

## Women and the new ‘extreme’ jobs

By Sylvia Ann Hewlett

NANCY PELOSI, Jeanine Pirro, Elizabeth Vargas—women with outsized jobs and grand ambitions burdened by family baggage. Sometimes it buoys them up; mostly it drags them down. In 2006, maternal responsibilities and spousal frailties have a new ability to shoot high-powered women down.

It’s as though the goal post just shifted. Over the last decade, high-level, high-impact jobs in our economy have become much more stressful and strenuous—and much more rewarding. Propelled by globalization, canny communication technology, and gargantuan compensation packages, a new work model has emerged which requires professionals to give huge amounts of their hearts and brains to the job. One problem with this increasingly “extreme” work model: women are being excluded in new ways.

Here’s the story. Over the last 40 years, highly credentialed women have flooded into the professional labor market. In at least some sectors they started to make serious progress, rising up the ranks, snapping at the heels of men. Then what happened? High-level, high-impact jobs got redefined to become even more time consuming, even more pressurizing. Indeed they have become so vast in scope that they are now undoable by individuals who cannot conjure up a 60- to 80-hour workweek on a steady basis. These top jobs increasingly exclude women who have serious family responsibilities—about two-thirds of the highly qualified female labor pool.

So what is an extreme job? As we discovered in our research for “Extreme Jobs: The Dangerous Allure of the 70-Hour Workweek” to be published in the December issue of the Harvard Business Review, these jobs are not just about hours worked. In this study, respondents are considered to have extreme jobs if they work 60 hours or more per week and deal with at least five additional performance pressures. Top picks are 24/7 client demands, profit and loss responsibility, and significant amounts of travel.

Using this complex definition, these data tell us that a great many well-paid, high-level jobs these days are “extreme.” Across sector, 21 percent of high echelon workers have extreme jobs, and in large global corporations this figure rises to 45 percent. Extreme jobs are no longer limited to Wall Street or the city. These jobs are now all over the economy, in manufacturing and the media as well as in investment banking and the law. They are prevalent on a global scale and are held by 55-year-olds as well as 35-year-olds.

As one would expect, these jobs exact a toll. The data show that the extreme work model is wreaking havoc in private lives—taking a toll on health, gutting relationships, sideswiping sex lives, and emptying out parental roles. Much of this fall out has particular significance for women.

More so than men, women are closely tuned into and pained by negative fallout on their children. More than half of mothers with extreme jobs see a close connection between their job pressures and a range of troubling problems with their children. Whether it’s eating too much junk food, or underachieving at school, many working moms feel directly responsible. As the research literature attests, it’s rare for parents to admit to problems with their own children—there are serious problems in society, but never in one’s own home. So these data are startling, a veritable “portrait of guilt.”

But maternal guilt is not the only issue for women. Women simply don’t get the same pay off from extreme jobs as men do.

A man in an extreme job is set to win the Triple Crown. As psychiatrist Anna Fels describes in her book “Necessary Dreams,” for males success at work often translates into success in the marriage market and success on the family front. These things are aligned. A man with an extreme job gets the girl and gets the kids. These three dimensions of success are not nearly as aligned for women. For women, success in an extreme job might well threaten potential mates—not to mention the general public (witness public hostility to Hillary Clinton in 2000 and Jeanine Pirro in 2006). In addition, success at work may well pre-empt children. As Elizabeth Vargas will attest, it’s awfully hard to both hold an extreme job and deal with the rigors of pregnancy, child birth, and mothering.

All of which helps explain why few women elect into extreme jobs in the first place (only 20 percent of extreme job workers are female), and of these, many find their jobs unsustainable. Fully 80 percent of women in extreme jobs have one foot out the door—they do not want to work this hard, under this kind of pressure, for more than 12 months. The figure for men is 58 percent.

The new extreme work model does not augur well for women’s progress. Many organizations and corporations see these high octane extreme workers as the “A” team—the bench strength from which they recruit future leaders. It’s extremely disturbing to see so few women in these ranks. What we need is a radical re design of the high-echelon work model.

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