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Behind Every Great Woman

As more women earn high-level corporate roles, more husbands are staying home, raising the kids, and changing the rules

By [Carol Hymowitz](#)

Among the 80 or so customers crammed into Bare Escentuals, it's easy to spot Leslie Blodgett. It's not merely her six-inch platform heels and bright magenta-and-blue dress that set her apart in the Thousand Oaks (Calif.) mall boutique, but her confidence. To the woman concerned she's too old for shimmery eye shadow, Blodgett swoops in and encourages her to wear whatever she wants. With a deft sweep of a brush, she demonstrates a new shade of blush on another customer's cheek. And when she isn't helping anyone, she pivots on her heels for admirers gushing about her dress, made by the breakout designer Erdem.

Blodgett, 49, has spent the past 18 years nurturing Bare Escentuals from a startup into a global cosmetics empire. She sold the company for \$1.7 billion to Shiseido in March 2010 but still pitches products in stores around the world and chats incessantly with customers online. Scores of fans post daily messages on Blodgett's Facebook page, confessing details about their personal lives and offering opinions on her additive-free makeup. She only wishes her 19-year-old son, Trent, were in touch with her as frequently as he is with her husband, Keith. In 1995, at 38, Keith quit making television commercials to raise Trent, freeing up Leslie to build her business. She'd do it all again, but she's jealous of her husband's relationship with her son. Trent, a college sophomore, texts his father almost every day; he often goes a week without texting her.

"Once I knew my role was providing for the family, I took that very seriously. But there was envy knowing I wasn't there for our son during the day," says Blodgett. "Keith does everything at home—the cooking, repairs, finances, vacation planning—and I could work long hours and travel a lot, knowing he took such good care of Trent. I

love my work, but I would have liked to have a little more balance or even understand what that means.”

Blodgett’s lament is becoming more familiar as a generation of female breadwinners look back on the sacrifices—some little, some profound—required to have the careers they wanted. Like hundreds of thousands of women who have advanced into management roles in the past two decades—and, in particular, the hundreds who’ve become senior corporate officers—she figured out early what every man with a corner office has long known: To make it to the top, you need a wife. If that wife happens to be a husband, and increasingly it is, so be it.

When Carly Fiorina became ([HPQ](#))Hewlett-Packard’s first female chief executive officer, the existence of her househusband, Frank Fiorina, who had retired early from ([T](#))AT&T to support her career, was a mini-sensation; now this arrangement isn’t at all unusual. Seven of the 18 women who are currently CEOs of Fortune 500 companies—including ([XRX](#))Xerox’s Ursula Burns, ([PEP](#))PepsiCo’s Indra Nooyi, and ([WLP](#))WellPoint’s Angela Braly—have, or at some point have had, a stay-at-home husband. So do scores of female CEOs of smaller companies and women in other senior executive jobs. Others, like ([IBM](#))IBM’s new CEO, Ginni Rometty, have spouses who dialed back their careers to become their powerful wives’ chief domestic officers.

This role reversal is occurring more and more as women edge past men at work. Women now fill a majority of jobs in the U.S., including 51.4 percent of managerial and professional positions, according to U.S. Census Bureau data. Some 23 percent of wives now out-earn their husbands, according to a 2010 study by the Pew Research Center. And this earnings trend is more dramatic among younger people. Women 30 and under make more money, on average, than their male counterparts in all but three of the largest cities in the U.S.

During the recent recession, three men lost their jobs for every woman. Many unemployed fathers, casualties of layoffs in manufacturing and finance, have ended up caring for their children full-time while their wives are the primary wage earners. The number of men in the U.S. who regularly care for children under age five increased to 32 percent in 2010 from 19 percent in 1988, according to Census figures. Among those fathers with preschool-age children, one in five served as the main caregiver.

Even as the trend becomes more widespread, stigmas persist. At-home dads are sometimes perceived as freeloaders, even if they’ve lost jobs. Or they’re considered

frivolous kept men—gentlemen who golf. The househusbands of highly successful women, after all, live in luxurious homes, take nice vacations, and can afford nannies and housekeepers, which many employ at least part-time. In reaction, at-home dads have launched a spate of support groups and daddy blogs to defend themselves.

“Men are suddenly seeing what it’s been like for women throughout history,” says Linda R. Hirshman, a lawyer and the author of *Get to Work*, a book that challenges at-home moms to secure paying jobs and insist that their husbands do at least half the housework. Caring for children all day and doing housework is tiring, unappreciated work that few are cut out for—and it leaves men and women alike feeling isolated and diminished.

There’s some good news about the at-home dads trend. “By going against the grain, men get to stretch their parenting abilities and women can advance,” notes Stephanie Coontz, a family studies professor at Evergreen State College in Olympia, Wash., and author of *Marriage: a History*. And yet the trend underscores something else: When jobs are scarce or one partner is aiming high, a two-career partnership is next to impossible. “Top power jobs are so time-consuming and difficult, you can’t have two spouses doing them and maintain a marriage and family,” says Coontz. This explains why, even as women make up more of the workforce, they’re still a small minority (14 percent, according to New York-based Catalyst) in senior executive jobs. When they reach the always-on, all-consuming executive level, “it’s still women who more often put family ahead of their careers,” says Ken Matos, a senior director at Families and Work Institute in New York. It may explain, too, why bookstore shelves and e-book catalogs are jammed with self-help books for ambitious women, of which *I’d Rather Be in Charge*, by former Ogilvy-Mather Worldwide CEO Charlotte Beers, is merely the latest. Some, such as Hirshman’s top-selling *Get to Work*, recommend that women “marry down”—find husbands who won’t mind staying at home—or wed older men who are ready to retire as their careers take off. What’s indisputable is that couples increasingly are negotiating whose career will take precedence before they start a family.

“Your wife’s career is about to soar, and you need to get out of her way.” That’s what Ken Gladden says his boss told him shortly before his wife, Dawn Lepore, was named the first female CIO at ([SCHW](#)) Charles Schwab in 1994. He was a vice-president at Schwab in computer systems. Lepore’s promotion meant she’d become his top boss. “I married above my station,” Gladden jokes.

Gladden moved to a job at ([V](#))Visa. When their son, Andrew, was born four years later in 1998, Gladden quit working altogether. He and Lepore had tried for years to have a child and didn't want him raised by a nanny. Being a full-time dad wasn't the biggest adjustment Gladden made for Lepore's career. That came later, when Seattle-based drugstore.com recruited Lepore to become its CEO in 2004.

Gladden had lived in the San Francisco Bay Area for 25 years and wasn't keen to move to a city where it rains a lot and he didn't know anyone. He rejected Lepore's suggestion that she commute between Seattle and San Francisco, and after some long discussions he agreed to relocate—on the condition that they kept their Bay Area home. They still return for holidays and some vacations. “To do what I'm doing, you've got to be able to say ‘my wife's the breadwinner, the more powerful one,’ and be O.K. with that. But you also need your own interests,” says Gladden, who has used his computing skills to launch a home-based business developing software for schools.

The couple's five-bedroom Seattle home overlooks Lake Washington. Gladden, 63, is chief administrator of it and their children, who now are 9 and 13. While they're in school, he works on his software. From 3 p.m. until bedtime, he carools to and from sports and music lessons, warms up dinners prepared by a part-time housekeeper, and supervises homework. Lepore, 57, is often out of town. She oversaw the sale of drugstore.com to ([WAG](#))Walgreens last year, for \$429 million. As CEO, she was rarely home before 8 or 9 p.m. and traveled several days a week. Now, as a consultant to several startups and a director at ([EBAY](#))EBay, she still travels frequently. If Gladden envies anything, it's the ease with which his wife can walk into a room filled with well-known executives like Bill Gates and “go right up to them and start talking. I don't feel like I can participate,” he says.

Lepore wishes her “biggest supporter” would get more recognition for everything he does at home. When an executive recently told her “having an at-home husband makes it easy for you to be a CEO,” she responded, “no, not easy. He makes it possible.” Lepore advises younger women to “choose your spouse carefully. If you want a top job, you need a husband who isn't self-involved and will support your success,” even if you go further than him. There are tradeoffs, she warns: “I've missed so much with my kids—school plays, recitals, just seeing them every day.”

For Lepore and Gladden, the role reversal paid off, and, as one of the few couples willing to go public about their domestic arrangement, they're a rare source of inspiration for those who are still figuring it out. Like Gladden, Matt Schneider, 36, is

an at-home dad. A former technology company manager and then a sixth grade teacher, he cares for his sons Max and Sam, 6 and 3, while his wife, Priyanka, also 36, puts in 10-hour days as chief operating officer at a Manhattan real estate management startup. He feels “privileged,” he says, to be with his sons full-time “and see them change every day,” while allowing that child care and housework can be mind-numbing. He uses every minute of the 2½ hours each weekday when Sam is in preschool to expand the NYC DADS Group he co-founded, 450 members strong. Members meet for play dates with their kids, discuss parenting, and stand up for at-home dads. “We’re still portrayed as bumbling idiots,” Schneider says. He rails against a prejudice that moms would do a better job—if only they were there. “Everyone is learning from scratch how to change diapers and toilet-train,” he says, “and there’s no reason to think this is woman’s work.”

Schneider and his wife, who met as undergraduates at University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School of Business, decided before they wed that she’d have the big career and he’d be the primary parent. “It’s her name on the paycheck, and sure, we’ve thought about the precariousness of having just one breadwinner. But she wouldn’t earn what she does if I wasn’t doing what I do,” he says. Which is not to say that he doesn’t wonder “whether I can get back to a career when I want to and build on what I’ve done before.”

At-home moms have snubbed him at arts and crafts classes and on playgrounds. “Men, even those of us pushing strollers, are perceived as dangerous,” Schneider says. He was rejected when he wanted to join an at-home neighborhood moms’ group, which prompted him to blog more about the similarities among moms and dads. “I’ve met moms *and* dads who are happy to give a screaming kid a candy bar to get him to settle down, and moms *and* dads who show up at play dates with containers filled with organic fruit,” he says. “The differences aren’t gender-specific.”

It’s no different for gay couples. Brad Kleinerman and Flint Gehre have taken turns being at-home dads for their three sons, now 19, 18, and 10. When their sons—biological siblings they adopted through the Los Angeles County foster care system—were young, Kleinerman and Gehre relied first on a weekday nanny and then a live-in one while both worked full-time. Kleinerman, 50, was an executive in human resources at (DIS)Walt Disney and NASA. Gehre, 46, was a teacher and then director of global learning and communications at Disney. Five years ago, they decided they no longer wanted to outsource parenting. “We always wanted to have dinner together as a family, but by the time we got home, the nanny had fed our kids,” says Gehre. “Our kids were at pivotal ages—the two oldest about to go to high school and the

youngest to first grade. We wanted to be the ones instilling our values and be there when they needed help with homework or had to get to a doctor.”

In 2007 the couple moved from Los Angeles to Avon, Conn., where they were able to get married legally and find better schools for their kids. Kleinerman became the full-time dad and Gehre kept his Disney job, working partly from home and traveling frequently to Los Angeles. A year later they switched: Gehre quit Disney to parent full-time and Kleinerman found a new job as a human resources director at (CI)Cigna Healthcare. Gehre says he’s never felt discriminated against as a gay dad or a stay-at-home dad. “No one has ever said to me, ‘Why would you stay home with the kids?’ Where we’re discriminated is when we pay taxes. We don’t qualify for the marriage deduction, we have to file as single people,” he says. If he has one regret about being at home, it’s the lack of adult conversation and stimulation: “I worked in a very high-intensity atmosphere with very intelligent and hard-driving people, and that keeps you sharp.” Any dullness doesn’t make Gehre doubt his decision. Having consciously chosen to have a family, he and Kleinerman felt they had not only to provide the essentials, but also to be present.

Is there an alternate universe where both parents can pursue careers without outsourcing child care? The five Nordic countries—Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Denmark—are noted leaders in keeping moms, in particular, on the job. “These countries have made it possible to have a better division of labor both at work and at home through policies that both encourage the participation of women in the labor force and men in their families,” says Saadia Zahidi, co-author of the World Economic Forum’s *Global Gender Gap Report*. The policies Zahidi refers to include mandatory paternal leave in combination with maternity leave; generous, federally mandated parental leave benefits; gender-neutral tax incentives; and post-maternity reentry programs.

There were no such programs or precedents for Jennifer Granholm and Dan Mulhern. When the two met at Harvard Law School, she grilled him about what he expected from a wife. Mulhern accepted that Granholm would never be a homemaker like his mother, but he never expected her to run for political office. “When I was young,” he says, “I thought *I’d* be the governor”—not married to the governor. Granholm was governor of Michigan from 2003 through 2010, and her election forced Mulhern to walk away from the Detroit-based consulting business he founded, which had numerous contracts with state-licensed health insurance companies, municipalities,

and school districts. Once that happened, he felt “in a backroom somewhere” and in a marriage that was “a lot more give than take.”

Mulhern understood that his wife faced “extraordinary pressure” during her two terms, including a \$1.7 billion budget deficit and the bankruptcies of ([GM](#)) General Motors and Chrysler. She had limited time for their three children, who were 6, 11, and 14 when she was elected, and even less for him. “I didn’t want to say, ‘hey, you missed my birthday’ or ‘you haven’t even noticed what happened with the kids,’ but I sometimes felt resentful,” he says.

Mulhern says he complained to his wife that they spent 95 percent of the little time they had together talking about her work. He missed the attention she used to give him but felt humiliated asking for it. He gradually changed his expectations. He stopped waiting for Granholm to call him in the middle of the day to share what had happened at meetings they’d spent time talking about the prior evening. And he realized he couldn’t recreate for her all the memorable or awkward moments he had with their children—like the time he found his daughter and her high school friends in the outdoor shower, “ostensibly with their clothes on. I had to call all the parents and tell them, as a courtesy, ‘I want you to know this happened at the Governor’s mansion,’ ” he says. “While my wife was battling the Republican head of the State Senate, I had a teenage daughter who was a more formidable opponent.”

When Granholm left office and was asked “what’s next?,” she said, “it’s Dan’s turn.” As a former governor, though, she’s the one with more obvious opportunities. Later this month, Granholm launches a daily political commentary show on Current TV. She’s also teaching at the University of California at Berkeley, where Dan has a part-time gig thanks to his wife.

“The employment opportunities that come my way—and my salary potential—aren’t what my wife’s are now,” says Mulhern. He plans to continue to teach, write, and do some consulting, while also taking care of their 14-year-old son. “Someone has to be focused on him every day,” he says.

The experiences and reflections of powerful women and their at-home husbands could lead to changes at work so that neither women nor men have to sacrifice their careers or families. “There’s no reason women should feel guilty about achieving great success, but there should be a way for success to include professional and personal happiness for everyone,” says *Get to Work* author Hirshman. “If you have to kill yourself at work, that’s bad for everyone.”

Kathleen Christensen agrees. As program director at the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, she has focused on work and family issues and says we're back to the 1950s, only "instead of Jane at home, it's John. But it's still one person doing 100 percent of work outside the home and the other doing 100 percent at home." Just as we saw the Feminine Mystique in the 1960s among frustrated housewives, Christensen predicts, "we may see the Masculine Mystique in 2020."

The children of couples who have reversed roles know the stakes better than anyone. One morning last year, when Dawn Lepore was packing for a business trip to New York, her nine-year-old daughter burst into tears. "I don't want you to travel so much," Elizabeth told her mother. Lepore hugged her, called her school, and said her daughter would be staying home that morning. Then she rescheduled her flight until much later that day. "There have been times when what Elizabeth wants most is a mom who stays home and bakes cookies," she says.

Lepore is sometimes concerned that her children won't be ambitious because they've often heard her complain about how exhausted she is after work. But they're much closer to their father than kids whose dads work full-time, and they have a different perspective about men's and women's potential. When a friend of her daughter's said that fathers go to offices every day, Lepore recalls, "Elizabeth replied, 'Don't be silly, dads are at home.' "

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