Falling Back on Plan B:

The Children of the Gender Revolution Face Uncharted Territory

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Young adults today grew up with mothers who marched into the workplace and parents

who forged innovative alternatives to traditional marriage. These "children of the gender

revolution" now face a world that is far different than that of their parents or grandparents.

While massive changes in work and family arrangements have expanded their options, these

changes also pose new challenges to crafting a marriage, rearing children, and building a career.

Members of this new generation walk a fine line between their desire to achieve egalitarian,

sharing relationships that can meld with satisfying work and succumbing to the realities of

gender conflict, fragile relationships, and uncertain job prospects. The choices they are able to

make will shape work and family life for decades to come.

Social forecasters have reached starkly different conclusions about what these choices

will be. Some proclaim that the recent upturn in "opt out" mothers foreshadows a wider return

to tradition among younger women.[1] Others believe the rising number of single adults foretells a

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[1] Anecdotal, but high profile stories have touted an "opt out revolution," to use Lisa Belkin's term (2003), although a number of analysts have shown that "revolution" is a highly misleading and exaggerated term to describe the recent slight downturn in young mothers' labor force participation (Boushey, 2008; Williams, 2007). Most well-educated women are not leaving the workforce, and even though mothers with infants have shown a small downtown from their 1995 peak, mothers with children over the age of one are still just as likely as other women to hold a paid job. Even mothers with children under one show levels of employment

1

deepening "decline of commitment" that is threatening family life and the social fabric.[2] While

there is little doubt that tumultuous changes have shaped the lives of a new generation, there is

great disagreement about how. Does the diversification of families into two-earner, single-

parent, and cohabiting forms represent a waning of family life or the growth of more flexible

relationships? Will this new generation integrate family and work in new ways, or will older

patterns inexorably pull them back?

To find out how members of the first generation to grow up in diversifying families look

back on their childhoods and forward to their own futures, I conducted in-depth, life history

interviews with a carefully selected group of young people between 18 and 32. These young

women and men experienced the full range of changes that have taken place in family life, and

most lived in some form of "nontraditional" arrangement at some point in their childhood.[3] My

interviews reveal a generation that does not conform to prevailing media stereotypes, whether

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that are much higher than the1960's levels, which averaged 30 percent. Moreover, Williams
(2007), Stone (2007), Bennetts (2007), and Hirshman (2006) also point out that the metaphor of
"opting out" obscures the powerful ways that mothers are, in Williams words, "pushed out."

[2] Recent overviews of the rise of single adults can be found in Pew (2007a and 2007b)
and Roberts (2007). Prominent proponents of the "family decline" perspective include
Blankenhorn (1995), Popenoe (1988, 1996), Poponoe et al. (1996), and Whitehead (1997).
Waite and Gallagher (2000) focus on the personal and social advantages of marriage. For
rebuttals to the "family decline" perspective, see Bengston et al. (2002), Coontz (2005), Moore
et al. (2002), Skolnick and Rosencrantz (1994), and Stacey (1996).

[3] Randomly chosen from a broad range of city and suburban neighborhoods dispersed
throughout the New York metropolitan region, the group includes 120 respondents from diverse
race and class backgrounds and all parts of the country. In all, 54 percent identified as non-
Hispanic white, 21 percent as African American, 18 percent as Latino, and 7 percent as Asian.
About 43 percent grew up in middle and upper-middle class homes, while 43 percent lived in
homes that were solidly working class, and another 15 percent lived in or on the edge of poverty.
With an average age of 24, they are evenly divided between women and men, and about 5
percent identified as either lesbian or gay. As a group, they reflect the demographic contours of
young adults throughout metropolitan America. See Gerson (2006 and forthcoming) for a full
description of my sample and methods.

they depict declining families or a return to strict gender divisions in caretaking and breadwinning.

In contrast to popular images of twenty- and thirty-somethings who wish to return to tradition or reject family life altogether, the young women and men I interviewed are more focused on *how well* their parents met the challenges of providing economic and emotional support than on *what form* their families took. Now facing their own choices, women and men share a set of lofty aspirations. Despite their varied family experiences, most hope to blend the traditional value of lifelong commitment with the modern value of flexible sharing. In the best of all possible worlds, the majority would like to create a lasting marriage (or a "marriage like" relationship) that allows them to blend home and work in a flexible, egalitarian way.

Yet young people are also developing strategies to prepare for "second best" options in a world where time-demanding workplaces, a lack of child care, and fragile relationships may place their ideals out of reach. Concerned about the difficulty of finding a reliable and egalitarian partner to help them integrate work with family caretaking, most women see work as essential to their own and their children's survival, whether or not they marry. Worried about time-greedy workplaces, most men feel they must place work first and will need to count on a partner at home. As they prepare for second best options, the differing fallback positions of "self-reliant" women and "neo-traditional" men may point to a new gender divide. But this divide does not reflect a new generation's highest aspirations.

<u>Growing Up in Changing Families</u>

Even though theorists and social commentators continue to debate the merits of various family forms, my informants did not focus on their family's "structure."[4]   Instead, I found large variation among children who grew up in apparently similar family types. Those who grew up in families with a homemaking mother and breadwinning father hold divided assessments. While a little more than half thought this was the best arrangement, close to a half reached a different conclusion. When domesticity appeared to undermine a mother's satisfaction, disturb the household's harmony, or threaten its economic security, the children concluded that it would have been better if their mothers had pursued a sustained commitment to work.

Many of those who grew up in a single-parent home also expressed ambivalence about their parents' breakups. Slightly more than half wished their parents had stayed together, but close to half believed that a breakup, while not ideal, was better than continuing to live in a conflict-ridden or silently unhappy home. The longer-term consequences of a breakup shaped the lessons children drew.[5] If their parents got back on their feet and created better lives, children developed surprisingly positive outlooks on the decision to separate.

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[4] Most research shows that diversity *within* family types, however defined, is as large as the differences *between* them. Acock and Demo (1994) argue that family type does not predict children's well-being. Parcel and Menaghan (1994) make the same case for different forms of parental employment.

[5] In the case of one vs. two-parent homes, children living with both biological parents do appear on average to fare better, but most of the difference disappears after taking account of the family's financial resources and the degree of parental conflict prior to a break-up (Amato and Booth, 1997; Amato and Hohmann-Marriott, 2007; Booth and Amato, 2001; Furstenberg and Cherlin,1991; Hetherington, 1999; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994). In a recent study of the effects of divorce on children's behavior, Li (2007) shows that "while certain divorces harm children, others benefit them."

Those who grew up in a dual-earner home were the least ambivalent about their parents'

arrangements. More than three-fourths believed that having two work-committed parents

provided increased economic resources and also promoted marriages that seemed more

egalitarian and satisfying.[6] If, however, the pressures of working long hours or coping with

blocked opportunities and family-unfriendly workplaces took their toll, some children concluded

that having overburdened, time-stressed caretakers offset these advantages.

In short, growing up in this era of diverse families led children to focus more on how

well – or poorly – parents (and other caretakers) were able to meet the twin challenges of

providing economic and emotional support than on its form.   Even more important, children

experienced family life as a dynamic process that changed over time. Since family life is a film,

not a snapshot, the key to understanding young people's views lies in charting the diverse paths

their families took.

Family Paths and Gender Flexibility

Families can take different paths from seemingly common starting points, and similar

types of families can have travel toward different destinations. When young adults reflect on

their families, they focus on how their homes either came to provide stability and support or

failed to do so. About a third reported growing up in a stable home, while a quarter concluded

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[6] Decades of research have shown that children do not suffer when their mothers work outside the home. A mother's satisfaction with her situation, the quality of care a child receives, and the involvement of fathers and other caretakers are far more important factors (Galinsky, 1999; Harvey, 1999; Hoffman, 1987; Hoffman et al., 1999). Bianchi, Robinson, and Milkie (2006) report that parents are actually spending more time with their children. Recent research on the effects of daycare have found only small, temporary differences. Barnett and Rivers (1996) demonstrate a range of advantages for two-income couples, and Springer (2007) reports significant health benefits for men whose wives work.

that their families grew more supportive as time passed. In contrast, just under one in ten reported living in a chronically insecure home, while a bit more than a third felt that family support eroded as they grew up. Why, then, do some children look back on families that became supportive and secure, while others experienced a decline in their family's fortunes?

Parents' strategies for organizing breadwinning and caretaking hold the key to understanding a family's pathway.[7] Flexible strategies, which allowed mothers, fathers, and other caretakers to transcend rigid gender boundaries, helped families prevail in the face of unexpected economic and interpersonal crises. Inflexible responses, in contrast, left families ill-equipped to cope with eroding supports for a strict division in mothers' and fathers' responsibilities.

Rising Family Fortunes

The sources of expanding support differed by family situation, but all reflect a flexible response to unexpected difficulties. Sometimes marriages became more equal as demoralized mothers went to work and pushed for change or helped overburdened fathers. Josh, for example, reported that his mother's decision to go to work gave her the courage to insist that his father tackle his drug addiction:[8]

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[7] Hochschild (1989) refers to dual earner couples' "gender strategies," although she focuses more on how these strategies reproduce gender divisions than on when, how, and why they might undermine gender distinctions. See Lorber (1994), Risman (1998), and West and Zimmerman (1987) for discussions of the social construction of gender. Zerubavel (1991) analyzes the social roots of mental flexibility.

[8] All of the names have been changed to protect confidentiality, and some quotes have been shortened or lightly edited to remove extraneous phrases.

My parents fought almost constantly. Then my mom got a job. They separated about five, six, seven months. Even though I was upset, I thought it was for the best. That's when (my dad) got into some kind of program and my mom took him back. That changed the whole family dynamic. We got extremely close. A whole new relationship developed with my father.

Chris recalled how his mother's job allowed his father to quit a dead-end job and train for a more satisfying career:

Between 7th and 8th grade, my dad had a business which didn't work. It was a dead-end thing, and he came home frustrated, so my mom got him to go to school. It was hard financially, but it was good because he was actually enjoying what he was doing. He really flourished. A lot of people say, "Wow, your mom is the breadwinner, and that's strange." It's not. It is a very joint thing.

Parental breakups that relieved domestic conflict or led to the departure of an unstable parent also helped caretaking parents get back on their feet. Connie recounted how her mother was able to create a more secure home after separating from an alcoholic husbands and finding a job that offered a steady income and a source of personal esteem:

My father just sat in the corner and once in a while got angry at us, but (my mom) – I don't know if it was him or the money, but she didn't stand up for herself as much as I think she should. The tension with my dad never eased, and my mom had gotten sick with multiple bleeding ulcers. That was her real turning point. It was building inside of her to leave, 'cause she'd got a job and started to realize she had her own money…(She) became a much happier person. And because she was better, I was better. I had a weight taken off of me.

7

More stable and egalitarian remarriages could also give children the economic and emotional support they had not previously received. Having never known her biological father, Shauna recalled about how her stepfather became a devoted caretaker and the "real" father she always wanted:

At first, I was feeling it was a bad change because I wanted my mom to myself. Then my mom said, "Why don't you call him daddy?" The next thing I was saying "Daddy!" I remember the look on his face and his saying "She called me daddy!" I was so happy. After that, he's always been my dad, and there's never been any question about it....(He) would get home before my mom, so he would cook the dinner and clean. My dad spoiled me for any other man, because this is the model I had.

When Isabella's parents divorced, her grandfather became a treasured caretaker:

It's not like I didn't have a father, because my grandfather was always there. He was there to take me to after-school clubs and pick me up. I was sheltered – he had to take me to the library, wait till I finished all my work, take me home. I call him dad. Nobody could do better.

And when Antonio's single mother lost her job, his grandparents provided essential income that kept the family afloat:

My mom and grandparents were the type of people that even if we didn't have (money), we was gonna get it. Their ideal is, "I want to give you all the things I couldn't have when I was young." My grandparents and my mother thought like that, so no matter how much in poverty we were living, I was getting everything I wanted.

Despite their obvious differences, the common ingredient in these narratives is the ability of parents and other caretakers to reorganize child rearing and breadwinning in a more flexible,

less gender-divided way. Mothers going to work, fathers becoming more involved in child rearing, and others joining in the work of family life – all of these strategies helped families overcome unexpected difficulties and create more economically secure, emotionally stable homes. Growing flexibility in how parents met the challenges of a earning needed income and caring for children nourished parental morale, increased a home's financial security, and provided inspiring models of adult resilience. While children acknowledged the costs, they valued these second chances and gleaned lessons from watching parents find ways to create a better life. Looking back, they could conclude that "all's well that end's well."

Declining Family Fortunes

For some children, however, home life followed a downward slope. Here, too, the key to their experiences lies in the work and caretaking strategies of those entrusted with their care; but in this case, gender inflexibility in the face of domestic difficulties left children with less support than they had once taken for granted. Faced with a father's abandonment or a stay-at-home mother's growing frustration, children described how their parents' resistance to more flexible strategies for apportioning paid and domestic work left them struggling to meet children's economic and emotional needs. Over time, deteriorating marriages, declining parental morale, and financial insecurity shattered a once rosy picture of family stability and contentment.

When parents became stuck in a rigid division of labor, with unhappy mothers and fathers ill-equipped to support the household, traditional marriages could deteriorate. Sarah explains how her mother became increasingly depressed and "over-involved" after relinquishing a promising career to devote all of her time to child rearing:

9

When my sister was born, (my mom's) job had started up, career-wise, so she wasn't happy (but) she felt she had to be home. She had a lot of conflicts about work and home and opted to be really committed to family, but also resented it....She was the supermom, but just seemed really depressed a lot of time...(It came) with an edge to it – "in return, I want you to be devoted to me." If we did something separate from her, that was a major problem. So I was making distance because I felt I had to protect myself from this invasion....She thought she was doing something good to sacrifice for us....but it would have been better if my mother was happier working.

Megan recalls her father's mounting frustration as his income stagnated and he endured the complaints of a wife who expected to him to provide a "better lifestyle":

My mother was always dissatisfied. She wanted my father to be more ambitious, and he wasn't an ambitious man. As long as he was supporting the family, it didn't matter if it was a bigger house or a bigger car. Forty years of being married to a woman saying, "Why don't we have more money?" – I think that does something to your self-esteem.

Unresolved power struggles in dual-earner marriages could also cause problems, as wives felt the weight of "doing it all" and fathers resisted egalitarian sharing. For Justin, juggling paid and domestic work left his mother exhausted, while a high-pressured job running a restaurant left his father with no time to attend nightly dinners or even Little League games:

I was slightly disappointed that I could not see my father more – because I understood but also because it depends on the mood he's in. And it got worse as work (went) downhill…(So) I can't model my relationship on my parents. My mother wasn't very happy. There was a lot of strain on her.

10

Harmful breakups, where fathers abandoned their children and mothers could not find new ways to support the family or create an identity beyond wife and mother, also eroded family support. Nina remembers how her father's disappearance, combined with her mother's reluctance to seek a job and create a more independent life, triggered descent from a comfortable middle-class existence to one of abiding poverty:

> My mother ended up going on welfare. We went from a nice place to living in a really cruddy building. And she's still in the same apartment. To this day, my sister will not speak to my father because of what he's done to us.

Children (and their parents) sometimes lost the support of other caretakers. Shortly after Jasmine's father left to live with another woman and her mother fell into a deep depression, she suffered the loss of a "third parent" when her beloved grandmother died:

> It seemed like I had everything I wanted. My mom worked at a good paying job and was doing great. My dad worked at night, so he was around when I'd get home from school. I just thought of it as the way it was supposed to be. I was used to him being there, cooking dinner for us. So after he moved in with another woman and her children, it made me feel worse 'cause I felt that he was leaving me to be with other kids. I miss him, and I know he misses me.

The events that propelled families on a downward track – including rising financial instability, declining parental involvement and morale, and a dearth of other supportive caretakers – share a common element. Whether parents faced marital impasses or difficult breakups, resistance to more flexible gender arrangements left them unable to sustain an emotionally or economically secure home. Their children concluded that all did *not* end well.

In sum, sustained parental support and economic security were more important to my informants than the form their families took. Since any family type holds potential pitfalls if parents do not or cannot prevail over the difficulties that arise, conventional categories that see families as static "forms" cannot account for the ways that families change as children grow to adulthood. Instead, young women and men from diverse family backgrounds recounted how parents and other family members who transcended gender boundaries and developed flexible strategies for breadwinning and caretaking were better able to cope with marital crises, economic insecurities, and other unanticipated challenges.

A range of social trends – including the erosion of single-earner paychecks, the fragility of modern marriages, and the expanding options and pressures for women to work – require varied and versatile ways of earning and caring. These institutional shifts make gender flexibility increasingly desirable and even essential. Flexible approaches to work and parenting help families adapt, while inflexible ones leave them ill-prepared to cope with new economic and social realities.

Converging Ideals, Diverging Fallbacks

How are young adults using the lessons of growing up in changing families to formulate their own plans for the future? Women and men from diverse family backgrounds share a set of lofty aspirations. Whether or not their parents stayed together, more than nine out of ten hope to rear children in the context of a satisfying lifelong bond. Far from rejecting the value of commitment, almost everyone wants to create a lasting marriage or "marriage-like" partnership. This does not, however, reflect a desire for a traditional relationship. Most also aspire to build a committed bond where both paid work and family caretaking are shared. Three-fourths of those

who grew up in dual-earner homes want their spouses to share breadwinning and caretaking; but so do more that two-thirds of those from traditional homes, and close to nine-tenths of those with single parents. While four-fifths of women want an egalitarian relationship, but so do two-thirds of men. In short, most share an ideal that stresses the value of a lasting, flexible, and egalitarian partnership with considerable room for personal autonomy. Amy, an Asian American with two working parents, thus explains that:

> I want a fifty-fifty relationship, where we both have the potential of doing everything – both of us working and dealing with kids. With regard to career, if neither has flexibility, then one of us will have to sacrifice for one period, and the other for another.

And Wayne, an African American raised by a single mother, expresses the essentially same hopes when he says that:

> I don't want the '50s type of marriage, where I come home and she's cooking. I want her to have a career of her own. I want to be able to set my goals, and she can do what she wants, too.

While most of my interviewees hope to strike a flexible breadwinning and caretaking balance with an egalitarian partner, they are also skeptical about their chances of achieving this ideal. Women and men both worry that work demands, a lack of child rearing supports, and the fragility of modern relationships will undermine their desire to forge an enduring, egalitarian partnership. In the face of barriers to equality, most have concluded that they have little choice but to prepare for options that may fall substantially short of their ideals. Despite their shared aspirations, however, men and women are facing different institutional obstacles and cultural pressures, which are prompting divergent fallback strategies. If they cannot find a supportive partner, most women prefer self-reliance over economic dependence within a traditional

13

marriage. Most men, if they cannot strike an equal balance between work and parenting, prefer a neo-traditional arrangement that allows them to put work first and rely on a partner for the lion's share of caregiving. In the event that Plan A proves unreachable, women and men are thus pursuing a different Plan B as insurance against their "worst case" fears. These divergent fallback strategies point toward the emergence of a new gender divide between young women, most of whom who see a need for self-reliance, and young men, who are more inclined to retain a modified version of traditional expectations.

Women's Plan B

Torn between high hopes for combining work and family and worries about sustaining a lasting and satisfying partnership, young women are navigating uncertain waters. While some are falling back on domesticity, most prefer to find a more independent base than traditional marriage provides. In contrast to the media-driven message that young women are turning away from work and career in favor of domestic pursuits, the majority of my interviewees are determined to seek financial and emotional self-reliance, whether or not they also forge a committed relationship. Regardless of class, race, or ethnicity, most are reluctant to surrender their autonomy in a traditional marriage. When the bonds of marriage are so fragile, relying on a husband for economic security seems foolhardy. And if a relationship deteriorates, economic dependence on a man leaves few means of escape. Danisha, an African American who grew up in an inner-city, working-class neighborhood, and Jennifer, who was raised in a middle-class, predominantly white suburb, agree. Danisha proclaims that:

Let's say that my marriage doesn't work. Just in case, I want to establish myself, because

I don't ever want to end up, like, "What am I going to do?" I want to be able to do what I

have to do and still be okay.

Jennifer agrees:

I will have to have a job and some kind of stability before considering marriage. Too

many of my mother's friends went for that — "Let him provide everything" — and

they're stuck in a very unhappy relationship, but can't leave because they can't provide for

themselves or the children they now have. So it's either welfare or putting up with

somebody else's c--p.

Hoping to avoid being trapped in an unhappy marriage or left by an unreliable partner

without a way to survive, almost three-fourths of women plan to build a non-negotiable base of

self-reliance and an independent identity in the world of paid work. But they do not view this

strategy as incompatible with the search for a life partner. Instead, it reflects their determination

to set a high standard for a worthy relationship. Economic self-reliance and personal

independence make it possible to resist "settling" for anything less than a satisfying, mutually

supportive bond.

Women from all backgrounds have concluded that work provides indispensable

economic, social, and emotional resources. They have drawn lessons about the rewards of self-

reliance and the perils of domesticity from their mothers, other women, and their own

experiences growing up. When the bonds of marriage are fragile, relying on a husband for

economic security seems foolhardy. They are thus seeking alternatives to traditional marriage

by establishing a firm tie to paid work, by redesigning motherhood to better fit their work

aspirations, and by looking to kin and friends as a support network to enlarge and, if needed,

15

substitute, for an intimate relationship. These strategies do not preclude finding a life partner, but they reflect a determination to set a high standard for choosing one. Maria, who grew up in a two-parent home in a predominantly white, working-class suburb, declares:

> I want to have this person to share [my] life with – (someone) that you're there for as much as they're there for you. But I can't settle.

And Rachel, whose Latino parents separated when she was young, shares this view:

> I'm not afraid of being alone, but I am afraid of being with somebody's who's a jerk. I want to get married and have children, but it has to be under the right circumstances, with the right person.

Maria and Rachel also agree that if a worthy relationship ultimately proves out of reach, then remaining single need not mean social disconnection. Kin and friends provide a support network that enlarges and, if needed, even substitutes for an intimate relationship. Maria explains:

> If I don't find (a relationship), then I cannot live in sorrow. It's not the only thing that's ultimately important. If I didn't have my family, if I didn't have a career, if I didn't have friends, I would be equally unhappy. (A relationship) is just one slice of the pie.

And Rachel concurs:

> I can spend the rest of my life on my own, and as long as I have my sisters and my friends, I'm okay.

By blending support from friends and kin with financial self-sufficiency, these young women are pursuing a strategy of autonomy rather than placing their own fate or their children's

16

in the hands of a traditional relationship.[9] Whether or not this strategy ultimately leads to marriage, it appears to offer the safest and most responsible way to prepare for the uncertainties of relationships and the barriers to men's equal sharing.

Men's Plan B

Young men, in contrast, face a different dilemma: Torn between women's pressures for an egalitarian partnership and their own desire to succeed — or at least survive — in time-demanding workplaces, they are more inclined to fall back on a modified traditionalism that contrasts vividly with women's search for self-reliance. While they do not want or expect to return to a 1950s model of fathers as the only breadwinner, most men prefer a modified traditionalism that recognizes a mother's right (and need) to work, but puts his own career first. Although Andrew grew up in a consistently two-income home, he distinguished between a woman's "choice" to work and a man's "responsibility" to support his family:

> I would like to have it be equal – just from what I was exposed to and what attracts me – but I don't have a set definition for what that would be like. I would be fine if both of us were working, but if she thought, "At this point in my life, I don't want to work," then it would be fine.

Because equality may prove to be too costly to their careers, seven out of ten men are pursuing a strategy that positions them as the main breadwinner, even if it allows for two

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[9] About a quarter of women concluded that if work and family collide, they would rather make a more traditional compromise. These women worried about inflexible workplaces and the difficulty finding an equal partner. Yet they still hoped to fit work into their lives. This outlook, too, reflects the dilemmas facing young women who lack the supports to share work and caretaking equally. (See Gerson, forthcoming, for a full analysis of the variation in women's fallback strategies.)

working spouses. When push comes to shove, and the demands of work collide with the needs of children, this approach allows men to resist equal caretaking, even in a two-earner context. Like women, men from a range of family, class, and ethnic backgrounds fall back on neo-traditionalism. They favor retaining a clear boundary between a breadwinning father and a caretaking mother, even when she holds a paid job. This neo-traditional strategy stresses women's primary status as mothers and defines equality as a woman's "choice" to add work onto mothering.

By making room for two earners, these strategies offer the financial cushion of a second income, acknowledge women's desire for a life beyond the home, and allow for more involved fatherhood. But this vision, which still claims separate spheres of responsibility for women and men, does not challenge a man's position as the primary earner or undermine the claim that his work prospects should come first. Although James's mother became too mentally ill to care for her children or herself, Josh plans to leave the lion's share of caretaking to his wife:

All things being equal, it (caretaking) should be shared. It may sound sexist, but if somebody's going to be the breadwinner, it's going to be me. First of all, I make a better salary, and I feel the need to work, and I just think the child really needs the mother more than the father at a young age.

Men are thus more likely to favor a fallback arrangement that retains the gender boundary between breadwinning and caretaking, even when mothers hold paid jobs. From young men's perspective, this modified but still gendered household offers women the chance to earn income and establish an identity at the workplace without imposing the costs of equal parenting on men. Granting a mother's "right" to work supports women's claims for independence, but does not undermine men's claim that their work prospects should come first. Acknowledging

men's responsibilities at home provides for more involved fatherhood, but does not envision domestic equality. And making room for two earners provides a buffer against the difficulties of living on one income, but does not challenge men's position as the primary earner. Modified traditionalism thus appears to be a good compromise when the career costs of equality remain so high.[10] New economic insecurities, coupled with women's growing desire for equality, are creating dilemmas for men, even if they take a different form than the ones confronting women. Ultimately, however, men's desire to protect work prerogatives collides with women's growing desire for equality and need for independence.

Across the Gender Divide

In contrast to the popular images of a generation who feels neglected by working mothers, unsettled by parental breakups, and wary of equality, these life stories show strong support for working mothers, a greater concern with the quality of a relationship, and a shared desire to create lasting, flexible, and egalitarian partnerships. The good news is that most young women and men had largely positive experiences with mothers who worked and parents who strove for flexibility and equality. Those who grew up with a caring support network and sufficient economic security, whether in a single or a two-parent household, did well. Young women and men both recounted how gender flexibility in breadwinning and caretaking helped their parents (and other caretakers) overcome such increasingly prevalent family crises as the

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[10] About three in ten men stress independence over traditional marriage, but autonomy has a different meaning for them than it does for women. Poor work prospects left them determined to remain single unless they find a partner who does not expect financial support. Unlike self-reliant women, who hoped to support themselves and their children, autonomous men worried about their ability to earn enough to support a family. (See Gerson, forthcoming, for a full analysis of men's varied strategies.)

loss of a father's income or the decline of a mother's morale/ By letting go of rigid patterns that once narrowly defined women's and men's "proper" places in the family and the wider world, all kinds of families were able to overcome unexpected challenges and create more financially stable and emotionally supportive homes. And most, even among those who lived in less flexible families, hope to build on the gains of their parents' generation by seeking equality and flexibility in their own lives.

The bad news, however, is that most young adults remain skeptical about their chances of achieving their ideals. Amid their shared desire to transcend gender boundaries and achieve flexibility in their own lives, however, young women and men harbor strong concerns that their aspirations will prove impossible to reach. Faced with the many barriers to egalitarian relationships and fearful that they will not find the right partner to help them integrate work with family caretaking, they are also preparing for options that may fall substantially short of their ideals. Reversing the argument that women are returning to tradition, however, these divergent fallback strategies suggest that a new divide is emerging between "self-reliant" women, who see work, an independent income, and emotional autonomy as essential to their survival, and "neo-traditional" men, who grant women's "choice" to work but also feel the need and pressure to be a primary breadwinner.

While women are developing more innovative strategies than are men, the underlying story is one of a resilient, but realistic generation that has changed far more than the institutions it has inherited. Whether they grew up in a flexible home or one with more rigid definitions of women's and men's proper places, their hard won lessons about the need for new, more egalitarian options for building relationships and caring for children are outpacing their ability to implement these aspirations.

Yet young men and women still hope to reach across the divide that separates them. Aware that traditional job ladders and traditional marriages are both waning, they are seeking more flexible ways to build careers, care for families, and integrate the two.[11] Convinced that the "organized career" is a relic of the past, most hope to craft a "personal career" that is not bound by a single employer or work organization. Most men as well as women are trying to redefine the "ideal worker" to accommodate the ebb and flow of family life, even if that means sacrificing some income for a more balanced life.[12] They hope to create a shared "work-family" career that interweaves breadwinning and caretaking.

Growing up in changing families and facing uncertainty in their own lives has left this generation weary of rigid, narrowly framed "family values" that moralize about their personal choices or those of others. They are searching for a morality without moralism that balances an ethic of tolerance and inclusiveness with the core values of behaving responsibly and caring for others. The clash between self-reliant women and neo-traditional men may signal a new divide, but it stems from intensifying work-family dilemmas, not from a decline of laudable values.

Since new social realties are forcing young adults to seek new ways to combine love and work, the best hope for bridging new gender divides lies in creating social policies that will allow 21st century Americans to pursue the flexible, egalitarian gender strategies they want rather than forcing them to fall back on less desirable – and ultimately less workable – options. Whether the goal is equal opportunity or a healthy family landscape, the best family values can only be achieved by creating the social supports for gender flexibility in our communities, homes, and workplaces.

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[11] See Moen and Roehling (2005).

[12] See Williams (2000).

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