

No woman should be expected to be Superwoman

Issued by [UCT Graduate School of Business](#)

29 Jun 2018

Working women can have it all when it comes to family, children and a career but they can't do it alone, says New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Aldern, who has just given birth to her first child, becoming only the second woman holding office to do so.



There has been enormous interest in the pregnancy of New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Aldern who has just given birth to a daughter – becoming only the second woman in history (after Indian PM Benazir Bhutto) to have a child while in office. In [interviews](#), Aldern has said that her child will be primarily looked after by the father and her partner, Clarke Gayford.

“I am no Superwoman nor should any woman be expected to be Superwoman. We achieve what we achieve through grit, determination and help,” Aldern said in an interview with BBC. Aldern added that she believed women could have it all but that they shouldn’t have to do it alone.

Many other women at the top would agree. Nicky Newton King, the first woman to head up the JSE in South Africa, for instance, famously has a househusband with whom, she has [said](#), these kinds of choices and decision were discussed immediately after he proposed. Gloria Serobe, another South African businesswoman pioneer, has [said](#) that there is no such thing as balancing home and career. “It is not balanceable. You have to have a good support network in place.”

Unfortunately, for too many women in South Africa, this is often not an option. Single working mothers are commonplace, with [recent research](#) showing that the country has one of the highest rates of absent fathers in sub-Saharan Africa with as many as 60% of children under the age of 10 not living with their biological fathers.

“This may be a contributing reason why women struggle to make it to senior leadership roles,” says Dr Makgathi Mokwena, a therapist and leadership development expert who co-convenes the Developing Women in Leadership programme at the University of Cape Town Graduate School of Business (GSB).

“Statistics show that there are [equal numbers](#) of professional women at entry level and junior and middle management level in South African organisations - but something is stopping these women from advancing. In corporate South Africa, only 29% of senior positions in business are held by women according to the [2018 Grant Thornton Women in Business report](#),” she says.

“Women seem to ‘disappear’ when it comes to the senior level,” says Sue von Hirschfeld, who co-convenes the Developing Women in Leadership programme with Dr Mokwena. “The reasons are complex and multifaceted, but there is a fair amount of research showing that a lack of support, prejudice and stereotyping, as well as personal factors such as self-doubt and a lack of self-confidence combine to deter women from advancing.

“Many women lack the confidence and/or skill to negotiate with employers and life-partners for support to assist with balancing home and family life with professional responsibilities,” she adds.

Jenny Boxall, the third convenor of the GSB programmes, says that there is no objective reason why this should be the case.

“According to a recent article in Harvard Business Review, the research shows that the sexes aren’t as different as is often quoted and assumed. There is no evidence that women are less good at negotiating, or lack confidence, or lack an appetite for risk. Or even that women are more committed to family life. What does differ is the attitude, structures and assumptions that men and women experience in the workplace,” she says. “And we need to address these on both the personal and organisational front.”

“If we want women to thrive in corporate spaces, we need to make them a lot more flexible spaces,” says Dr Mokwena. “Many women climbing the corporate ladder are exhausted, since they put in 12 plus hours in the office and still have to face the second shift when they get home. It’s no wonder some women jump ship as they get closer to executive positions. They are exhausted and depleted, and often disillusioned with the whole journey.”

Workplaces wield tremendous power when it comes to their ability to exacerbate or relieve pressure on women, she says. A recent [survey](#) from the Global Network for Advanced Management (GNAM), a network of 29 business schools around the world, argues that finding innovative ways to reward productivity, rather than hours worked in the office and enabling more flexible working practices that allow women to work remotely without stigma being attached to that, can be very effective.

On a personal level, von Hirschfeld says that there is much that women can do to boost their resilience and shift their own assumption. “By helping women to explore and understand, for example, the impact of a lack of confidence and limiting self-beliefs on career success and by developing critical skills, women can be better equipped to develop and maintain useful networks, identify and work with a mentor and generally develop social capital – all vital for success on the world of work.” She adds that there is growing evidence that women-only leadership development programmes are an effective vehicle for achieving this.

“The important thing is that women don’t need to wait until the system changes before they can advance,” says Dr Mokwena. “We don’t need to settle for being on the receiving end of a system that doesn’t serve us well. We need to advocate for change, take steps to develop our skills and support each other.

“We need to be the change we want to see in the workplace and work together to prevent women from ‘disappearing’. Not to do so is a loss for everyone.”

For more information on the Developing Women in Leadership Programme which runs this August at the UCT GSB go to <http://www.gsb.uct.ac.za/developing-women>

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