
CAN WOMEN HAVE IT ALL?

It Depends On Whom You Ask

It used to be that “having it all” meant you could bring home the bacon and fry it up in a pan.

And read to your kids.

And engage with your partner.

And get in an hour of yoga.

But as more women are starting to realize, maybe the question isn’t “Do you have it all?” but rather “Do you love all that you have?”

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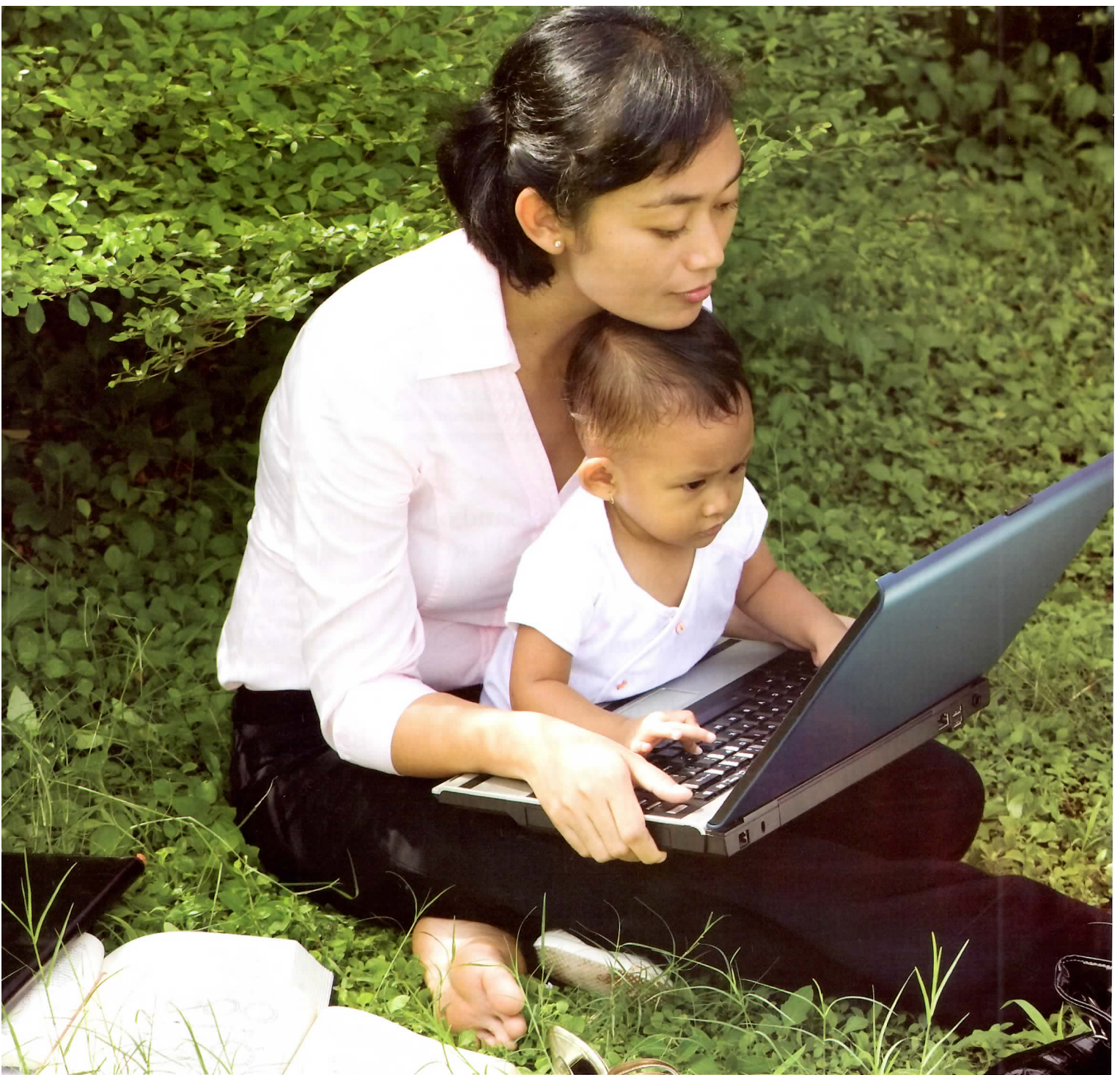
year at the Aspen Ideas Festival, when David Bradley, who owns *The Atlantic*, asked PepsiCo CEO Indra K. Nooyi if she thinks women can have it all, the married mother of two told the audience, “I don’t think women can have it all. I just don’t think so. We pretend we *have* it all. We pretend we *can* have it all.”

Her answer stirred a lot of dialogue around the subject, as recent generations have been saying that American women can indeed have it all. But when seemingly more liberal companies like Apple and Facebook are offering such benefits as elective egg freezing for female employees, these gestures seem to be signaling the same thing that Nooyi expressed: You can’t have it all. For one, you may have to wait to have a family in order to have a career, or at least that’s what many of the women in these organizations may be feeling.

It’s true, ladies, you have to make hard choices — choices that your male counterparts generally don’t have to make.

Even President Obama touched upon these points in his January State of the Union: “Today, we’re the only advanced country on Earth that doesn’t guarantee paid sick leave or paid maternity leave to our workers. ... And that forces too many parents to make the gut-wrenching choice between a paycheck and a sick kid at home.” And here’s another painful reminder from our Commander-in-Chief: “Congress still needs to pass a law that makes sure





a woman is paid the same as a man for doing the same work.”

Welcome to America, where it can feel like so many forces are against you when it comes to being— or considering becoming — a working mother. In Canada, working mothers are guaranteed one-year maternity leave. Imagine that.

Granted, Nooyi, who is of South Asian descent, runs a billion-dollar company with thousands of employees — that’s a whole other breed of busy — but many career-driven women and mothers often talk about being pulled in

many different directions. Because let’s remember that having a family doesn’t just mean being a mother, which Nooyi’s own mother told her and whose words Nooyi recounted to the Aspen audience: “Let me explain something to you. You might be president of PepsiCo. You might be on the board of directors. But when you enter this house, you’re the wife, you’re the daughter, you’re the daughter-in-law, you’re the mother. You’re all of that. Nobody else can take that place.”

I understand this well. It’s actually 12:30 a.m. as I write this. My 2-year-old has finally fallen back asleep (my hus-

band went to bed two hours earlier), I did the dishes, put toys away, paid some bills, did 100 crunches, fed the animals, folded the laundry; and earlier in the day, I walked the dog with my daughter, got her bathed (but not myself!), took her to her classmate’s birthday party, had my parents over and much more. And now, I’m working. This is what I call Saturday. Thousands of other women, including Nooyi, probably did even more — and maybe even got in a shower and blow-dry.

Is this what I consider having it all? Or *pretending* to have it all, as Nooyi



Daria Yadacufski.

PHOTO BY MARIE REINE VELEZ

“This concept of ‘having it all’ is just kind of weird and problematic. It just depends on so many factors, who we are, which we can’t really define, and what people want. I think that the way it is being defined is having a successful career and family, and that is not for everybody.”

— Daria Yadacufski,

cofounder of feminist magazine *Make/shift* and executive director of University of Southern California’s arts and humanities initiative Visions and Voices

put it? That’s not what I’d call it. I’d call it having it all ... to do.

SUCCESS DEFINED

When you hear the phrase “having it all,” what comes to your mind? Is it having a career, a life partner and a family? Hell, tons of people have those. But let’s add a few words and see how that changes things: a *successful* career, a *supportive* life partner and a *loving* family. But defining what successful, supportive and loving are is very subjective, as is defining “having it all.”

“I think that at the end of the day, everyone has his or her own definition of what it means ‘to have it all,’” says award-winning and bestselling paranormal romance/urban fantasy author Marjorie Liu, speaking by phone from New York. “For some people, that means being a mother and having a career, having the perfect home, the perfect husband or partner. But I happen to believe in the beauty and power of

imperfection and not always getting everything you want — staying a little hungry, growing and learning; and, most importantly, being humble and grateful for what you do have.”

Another New Yorker, Christina Seid, owner of the popular Chinatown Ice Cream Factory, believes “you can have it all ... at different times.” And while Seid doesn’t run a big operation like PepsiCo, her daily schedule could probably compete with Nooyi’s. (She actually spoke to me by phone at 11 p.m. her time, because that was the only time she had free.) A former board member

when I have more down time, but I don’t think you ever have it all on one day at one time.” Seid goes on to add that while she does spend a lot of time with her family, maybe she’ll miss what many would consider big moments: her daughter’s exact birthday or celebrating a major holiday together on the exact day, which her family has adapted to. “I think when you have a business or you’re a career woman, you have to be very flexible, and your family has to be very flexible.”

Meanwhile, Daria Yadacufski, cofounder of feminist magazine *Make/shift* and executive director of the University of Southern California’s arts and humanities initiative Visions and Voices, questions the notion of “all” that society has put forth. “This concept of ‘having it all’ is just kind of weird and problematic. It just depends on so many factors, who we are, which we can’t really define, and what people want,” says the biracial Japanese American. “I think that the way it is being defined is having a successful career and family, and that is not for everybody,” she says. (I should note that her 5-year-old daughter and mine, who both have school holidays on the day of our meeting, periodically interrupt us. This is called juggling — or perhaps enjoying it all at once?)

“I think that there are people who can very easily choose to not have a

of the organization Asian Women In Business, the Chinese American is very committed to various causes — she’s been known to serve on 10 committees or boards at a time — in addition to running her own business. She is also the author of the bilingual children’s book *Saturdays in Chinatown*, has a small consulting firm, occasionally teaches at the Metropolitan College of New York, plus is a wife (she met her husband when she served as a board member on the American Cancer Society), a daughter (her dad originally founded the ice cream business), a sister and a mother to a 2-year-old. Oh, yes, and she often manages to get to the gym for an hour a day and will soon be serving as a judge on the popular Food Network show *Chopped*. *Phew*. If there’s ever been a woman who can *do* it all, Seid is it.

“There are times, when my business is slow, when I get to spend more time with my family,” she explains. “There are times when I’m on vacation



PHOTO BY ALBERT CHEUNG.

Christina Seid is, among many other things, the owner of Chinatown Ice Cream Factory.

Marjorie Liu.



PHOTO BY NINA SUBIN.

ances all over the world; and whose partner, the Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Junot Diaz, very much understands the demands of a writer's life. "But having it all doesn't mean being content to just be in my place. Having it all means being content with where I am, but also thinking what is going to happen next. Success in my mind implies that the game is over, that there's nothing left to dream about or accomplish."

STRIKING A BALANCE

What I found really interesting about these women is that the words "sacri-

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— Marjorie Liu, bestselling author

family and have a successful career and have it all," she adds. "Or they can have a family and not have a job and also have it all. And there are also class and privilege issues with all of that, too. I think that if you are a working single mother, you are dealing with a whole other set of issues."

But if you ask Yadacufski simply if she's happy, her answer is simple. "I am really happy where I am at. I feel incredibly lucky that I have a job that I really like, and I have this amazing daughter. And I am still able to publish this magazine that is so important to me." That says a lot from this working mother, who is also a breast cancer survivor. (She had a double mastectomy two years ago.)

As for Liu, her answer is also simple, albeit different. "Yes, I do have it all," says the biracial Chinese American, who, in addition to penning more than 17 novels, teaches writing at MIT, writes comic books and makes appear-

ance" and "compromise" never came up. They all seemed to own their, at times, difficult choices without lamenting them. Though Seid does share she's "actually taking more time to be a mother," overall, she feels great about her relationship with her daughter. "We have very full days together, so I have no guilt about not spending enough time with her," she says. And Seid truly loves working. "If I don't have my job, and I don't put energy into my career, I can't give my daughter the things that she wants, so it's hand-in-hand in a way."

Likewise, Yadacufski doesn't necessarily *have* to juggle motherhood and two jobs — she had been planning to just work on the magazine before the USC opportunity presented itself — but her well-being depends on it, she says. "I think that the work that I do with my daughter, just being there as a parent, is so critical, but really I need all of those things [running the feminist magazine

and directing the USC arts program] to have my own happiness."

After a whirlwind writing period of eight years, Liu, on the other hand, who used to call a 14-hour workday the norm, realized that she wanted more than her work. "I did an excellent job of being alone, all in the name of work — but I woke up one day and realized that if I wasn't careful, another eight years would pass, and I still wouldn't see my friends at all, except for once or twice a year. I wouldn't have a family of my own, unless it was a family of five cats and a bunch of little dogs. Which isn't so bad, but also not what I wanted for myself."

THE ROAD AHEAD

So what to think? Are these women the exceptions? Are they just "pretending" to have it all? If I talked to these women again five months or five years from now, would their answers be different? Perhaps. If you asked me if I had it all a year ago, I would have a different answer than I do today, though I believe that I can have my "all" again and again.

Perhaps it's time to redefine what "having it all" means. It's not about having the career *and* the partner *and* the children *and* the fill-in-the-blank, and managing each and every one of them perfectly. It's about how you *feel* about what you *do* have.

Yadacufski's advice for women just starting to cope with these issues is what we've heard before, so simple yet seemingly so unattainable: "Do what you love. Do what makes you happy. Not what makes you more or less money, or what everyone else tells you that you are supposed to be doing." And specifically addressing Asian American women, she says, "It is not about getting the job that your parents want you to have, but it is about following your heart and figuring out your passion." (Honestly, for me, since becoming a mother, I've forgotten just what that is, but I'm up for the challenge.)

"It's a balancing act," says the ever-striving Liu. "Staying grounded and satisfied, while also looking forward — dwelling in possibility." Her words of wisdom? "I think the key to making it all work is gratitude. If you appreciate what you have, that creates a healthy space for growth and exploration."

Think on that, and perhaps you'll find yourself having it all, and so much more.