Balancing act

International Women’s Day highlights reality for many

JOANNE RICHARD
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Women are not acing life’s balancing act.

No surprise, say experts. “How can women feel balanced when our society places so much on their shoulders and then expects them to walk around and deal with it all — on stillets no less?” says Susie Orman Schnall, mother of three young boys and author of the soon-to-be-released The Balance Project: A Novel.

Many women are struggling trying to do it all, have it all, and “Make It Happen,” which happens to be the theme of International Women’s Day on March 8 and promotes women’s equality and advancement.

But things are not equal on the home or work front, so personal balance is not happening. A new BMO study released in honour of International Women’s Day 2015 indicates that fewer than half of Canadian women feel they’ve achieved work-life balance. Only 31% say they get the needed support at home to attain home/work balance.

Women take on the lion’s share of household responsibilities, “whether it is acting as primary caregiver for the children, doing housework or generally playing the role of chief operating officer of the family,” says Julie Barker-Merz, spokesperson for BMO.

“Our study clearly indicates that many women are struggling with balancing their home and work lives and are seeking the active support of their spouses, children and employers in helping them do so.”

Life is a tightrope for many working women, and they struggle to get a flawless grip on this unrealistic and unhealthy high wire act. Being the “perfect mother” and the “perfect employee” can’t be achieved simultaneously without something falling through the cracks, says Schnall.

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Feeling balanced is virtually impossible because of the “prevailing reality of what most women actually have to contend with on a daily basis and the pressures that they are under from demanding bosses/industries, relentless social media, 24/7 connectivity, home/family life — let’s face it, most women will always take on the lion’s share at home — and their own expectations of themselves to lead vibrant, successful, happy lives … it’s almost laughable!”

Schnall has interviewed countless working women for The Balance Project, an online interview series she founded. “The goal is to feature authentic voices to show that all women are making sacrifices, that all women struggle, and that women aren’t alone facing the challenge of trying to juggle work, family, and self.”

According to life coach Julian Bolster (julianbolster.com), trying to live a balanced life eventually leads to stress for most women, as the typical idea of balance is just to do more, and to try harder doing it. “Balance isn’t about letting go, doing less or doing more. It’s about harmony, rhythm and quality, investing your time and energy, versus spending it. Mostly it’s about living a routine that you’ve designed, not one that you’ve resigned to.”

Balance has to come from all around the working mom, says Bolster, “starting with spouses and life partners, family members and friends. As a community we are an ecosystem that is best when inter-dependent.”

Making it happen, says Schnall, is about “rejecting the belief that women can and should somehow manage a full-time job, run a household, be a present mother and partner, and take care of her own needs to a social-media photo-worthy degree.”

Embrace what is realistic for your own life and stop trying to be the impossible, says Schnall. Beware though: “Our society is relentless, there are so many demands placed on women, it’s just another knife in the heart when we tell them to relax and do what they can do while maintaining unrealistic expectations of them.”

CHANGE IS POSSIBLE!

Unsatisfied with life? Make changes to “Make It Happen.” This could include changing jobs to a more family-friendly environment or simply tweaking to boost your satisfaction level of a particular area, says wellness expert Beverly Beuermann-King. “The key is to assess where you are and your level of satisfaction and to be willing to keep making changes to make it work for you.”

Empower yourself with her strategies:

■ Say “no” to those things which are not your priority. “Do not take on extra tasks if you are struggling with the ones that you currently have. Make sleep, exercise and eating well a priority so that you have the energy to put into the other spheres of your life.”

■ Do not over-program yourself or your family. Build in down time to get re-connected with each other, otherwise life will be drudgery and no fun.

■ Treat your household and the chore of maintaining it like your own small business. “If daily tasks are shared, organized and routine, everything is easier.”

■ Plan your work-related activities for the next day before you leave the office.

■ Most behavioural problems occur upon first arriving at home. “Take 10 minutes when you first get home to get reconnected and rebuild the family bond.”

■ Piggyback activities. Spend time talking to your children while making dinner together or while doing other household activities, she adds.

BMO’s third annual International Women’s Day study finds that women struggle to find optimal balance between work and family life:

When asked what their families could be doing better or more of, women identified the following:

■ Be more helpful around the house — 24% ■ Be more understanding of their work schedules — 19% ■ Take on more child care responsibilities — 9% ■

Top challenges when starting with a new employer included:

■ Establishing a comfortable work/life balance — 78% ■ Perceptions regarding family obligations and/or maternity leave — 72% ■

In terms of what employers can do to help women balance their lives more effectively, women identified:

■ Better benefits — 27% ■ Flexible time — 24% ■ Sick/family emergency days — 21% ■

Top reasons women reported for changing employers included:

■ Poor management/bad boss — 57% ■ Insufficient compensation — 54% ■ Poor work/life balance — 42% ■