

## Women Who Do Too Much

Nancy Post, MAc, PhD

Can following the leader ruin your health? Let's look at the life of female leaders and find out.

A recent study of high-achieving women explored the private and professional lives of highly educated, high-earning women. The Center for Work-Life Policy in New York targeted the top 10 percent of women in the workplace (measured in terms of earning power) to learn what motivated them, how they lived and what they felt about work. The survey queried two age groups of American and British women, 41 to 55 years old; and their younger peers, ages 28 to 40. The women were asked about their home lives: relationships with spouses, children, delegation of home responsibilities and feelings about "balance." Additionally, their employment histories and current feelings about work were evaluated.

So, who gets to the top, and how does she feel about her life?

First, she works longer hours. Findings show that the more successful the woman, the longer she works. Of the "ultra-achievers" (who earn more than \$100,000 per year), more than 34 percent work more than 50 hours per week, compared to 29 percent of high achievers (who earn between \$55,000 and \$65,000).

Second, the more successful she is, the more likely she is to be single. Only 60 percent of high-achieving women in the 41 to 55 age group are married or with partners. It's worse in corporate jobs, where the number falls to 57 percent. By contrast, the study shows that 83 percent of ultra-achieving men are married.

Third, she is more likely NOT to have children. Thirty-three percent of high-achieving women are childless among the women ages 41 to 55, and this number rises significantly to 42 percent in corporate America. Compare this to only 19 percent of ultra-achieving men without children. Furthermore, of the women who didn't have children, only 14 percent did this by choice. (More than a quarter of the childless women 41 to 55 years old still wished for children.)

Women in the work force carefully observe the behavior of their more senior level colleagues to learn what it takes to "succeed." So, if you are a woman and you follow the example of female leaders, you will work more, feel more torn between work and home, and be more likely to live alone during middle age. Additionally, if you work in a corporate setting, the pressures will be greater, although the compensation will be higher. Your home may be empty, but your bank account will be full.

However, despite their success, it is not at all surprising that very few high-achieving women feel fulfilled. The survey showed that only 16 percent feel that they can "have it all" in terms of family and career. Although they may appear to be holding it all together, female leaders with families often feel compromised by the constant trade-offs and persistent juggling of the demands placed upon them. This is even harder for women of color. Only 29 percent of high-achieving African-American women are married and almost half remain childless. In some cases, it is just too hard to do both.

The study suggested that women who work for themselves do a better job at balancing than women who work in corporate America. In fact, self-employed women are less likely to be childless (22 percent versus 42 percent in women ages 41 to 55), and self-employed women are more likely to be married (67 percent versus 57 percent).

The truths emanating from this study put a spotlight on something many women already know - taking a leadership role in an organization is likely to compromise your emotional health. As we know in the world of body/mind medicine, it is virtually impossible for emotional strain NOT to impact the body, especially for women, whose emotional changes immediately affect the delicate female endocrine system. Corporate cultures can affect your health, not just your choice of career.

I have worked with many professional women in leadership positions. Some have children, some are childless, some are married or with a partner, and some single. Yet they all have a lot in common. They are capable of being extremely focused when needed, getting a lot done and turning time management into a marshal art. The single women routinely stay late at work and offer a level of time and devotion to their organizations that precludes time for much of a social life. Childless leaders with partners are comfortable spending significant time independent of their mates. However, the women with children have the hardest time. They often are the most tired, referring to time at home as a "second shift" when they assume the role of family chef, as well as primary caregiver for children (and elder parents).

Two jobs for one woman opposes the study's primary recommendations that there should be constructive ways for senior-level jobs to be shared and that meaningful part-time assignments should be developed for talented, senior-level women. American and British corporate cultures have begun to dip their toes in these waters, but practices such as job sharing are not yet common.

The sorry effect of this phenomenon shows up in our offices. Perfectly "healthy," high-functioning women in their 30s arrive as they struggle with infertility. Successful, mature women cannot break the cycle of fatigue that arrived with menopause. Pressured women (of both age groups) struggle with memory problems, insomnia and personal organization, demonstrating the special connection in Chinese medicine between the uterus and the brain. Ironically, the pressure to use all your time efficiently can lead to impairment in organizational ability. The very energy needed to focus gets depleted.

Women fought for the right to work, but many work places have barely changed to accommodate their needs. If mothering is an essential glue to a healthy society, then employment patterns must change so children of working women grow up with functional mothers. The question is who needs treatment? Is it overstressed, successful women or organizations that haven't yet learned how to value them?

### *Resource*

- The Hidden Brain Drain Task Force. *Women and Minorities as Unrealized Assets*. Center for Work-Life Policy, 2002.

MARCH 2007