

# THE OTHER GENDER

Focusing on males in the workplace is good for men and women alike.

A group of New York executives was on a business trip to Stockholm. They were puzzled to see men pushing infants around the city in strollers. To the amusement of their Swedish hosts, one of the Americans observed that it was remarkable how many families in Sweden employed gay nannies.

This true story seems like a classic case of cross-cultural misunderstanding. The buggy-wielding men, in case you haven't worked it out, were the children's fathers. Sweden gives new dads ten days leave. It also allocates an additional sixty days parental leave, to be taken flexibly any time in the child's first eight years, at 80 percent of earnings.

While Scandinavian countries are socially progressive, they are not alone in thinking that paternal input matters. According to the Project on Global Working Families, a Harvard and McGill research unit, sixty-five countries grant paid parental leave. The United States



ALISON MAITLAND is co-author of *Why Women Mean Business*, just published in paperback. She is a former longtime writer and editor for the *Financial Times*, director of The Conference Board's European Council for Diversity in Business, and a senior visiting fellow in the Faculty of Management at Cass Business School, London. She can be reached via [alisonmaitland.com](http://alisonmaitland.com).

is not one of them: Neither mothers nor fathers have a guaranteed legal right to paid leave to care for their newborns. No wonder nannies hold sway in wealthy areas of New York.

Government policy, like corporate attitudes toward employees, often lags behind social trends. But changes that the New York executives witnessed in Scandinavia are happening in America too.

As women are increasingly equal or primary breadwinners, men's views of work and family are shifting. Fathers are spending more time with their children and doing more of the cooking, according to a national study by the Families and Work Institute. Among the study's most interesting insights: More men than women now report experiencing "work-life conflict," especially fathers in dual-income families.

Why do these trends matter to senior executives? Because companies that base their talent management or marketing strategies on the assumption that women do all the child care are out of date. Also, organizations that want to promote gender diversity in their top ranks need to understand what's happening to a growing proportion of men in their workforce. Instead of continuing to focus all their gender-diversity efforts on women, companies would do better to take account of the other side of the coin. Enabling men to play their full role as fathers is good not only for children and families but also for women's progress in the workplace and for developing more rounded leaders of both genders.

The views of American men and women of all ages on work and family

roles have converged dramatically over the years, according to the Institute's study. Back in 1977, 74 percent of men and 52 percent of women thought it was better if men were responsible for family income and women looked after the home. Today, 42 percent of men and 39 percent of women hold that view. More striking, 69 percent of young mothers want greater responsibility at work—a little higher, even, than young women *without* children.



Social attitudes, of course, take time to evolve. So while the dual-earning couple is the norm, the division of labor within households is still partly stuck somewhere in the 1950s. The Institute's study, for example, reveals that men's increasing share of responsibilities at home does not quite stretch to cover the drudge of cleaning and laundry. Men could do more, just as women could be more open to role changes. I've heard fathers who take their children to school say they feel ignored by the "mothers mafia" at the school gate.

Young people, in particular, expect to be equal partners at home and at work. Unfortunately, managers' assumptions about men and women in the workplace have not kept pace. As a recent Norwegian white paper on male roles and gender equality puts it: "There has been little or no gender equality development by business itself, and the workplace serves more as a hindrance to equality of the sexes."

How does this play out in everyday

work? Research on Generation Y by the Centre for Women in Business at the London Business School found that young professionals are worried and confused by the lack of diversity in the higher echelons of the corporate world. "The men and women we spoke to wanted to be good citizens and good parents—their anxiety was that they do not know how to do this," said the LBS team.

I'm not suggesting it's the responsibility of companies alone to respond to these big trends. Nevertheless, it's up to employers who want to keep their people loyal and motivated to revise their thinking.

Requesting even a little flexibility can still be career death, especially for men. A male executive in a large German manufacturing company asked to reduce his hours slightly so he could help take care of his new baby. His employer declined his request and offered him a promotion to a job with even longer hours. It was an offer he felt, in the unforgettable line from *The Godfather*, he could not refuse. But at what cost to his motivation and loyalty?

Another high-flier quit the corporate world at 36 because the nonstop travel and long hours left him no time to be the kind of father he wanted to be to his two young sons. He signed up with Eden McCallum, a progressive U.K. consulting firm with a pool of independent consultants who choose which projects to take on to fit their lifestyles—without having to sacrifice earning power.

Some large companies are also taking a lead. At IBM and British Telecom, for example, some senior men work shorter weeks so that they can be active fathers as well as busy executives. And when Lloyds bank conducted employee surveys, it discovered that men at all levels were less satisfied with their working lot than women. They wanted more recognition of their role

as fathers and feared it would count against them if they called into the office to say their child was sick. Consequently, Lloyds started working with a national information center on fatherhood to see what information and support it could provide to men, especially to new fathers. Other companies also now run workshops for first-time fathers.

Rigid views about what constitutes a successful career will disappear only when employers assume that, at some point in their lives, all employees—male and female—may need some time out or a less pressured job. The men at the top of the corporate ladder who have non-working wives should be aware they are a very small minority of the workforce today.

Unfortunately, many organizations still see family responsibilities as a women's issue. Even though female employees report experiencing slightly less family-work conflict than their male counterparts, their managers still *perceive* them as having more, according to research from the University of Illinois at Chicago. This misperception has "significant implications for women's organizational advancement," at the expense of men's needs, as well.

One of the most forward-thinking businesses I've come across is a small automotive-components firm in the British Midlands called West Bromwich Tool & Engineering. The manufacturer offered one of its key engineers flexible hours when he and his wife started a family—before he had even considered that he might need the arrangement.

"We thought: We don't want to lose him to a competitor," explained the company's owner, Stuart Fell. "If we offer him flexibility, he's going to have a job he can't replicate because, particularly for men, most employers don't offer flexibility." ■

**ENABLING MEN TO PLAY THEIR FULL ROLE AS FATHERS IS GOOD NOT ONLY FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES BUT ALSO FOR WOMEN'S PROGRESS IN THE WORKPLACE AND FOR DEVELOPING MORE ROUNDED LEADERS OF BOTH GENDERS.**