

Generation eXXception

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On September 20, 2005, *The New York Times* published an article that reported many of the highly educated women of Yale just wanted to be housewives. This trend was touted as an example of the "opt out revolution" first floated in the '90s: women who rejected the life of a modern career women and chose instead a return to the traditional life of a wife and mother. Supposedly, the women of the country's elite universities were not making it to the top because they "chose not to."

Was it possible that the new millennium generation of women college students would decide to walk away from the doors their professors, mothers, aunts and older sisters had opened? If the article's findings were true, the results were chilling to those of us who had battled our way into the workforce.

Over the past several months, we surveyed women from the Wellesley College classes of 2007, 2008 and 2009 to find out their expectations for work and family.

Having watched older generations struggle to be perfect, opt out or put off starting a family, these young women are at the forefront of a changing definition of womanhood in American society. They believe that employment will be part of their life's fabric; motherhood will not prompt them to choose between family or work. They want family and work.

It's not that these women live in la-la land; they don't believe that women have equality with men in the workplace. They understand that beyond workplace sexism, having a family takes time away from climbing the ladder. But, these are the young women who grew up with perceived equality, born after the implementation of Title IX these girls took their place on the field alongside the boys and often surpassed the boys in academics. They do not think that being a woman will negatively affect their own career. These young women see themselves as the exception that defies the odds.

This individual confidence is the linchpin that culturally defines young women in college today. Women who have already risen to the top often explain their achievements by individual chutzpa and therefore they believe themselves able to conquer (and overcome) existing inequalities despite systemic impediments. They will make contemporary workplace cultures succeed for them without shaking up traditional career ladders.

If you've interacted with a twenty-something these days, you know that these are people who know what they want, and plan to get it. The women we surveyed came to college with résumés full of volunteer activities, sports and artistic talents; they don't want to shelve these activities in deference to baby bottles and bosses. Moreover, while there is some evidence that having only one child is beneficial for a woman's career, Wellesley women want at least two children. Camille wrote, "I think leading a well-rounded life, including having a family, would make me more capable of doing great things."

To "have it all" these women are willing to sacrifice a little bit of everything. They envision a life plan in which they combine work and family while letting go of hardcore notions of success. They no longer feel forced to choose between becoming the top honcho and PTA mom of the year.

While Wellesley College students and recent alums believe they will be successful in their chosen career fields, we were surprised that they limited how far they would advance even before entering the workforce. Only a small percentage of women envision themselves as super-stars in their field. "I don't want to be mommy-tracked; but the reality is that you can get behind your other co-workers," said Andrea. "They will know that I have children, it's a priority."

On the one hand, this may be a more realistic generation; on the other hand, it is surprising to think that women at the beginning of their careers are shooting for something other than number one. These young women may see the sacrifices for the sake of success as too great. While balance may have become a cliché, these women are deciding that staying in a job, or a series of horizontal moves, may be "good enough" or even better than a risky climb to the top. Further, young women strongly value the image of a full life in their minds.

The vast majority of women we surveyed want to have their first child after working for a few years, which they see as a minimum of 28 years old. The delay before childbirth works as a time to set a solid foundation for a career, allowing

a new mother to take time off without ruining her chance of occupational success. Once their youngest child is in elementary school over half want to work full time.

Thinking about their futures as new mothers, about a third expect to stay at home while their youngest is under age one. If they have two children with only a two year gap between children they will be out of the labor force for several years. Even though there has been article after study after salacious news program broadcasting the difficulties women face re-entering the workforce, these young women have strong expectations about how they will be able to become mothers and careerists.

Interestingly, the majority expect to return to the labor force quickly. Part-time work is their ideal especially with children under age 1; only 14 percent of women surveyed expect to return to full time work immediately. Zoe wrote, "I may want to scale back, but I will never want to stop entirely."

In effect, remaining in their profession may be their success in and of itself. While others may see them as "mommy tracked" or treading water when they leave the fast-track lanes, they are immune to being pigeonholed and labeled as less than competitive. They have chosen an alternative definition of success which includes remaining a member of their professionals on their own terms.

Raised to believe they could be and do anything they want, the idea of choice has become the singular word that legitimizes anything and everything these young women do. Christina wrote, "Sometimes I feel that a lot of feminists lose sight of the idea that feminism should be about making your own choices, and feeling comfortable doing so. So many people seem to push feminist ideas such as not changing your name or not being a stay at home mom, that they become no better than society; they just try to force us in the other direction. This isn't what feminism should be about." These are the women who live Charlotte's famous line from *Sex and the City*, "I choose my choice!" Feminism empowers them to make the decision they think is best for themselves. Hoping to be a stay at home moms or a working woman, both groups are simmering that they have to "make a choice" at all.

Interestingly, if money were not an issue 42 percent of the women surveyed thought they might be a stay-at-home mom at some point in their life. Money weighs heavily on this generation and staying at home is seen as a luxury, not a prescription.

Nearly one third of the women surveyed are willing to share this luxury with a partner (a house partner is a serious consideration which college aged women have not dismissed). Cassandra wrote that having a baby, "will probably change the amount of work I can get done in a given day, especially if I'm working from home. It's also possible however that my husband will be a stay at home dad in which case it won't affect my career path all that much."

These women would also be happy working part time and splitting childcare more evenly with spouses. This younger generation expects both men and women to be involved in parenting. Even without the guarantee of a top salary, most of the women expect to share childrearing and return to the labor force. This home formula may be the key to the gender revolution that stalled at the threshold of the family door. While countries such as Spain have social policies requiring men to become active dads, young U.S. women are at least discussing the possibility of househusbands or partners sharing the family responsibilities.

Considering these work plans, it is not surprising that most of the young women think that parental leaves should be for six months to a year. If that were the case, then stay-at-home parenting might become a normal part of a work path rather than a terminating factor. It would also make the work/family juggle less stressful if all parents left paid work to care for their children.

Regardless of partner involvement, the number of women desiring to stay at home declines as their fictional youngest child grows. Seven percent want to stay at home when their youngest child is in elementary school and three percent want to stay at home when their child is in middle school. By the time their youngest child is in high school, a scant one percent of the survey respondents say they would like to stay home.

Finding childcare, particularly when school days do not match work hours, is the bane of all employed parents. While these young women may be accepting of present career ladders and expect to find individual ways to move ahead, they surprisingly imagine their children cared for in public settings. The nanny solution is not theirs. While working full-time they would like to place their youngest child in an after school program. These young women do not want to patch together care giving solutions; they want a seamless approach to raising children. Young women want their communities to play a significant role in meeting the demands of raising kids and continued employment.

While it may have been essential for babyboomers who broke the glass ceiling to focus all their energy on moving up the ladder, today's young women have new ideas about how to structure their life, their family and their career.

The Wellesley classes of 2007, 2008 and 2009 are worried about balancing it all and finding true happiness. Women such as Delia agonize over weighing the choices: "the conflict between motherhood and career advancement -- having to choose between cutting back on hours and getting a promotion."

But these women are not willing to give up any part of their identity in deference of a success defined by someone else. As women in their 20s, they do not want to let go of either work or family or fun. To do this, many are willing to let go of unrealistic notions of perfection and the intensive pace that has escalated in both corner offices and playgrounds. In the end though, they are confident that they truly will be able to find a balance, and "have it all."

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