#)”, makes several inarguable points regarding what women need in order to be successful – more role models in high-powered positions and institutions that support working mothers – the narrative she chooses to illustrate her points may do more to stymie those goals than to promote them. If readers extrapolate her story as a manifesto for all working women, as exposure on such a public platform inevitably leads to, we may end up back where we started; promoting the idea that deep down women feel better giving up powerful positions at

work in order to spend more time at home. When in fact, the issue may not be what women give up for positions of power, but rather what positions of power, by their very nature, require us to give up regardless of gender.

The antiquated rhetoric of “having it all” disregards the basis of every economic relationship; the idea of tradeoffs. All of us are dealing with the constrained optimization that is life, attempting to maximize our utility based on parameters like career, kids, relationships, etc., doing our best to allocate the resource of time. Due to the scarcity of this resource, therefore, none of us can “have it all”, and those who claim to are most likely lying.

As we all face different utility functions, we should be cautious in categorizing all women in one large group with one shared set of desires. The danger in Ms. Slaughter’s narrative is the implication that all women, even women like her, deep down want to choose more time at home over positions of power, that this will make us happier. In fact, the meticulously researched article by Justin Wolfers and Betsey Stevenson showing a trend of decreasing happiness among women that Ms. Slaughter uses to further this narrative makes no such claim. A close read of the paper reveals that if increasing time at work leads to increasing unhappiness, the data do not show this. In particular, all of the relationships we would expect if this story were true – that employed women are less happy than unemployed women, that women of childbearing age are less happy than women in retirement, etc., – actually do not bear out in the data. Thus, while women may be getting less happy over time, it has yet to be proven that it has anything to do with how much time we spend at home.

It should not be minimized that a large part of the difficulty Ms. Slaughter faced was largely a function of the position she rose to rather than gender per se. Positions that are extraordinary demand hours that are extraordinary and often require a physical presence. Men in these roles also sacrifice time at home. Does this imply “having it all” should mean working at such a high level, setting one’s own hours, and receiving a decent income? For positions such as these, this world of “all” exists nowhere, neither for men nor for women.

However, in terms of gender issues, Ms. Slaughter’s experience brings up many concerns that we need to address. In particular, we need to understand her motivations for stepping down beyond just her commitments at home, and whether these are gender based. Perhaps most disturbingly, Ms. Slaughter identifies with Mary Matalin, assistant to President George H.W. Bush, who felt motivated to step down because she felt dispensable at work. Would someone tell Hillary Clinton or Sheryl Sandberg that she is dispensable? More importantly, would we believe them? If the feeling of being dispensable is paralyzing enough to help us justify stepping down while seemingly no such insecurities plague men in power, we need to figure out why.

Further, Ms. Slaughter cautions that using women such as Ms. Sandberg as role models sets us up for a sense of failure, because such women are simply “superhuman”. But why do we need to buffer ourselves from a sense of failure? Failure is ubiquitous and genderless. I’m sure even Sheryl Sandberg failed at something in her life at one point or another. But as a society, as women, we will get much further if we fall 10% short of 100 rather than 5% short of 50. Perhaps the mark of these “superwomen” is that they did not let themselves become confined to others’ metrics of success and were not inhibited by a fear of failure. Alienating female readers from a very human Ms. Sandberg promotes the notion that success on her level is unattainable.

Part of the difficulty women face, and Ms. Slaughter’s article unfortunately furthers, is the social construct that measures motherhood largely by how much of our career we sacrifice. Why are we so focused on how difficult it is for women to work and not at all on how difficult staying at home might be? Very rarely do we discuss the fact that labor is extremely painful, that pregnancy can be physically tortuous, or that staying home with your child can be mind-numbing, although covertly many women think this is true. We still as a society martyrize motherhood, glorifying women who are mothers and sacrifice their career for their children. This social construct needs to change. Perhaps then the guilt mothers feel in positions of power, making sacrifices that men have been making for millennia, can be somewhat alleviated.

It is time to abandon the “have it all” rhetoric. It is confusing and confining. I personally don’t want to live in a world where we are burnished for working more, wanting to make contributions to society outside of our children. And we need to be careful to not perpetuate the stereotype that realistically, women’s choice set includes only lonely moo shoo pork-eating powerwoman or dream job quitter, as it minimizes the diversity of options open to women. Ms. Slaughter had other options open to her that would have allowed her to keep her job and spend more time with her teenage sons, which she chose not to take. This variation, and the very choices that women increasingly have, should not be undermined.

*Sharon L. Poczter is an expert in emerging markets, financial economics, industrial competitiveness and strategy. She is an assistant professor of Managerial Economics at Cornell University’s Charles H. Dyson School of Applied Economics and Management.*

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