Changes in the social, political, and cultural landscapes since the 19th century have included a dramatic evolution in women's roles. Women, once considered primarily as housekeepers and full-time child care providers, have become equal participants in higher education, and the majority of women living in Western societies are now employed outside of the home. These changes have influenced the structure of contemporary families as well as the ways in which women experience motherhood.

While there has been a slow but steady move towards gender equity in educational institutions and in the workforce, achieving full employment equity continues to be complicated by the roles assigned to and constructed for women—roles reinforced by biological functions associated with pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding. Regardless of their achievements outside of the home, women continue to assume the bulk of the responsibility for household labour and child care work inside of the home. While dominant neoliberal discourses focus on the economic and moral virtues of paid employment, the needs of parents, particularly mothers, as contributing members of the workforce remain largely unsupported. Neoliberalism fails to challenge the fundamental ways in which modern societies continue to privilege paid work over family care, upholding male standards for what counts as valuable, meaningful, and important life work. Thus, little room is left for reimagining public and
private spheres as fully shared genderless spaces. If Western societies are truly committed to promoting a strong work ethic and strong family values, the structures must be in place to allow individuals, both men and women, to pursue, succeed in, and find satisfaction in both paid employment and family life.

In the Western tradition, women are seen as the primary caregivers, regardless of their commitment to work. Consequently, contemporary women are still internalizing the idea that they need to be perfect mothers. The messages contemporary mothers receive are competing but clear: on the one hand, they must be able to protect and nurture their children; on the other, they must find their rightful place in the workforce. Both prescriptions are tall orders. Struggling with competing loyalties, contemporary women trying to fully engage in higher education or in professional careers as well as in motherhood often find themselves in a difficult situation. While feminist maternal scholars are continuing conversations that strive to create spaces valuing motherhood as a legitimate and appreciated role for women, with these discourses comes the risk of misinterpreting and misrepresenting women as essentially maternal. Thus, although this approach brings the tensions between mothering and motherhood to the forefront, it has done little to address the public/private dichotomies that function to sustain the gendered nature of both paid work and family care.

Being able to make the most of women’s talents in the workforce, while providing the space for excellent child and family care is a major challenge facing contemporary societies. The solution might be simple if gender were to be removed entirely from the family/work equation, allowing women and men to freely choose how to engage in all aspects of family and career life. Ungendering public and private spaces would offer all individuals the opportunity to choose when and how to engage in education, professional work, career advancement, partnering decisions, family planning, and child care. However, the firm entrenchment of gender roles in Western societies suggests that the solutions to work/family balance issues, for women, will remain complex. Gatrell (2013) notes that “despite a long history of theoretical endeavours, the ‘maternal body’ is still, often, unwelcome within managerial and professional settings” (p. 622).
THE FACE OF TODAY’S FAMILIES

Some women have chosen to handle the dilemma associated with balancing family and work by forgoing family life. The proportion of couples with children has been declining over the past few decades, and for the first time since the Census was instituted in Canada in the early 1900s, we now see slightly more couples in Canada with no children than with children (Milan, Keown, & Urquijo, 2011, p. 10). More women today are choosing to have fewer or no children at all. The average age of a woman having her first child is now close to 28, five years older than it was only a few decades ago. While changes in national economies and advances in birth control technologies have had their effects on limiting family size, many women are delaying childbirth or choosing not to have children because they are partnering at an older age and also because many want to establish careers before creating families (Milan, Keown, & Urquijo). In light of recent media coverage exploring the difficulties of work-life balance for women, many assume that these multiple roles—student, employee, and mother—will be incompatible.

Such an assumption is not unreasonable. The data suggests that in Canada and the US women with children shoulder the bulk of the responsibility for child care and spend far more time and emotional energy caring for children than do men (Bianchi, 2011; Guppy & Luongo, 2015; Statistics Canada, 2011a). Data from the 2010 General Social Survey (Statistics Canada, 2011a) shows us that even when both partners work full-time outside of the home, women spend on average more than 50 hours each week in child care activities—a figure slightly more than double the average time spent by men. Not surprisingly, when infants and young children form part of the household, the hours spent in child care increase for both men and women, but the greater time demands are absorbed by women. In households where children are very young (newborns up to age four), women spend on average 68 hours a week in child care; in the same situation men spend approximately 30 (Statistics Canada, 2011a). These are not trivial numbers of hours for women to be adding to already demanding workloads outside of the home.

In addition to child care responsibilities are the hours needed to maintain households. Although the amount of time spent in household labour has declined over recent years, more of the housework is still being done by women. Women in Canada spend on average close to 14 hours a week
in domestic labour, men just over eight (Milan, Keown, & Urquijo, 2011). On top of the hours spent in child care and household labour, women spend far more time multitasking than do men. Highlighted by some as a further source of gender inequality and increased levels of physical stress and psychological distress, multitasking adds to the burden women face in their attempts to resolve work/family balance conflicts (Offer & Schneider, 2011).

Even though having a family and working outside of the home can be a stressful situation for many, the reality is that the majority of women in Western societies are employed outside of the home. In 2009, almost 60% of women in Canada were employed (Ferrao, 2010). And although it was once the case that working women were either single or married without children, as the rates of women’s employment have risen generally, over the past three decades there has been a significant increase in participation in the labour markets by women who are also mothers. However, women with children are still less likely to be employed than those without. Lone-parent mothers, particularly those with very young children (under the age of three), are the least likely of all groups of women to be employed (Ferrao), suggesting that women’s child care responsibilities inhibit their opportunities to engage in the labour market (Genre, Salvador, & Lamo, 2010).

Women make various compromises in order to negotiate work and family life. For example, in 2009, women were seven times more likely than men to work part-time (Ferrao, 2010). While over 13% of women working part-time specifically mentioned child care as the main reason, this proportion is in sharp contrast with “only 2.3% of male part-time workers cit[ing] these as reasons they did not work full time” (Ferrao, p. 15). And mothers are far more likely to take maternity or parental leave benefits than are fathers (Ferrao, p. 30). In Canada, “about 114,000 individuals received parental benefits each month in 2009—of these, 92.5% (105,000) were women” (Ferrao, p. 30).

Working part-time and taking leave in order to care for children are choices women make in order to balance work and family responsibilities; however, both strategies take a toll on women’s salaries and their career progression. Although the gap between men’s and women’s salaries has narrowed over time, women’s hourly wage in Canada is still 16% lower than the average hourly wage earned by men (Canadian Association of
University Teachers: CAUT, 2011b). Not all, but some of this discrepancy can be accounted for by the gaps that are created in women’s work history resulting from demands placed upon them by family care responsibilities.

WOMEN, HIGHER EDUCATION, AND CAREER CHOICES

Since 1990, the majority of full-time students enrolled in and graduating from undergraduate university programs in Canada have been women (CAUT, 2013; Turcotte, 2011). Over half of students studying at the master’s level and close to half of doctoral level graduates are women (CAUT, 2013; Turcotte). However, women continue to be overrepresented in some disciplines (e.g., education, health sciences, humanities, visual and performing arts, communication technologies, social and behavioural sciences) and underrepresented in others (e.g., architecture, engineering, mathematics, computing and information science, sciences). In particular, there are still unequal distributions of men and women in scientific disciplines, which raise questions about what is keeping women out of these traditionally male-dominated areas of study. Though disciplinary interests and expected career outcomes play a role in what areas of study women choose to pursue, other factors have been proposed to account for women’s absence in historically male-dominated fields of study.

In the past, attempts to increase participation in traditionally male-dominated areas were focused on boosting women’s confidence to study in the “hard sciences” (Turkle, 1988). The term “the incredible shrinking pipeline” was coined to describe women’s declining participation in computer science, which was arguably, at the time, one of the most gendered of all of the science professions (Camp, 1997; Davies & Camp, 2000). Hacker (1982) explored patriarchal elements that define the culture of engineering and concluded that the intellectual traits associated with many scientific disciplines can largely be understood as male and have dominated fields of technology—as well as medicine, science, and engineering—for decades. The pipeline analogy helped to illuminate women’s disappearance from educational programs and professions where unwelcoming masculine cultures became an integral aspect of these career domains. The culture was viewed as a mechanism that acted as a gatekeeping device to keep women out, resulting in systems that replicated gender inequities (Bix, 2006;
This same pipeline analogy is now being applied to a broad range of male-dominated careers and its association with a recent trend that sees women leaving training and employment opportunities in those same disciplines. There is a renewed emphasis on women’s achievements in the fields of science and technology as well as a renewed interest in the discrimination they face (Kohlstedt, 2006). Once women have graduated from degree programs, there are other concrete factors affecting their decisions to stay in or opt out of careers for which they have been trained. For example, we still see that only 36% of active physicians in Canada (Canadian Institute for Health Information: CIHI, 2010), 35% of practising lawyers (Catalyst, 2014), and 35% of full-time faculty in Canadian universities are women (CAUT, 2013). Although women make up a significant minority of professionals in each of these careers, parity for women has clearly not yet been achieved.

**Mothering and Professional Employment**

In addition to the male cultures that plague many professions, perhaps making them unwelcoming for women, women’s choices to fully participate in male-dominated professional careers are often tethered to their prescribed roles as mothers and primary caregivers. Women’s choices to study in various disciplines are also related to how they imagine they will balance a career in the future with their realistic expectation that once children enter into the picture they will become their primary caregivers. Legault and Chasserio (2003) surveyed employees from seven Canadian companies and found that the women employed as professional engineers and managers reported more difficulty in balancing private life and work than men working in similar positions in these same companies. Approximately one half of the women who had children felt that the children were negatively affected by their long work hours, and many of these same women felt guilty about the impact of their employment on their children’s well-being. Although the majority of the women indicated that they were content with their choices, close to three quarters of them felt they had also made career sacrifices in order to have a family, including putting in less time at work, turning down interesting projects and promotions, and reducing their
work hours. One quarter of these women felt it necessary to make these career sacrifices in order to spend more time with their families. At the same time many of these same women felt they were not satisfying their supervisors or colleagues. In demanding positions, many women feel the need to constantly be available to their employer as well as to be highly visible in the workplace. Many felt that availability and visibility are used by employers to measure employees’ commitment to both company and career. Moreover, in many demanding positions there is no such thing as a normal work week defined by hours that begin and end at specific times, Monday through Friday, or even by the number of hours an employee is expected to work in any given week. Professionals are often expected to work-to-task rather than to a prescribed time clock. The ethos defining the culture of professional work is encouraged by employers and internalized by professional employees. While demanding work environments may suit male employees who are not torn between work and family obligations, the climate does not make room for the family responsibilities that are borne by many professional working mothers.

When women in professional jobs find it difficult, if not impossible, to find a balance between what is expected at work and what is expected at home, the outcome can result in frustration with one or both roles. On the one hand women may feel that their performance is lagging at work, while on the other, they may feel that their family is suffering because they are not available to their children in the ways they imagine they should be. For some women, resolving this conflict will necessitate leaving the workforce.

Hanappi-Egger (2012) looked at female computer scientists who abandoned their original careers following the birth of a child. Many of these women found employment in other sectors that required a reduced personal commitment to work. These highly educated women resigned from their original positions because of the excessive demands for overtime work, heavy workloads, and the pressure of working with immovable and strict deadlines. All of these work-related factors, in concert with child care responsibilities, left women feeling frustrated and exhausted. Similarly, Nowak, Naude, and Thomas (2013), in assessing health care professionals following the birth of a child, found that while the majority had anticipated coming back to work after an arranged maternity leave, a significant proportion did not return. Instead many of the women chose to stay home. Their
decision to give up a career was influenced in part by the dissonance they experienced between what organizations formally promoted in terms of family-friendly policy and the reality of management’s less than supportive attitudes towards motherhood. This is a finding consistently repeated by other researchers who have looked at ways in which women attempt to find balance between mothering and work obligations (Herman, Lewis, & Humbert, 2013).

Child care responsibilities require some workplace flexibility, and for many women in high-level careers, flexibility is not an option. Women’s choices not to return to work after maternity leaves can be influenced by a variety of factors, including lack of on-site day care as well as non-existent breastfeeding policies in the workplace. Despite all of the work that has been done with regard to family-friendly policy, the tensions between motherhood and employment remain (McIntosh, McQuaid, Munro, & Dabir-Alai, 2012).

**MOTHERS WHO WORK IN ACADEMIA**

In Canada, just under one third of university faculty members are women, and they are best represented in the humanities, social sciences, and education (39.6%) as well as in the life sciences (35%); not surprisingly, their numbers are lowest in the physical sciences, computer science, engineering, and mathematics (14.8%) (Expert Panel on Women in University Research, 2012, p. xv). According to The Expert Panel on Women in University Research, women’s absence is also patently visible at the higher ranks of full professor and in senior administration across all disciplines. Further, there are higher proportions of women compared to men who work in less secure positions at universities as part-time professors, sessional instructors, and lecturers.

There are many challenges for highly educated women trained for and anticipating blending successful academic careers with mothering. Although women are earning doctoral degrees at an ever-increasing rate, fewer women are entering into tenured (or tenure stream) positions in Canadian universities and indeed in universities worldwide (Expert Panel on Women in University Research, 2012). Goulden, Mason, and Frasch (2011) suggest that “family formation—most importantly marriage and childbirth—account for the largest leaks in the pipeline between PhD receipt and the acquisition
of tenure for women in science” (p. 147). Decisions about childbearing and childrearing can dramatically influence postdoctoral women’s choices to abandon their intentions of working in academic positions with a research emphasis (NSERC, 2010 in Adamo, 2013). Many women will forsake their original plan of combining research and teaching and instead will turn their attention to careers that offer at least some promise of being able to manage family and work responsibilities. Research-intensive careers in academia disadvantage mothers because they are “the least family friendly of a range of possible career choices” (Goulden, Mason, & Frasch, p. 150).

The same is not true for men who have chosen academic careers; as fathers, men do not face the same family-work conflict. As evidence of this, male academic scientists are much more likely to be married with children than tenured female academic scientists. Further, tenured women academics are more likely to be single and have no children than men in the same positions. Women who enter academic careers during their childbearing years may also try to time their pregnancies so that having children does not interfere with tenure, and for some, the consequence of delaying decisions to have children may result in infertility (Armenti, 2004). Not only does motherhood impact women’s career progressions, but the high divorce rate among tenured female faculty—50% higher than that for tenured men—also reflects the impact of choosing to pursue an academic career (Goulden, Mason, & Frasch, p. 151).

These facts highlight the tensions for women as they attempt to combine family with work (Devos, Viera, Diaz, & Dunn, 2007). Academic mothers, but not fathers, “live their lives in two separate worlds and many find that they are not doing as well as they would like in either world” (Pillay, 2009, p. 503). The expectation that women will care for children is still not extended to men. The dominant cultural scripts surrounding intensive mothering demand that women expend huge amounts of time, energy, and money on raising children (Lynch, 2008). It is little wonder that when motherhood enters into the equation alongside the heavy workload of an academic career, finding a balance between work and family responsibilities becomes a nearly impossible task for many academic women. As noted earlier in this chapter, in addition to child care, women generally perform the lion’s share of the work in the home and enjoy less and poorer-quality free time than do their male counterparts (Bianchi, 2011; Erickson, 2005;
Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010; Lee & Waite, 2005; Mattingly & Sayer, 2006). Even in a situation where both husband and wife are employed full-time as university professors, domestic labour is distributed along traditional lines, and women in these partnerships continue to “shoulder considerably more household labor than do their male colleagues” (Suitor, Mecom, & Feld, 2001, p. 50).

While earlier explanations for the shortage of women in the professoriate emphasized discrimination and an unwelcoming climate, Wolfinger, Mason, and Goulden (2008) suggest that the absence of female professors can be attributed to the inflexible nature of the workplace. While “academe would appear to be the most family friendly workplace imaginable” (Townsley & Broadfoot, 2008, p. 135), issues of job autonomy and flexibility “generate stress and anxiety about maintaining excellence in scholarship, teaching, and service when the dual demands of work and family are constantly vying for attention” (p. 135). O’Meara and Campbell (2011) highlight agency as an important aspect of balancing career and family obligations. Through interviews with faculty members who were also parents, these authors found that agency was related to the presence or absence of role models, standards for working at home, and parental-leave policies. Academia offers a working environment historically configured around a male career trajectory, and it is a place that effectively forces women, but not men, to choose between work and family (Careless, 2012).

Discrimination appears to no longer be focused simply on gender. In fact, single women are 16 times more likely to get academic jobs than are single men; evidence shows that “women are more successful in obtaining academic careers if they delay or forsake marriage and children” (Wolfinger Mason, & Goulden, 2008, p. 401). Single women fare better in academia than do married women with children. While it might be true that the presence or absence of children is not directly related to promotion, research productivity, as evidenced through successful grant applications and publications, plays a major role in academic career advancement. Recent studies show that although the gap has declined, men’s research productivity still outstrips that of women (Hart & Metcalfe, 2010; Wilson, 2012). Women who are mothers have less time to spend on research and writing, both of which require time and sustained attention often not available to those caring for children (Wilson, 2012). Family responsibilities can interfere
with women’s capacity not only to fully engage in such work but to be able to “visualize a position of academic dean or higher as a reasonable goal to pursue before their children [have] completed secondary education” (Perrakis & Martinez, 2012, p. 11). Seierstad and Healy (2012) also note that “academic work is international; to succeed, reputations need to be made both nationally and internationally” (p. 307), and mothers often find it difficult, if not impossible, to travel to and participate in conferences, in part because few offer onsite day care for mothers with young children (Nazer, 2008).

Faculty report an average work week of more than 50 hours (Adamo, 2013, p. 44). Academic mothers, like mothers working in other professional careers, spoke of the lack of institutional support for pregnancy, breastfeeding, and child care and felt that university priorities and promotion systems favoured academics that did not have to manage daily responsibilities associated with child care (Baker, 2010). As partial evidence of this, there remains a wage gap between male and female faculty that cannot be explained solely by looking at age or rank. Academic women, at the rank of full professor, earn on average 4.5% less than their male counterparts (CAUT, 2013). Among the reasons proposed for this wage gap are women’s career interruptions related to childbearing and childrearing that interfere with an academic’s progression through the professorial ranks and salary grids. Although Scandinavian countries are some of the most gender-equitable in the world, Seierstad and Healy (2012) found through interviews with highly educated women in Nordic countries that they also “reported little sex equality in their universities” (p. 306). The authors concluded that “despite ‘women-friendly policies,’ the socio-economic and familial context surrounding women’s reproductive capacity continues to form the basis of their discrimination” (Seierstad & Healy, p. 307). While Baker (2010) found that academic mothers were concerned about the gendered division of labour in the household and in the workplace, many did not see taking extended leaves or leaving academic positions as a desirable option for balancing work and family.

**THE MEDICAL PROFESSION AND MOTHERHOOD**

In Canada, medical doctors work on average 83 hours a week—women physicians work five hours less (Adamo, 2013). Although female physicians
work less on average than do male physicians, not unlike academics, they typically work far more hours than what is considered by most as a normal work week. Whereas research academics may have some control over their workload and scheduling, Boulis and Jacobs (2011) suggest there is a real disconnect between an individual’s desire for work and family balance and the realities of the medical work environment. The disconnect “stems largely from structural pressures beyond the control of the individual physicians” (Boulis & Jacobs, p. 230). These authors highlight how the labour market puts pressure on elite workers to work long hours while also limiting meaningful part-time opportunities. Longer than average work hours and lack of opportunities for part-time work, in combination with work environments that have become increasingly difficult to manage, have made medicine a less than family-friendly career option, particularly for women. The impact of technology on medicine (e.g., personal computers, cellphones, Internet) has also contributed to physicians being on call 24/7 in much the same way these technologies have burdened other professional workers.

As in many academic areas of study, women have outnumbered men in medical school classes for several decades (Adamo, 2013). But, just as we saw limitations in terms of parity in certain disciplines in the academic world, Gartke and Dollin (2010), in their FMWC Report to the House of Commons, found that women in medicine are choosing specialties in primary care disciplines like obstetrics and gynecology as well as pediatrics rather than other areas where scheduled hours can be less predictable. And just as we saw women drawn to different areas of study and disciplines in academia, family medicine attracts more women than other subspecialties in medicine because it is considered to be more family friendly (Adamo).

However, in other areas of medicine women remain underrepresented. In 1998, for example, 12% of surgical graduates were women; by 2008 this figure had only risen to just slightly over 19% (Gartke & Dollin). Not unlike the situation in academia generally, “women comprise only 18% of full professors of medicine and in hospitals, they comprise only 13% of department chairs” (Gartke & Dollin, p. 7). As well, there tends to be a gender imbalance in senior level medical positions, and while some may attribute this to a lack of motivation on the part of female doctors, others suggest that it is the unsupportive workplace environment that affects mothers’ ability to assume these demanding positions. Pas, Peters, Eisinga, Doorewaard, and
Largo-Janssen (2011), in assessing the situation for a large sample of Dutch female doctors, concluded that it was neither having children nor the age of the youngest child that affected the career motivations of female doctors. Instead, these researchers found women’s views of motherhood as well as whether they experienced a supportive work/home culture to be the primary factors in determining the career motivations of female physicians and, consequently, their advancement. Thus, “among female doctors, the more traditional their views on motherhood are, the less motivated they are to strive for career advancement” (Pas et al., p. 501). These authors also suggest that strategies to support women in their careers, including making part-time work available, rather than policies focused on balancing work and life would be more effective in ensuring women’s participation in demanding medical careers (Pas et al.). However, as Pas and colleagues point out, while improving work/life balance for medical doctors may not have a direct or positive impact, not providing it will in all likelihood negatively affect female workers’ career motivation.

Although there is evidence that some women in other professional careers, as well as those in doctoral and postdoctoral programs preparing for research-intensive academic careers, have made the difficult choice to leave their chosen professions, this is not the case in medicine. However, women aspiring to medical careers are forced to make other sacrifices in order to achieve some sort of balance between work and family.

Not surprisingly, women physicians have fewer children than do their male counterparts (Gartke & Dollin, 2010). Bolanowski (2005), in assessing factors related to stress medical students experience during their training, found that doctors continuing into residency programs reported suffering from work overload and stress and that their private lives were negatively impacted by their workloads. While some degree of stress was evident for all, stress levels were particularly high for women with children. Despite the stress evident in residents who are balancing work and family life, there is little attrition of women physicians from the profession once they complete medical school. Adamo (2013) noted that seven years after 1700 Canadian medical students had graduated, 99% were still practising medicine. Women in medicine seem to cope with the reality of being primary caregivers for their families through selecting specialties that permit some element of control over the time spent at work. Women in these situations
are trying to create more flexible work environments that will allow them at least the possibility of balancing work and family responsibilities. For some mothers this could mean looking for opportunities for part-time work (Berkowitz, Frintner, & Cull, 2010).

**Mothers as Practising Lawyers**

While women’s representation in the legal profession in most Western countries has exceeded 30%, there is some evidence that this proportion is not going to get much higher (Wallace & Kay, 2012; Walsh, 2012). As is the case in academia and medicine, the continued underrepresentation of women in the legal profession, can be attributed, in part, to the demands placed on them by their private lives as mothers and caregivers. Wallace and Kay found, from their survey of a large number of practising lawyers in Alberta, that the lawyers reported working an average of 49 hours a week, with men reporting just over 50 hours and women just over 47. Both men and women included evening and weekend hours as making up their totals. Not surprisingly, given the lack of gender parity in the profession, 27% of the lawyers in Wallace and Kay’s sample were employed in firms where women still had only a token status; over half reported that women were still in the minority. By contrast, only 5% reported that their work location was reasonably balanced, and perhaps most interestingly, only 3% reported environments in which women were in the majority, with a meagre 2% indicating women were dominant.

Women lawyers are also often working in lower-level legal positions and are less likely to be partners in law firms than their male counterparts (Law Society, 2009 cited in Walsh, 2012, p. 509). Drawing from a large sample of female lawyers, Walsh found that female lawyers “with high career aspirations had already internalized the likelihood that motherhood would impede their career advancement” (p. 522). Some of these women intended to delay motherhood until they had reached their partnership goals, and women with strong career aspirations who did have children also expressed a desire to achieve a work-life balance despite their assumption that they would be responsible for the bulk of the housework and child care and could therefore expect to experience significant tensions between their work and family life. Women who had children emphasized the difficulties of integrating the demands of work and family and feared that their caregiving
responsibilities would ultimately undermine their career advancement. They believed that their law firms were reluctant to accommodate their family responsibilities. “Importantly, several women with strong partnership aspirations anticipated that work-family/life tensions might lead ultimately to their departures from their law firms” (Walsh, p. 527).

Indeed, as in academia and other demanding professional careers, it is not unusual for women to leave the law profession and to turn away from promising careers after having a child. In attempting to understand why, Halrynjo and Lyng (2009) interviewed a small sample of women in Norway, a country that has some of the best maternity leave policies in the world. The women in Halrynjo and Lyng’s sample experienced an unexpected shift from career to care commitment following the birth of a child. This shift was not planned or seen as a natural consequence of parenthood but was theorized as a shift in mental schemas of “devotion,” first to work and then to care. These authors explain how the shift takes place in stages. Careerists by choice, these women experienced domestic life during their year-long maternity leaves. Further, these authors suggest that, although parental leave is equally available to both mothers and fathers, it is mothers who generally take the lion’s share of parental leave: 80% of Norwegian mothers take a full year away from paid employment; 82% of fathers take less than five weeks. The very fact that it is mothers and not fathers taking so much time off following the birth of a child has a number of consequences for mothers. It contributes to gender-polarized division of work in the home, establishing patterns of care that see mothers rather than fathers as primary providers for their infants’ needs and for daily household maintenance. These are difficult patterns to break at the end of a year-long maternity leave. When women do return to work, after a year-long absence, not only must they be prepared to put in the long hours required by the legal profession but, like academics and many specialist physicians, they must be prepared to work around the clock.

The demands for accessibility and flexibility placed on those in the legal profession in the workplace are often in conflict with the predictable demands and tasks associated with child care. Halrynjo and Lyng’s (2009) findings suggest that when mothers do return to work, their devotion to work diminishes somewhat as women attempt to juggle their re-entry into the workplace with the newly established family life patterns. Mothers
often find the conflict between roles untenable, and in deciding to withdraw from the workforce, devotion shifts from work towards family life. The shift is neither easy nor necessarily a satisfying one. In concert with increased family responsibilities, women in law, as in other demanding professional positions subject to highly competitive and visible reward systems for performance, carry with them a sense of failure in their work which leads to a doubting of their own abilities and capabilities. It also leads to a diminishing of confidence in their ability to work successfully, a confidence that was taken for granted before they had children. A natural consequence for many professional women is that work can start to lose its meaning and is replaced with a schema of “family devotion” (Halrynjo & Lyng). This shift in devotion rarely, if ever, occurs for men.

**CONCLUSION**

Concerns about women’s underrepresentation in specific areas of academia, medicine, and law and their absence particularly in positions of power and influence are frequently framed within human rights, equity, fairness, or social justice perspectives. We also hear the term “knowledge economy” to describe the important role that knowledge production plays in today’s societies. The absence of women in the production of knowledge reflects a knowledge economy in Western societies that is not making full use of its talent pool—namely women—thus narrowing the perspectives, experiences, creativity, and ideas that can inform the production of knowledge. More fully including women would also address skill shortages, increase innovation potential, facilitate greater market development, provide better returns on human resource investments, and develop stronger positions from which to compete in the global talent race (The Expert Panel on Women in University Research, 2012, p. xiii). These are compelling, social, political, and economic reasons to be alarmed about women’s relative underrepresentation in paid employment positions of power and influence.

At the same time as Western societies wish to privilege knowledge production, Western modernities remain haunted by anxieties about the feminine and the primitive which are associated with traditional women’s roles (Harding, 2008). Harding maintains that Northern philosophies of science and technology have been intimately involved in maintaining these anxieties. It is the power of rationality and technical expertise of men in
science that have allowed men to escape tradition, leaving women embedded in caregiving roles. Harding questions how modernity can deliver social progress to women when modernity’s most valued achievements are “measured in terms of its distance from the interests, needs and desires of the very humans who produce and reproduce human life” (p. 191). Harding highlights, as have other radical feminists of the past, the need to recognize women’s equal humanity. This idea brings us back to whether the problem of women’s underrepresentation in high level careers can be framed as a problem with a simple or complex solution. “The widespread prevalence of gender stereotypes within modernized societies is not a mere residue of traditional social relations” (Harding, p. 212). Harding suggests that “these stereotypes are built into the founding conceptual framework of modernization thinking” (p. 212), and it is these same stereotypes, distancing the masculine from the feminine, which largely count as progress in modern societies.

The cultural and structural realities of work are lagging far behind the realities for most employed women with children. Needed change can only come about by de-gendering the motherhood construct. This would require more than simply replacing feminized language describing “mother” and “mothering” with neutral words such as “parent” and “parenting.” Instead, de-gendering requires a reformation that challenges the ideologies and assumptions currently framing the maternal world and everything it entails as belonging to women. Then the work can begin to make the structural changes necessary to achieve a truly shared responsibility for child care. Places of employment should ask what policies will benefit parents, children and all other dependents who are cared for in society, instead of asking what social, economic, and political policies are good for women.