

**THE WORK-FAMILY DEBATE
IN POPULAR CULTURE**
Can Women and Men "Have it All?"

Ellyn A. Lem
and
Timothy J. Dunn

With a Foreword by
Anne-Marie Slaughter

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Foreword

Media matters. How we see and depict ourselves in popular culture both reflects and shapes who we are. That is the central insight of Ellyn Lem and Timothy Dunn's jaunt through the way the "work-family debate" is represented in books, TV shows, and movies. It is a great read, one that I found to be both enlightening and instructive.

To begin with, Lem and Dunn are wonderfully fair-minded on the current state of the debate with regard to women, work, and family. I found their description of my own article "Why Women Still Can't Have It All" to be accurate and nuanced, reading beyond the headline and the caricatures of "professional woman goes home to be with her kids." They have also tracked the way my own thinking has evolved in subsequent speeches and interviews, particularly in response to frequent criticisms leveled at the article.

Lem and Dunn are equally fair to Sheryl Sandberg, understanding that the debate between us is just that: a debate. Certainly not a "catfight," but rather a back and forth in which we agree on more than we disagree but focus on different dimensions of where society needs to go to attain genuine male-female equality. Reading *The Work-Family Debate in Popular Culture* is a great way to bring yourself up to date on the current state of an entire set of debates among other women and a few men, including Debora Spar, Joan Williams, Hanna Rosin, Liza Mundy, and Stephen Marche.

The core of *The Work-Family Debate in Popular Culture* is an analysis of novels and movies such as *I Don't Know How She Does It*, *Sex and the City*, *Modern Family*, *Modern Dads*, *Breaking Bad*, and many others. As the parent of teenagers, I am regularly reminded that their peers have a far greater influence on them than anything their father or I try to do. Their peers, of course, are deeply influenced by popular culture. But even more fundamentally, the characters in our favorite TV shows, at least, *become* our peers. I remember when I was commuting to DC while I was working in the State Department. I was often very lonely in the evenings, no matter how many dinners with friends I arranged. At times the members of the Behavioral Analysis Unit on *Criminal Minds*, which came on at eleven and again at midnight, seemed to become my surrogate family. If that can happen to a middle-aged woman who has her own real and generally close family, consider the impact on teens and young adults.

Unlike our actual peers, however, media characters do not reflect present reality so much as aspirational reality. Every show, movie, or book creates a mirror not only of who we think we are and but also who we want to be – or rather who the author or producer wants us to be. It is a neat form of time travel, from the tidy, conventionally gendered nuclear families of *Leave It to Beaver* and *I Love Lucy* to the constructed, gender-bending variety of *Modern Family* and *Modern Dads*. Interesting that both series self-consciously announce that they are “modern,” an adjective that can be understood as a flat description of “the way we live now” or as a more positive moniker of forward-leaning, progressive.

Beyond the prologue, neither Lem nor Dunn refer explicitly to their own lives or experiences. But their sensibility is firmly and warmly present throughout the book. They are as objective and as fair as possible, retailing arguments and counter-arguments and stretching wherever possible to ensure that multiple points of view are presented. At the same time, they do not hesitate to point out distortions and limitations even to sympathetic media portrayals of working mothers and fathers. They manage to be equally aware of how far we still have to go but also of how far we've come.

Finally, as a former academic myself, it is refreshing to read an academic study that is attentive to the literature and grounded in empirical work but that is also accessible to the lay reader. I am wiser for having read *The Work-Family Debate in Popular Culture*. I also have a long list of books to read and TV shows and movies to see!

Dr. Anne-Marie Slaughter

President of the New America Foundation