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What women want: Work-life balance

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Madhabi Puri-Buch offers advice on how women can strike a balance between family responsibility and career development.

In Asia, women are now more ambitious than ever. They are climbing the corporate ladder with finesse and achieving unprecedented success in the workplace. Yet, even as Asian women achieve greater parity in the workplace they continue to report struggling with achieving a healthy work-life balance. This is perhaps why women tend to leave their jobs at the mid-management level, ultimately representing only 20 percent of senior positions according to research by the Corporate Executive Board.

Madhabi Puri-Buch, Head of Agora Partners, suggests that women must recalibrate their expectations about what it means to have a balanced life. Puri-Buch has first-hand knowledge of this problem. She has worked in a range of roles within the banking industry. She has served as an Executive Director on

the Board of ICICI Bank, India's largest private sector bank and the CEO of ICICI Securities, an investment banking and broking firm. She also founded Toofles Foundation, a small trust that raises funds for grassroot NGOs. Throughout this, she has also taken her role as a wife and mother very seriously.

In order to lead a career-driven but balanced life, Puri-Buch offers women the paradoxical advice to stop trying so hard to achieve balance on a daily basis. "It is very hard to achieve the perfect work-life balance every single day of your life. In fact, the stress that trying to achieve this creates on a daily and on-going basis, makes it almost impossible to do justice to either what needs to be done at work or at home. Compound this with the expectation that you create within yourself, in people at work and your loved ones at home, and you have the perfect recipe for disappointment and further stress."

Balance shouldn't be a daily struggle

Instead, Puri-Buch urges women to think about balance in different units of time. She says, "I think that it is more of a question of how you look at work-life balance. To me, the question of work-life balance is: Are you trying to maintain the balance every minute of the day? Are you trying to maintain it every day, every week, every month, every year, every couple of years, every decade? I think somewhere along the way I learnt that anything shorter than a month is really too short."

Women who are trying to become leaders in their places of work will often have to work long hours or travel. In her own experience, Puri-Buch says that there were weeks when she was working 18 hours a day and not seeing her family at all. By the same token, however, there were other times when her family needed her and she would simply re-prioritize and put work on auto-pilot for a while.

"If I were to take that concept further," says Puri-Buch, "there was a phase of about five to eight years when I had put a lot into my career and I had been very well rewarded for it, and yet the next phase of my life required me to take a slightly different route and to make a trade-off." In a sense, Puri-Buch believes that taking time away from one's job to focus on family is a natural part of women's career trajectory. However, this does not have to mean the end of a woman's leadership goals. "I don't see it as the end of a story, I see it as a phase of a story."

Keep your mind in the game

Puri-Buch advises women to keep intellectually engaged in their industry even when they are not actively working. She has noticed that many women cut off all ties to their former careers when they leave their jobs. "The world is a very dynamic place and people are learning all the time. So if you have been out for five years, it means you have not been learning and keeping pace for five years." So, even when women choose to take a break from their careers, Puri-Buch warns that they should never take a complete break.

There are many ways that women can stay involved in their careers. "Women should take part in some form of continuing association with their profession, even if it is not remunerated, even if it is just three hours a day and even if it is just on the periphery of what you were doing. You should make sure that you have a reason every morning to wake up and read the newspaper."