

Getting to 50/50

EXCERPT

Chapter 2

What your Husband Wins from a Working Wife

You may be thinking, “My children will have plenty of time with their father and he'll be an equal parent, whether I'm at home or in a job.”

In many families today, both dads and moms want to be involved with their kids whether or not both parents have careers. But consider this: If you stay home, you're likely to take on more family work-and your husband is less likely to make it home for dinner. Being the *sole* breadwinner for a family is stressful (and sometimes scary). Contact one last client or race home for bedtime? Facing this choice, the sole earner may tell himself, “the kids don't really need me” and make the call. Asked to fly cross-country to meet a customer, the sole breadwinner may feel it's too risky to suggest a conference call and skip his son's school play instead.

As children grow and become more expensive to raise, the pressures on a sole provider increase. At the same time, that breadwinner becomes more competent at work and less competent at home. The 50/50 couples we've talked to tell us it doesn't have to be that way. You can choose to be competent both at work and home, no matter if you're called Mom or Dad. For this to happen, women need to work more so men can work less.

THE HIGH PRICE OF THAT PICKET FENCE: HOW SOLE BREADWINNERS GET HEMMED IN

“How am I going to tell my wife?” Zach wondered, after a bad review with his boss. Zach has a great education and makes a decent salary, but he hasn't enjoyed his work for a long time-he'd really like to change jobs.

When his wife was working, Zach could have called it quits and made a new start. However, his wife, a Harvard- trained physician, left her job six years ago to stay home with their two kids. So the family now relies on Zach's income for 100 percent of its needs. *She wants a new house. She wants more children. She is going to be so disappointed in me.*

All these thoughts keep Zach in his current job even though he is so anxious he is unlikely to perform well. So he is stuck-unless his boss makes the decision for him.

Remember Darrin in the sixties sitcom *Bewitched* ? Whether you watched the series growing up or on Nick at Nite reruns, you may have felt frustration on his behalf. As he scrambled to please

his intrusive boss, Mr. Tate, and his nutty advertising clients, Darrin's angst was the grist for the show. When Darrin got into a jam, Samantha wiggled her nose and got him out of it. What Darrin could *not* escape was his joyless work life. What if Samantha had gotten a job?

One income, no options

Becca runs human resources for a semiconductor firm, where most employees are male. Men tell her personal stories about what they like and don't like about work. But it's Becca's personal setup that most interests her male colleagues with at-home wives. "I'm jealous of your husband. He doesn't have to take as much crap at work as I do," one man told Becca. Another told her how boxed in he feels. "My last boss was a jerk; now I've been transferred to a bad division. But I can't afford to protest or change jobs." He's obliged to grin and bear it since his income alone supports his family. "If I were married to someone with a real career like yours, I wouldn't have to suck it up twenty-four-seven," he says. "I feel trapped, like my only option is to stay here."

Two incomes are a safety net. If a husband's work is jeopardized or vanishes because of "right-sizing," a working wife keeps the lights on and provides security until the next job comes along. If your husband leaves his job (or his job leaves him), your income gives him choices—more good ones. He won't have to panic. He'll be free to take his time and decline what one man called the "soul-killing" jobs because you've got things covered.

In the wake of the tech bubble, 9/11, and Enron, many people got pink slips they weren't expecting. Ethan was one of them. He worked for an Internet company that went bankrupt. His wife, a pediatrician, had been working three days a week and staying home the other two to be with their children. When Ethan's job vanished, their solution was simple: His wife returned to seeing patients full time so she could support the family. That gave Ethan a lot of breathing room and he used it well. It took six months, but Ethan found a good new position where he has done well. "Many of my friends had to take jobs they weren't excited about," he says. "Sometimes they had to move across the country. Their spouses didn't work and they were stressed about paying the bills. I was lucky that I could be more discerning because my wife was our safety net."

When wives don't pay their way, men often pay a price—they have to compromise themselves, sticking it out in work environments that don't reflect their values. "Your business is filled with people who don't put family first," Sharon's husband, Steve, said to her when they first met. Steve had interned on Wall Street one summer. One of his strongest memories was of Nick, a respected banker, who was forced to choose between attending a "mandatory" recruiting event or his son's birthday party. Nick felt the culture wouldn't accept how he felt: that his son was more important than summer interns. So what did he do? Nick stealthily tiptoed out of his office at 6 p.m., ducking down between the cubicles as he went for the elevator. Steve's takeaway: "It wasn't a life I was willing to lead." Steve hasn't had to—and Sharon's job meant Steve hasn't had to worry that his family would go wanting if his career had a hiccup. But he did make a compromise. He supported Sharon's career in a business he'd intentionally avoided. "Be your own man." That's what we teach our sons and, after fashion, our daughters. Yet a dad can't *do*

that when he's the sole provider. Freedom to walk out on a bad deal at work, to tell the truth—that's a big part of what husbands win with a working wife. But it's more than just avoiding the negatives. Men also gain an advantage in their careers (and lives) that often goes unnoticed.

Should his heart race for his boss-or for you?

Let's say your spouse supports your family while you stay home, but dreams of bigger things or wants to change tracks. If he's a responsible guy but hasn't yet won the lottery, what's the chance he'll get to act on his desires? It's hard to be a frontiersman without a grubstake or a second income that acts as one. When men yearn for open territory, wives can block the way or pave it.

Pablo came to the United States when he married Celia, a public school teacher. He left behind a job as an accountant to start over in his adopted country. To work in health care, he needs credentials and Celia's full-time teaching salary pays for the classes that will certify him in his new specialty. Alex was a successful sales executive at a large company but wanted something more in life. His wife, Deb, ran a public relations business and together they had three small children.

Deb's job meant that Alex could go to graduate school and launch a career he found more rewarding. Maggie's husband, Marc, is a writer; they knew when they first married that her nurse's salary would probably provide the steadier income stream and that it would allow him to write. He makes money when he sells his work and her income pays the bills in between.

If your husband is burning to move into a new field or start that business he's been talking about since college, he has a fighting chance, if you have a job. In fact, he's more likely to spread his wings. The research group Catalyst reports that when both spouses work, one or both are more likely to take career risks. Says one man in a survey Catalyst conducted, “[my wife] made enough that I was able to go off and do something far more entrepreneurial than I would have if we were relying on one income.”¹

Craig took three years off to redirect his career and is now CEO of a software company. “I'm paying myself a lower salary and giving myself more upside in the company because [my wife's] income makes that possible. I'm putting in a lot of sweat equity and I couldn't do that if I needed the money to pay our bills. I have friends who would kill to do what I'm doing. But they can't take the chance because they're the only income in the family.”

That's been the story in our lives, too. Both of us married men who enjoy taking risks. Because their wives work, they've been free to forge their own paths.

Joanna's spouse is a “serial entrepreneur” who thrives on creating new ventures. Before they married, Jason sat her down and said, “I don't want to be a corporate drone. I don't want to work for anyone else.” He was prepared to live simply, he told her, if he could enjoy his work. But to support a family they'd need a steady income, and early on Joanna made the decision that

consistency would come from her work. Jason was able to pursue his entrepreneurial career, starting successful (and some not- so- successful) companies.

When they married, Sharon's husband, Steve, worked for an established real estate developer. But the year they bought their first house, Steve made a big move: starting his own company. Since Sharon could make the whole payment if Steve's firm folded, the bank granted their mortgage. Steve was able to go with his gut and pursue his dream without fear that he would lose the family home.

Your work, his wages-how does it all pan out?

Your work adds a layer of security and freedom that your spouse will appreciate, but how does it affect his income? Historically, experts believed that men with nonemployed wives made more money (around 15 to 20 percent more) than men with working wives. They concluded that a working wife must create disadvantages for her husband that lower his wages.

Economists have now shown that this view confuses cause and effect: The wife's job does not determine the husband's wage-it's the other way around. After men have achieved high earnings, some percentage of wives cut back their employment. The increase in the man's wage creates a disincentive for women to work more hours. In the *American Economic Review*, one study controlled for variables like number and age of children and wife's age and education. The result? The wage "premium" from having a nonworking wife shrank to 5 percent or disappeared entirely. Bottom line: Don't quit your job because you think it will help your husband. There's likely no benefit at all, and there may be a big cost.²

When we stop believing that a woman's job will hurt her husband- and realize that it might help him instead-we free women to see the importance of their jobs as clearly as men do. Until we do this, women will not approach making money in the straightforward way men tend to. "I want to be able to support myself " is what we heard when we asked young women why they work. Do they ever think about supporting dependents? "It's a good idea in case my husband dies or we get divorced" is another frequent comment, as if it's optional, like flood insurance you might let lapse if the river dries up.

But when men talk about their incomes, they see the need to earn a living as clear, present, and perpetual-to look after their spouses, kids, grandkids, friends. Making money is not a contingency for most men. It's required. If we want men to treat us equally in the world, we have to take our paychecks as seriously as they do theirs. We owe it to the men we love to take half the burden (and joy) of making money. (How many people know that 30 percent of wives make more than their husbands?)³ Whether we earn a lot or a little, men can worry less and enjoy life more when wives are committed to their careers.

"For a single- earner man, there's a lot of pressure to continue doing things he may not want to do. They can't take risks, they can't explore other things they might like better or be better at," says Laura, who shared breadwinning with her husband while raising two now grown kids. "But

if you have two careers, you have a lot more financial resilience as a couple. That is a big, big deal for women to understand.”

MARRIED, FILING JOINTLY: WHY YOUR JOB MATTERS TO YOUR MATE AND YOUR MARRIAGE

Flying cross-country, Joanna found her seatmate eager to talk about his life. He asked Joanna what she'd been doing in New York and told her about his job. They compared notes on the elections and local schools. Then, this man blurted out a confession of sorts. “I miss the days when my wife came home with stories about her work. Now, every night, she tells me what's going on in preschool. I know what she's doing is important and I like hearing about our son's day. But I miss the camaraderie we once had, when she was working, too.

“I never envisioned myself in this sort of marriage,” he went on, saying he'd be willing to do more child care if his wife returned to work—“but she doesn't seem interested.”

This wife may have many reasons for quitting: wanting to spend more time with the kids, perhaps believing that her children will suffer without a mom at home; disliking a job where she felt less appreciated or could not get control of her schedule, and was uncertain that she could steer her career to a better place; needing more help at home from her husband than she was getting (*before* he realized how much he wanted her to keep her job). We don't know how this couple fell into their rut, but we do know you and your husband can avoid it.

Life on the same page-fewer secrets, more sex

Many people ask us, “Isn't it easier to run a household if one spouse focuses on home and the other concentrates on making money?” True, logistics may be simpler if one parent mostly covers the home front while the other mostly pays the bills: There will probably always be milk in the refrigerator and clean underwear for everyone. When only one career is at stake and the possibility of relocating for a better job arises, the decision making will be easier. There will certainly be fewer day- to- day questions about who does drop- off and what's for dinner.

But is this necessarily good for a marriage? No. In fact, a lot of research shows that marriage can be a lot more rewarding (and fun) if both parents jump into family life full force. And in our interviews, many couples said that sharing their career lives gave them more mutual respect and excitement in marriage.

Studies show that once a child enters the scene, spouses begin to gradually disengage from one another if one parent leaves the house for work each day while the other stays behind.

“My male colleagues with wives at home have a hard time. They have a constant battle because their wives really don't understand why they have to work and travel so much,” says Maya, who works at an investment firm and has two children in grade school.

When we started our careers, we saw the same thing Maya did- that trust and respect often suffer when husbands lead lives that become too different from their wives'.

At her first office holiday party, Joanna recalls talking to the nonworking wives of some more senior associates. "How do you like the firm?" one wife asked Joanna. "Most of the time it's great," said Joanna.

"But there are some things that are a little awkward. Like when we finish working late and the whole team goes out with the clients to a strip club." The next day, the woman's husband came to Joanna's office and closed the door. "What do you think you're doing telling my wife about strip clubs?" It hadn't occurred to Joanna that her peers would hide these things from their wives.

Sharon's firm lost a lot of money one year. For months, everyone knew their pay would be down. On the day compensation was announced, Sharon walked by a man she liked on the trading floor. He was on the phone with his wife trying to break the bad news. His face was strained. His nonworking wife wasn't taking it well. Sharon and her colleagues felt bad enough. They'd all sacrificed, put in round-the-clock hours, only to make less money this year. But for this man's spouse to berate him about something beyond his control-that seemed too much. Sharon called her then boyfriend, a journalist, and told him her own pay had been cut. "Gee," he joked, "can we still afford to eat?"

When you both have jobs outside the home, your daily experience remains more similar, even if you work in entirely different fields. If either of you has had a rotten day or a stunning success, it's nice to have someone who still knows what it's like to work with colleagues *and* with kids.

Jeff 's wife, Tracy, returned to a demanding full-time job after five years at home. "Our experience with the kids is now more similar and that's good. When Tracy went back to work, it caused me to rethink getting up and running out the door to work at seven a.m. I had to be aware of where our three kids were. With both of us at work all day, it helps the dynamic in our family. It focuses our time together and simplifies our priorities. When we get home, we both agree that it's time to be with the kids." When he does windows More career options, more companionship-your job gives your husband a lot of benefits he can discuss with his parents when they wonder if your career is good for him. But men smile most broadly when we get to the private reason couples enjoy life when they share roles: more sex. (Probably best to let your husband decide if he wants to tell that to his mom.)

In 2006, a survey of 360 married men found that men who did more chores at home fared much better in the bedroom. "The more satisfied a wife is with the division of household duties, the more satisfied a man is with his marital sex life," according to the survey. These married men reported that when wives were happier with their husband's household work, the frequency of sex was also higher. And, confounding many skeptics, the survey found that "the more hours a woman works at the job, the more sex she has at home."

Why would this be? Aren't dual-career couples more harried and tired? Maybe, but fatigue may be a smaller factor in who gets sex than how couples interact.

If you look at the wealth of research, couples who share work and family life more evenly have three factors on their side. First, wives are less likely to see their husbands as slackers at home (less “you jerk” effect); instead, wives may find husbands more appealing because they snuggle their kids (more “Baby Bjorn” effect); third, employed wives are statistically more likely to be happy with themselves (more “self-confidence” effect).

For years, noted marriage expert John Gottman has told husbands that dumping family chores on wives is an anti-aphrodisiac. Gottman and other couples therapists have identified household conflict as the toxin most likely to stunt married sex life.⁵ In a ten-year study of young parents, Berkeley psychologists Philip and Carolyn Cowan found “the greatest interference with what happens in the bedroom comes from what happens between partners outside the bedroom.” When parents get siloed—dads at work, moms at home—there's a lot of room for misunderstanding and anger. So, in early parenthood, with so little time to sort things out, disagreements fester. And then, as the Cowans point out, partners “feel 'not in the mood.'”

The NICHD study on child development also looked at the behavior of parents and found this pattern: When wives work longer hours, husbands do more child care. And when husbands do more child care, wives report greater “marital intimacy.” (Men reporting the highest intimacy were also the guys rated “most sensitive” with their kids.) More sex may also be a function of more contented wives. Author Stephanie Coontz points to the many studies showing that “working wives report fewer feelings of distress than wives who stay home and they are more likely to believe that their marriages are egalitarian.”⁸ Joshua Coleman, psychologist and marriage counselor, told us “the biggest predictor of marital satisfaction for women is how much 'emotional work' the husband does. While this is typically defined by his capacity for empathy, expressiveness, and sensitivity, it's clear that doing his fair share of housework and parenting communicates that he cares about her feelings and doesn't want her to feel overly burdened or unduly stressed. This kind of participation makes for a happier wife, and, in general, happier wives make for happier husbands.

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