

Articles

"It Takes Two to Make a Good Marriage"

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In late August, Forbes.com posted an article titled "Don't Marry a Career Woman," which cited several studies showing that marriages to "career women" are more likely to end in divorce.

In a nutshell, the article summarized a handful of recent studies that found that professional women are more likely to get divorced, more likely to cheat and less likely to have children. And if they do have kids, they are more likely to be unhappy about it.

Clearly, women lawyers are not the exception to those statistics. Indeed, studies that have been done on the divorce rate among lawyers in general, and women lawyers in particular, show that lawyers have a higher divorce rate than other professionals, and that women lawyers have higher divorce rates than other women in similarly well-educated professions (such as doctors and professors).

It's enough to make you call it quits and buy your copy of "Divorce for Dummies" right now.

Why do women lawyers have higher rates of divorce than male lawyers and other female professionals? I honestly think it's simply a matter of hours in the day. The legal profession demands long hours — longer than most, due to the emphasis on billable hours — and that means less time for the important work of maintaining a marriage.

And women probably get the short end of this stick more than men because, in most marriages, the wife still spends more time and energy maintaining the home and taking care of children. She is, thus, more likely than a male lawyer to experience burnout, exhaustion and bitterness toward her mate — none of which serves a marriage well.

The more important question is what women lawyers can do to stave off their own divorces. And the answer to that is the same as it is for men and women in any profession: Make your marriage a priority. Maintain it in ways big and small, and don't let you and your spouse drift so far away from each other that you forgot what brought you together in the first place.

As in most things in life, the answers are simple. It's the execution that's difficult.

What's frustrating about reading articles like the one on Forbes.com is that readers are tempted to equate statistics with causation, i.e. if you're a woman lawyer or you're married to a woman lawyer you're destined for divorce court, so why bother?

Even worse is the assumption that the problem is necessarily the fault of the women in the marriage. Last time I checked, marriage still required two participants, both of whom are jointly and severally responsible for the success or failure of the union.

By the way, anyone with such a progressive worldview should visit the Forbes.com Web site and peruse the reader discussion board, accessible from the "Don't Marry a Career Woman" article; a search for "Careers and Marriage" should bring up the column. The comments are, to put it mildly, misogynistic. Those posting remarks — who hopefully represent a tiny percentage of the male population — not only blame "career women" for America's divorce rate but also for just about everything that is bad about modern-day America.

If I ever wonder why I keep writing about issues affecting women in the workplace, I need go no further than the Forbes.com discussion board. But I digress.

The truth is that the world is changing. Women make up at least half of the law school classes. True, many of us may take time off from the full-time work force to raise kids, but even many of those women plan to bring their skills back to the paid work force sooner or later.

Articles

Even if women didn't want to work, the changing financial landscape makes two-income households a necessity for many families. The skyrocketing cost of everything — from homes and college tuitions to milk and gas — combined with the disappearance of pensions and the questionable financial stability of Social Security mean that many couples who want to retire before they're 90 have to bring in two incomes.

It would be nice if the legal profession — and all other employers, for that matter — accommodated the often conflicting needs of its members who have personal and family obligations by making part-time work and flexible schedules more available to those who need them. And, in fairness to the profession, many firms have made strides in that area, and I am confident that progress will continue in the years to come.

Regardless of what's going on in the workplace, however, the success or failure of a marriage is ultimately on the shoulders of the parties to it: husbands and wives alike. Both parties need to be clear about their expectations upfront, and even then, there's going to be a lot of compromising and flexibility required on a daily basis.

That's true in any marriage, but it's imperative in a marriage in which both partners work full time in demanding — and fulfilling — careers.

The Forbes.com article, which paints women as single-minded career junkies, stands in sharp contrast to a more recent article published Sept. 4 in The National Law Journal. The article, by Linda Hirshman, posits that female attrition in the legal profession isn't due to women being unable to balance their competing interests — it's because they don't want to balance them, and they only went to law school to meet a sugar daddy.

The money quote: "One explanation that has surfaced is that women go to graduate school to earn their MRS degree, looking for a high-earning mate who will enable them to compete in the bake-sale Olympics, which was their real career goal."

I've been forwarded this article several times via e-mail, and each time, the string of angry comments from the women lawyers who have read the article gets longer and longer.

So, are women lawyers just biding their time until their rich husbands make partner and they can pursue their real dream of being a professional minivan driver, or are we career-obsessed automatons, unconcerned with husband, children, and all things domestic?

As you might guess, I and the women lawyers I know don't fit either of these caricatures. We want what's best for us, our families, our careers, our clients, our profession, and the countless other people and entities by which we're trying to do right.

We do the best we can to juggle all those competing interests, and they all take turns being number one on our to-do list.

The best marital advice I can give to any female lawyer is to take whatever time you may have spent reading, fuming about or commenting on articles about women lawyers and their marriages and spend it over a nice, quiet dinner with your husband.

It's a much better investment.

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