





Transcending 9 to 5

How American women *and* men are reworking our country

By Courtney E. Martin

My paternal grandmother, Maryanne, dreamed of becoming a writer. For a short spell in the 1950s, she edited manuscripts for a literary agent—male, of course. Hunched over stacks of paper at a Formica-topped kitchen table while dinner got a little burnt nearby, she was blissfully happy. It was the closest she would ever come to realizing her dream. For the majority of her life, she worked exclusively in the home exclusively as a “homemaker.”

My maternal grandmother, Joan, boldly went where few 18-year-old girls from Kearney, Nebraska, dared to go in the early 1940s—Chicago, Illinois. She attended a teachers college while volunteering at Jane Addams’ Hull House, the progressive community house founded by the Nobel Prize-winning social activist in the late 1880s. My grandma Joan would ring her own heavy school bell for just a few years, as a kindergarten teacher, before starting a family and staying home forevermore.

My own mother thought that the perfect job for her, circa 1965, would be secretarial work. She heard that if you finished your work early enough, you could read novels all day at your desk. Then the late 1960s turned everything upside down, and suddenly my mom was protesting the Vietnam War right alongside my dad, earning top grades as an undergraduate at Colorado State University, and applying to social work graduate school.

She worked throughout my childhood—mostly a juggling act of consulting, part-time, and unpaid community work. She was often sick with an autoimmune

disorder, but deeply fulfilled nevertheless. My parents' commitment to shared parenting proved noble, but ultimately unrealized—with my dad logging long hours at his inflexible law firm.

My partner's mother, a Caribbean immigrant, worked nights as a nurse while raising four kids on her own in Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. She would sew suits from scratch for the doctors at the hospital for extra money and occasionally make elaborate wedding dresses for their daughters. She didn't fret over failed promises or her own unfulfilled dreams; she worked tirelessly so that her children could thrive. And they did. They became a blues singer, a nurse, a technology expert, and—my partner—a film editor.

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On the precipice of my 30s, I look back at my matrilineal history and that of my partner's family—and more broadly at the historical shifts described in this book—and I feel profoundly grateful. There is no longer any real debate over whether women *should* work. Perhaps some on the fringes still wonder, but the majority of Americans know that women, in most cases, *must* earn a living, and that, just like men, we find fulfillment in an honest day's work—whether we fix plumbing, care for the elderly, or design websites. If we are lucky, we even find a vocation where, as theologian and novelist Frederick Buechner puts it, our “deep gladness meets the world's deep need.”

There have been such significant gains in so many of the areas examined in these pages—government, business, education, health, religion, and, yes, even the still-frustrating arenas of pop culture and mainstream media. You've just read many of the exciting headlines:

- Women are indeed half of all U.S. workers
- Workplaces are beginning to change to allow workers to be able to earn an income for their family and still meet their family responsibilities

- Studies prove that women-led businesses have an improved bottom line
- Women are more educated than ever before
- Religious institutions are being compelled to evolve to accommodate the working woman
- Women's access to contraception has put them in a position to design their lives as never before
- Men want to be present fathers!

For all of this and so much more, I raise a glass and toast those who have spoken up, stood out, and refused to settle for indignity or injustice.

I thank the icons, such as Anita Hill and Lilly Ledbetter, who took great personal risk to expose large-scale injustice. I thank the lesser-known, but no less courageous, fighters, among them Bernice Sandler, the architect of Title IX, and Sarah

FEMINIST ICONS. Women marching for the vote on May 1, 1912. {BETTMANN, CORBIS}





COMING OF AGE. Today's young women stand on the shoulders of earlier feminist leaders.
{BOB THOMAS, CORBIS}

Claree White, a union organizer at the Delta Pride catfish plant,¹ who led one of the largest strikes of African American workers in Mississippi. I thank the women all across the country who have dreamed despite their deferment and worked tirelessly so that the next generation could live less restrictive lives.

The women (and men) of my generation have come of age at a time when feminist values are simply in the water. On “Free to Be... You and Me,” the early 1970s children’s record album, Harry Belafonte and Marlo Thomas sang to a new generation, “Some mommies are ranchers, or poetry makers/Or doctors or teachers, or cleaners or bakers/Some mommies drive taxis, or sing on TV/Yeah, mommies can be almost anything they want to be.”² Immigrant mothers have served as courageous

models—caring for their families while working double shifts, all with an eye on their children's education and upward mobility; their daughters watch them and learn that femaleness is about dynamism and determination. Even if our parents didn't call themselves feminists, we—the daughters of the 1980s and 1990s—were raised with a new and improved edict of equality: *You can do anything you want to do, just like your brothers.*

It's a good thing we've been so pumped up on post-gender idealism, because there are some big battles ahead. As the authors of these pages attest, we need comprehensive policy reform that reflects an accurate picture of the American worker—not Mr. Cleaver putting in his eight hours and then wandering home for dinner on the table at 5:30 p.m., but men and women customizing their 15-plus hour days out of a unique mix of work (both in office and remotely), caretaking (for both children and aging parents), community activism, religious and spiritual practices, entertainment, and exercise.

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It will take a truly diverse and cohesive coalition to make sure these reforms are not seen as “women's issues,” but critical quality-of-life concerns for all. Likewise, we must work across class, ethnicity, religion, and political party if we want to shape policy that benefits all Americans, not just the privileged few who sit in the hallowed halls of power or have the resources to lobby. From the federal level on down, we need policies that honor Americans' ideals for their own lives and support their human right to have safe working conditions, economic stability, access to education, quality health care, and time with their loved ones and communities.

Men need to own their responsibility in championing these causes alongside women. For too long, women have taken on a disproportionate amount of the burden of shifting government and workplace policies to be more family friendly—causing the unintended side effect of having these efforts framed as niche issues.

Labor unions—a great force throughout American history—have helped, pushing for the passage of family and medical leave and state-paid family leave laws, and we’ll continue to need their collective voices on our side. More gender-balanced leadership and widening the fairly narrow rights framework to a more broad-based quality of life framework would be exciting.

Of course, the notion that motherhood could somehow be niche is so preposterous as to be comical. After all, we all have a mother! And beyond that, there is nothing niche about wanting to have a well-rounded life, about needing flexibility and support, about wanting to be there when your 2-year-old says her first word or your father his last. Thanks to the feminist movement, young men are increasingly seeing these issues as directly related to their own lives. Recent studies confirm that men, just like women, have an optimum fertility window,³ and even those who don’t want children are waking up to the precious gift of having a rich life outside of work. The challenge ahead is for men to grapple for the language and the framing that inspires them to join the fight. Women, for our part, must make room for our male partners and colleagues to own their share.

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There are also some battles ahead that are far less direct—the stuff of self-examination, social and cultural shape-shifting, open interpersonal communication, experimentation, and scariest of all, bold and unapologetic dreaming. Women must face the ways in which they take on too much of the burden of housework and then resent their partners for it. Men must grow comfortable leaving work meetings early for family obligations and being transparent with colleagues about it. Supervisors must try out policies that acknowledge their workers as whole human beings and neighbors must collaborate on child care, meal preparation, and extracurricular opportunities to ease the burden of raising children in isolation.

We must all envision the more equitable, humane, and balanced America we want to live in and then fight like mad to make it a reality. I see all of these less definitive shifts buzzing beneath the surface of so much of this comprehensive report—the not-so-subtle subtext to all the analysis about workplace structure, government policy, and health care reform.

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You see, we can reform our government, social, and workplace institutions, but until we re-imagine our own lives, we will forever be caught in the crossfire of thwarted personal expectations. My generation must carry on our backs the burden of so many unresolved interpersonal and social issues and so many unanswered questions about the best way to shape a life, a family, a nation.

Take my own history as an example. I have never had a role model of a marriage where two partners truly shared caregiving responsibilities. I've had tremendous mentors in the daily effort to maintain a committed partnership and a messy, loving family, and the humble search for work that is both satisfying and economically secure. But I also come from a long line of women with physical and mental health issues, unrealized potential, and unspoken regrets. I feel as if I carry this complex mix—the enlightened mentoring and the swallowed failures—around with me as I try to envision my own life as a working woman and, some day, mother.

Of course, those institutional reforms will enable me and my generation to make decisions within a healthier, more just context. The women of my generation will face far fewer double-binds than our mothers or grandmothers. The men of my generation will enjoy a far broader, though still not universal, cultural assumption that they are not only workers but also nurturers and partners. But I still believe that it is incumbent upon all of us to reinvent the most intimate of spheres in order to fully realize the potential afforded by these institutional reforms.



SHARING LIFE, SHARING HAPPINESS. Men who do more housework and child care are healthier, physically and psychologically. {TODD HEISLER, *THE NEW YORK TIMES*}

What does this new future look like?

It is my friend Charlton, staying home with his newborn baby boy while his wife works, reveling in all the new discoveries that both of them—father and son—enjoy in that precious time. It is my friend Megan, walking into her boss’s office and negotiating the salary she deserves without apology. It is my dad, retired and learning to cook for the first time, smiling from ear to ear when my mom tells him how delicious his stir-fry tastes. It is my friends Rachel and Yvette, sustaining a loving partnership via Skype and a thousand beautiful emails despite the

U.S. government's refusal to recognize their union and grant Yvette a visa. It is partners across the country, sitting down with one another and having honest conversations about what they need in order to be fulfilled individuals *and* happy families—and most important, honoring their commitments even when it bucks cultural conventions. It is—and this is hard to admit—women letting go of some of the unhealthy expectations that we've had of ourselves and giving men more room to contribute, fail, learn, and own their part in the domestic sphere.

As men remake the role of father—from antiquated “big daddy” protector to emotionally attuned, involved mentor—and as women remake the role of mother—from martyred queen of the home to full human being with a capacity to lead in many areas—our country's ideas about leadership will also continue to evolve.

Just as policy reform can create a more comfortable climate within which individuals can make courageous choices, those courageous choices can then influence a more enlightened politics at large. As men remake the role of father—from antiquated “big daddy” protector to emotionally attuned, involved mentor—and as women remake the role of mother—from martyred queen of the home to full human being with a capacity to lead in many areas—our country's ideas about leadership will also continue to evolve.

It's such an exciting moment. We are balanced on the precipice of a whole new way of working and living, not just for women, but for everyone. If we can hold tight to our vision of what a more humane, healthy, and just America looks like, pull up our sleeves and do the hard work—side by side—that manifesting this vision will require, then the rewards could be breathtaking.

We could birth differently. No longer forced to have a baby and then rush back to work, women and men together could share the first, sacred months of life and head back to work with their bonds secured. We could learn differently, finally honoring our rhetoric in this country about providing equal education for all and

supporting more diversity within every field. We could work differently, expecting dignity and fair wages in our workplaces and using the best technology has to offer to be more efficient within our truly customizable work schedules.

We could govern differently. Lawmakers could craft policies that support individuals and families, not just the bottom line. We could care differently, coordinating not just with our equally harried partners but also with federally subsidized child care centers, more cohesive neighborhood groups, and religious and spiritual communities.

We have leaders at the highest levels who—both symbolically and fundamentally—support Americans, men and women, in their quest for fulfilling work and personal lives. We have momentum.

We could worship differently. “Bowling alone” no more, we could depend on our religious and neighborhood communities to feed our spirits while starving our sense of alienation. We could even die differently, surrounded by those who love us, those who are supported to be present during the moments that matter most in our lives.

My grandmothers, and my mother especially, lived amazing, courageous lives, but they were limited by the times in which they were born—the economic constraints, the fearful clinging to joyless gender norms, the lack of a collective analysis and an inspired vision. My generation faces its own challenges today—the Great Recession, a dangerous and insecure world, the threat of environmental ruin, the residue of decades of gender disparity—but the world today also boasts ripe conditions for thoroughgoing change.

We have the opportunity that comes from crisis—the battered economy has shaken up just about everything. Our environmental crisis points toward our undeniable interconnection. We have leaders at the highest levels who—both symbolically and fundamentally—support Americans, men *and* women, in their quest for fulfilling work *and* personal lives. We have momentum.

Alice Walker once wrote, “And so our mothers and grandmothers have, more often than not anonymously, handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see—or like a sealed letter they could not plainly read.”⁴ In these pages, I have read the sealed letter. It is a call to action to my entire generation to agitate for the world that our mothers and fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers, didn’t get to live in, but dreamed of—for us.

Courtney E. Martin is the award-winning author of Perfect Girls, Starving Daughters: How the Quest for Perfection is Harming Young Women.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Kristal Brent Zook, “Catfish and Courage,” *Essence*, April 21, 2003, available at http://www.essence.com/news_entertainment/news/articles/catfishandcourage.
- 2 Harry Belafonte and Marlo Thomas, “Parents Are People,” *Free to Be... You and Me*, Bell, 1972.
- 3 Steven Reinberg, “Late-Life Fatherhood May Lower Child’s Intelligence,” *US News and World Report*, March 9, 2009, available at <http://heath.usnews.com/articles/health/healthday/2009/03/09/late-life-fatherhood-may-lower-childs-intelligence.html>.
- 4 Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens* (New York: Harvest Books, 2003), p. 240.