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MANAGING YOURSELF

Do Women Lack Ambition?

by Anna Fels

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Do Women Lack Ambition?

The Idea in Brief

Women today have more opportunities than ever to pursue major life goals. So why do many of them walk away from their dreams? It's not that they lack ambition: Young girls confidently envision becoming renowned business leaders, diplomats, artists, and scientists. They fully expect to master important skills and earn recognition for their successes—the two essential ingredients of achievement.

But when girls become women and enter the professional arena or start families, they succumb to powerful cultural imperatives that equate ambition and quests for recognition with lack of femininity. Many soon associate ambition with egotism or selfishness. And they receive scant praise for achievements and personal qualities (drive, decisiveness, assertiveness) that conflict with traditional notions of femininity.

Result? To be seen as feminine, women deny their ambitiousness, cede recognition to men—and abandon their dreams. Deeming their work lives unfulfilling, many leave their jobs.

To reverse the situation, women must get ambitious about ambition—including cultivating connections with people who have the power to advance their work and publicly praise their successes. When women master new skills and actively claim recognition, they achieve more of their goals—enriching themselves *and* their organizations.

The Idea in Practice

Women can use these strategies to defy the odds stacked against their ambitions:

ORGANIZE POLITICALLY

Women pursue their ambitions only when confident they won't put their children's care at risk. Therefore, organize with other women to form a political constituency with one goal: supporting mothers in the workforce *and* mothers who choose to remain at home.

DON'T ALLOW SOCIETY TO DEFINE YOU

Women have too many conflicting roles thrust on them: devoted mother, sex symbol, innovative professional, supportive wife, competent employee, talented homemaker. To rise above the confusion, assert your own values, priorities, and identity. Carve out a life for yourself that has profound meaning and immense satisfaction.

ACTIVELY CLAIM RECOGNITION

To sustain your ambitions, formulate life plans that enable you to earn recognition based on *talent, skill, or work*—not physical appearance or subservience. That means not only mastering the skills required to pursue your ambitions but also seizing opportunities to demonstrate those skills in arenas where your talents will be valued and publicly praised.

BLOW YOUR OWN HORN

In itself, high-caliber work won't generate proper recognition for your accomplishments. Forge connections with mentors, peers, and powerful people who can help you blow your own horn—or blow it for you. Overcome any personal resistance to the notion of cultivating relationships based on expediency.

REALIZE IT'S NEVER TOO LATE

Ambitions continually evolve in response to new opportunities for mastery and recognition. Never assume that it's too late to find powerful mentors, seize opportunities to learn new skills, earn promotions, or gain support from admiring peers.

For women—far more than for men—the decision to pursue an interest is reconsidered repeatedly and often abandoned. To realize their dreams, women need to understand why they are willing to walk away from them.

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“I wondered, before I came here, whether I was going to confess to you this secret I’ve had since I was seven. I haven’t even told my husband about it.” The woman across from me, a journalist in her forties, paused and looked at me intently, trying to decide whether she should go on. Sitting there under her worried gaze, I wondered where we were going with this. As a psychiatrist, I’m used to hearing the most improbable and even lurid of personal revelations. But this woman was not a patient. She was a friend of a friend, who had kindly agreed to let me interview her. It was actually the first in a series of exploratory discussions I had scheduled as a start to my research on ambition in women’s lives, and I had already found myself in unfamiliar territory. How had my seemingly straightforward question about childhood goals elicited a long-hidden secret?

The journalist looked at me uncertainly but continued. “When I was about seven, I had a notebook at school, and I would write poems and stories in it and illustrate them....I had this acronym that was like magic, like a secret pact

with myself. I didn’t even tell my sisters its meaning. It was IWBF—I Will Be Famous.” She broke into nervous laughter. “Oh my God, I can’t believe I told you. You must understand: I didn’t want to be recognized in the streets. My pact was tied up with writing and being recognized for it. I’m sure it was tied up with my father’s approval and the literary world he operated in.”

This was the long-held secret? Not sex, lies, or videotape, but an odd incantation from childhood? It was the first of what were to be many lessons for me on how hidden and emotion laden the subject of ambition is for women. I soon came to realize that although the articulate, educated group of women I interviewed could cogently and calmly talk about topics ranging from money to sex, when the subject of ambition arose, the level of intensity took a quantum leap.

In fact, the women I interviewed hated the very word. For them, “ambition” necessarily implied egotism, selfishness, self-aggrandizement, or the manipulative use of others for

one's own ends. None of them would admit to being ambitious. Instead, the constant refrain was "It's not me; it's the work." "It's not about me; it's about helping children." "I hate to promote myself. I'd rather be in my workshop alone." You could write off such comments as social convention or mere window dressing if it weren't for two facts. First, men simply do not talk this way. (Quite the contrary: The men I interviewed considered ambition a necessary and desirable part of their lives.) Second, the statements weren't tossed off casually. Clearly, these accomplished women were caught up in some sort of fear. But of what?

The Two Faces of Ambition

As I tried to sort through the diverse responses to my questions and to home in on the aspect of ambition that made these women so uncomfortable, I realized I needed to backtrack. First I had to understand what ambition consisted of—for men and for women.

In psychiatry, as in most branches of science, the study of a complex phenomenon often begins with researchers tracing it to its earliest, simplest form. So I decided to review the childhood ambitions recalled by the women I had interviewed. Compared with the wordy, ambivalent responses these women had given about their current ambitions, their childhood ambitions were direct and clear. They had a delightfully unapologetic sense of grandiosity and limitless possibility. Each of the women had pictured herself in an important role: a great American novelist, an Olympic figure skater, a famous actress, president of the United States, a fashion designer, a rock star, a diplomat.

In nearly all of the childhood ambitions, two undisguised elements were joined together. One was mastery of a special skill: writing, dancing, acting, diplomacy. The other was recognition: attention from an appreciative audience. Looking through studies on the development of both boys and girls, I noticed that they virtually always identified the same two components of childhood ambition. There was a plan that involved a real accomplishment requiring work and skill, and there was an expectation of approval in the form of fame, status, acclaim, praise, or honor.

That the first of these—mastery—was fundamental to ambition seemed nearly incontrovertible. Without mastery, a picture of the fu-

ture isn't an ambition; it's simply wishful thinking. (You may desperately want to win the lottery, but that's not an ambition.) Approximately half a century after Freud postulated his "drive theory" of motivation based on sex and aggression, researchers and theoreticians alike realized that a huge portion of behavior simply could not be explained in those terms. Jean Piaget and other developmental psychologists who focused on children's need to master both intellectual and motor tasks discovered that children would repeat a task over and over until they could predict and determine the outcome. Theorists such as Erik Erikson began to posit that at a certain stage, children develop a "sense of industry," or the need to do things well, even perfectly. Robert White, one of the seminal investigators of motivation, named this drive toward mastery "effectance." "It is characteristic of this particular sort of activity," White noted, "that it is selective, directed, and persistent, and that an instrumental act will be learned for the sole reward of engaging in it."

In Frank Conroy's classic memoir of his childhood, *Stop-Time*, the author captures the sheer joy that children, like adults, take in mastery. The young Conroy becomes fascinated with the yo-yo and painstakingly works through a book of tricks, practicing hour after hour in the woods near his house:

"The greatest pleasure in yo-yoing was an abstract pleasure—watching the dramatization of simple physical laws, and realizing they would never fail if a trick was done correctly.... I remember the first time I did a particularly lovely trick.... My pleasure at that moment was as much from the beauty of the experiment as from pride."

Doing a thing well can be a reward in and of itself. The delight provided by the skill repays the effort of learning it. But the pursuit of mastery over an extended period of time requires a specific context: An evaluating, encouraging audience must be present for skills to develop. Conroy, in the same childhood scene, rushes off to show his new yo-yoing expertise to his friends and to two particularly proficient older boys. It is vital for the expertise to be recognized by others.

We are not used to thinking of recognition as a fundamental emotional need, particularly in adulthood. It's nice when you get it, but if you don't, it's not the end of the world—life

Anna Fels is a psychiatrist and a faculty member at Cornell University's Weill Medical College in New York. This article is adapted from her forthcoming book *Necessary Dreams: Ambition in Women's Changing Lives* (Pantheon).

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goes on. We even tend to look down on those whose eagerness for recognition is too obvious, too pressing. And in truth, some people have needs for recognition that are exaggerated and nearly insatiable; they require constant infusions of admiration to maintain their tenuous sense of self-worth. In psychiatry, such individuals are called narcissists.

But multiple areas of research have demonstrated that recognition is one of the motivational engines that drives the development of almost any type of skill. Far from being a pleasant but largely inessential response, it is one of the most basic of human requirements. We all want our efforts and accomplishments to be acknowledged.

In the typical learning cycle, recognition fuels the next stage of learning. The early-learning theorist Albert Bandura was clear on this point: “Young children imitate accurately when they have incentives to do so, but their imitations deteriorate rapidly if others do not care how they behave.”

And what’s true in childhood is no less true in later life. Research has confirmed that in the overwhelming majority of cases, the acquisition of expertise requires recognition. A rare longitudinal study by the renowned psychologist Jerome Kagan looked specifically at this issue. He and his coauthor, Howard Moss, examined the relationship between “the tendency to strive for a mastery of selected skills (achievement behavior) and social recognition through acquisition of specific goals or behaviors.” They followed a cohort from childhood through adulthood, and at the end of this massive project concluded that there was a high positive correlation between mastery and recognition. According to Kagan and Moss, “it may be impossible to measure the ‘desire to improve a skill’ independent of the individual’s ‘desire for recognition.’”

Without earned affirmation, long-term learning and performance are rarely achieved. Ambitions are both the product of and, later on, the source of affirmation.

What’s Dashing Women’s Dreams?

There is no evidence that the desires to acquire skills and to receive affirmation for accomplishments are less present in women than in men. So why is it that we find such dramatic differences between men and women in their attitudes toward ambition and in how

they create, reconfigure, and realize (or abandon) their goals?

One clue to the pressures that contemporary women experience in connection with their ambitions can be found in the stories that unusually successful women tell about their lives. In their best-selling book *See Jane Win: The Rimm Report on How 1,000 Girls Became Successful Women*, Sylvia Rimm and her coauthors, after profiling a state senator, remark with puzzlement, “[The senator], like many of the women of our study, attributes much of her success to luck.” In another chapter, the authors quote an eminent female chairman of a department of medicine as concluding, “Everything has been rather serendipitous. None of what I’ve described to you was planned....I was able to get good positions and good things just happened.” An interview from a women’s magazine with one of the most famous women architects in America revealed the intensity of the woman’s dread about receiving attention. The magazine reported: “Laurinda Spear is so riddled with anxiety about the way she might come across in print that she endlessly repeats the same self-deprecating refrain: ‘Can’t you just say that I’m this totally bumbling person?’”

One could chalk up these demurrals (and I heard many of them in my own interviews) to women’s innate modesty or even see them as a sly way of highlighting their achievements. But the fear, at times verging on panic, that women express when they are personally recognized for their work belies this interpretation.

It seems paradoxical. Women have gained hard-won access to training in nearly all fields, and this type of expertise can bring enormous satisfaction. But far from celebrating their achievements in newly available professions, women too frequently seek to deflect attention from themselves. They refuse to claim a central, purposeful place in their own stories, eagerly shifting the credit elsewhere and shunning recognition. Furthermore, on close inspection, it emerges that it’s not only women of achievement who anxiously work to relinquish recognition—it’s nearly all women. Studies have demonstrated that the daily texture of women’s lives from childhood on is infiltrated with microencounters in which quiet withdrawal and the ceding of available attention to others is expected—particularly in the pres-

ence of men.

It's tempting to conclude, as many have, that women aren't actually deferring to others when they remove themselves from the spotlight; they're just intrinsically different in their needs and style. Women, after all, may just be less interested in personal attention than men. Or maybe they simply don't care about the types of recognition that men strive for. It has been suggested, for example, that women have a greater capacity for empathy than men, making it more painful for them not to gratify the wishes of others or relinquish coveted resources. (And recognition is nothing if not a coveted social resource.)

The belief that women's deferential behavior with regard to recognition is "natural" has

not held up in the extensive research on gender that has been conducted since the 1970s. By and large, the research has suggested that to a significant degree, such behavior varies according to social context: Girls and women more openly seek and compete for affirmation when they are with other women—for example, in sports or in all-girl academic settings. They have no difficulty aggressively pursuing roles that complement rather than compete with males (such as trying out for a female acting part, a modeling career, or a singing group). But they change their behaviors when it comes to competing directly with men.

Intuitively, we know this is true. As the recent best seller *The Rules: Time-Tested Secrets for Capturing the Heart of Mr. Right* tells women,

Hidden in Plain View

It's no secret that women receive less recognition for their accomplishments than men do. The documentation is substantial, and the findings are consistent.

Preschool

By nursery school, the differential in attention received by girls and boys is already evident. In one representative study of 15 coed preschool classrooms, investigators found that "all 15 of the teachers gave more attention to boys.... They got both more physical and verbal rewards. Boys also received more direction from the teachers and were twice as likely as the girls to get individual instruction on how to do things."

Grammar School

Studies show that in grammar school, girls have stronger verbal skills than boys do. One might assume that this would serve girls well, but they continue to get less recognition than boys. One three-year project looked at more than 100 fourth-, sixth-, and eighth-grade classrooms in four states and the District of Columbia. The conclusion: "Teachers praise boys more than girls, give boys more academic help, and are more likely to accept boys' comments during classroom discussions." In high school, the pattern becomes even more pronounced, particularly in math and the sciences.

College

In the late 1980s, a women's college that was in the process of becoming coed videotaped

and analyzed coed classes elsewhere to "make sure that the quality of the women's education would not be affected." To quote the abstract of the resulting paper:

"Do men get more for their money than women when they invest four years and tens of thousands of dollars in a college education? Close examination of videotapes of classroom interactions reveals that they generally do.... Should a teacher choose a first volunteer to answer a question (as often happens), that student will most likely be male.... Tacit collaboration of faculty members permits men to dominate class discussions disproportionately to their numbers."

Graduate School

One study found that in graduate school, women "are more likely to be teaching assistants rather than research assistants, as compared to men, and receive, on the average, less financial support."

First Jobs

Several studies have looked at the effect of gender on recognition in the workplace. Here is a summary from one such investigation:

"Two groups of people were asked to evaluate particular items, such as articles,

paintings, résumés, and the like. The names attached to the items given each group of evaluators were clearly either male or female, but reversed for each group—that is, what one group believed was originated by a man, the other believed was originated by a woman. Regardless of the items, when they were ascribed to a man, they were rated higher than when they were ascribed to a woman. In all of these studies, women evaluators were as likely as men to downgrade those items ascribed to women."

Career

In one study, male and female researchers took turns assuming leader and nonleader roles with subjects performing a problem-solving task. The researchers found that regardless of which role the woman took,

"The trained females received a greater number of negative facial reactions than positive ones.... When women [were] assertive and acted as leaders the negative reactions outnumbered the positive ones; women end up with a net loss.... The naive participants [the subjects] paid less attention to the women than the men; for example, they made fewer facial reactions to the women per minute of talking time."

“Don’t be a loud, knee-slapping, hysterically funny girl. This is O.K. when you’re alone with your girlfriend. But when you’re with a man you like, be quiet and mysterious....Don’t talk so much....Look into his eyes, be attentive and a good listener so he knows you are a caring being—a person who would make a supportive wife.” The book later acknowledges, “Of course, this is not how you really feel. This is how you pretend to feel until it feels real.” (For more scientific evidence of women’s invisibility in situations that involve men, see the sidebar “Hidden in Plain View.”)

Hidden Barriers

Although women are no longer denied access to training in most types of careers, they have come up against what seems to be an even more powerful barrier to their ambitions. In both the public and the private spheres, white, middle-class women are facing the reality that in order to be seen as feminine, they must provide or relinquish resources—including recognition—to others. It is difficult for women to confront and address the unspoken mandate that they subordinate needs for recognition to those of others—particularly men. The expectation is so deeply rooted in the culture’s ideals of femininity that it is largely unconscious.

In the psychological instruments used for studies of gender, however, such expectations are made explicit. The most famous and widely applied psychological measure of femininity (as well as of masculinity and androgyny) is the revised Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI). The test includes 60 descriptive adjectives—20 masculine traits, 20 feminine traits, and 20 neutral traits—that subjects use to rate themselves. These traits were originally chosen from 200 personality characteristics by 100 male and female undergraduates at Stanford University in the 1970s. The students, mostly white and middle-class, were asked to rank the desirability of these traits for men and women in American society. The traits chosen to define femininity in the BSRI are: yielding, loyal, cheerful, compassionate, shy, sympathetic, affectionate, sensitive to the needs of others, flatterable, understanding, eager to soothe hurt feelings, soft-spoken, warm, tender, gullible, childlike, does not use harsh language, loves children, gentle, and (somewhat redundantly) femininity.

Reading through these adjectives, two basic tenets of femininity emerge. The first is

that femininity exists only in the context of a relationship. A woman’s sexual identity is based on qualities that can’t be expressed in isolation. To quote the author Jane Smiley, “Does a woman alone in a dark room feel like a woman?...How about a woman reading a book or climbing mountains?”

The second tenet that emerges from the BSRI adjectives is that a woman must be providing something for the other person, be that person a lover, a child, a sick parent, a husband, or even a boss. Giving is the chief activity that defines femininity. This may help explain why professional women are credited with being highly supportive managers and excellent team players. By focusing their energy on these aspects of work life, women can be both businesslike and feminine.

Near the top of the list of resources that women are asked to provide is recognition. They are asked both to supply personal recognition for their husbands and to relinquish recognition in the work sphere to the men with whom they work. When women speak as much as men in a work situation or compete for high-visibility positions, their femininity is routinely assailed. They are caricatured as either asexual and unattractive or promiscuous and seductive. Something must be wrong with their sexuality.

Masculinity, by contrast, is defined neither by relationships nor by what men provide for others—except financially. One can be masculine in solitary splendor. The BSRI adjectives that describe masculinity are: self-reliant, strong personality, forceful, independent, analytical, defends one’s beliefs, athletic, assertive, has leadership abilities, willing to take risks, makes decisions easily, self-sufficient, dominant, willing to take a stand, aggressive, acts as a leader, individualistic, competitive, ambitious. (“Masculinity” is the twentieth trait.) The “other” appears in these adjectives chiefly as someone against or over whom the man must assert himself. Not only can a man be solitary and masculine, but if he’s in a relationship that involves overt dependence or being influenced by others (and virtually all relationships do), his sexual identity is at risk.

College women have been shown to identify with more of these masculine traits in recent years than they have in the past—without dropping any of the feminine ones. These young women have, for example, been found

to endorse goals such as becoming an authority in one's field, obtaining recognition from colleagues, having administrative responsibilities, and being better off financially. But it is unclear how this apparently broadened gender role plays out in their actual lives. As the author of one study notes, "Soliciting the respondent's expected career goals at only one point in time at such an early period in the individual's life tells us very little about the degree of commitment attached to these career goals."

At each historical juncture where women have achieved access to social influence and recognition—legal and political rights, educational opportunities, career options—their capacity to be "real women" has been impugned. They are labeled as bluestockings or spinsters or agamic (the Victorian term for women who pursued higher education and were therefore considered asexual). In the present, this pain-

ful questioning occurs when career women move beyond the student or early career stage and are trying to start families. Many articles and books caution that career women will fail to get married, or, if they do get married, will be unable to have children—or if they do have children, will be bad mothers. They will somehow fail to fulfill the feminine role. The data on which these "facts" are largely based do not support the conclusions. But for women, they raise an understandably frightening specter.

Clearly, there are many situations in which both the masculine and feminine BSRI traits are compatible and even complementary. You can, for example, be a dynamic leader who is also sensitive and responsive to the needs of your staff. But there are also scenarios in which the traits inevitably conflict. Such conflicts arise when jobs become more competitive and when couples begin to have children. Increas-

Getting Ambitious About Ambition

What can be done in the face of the overwhelming odds stacked against women's ambitions? Here are some recommendations and observations.

Organize

Women must see themselves as a political constituency (one that encompasses the majority of voters) with one set of goals in particular: the support of mothers in the workforce as well as mothers who choose to remain at home with their children. Women will be able to fully share in the satisfaction that ambitions can provide only when they are confident that their children are well cared for.

Don't Expect Things to Fall into Place

Because so little is mapped out for them at this moment in time, women, more than men, need to actively imagine themselves into their futures. Unlike men, women have few accepted roles in our society—or, more accurately, they have too many: innovative professional, devoted mother, competent employee, sexually attractive babe, supportive wife, talented homemaker, and independent wage earner, to name a few. It falls nearly entirely on the individual woman to carve out a life for herself with adequate meaning and satisfaction—not an easy task for anyone, let alone an impressionable young person. For

each woman, life must be a creation of sorts and also an assertion of values, priorities, and identity, because no role is unquestioningly accepted in our society.

Provide for Structures of Recognition

To sustain their ambitions, women must formulate life plans that include the potential for receiving earned recognition—and that recognition must primarily be based on talent, skill, or work, rather than on appearance, sexual availability, or subservience. This means identifying, critically assessing, and purposefully developing "spheres of recognition" that can provide sustaining affirmation. If we have no opportunities for appropriate support, we have to acknowledge this and find other venues. Otherwise, the situation is not only a dead end but one that will engender painful and unnecessary self-doubt.

Blow Your Own Horn

Even when discriminatory factors are not at play, women have much more difficulty than men developing relationships with people who have the power to advance their work. Actively pursuing advantageous connections

runs counter to the classic ideal of femininity. Women in virtually every profession express their distaste for cultivating such relationships, labeling it as "pushy." Unfortunately, there is ample data that in and of itself, high-caliber work is unlikely to produce proper recognition for accomplishments.

Realize It's Never Too Late

As profoundly social beings, we work throughout life to maximize affirmation. In some ways, this is a disturbing realization; we would like to believe that by the time we reach adulthood our goals are formed and we are largely self-motivated. The available research, however, does not support this view. To an astonishing extent, opportunity for mastery and recognition continually reshapes our ambitions and modulates the effort we expend on them. Powerful mentors, opportunities for learning new skills, promotions, admiring peers who provide collegial support, institutional recognition, and broad cultural trends all continuously mold ambitions. At what point does ambition become fixed? In short: never.

ingly precious and limited resources must be allocated: time for work, for leisure, for financial independence, for career advancement, and for power. It is precisely at this time in a woman's early adulthood that the mandates of traditional femininity reemerge in full force. Women must decide whether to subordinate their needs to those of their male partners and colleagues. What should a young married woman do if her husband wants to move overseas to advance his career even if it disrupts or derails her own? Should she be "yielding," "loyal" and "cheerful," or should she be "independent" and "forceful"? What happens when her partner's meetings last later and later, and there's no parent home with the children unless she leaves the workplace early? Should she be understanding and sensitive to the needs of others (feminine) or willing to take a stand (masculine)? What happens when a previously supportive male mentor finds a more proactive, independent, or competitive stance alienating?

or access to birth control. Women tend to feel foolish asking for appropriate acknowledgment of their contributions. They find it difficult to demand appropriate support—in the form of time, money, or promotion—to pursue their own goals. They feel selfish when they do not subordinate their needs to those of others.

This subtle, incremental, but ultimately powerful dynamic militates against women's pursuit and attainment of their goals in most fields. For them, or for anyone, the motivation to learn a skill or to pursue any endeavor, including an ambition, can be roughly calculated on the basis of two factors: how certain the person is that he or she will be able to attain the desired goal and how valued the expected rewards are.

The rewards aspect of this calculation is problematic for women. Although they may find mastery as satisfying as do their male peers, the social rewards that women can expect to reap for their skills are diminished. The personal and societal recognition they receive for their accomplishments is quantitatively poorer, qualitatively more ambivalent, and, perhaps most discouraging, less predictable.

It gets worse. To attempt to master a skill, particularly one that requires prolonged effort, you must believe you are likely to succeed. And here we see the long-term impact of the relatively low recognition that girls and young women receive. Despite the fact that girls' and women's achievements, particularly in the academic sphere, frequently outstrip those of their male peers, they routinely underestimate their abilities. Boys and men, by contrast, have repeatedly been shown to have an inflated estimation of their capabilities. Paradoxically, these inaccurate self-ratings by both women and men seem to be accurate reflections of the praise and recognition they receive for their efforts. The impact of these findings on the selection and pursuit of an ambition is obvious: If you don't think the chances are great that you will reach a career goal, you won't attempt to reach it—even if the rewards are highly desirable.

This, for women, is why early aspirations so often do not translate into achievement later in life: A lack of appropriate affirmation of accomplishments in combination with threats to women's sexual identity inevitably lead to demoralization. And so the process continues. At many junctures in their lives, both women and men must reevaluate the meaning and value

Women have greater opportunities for forming and pursuing their own goals now than at any time in history. But doing so is socially condoned only if they have first satisfied the needs of all their family members: husbands, children, elderly parents, and others. If this requirement isn't met, women's ambitions as well as their femininity will be called into question.

In addition, for a woman's ambition to thrive, both the development of expertise and the recognition of accomplishments outside of the family are required. The elimination of the barriers that have historically kept women from mastering a subject—such as restrictions on admission to professional schools or the habit of doing business and advancing careers inside men-only clubs—has brought women a long way toward realizing their ambitions. But the pressure on girls and women to relinquish opportunities for recognition in the workplace continues to have powerful repercussions.

One key type of discrimination that women face is the expectation that "feminine" women will forfeit opportunities for recognition at home and at work. Being silenced or ignored often remains a baffling and frustrating barrier to women's understanding of how their lives are shaped. This is a "sin of omission" rather than one of commission, so it's hard to spot. It's not as obvious as being denied the right to vote

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of their ambitions and decide how intensely to pursue them. But when women revisit their calculations, they are more likely than men to conclude that their goals aren't rewarding enough to justify the effort required to reach them. So they abandon their ambitions. Sociologists who have compared middle-class females' goals to their actual situations in midlife have found the correlation to be surprisingly weak. As one author discovered, "Women are only slightly more likely to follow the paths they expect to [early on] than not."

Set Up for a Fall

Where does this leave contemporary women? Over many decades, opportunities for women have slowly increased through the different life stages, starting with girlhood and working up to young womanhood. Access to grammar school education for girls was followed by access to high school and college programs. By the early twentieth century, a few women had gained admission to graduate and professional schools, and in the 1970s, women began to graduate from these programs in significant numbers. By the 1980s and 1990s, women were assuming places in the lower ranks of the professions in ever-greater numbers.

Today, the time when women become second-class citizens, when their options are radically reduced in comparison with those of men, has been pushed yet later into their lives. Girls and women still receive less favorable treatment than their male counterparts throughout their childhoods and adolescence—but the discrepancy has narrowed. Many young, middle-class women have experienced a shift toward more equal opportunities right up to their early careers and marriages.

Women now experience the most powerful social and institutional discrimination during their twenties and early thirties, after they have left the educational system and started pursuing their ambitions. At the age when women most frequently marry and have children, they must decide whether to try to hold on to their own ambitions or downsize or abandon them. Often, a young woman must make this decision at the moment when she is just learning to be a parent, with all its attendant fears, pleasures, insecurities—and around-the-clock work.

As with past obstacles women have faced, the current ones have proved stressful, confusing, and painful. In all such transitions, there

are no easy solutions. Institutional changes and cultural norms lag behind social realities. The lack of adequate social support, ongoing career opportunities, and financial protection for women who provide child care is the contemporary phase of women's long struggle for equal rights.

Stressed for Success

As contemporary women evaluate their goals, they must decide how much of the stress that comes with ambition they are willing to tolerate. I have vivid memories of being among the first large wave of women medical students and doctors. My first interviewer for medical school, a surgeon, asked antagonistically how I could possibly care for my children. In medical school, many of the physicians who taught us were openly hostile to women students. I recall a lecture on endometriosis entitled "The Working Woman's Disease." The hospital didn't even have uniforms that fit us: For a while, we all looked like little girls dressed up in Daddy's clothes. When my female peers and I moved on to our residencies and fellowships in our early thirties, there were no established policies about pregnancy leave, no options for part-time work, no available child care. I gave birth to one of my children after finishing my patient rounds at nine o'clock at night. Luckily, the delivery room was across the street. At that historical moment, becoming a physician was a brutal, confusing, and often demoralizing process for a woman.

Twenty years later, many of the problems my colleagues and I faced have been addressed. But in this field, as in many others, the most intense social pressures are no longer about mastery. Hardly anyone claims today that women lack the native ability to become neurosurgeons or executives. And the problems don't tend to arise in college or in the first few years of a career. These days, the threat to women's ambitions comes at a later phase of women's lives, when they have families and are advancing to more competitive positions in their work. Women who pursue careers must cope with jobs structured to accommodate the life cycles of men with wives who don't have full-time careers. And they must suffer the social pressure to fulfill more traditional, "feminine" roles. It's a situation that still creates unnecessarily agonizing choices. Too often, when the choice must be made, women choose to

downsize their ambitions or abandon them altogether. As at each prior time when women gained new opportunities, the early stages of change are exhilarating, but also painful.

Interestingly, many famous writers have claimed that in later life, after their children have been raised, women develop a new resilience and energy. Dorothy Sayers referred to such women as “uncontrollable by any earthly force.” Margaret Mead described an age of “heightened vitality” that she called the Third Age. Isak Dinesen proclaimed, “Women...when they are old enough to have done with the business of being a woman, and can let loose their strength, must be the most powerful creatures in the whole world.” I have often wondered whether the newfound strength of these women reflects

the fact that their sexual identity is no longer assailable. “Been there, done that,” they can say to anyone who questions their capacity for relationships. The classic reproach (always aimed at women and never at men)—that they are promoting themselves at the expense of others who need their care—no longer applies. In a very real sense, it is the first time in their lives that they are free to express, without fear of reprisal, the wide spectrum of feelings and behaviors previously reserved for men.

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Do Women Lack Ambition?

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by Debra E. Meyerson and Joyce K. Fletcher

Harvard Business Review

April 2002

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[Mommy-Track Backlash](#)

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This fictional case study, accompanied by commentators' analysis and advice, widens the focus of the work-life balance problem to look beyond the problem's impact on women. Hayashi emphasizes the point that work-life balance is a *human*—not merely a women's—challenge. Yet too many companies' well-intentioned family-friendly policies (e.g., flex-time, reduced workloads) ignore the equally important personal needs of employees who *aren't* parents. Effective work-life policies respect all employees' need for a personal life—as well as the company's needs. The article describes several creative ways to achieve this win-win scenario.

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by Sheila Wellington, Marcia Brumit Kropf, and Paulette R. Gerkovich

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The authors examine more closely the barriers blocking ambitious businesswomen from achieving their goals. Lack of general management or line experience is the major culprit. Owing to assumptions that women can't perform well in such positions, men hold most of these jobs in the *Fortune* 500. The solution? Ensuring that women get the profit-and-loss experience that will qualify them for senior-most positions. Companies that support women's advancement share a commitment from the very top. The CEO builds a strategic vision and business case for gender diversity, sets concrete goals to meet those commitments, and holds management accountable for achieving diversity goals. He or she also reports on progress, participates visibly in diversity events, and takes every opportunity to communicate these commitments down through the ranks.

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