

HAVING IT ALL OR GIVING SOMETHING BACK?

WORDS

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As another wave of school leavers and university graduates turns up for the first day of 'real work' (not a phrase to use to any young person who has recently sweated through finals at a competitive university), the pride of their parents will be tempered by niggling anxiety if their child is a girl. It's not a worry that can be voiced easily for it's not politically correct to suggest that the question of gender makes any difference to a young person's career path. Girls leave school believing there is nothing they can't achieve. But the elephant in the room doesn't go away, and recently it's trampled all over a sacred feminist myth. An article in *The Atlantic* magazine in July by Anne-Marie Slaughter, a professor of politics and international affairs at Princeton University who served under Hillary Clinton as the director of policy planning at the State Department from 2009 to 2011, has argued that women can't 'have it all'. And her recent address to Oxford University students on the work-life balance for women made some radical proposals.

The details of her situation – how she gave up a high-powered job in the Obama administration to spend more time with her husband and sons – are well known, but her 'manifesto to women' may not be. Slaughter asserts that despite the substantial gains in educational, economic and professional attainment in the last three decades, women are less happy today than they were in 1972. Well-being not wages is the issue. She believes that even if women have husbands or nannies who share the parenting load, they don't feel as comfortable as men about being away from their children. She challenges the very definition of success – someone who

climbs up the ladder the furthest in the shortest time – in an age of significantly higher life expectancy. Slaughter says that women should see their careers not in terms of a straight upward slope but as irregular steps with periodic plateaus and even dips (she calls these 'investment levels') where a promotion is declined or a couple of years spent working fewer hours to help the family situation. Rather than concentrating on reaching the top of the ladder as quickly as possible, and delaying having children until later, women should have children before 35 or freeze their eggs. Count on peaking in your late fifties and early sixties, rather than late forties, she advises, and use technology to be able to work more from home or at weekends. She urges pushing for school timetables which match work schedules and for it to be acceptable to talk about children and family commitments at work, citing the relationship between family-friendly policies and better economic performance. Perhaps most radically, she decries the 'face-time culture' of the macho work place and advocates space for play and imagination to free up creativity and innovation, referring to studies which show that this would be the single most important step in unleashing a 'new culture of learning'.

If what she says is true, it has profound implications for how we prepare girls for the world beyond school. We need to acknowledge that much of that world has been rotten at the core, and that joining the picnic is not the way to a decent life. But it's not just women who are rethinking their priorities. Young people, both male and female, many sickened by the greed and amorality exhibited by so many in high profile positions, are opting for jobs which they feel are 'worthwhile', which make a difference to others' well-being, and which bring emotional and not merely



financial fulfilment. To them, integrity and conscience matter. Quality and balance appeal more than quantity and extremes. And they realise their career paths won't be linear. They know that they may have to 'reinvent' themselves many times in the course of their lives, that they need to develop flexibility, creativity, communication skills and emotional intelligence, and that, for such a life-style, passing exams is no longer sufficient. Perhaps now is the moment when not only our daughters but our sons too will reclaim healthy, happy and productive lives for themselves and their families, switch the emphasis from getting to giving, and create a sea-change in attitudes to work and wealth.

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