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Let's Stop Putting Each Other Down

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By Eileen Connolly-Robbins

When the debate broke out a few weeks ago over “Working Moms” versus “Stay-at-Home Moms,” I felt like I was hearing a tape from twenty or thirty years ago. Isn't it about time we put the Mommy Wars to rest?

Another feeling of déjà vu set in when Sheryl Sandberg, COO of Google, made headlines by admitting that she left the office at 5:30 to be home for dinner with her kids. Once again, everyone seemed to have an opinion. Some cheered Sandberg on for being brave enough to confess she had a family life, whereas others voiced that you can't expect to have a home life if you want to make it to the top.

The Sheryl Sandberg story underscores the fact that we need to move the conversation forward when it comes to gender issues. The bottom line is that the majority of women do work at paying jobs, but it's not as if the world is neatly divided into two camps — those who work outside the home and those who stay at home. The reality is more complicated than that. Some women find a way to go full-steam throughout their careers. Others amp up their careers in the beginning stages and then dial back for a while when family attention is required. Many women tend to their kids and homes by day and then head off to jobs in the evening or weekend to help keep the family afloat. Some women choose to leave the traditional workplace when they start a family, but find new ways to thrive as “Momprenuers.” In some cases, a woman's financial and family circumstances allow her to opt out of the workplace, perhaps with the notion of returning some day.

Despite what everyone says, I have found there is no such thing as a perfect work-life balance. Sometimes our jobs demand every ounce of our energy and focus and the only thing that keeps us going is sheer adrenaline. Other times, family or personal issues require our undivided attention. Sheryl Sandberg's admission that she leaves the office at 5:30 to get home to her kids should prompt us to have an enlightened discussion on the merits of flexibility. Workplaces need to be flexible to the needs of women (and men) if they want to keep talented women in the pipeline and broaden the slate of leaders in executive suites and boardrooms. Work shouldn't always have to be a 110-percent-or-nothing proposition.

With that said, today's workplace is changing so rapidly that no one can afford to be content with coasting by or thinking that what he or she did yesterday will work tomorrow, too. No matter what stage of paying or non-paying work you're in, you need to stay current on developments in your field, up-to-date with your skills and be willing to change. For example, I heard one women tell a story of how she took a hiatus from work to raise her kids, then returned to the same job she had had years earlier. She was shocked to discover that there was no longer a clerical support staff in place to back her up and was unprepared for this change because she hadn't kept up with workplace trends.

The Society of Professional Women provides a forum for women of all ages and stages of their careers to network, reenergize and share the challenges of today's work environment. Our monthly events always have a way of speaking to something relevant that's going on in our multi-dimensional lives.

At our most recent lunch event, for instance, guest speaker Reneé Amoire, founder and president of The Amoire Group, challenged the audience to “Feel good about who you are.” She told SPW members and guests to take time to reflect and ask themselves, “Where do you want to go? How do you want to get there?” She also discussed the importance of “having a network of people that you can trust.”

There will be plenty of opportunities to grow that network at our next SPW event on May 15 on the topic of Business in the 21st Century...What's Next? Amanda Bennett, executive editor of Bloomberg News and former editor of the Philadelphia Inquirer will have a conversation with Deirdre Connelly, President of GlaxoSmithKline NA about issues presently on the minds of U.S. business leaders: What is the lasting impact of the recession and how do businesses stay relevant in the 21st century? We will be partnering with the World Affairs Council for this event so make sure to register early (www.spwmainline.com) for this event that is going to be a big hit.

All of this is good advice whether you consider yourself a Working Mom or a Stay-at-Home Mom, or perhaps you're not a Mom at all but rather a daughter, sister, aunt or friend. It doesn't matter, because as Reneé reminded us at the last SPW event -we're all in this together as women.

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