

# Of Love and Power: How partner choice may make or break a (woman's) career

*Prof. Aarti Ramaswami of ESSEC Business School Asia-Pacific and her fellow researchers George F. Dreher at the Kelley School of Business at Indiana University, and Tom Dougherty from Trulaske College of Business at the University of Missouri, share new research on the influence of partners on career attainment.*

By Tom Gamble for the Council on Business & Society, from the forthcoming research paper *Women Reaching the Senior Executive Suite: A Framework of Life Partner Advocacy and Power*, George F. Dreher, Aarti Ramaswami, Thomas W. Dougherty in the journal *Research in Human Resource Management*.

Commencement Day. Among the cheers, laughter, and mortarboards flying high through the air in a celebration of years of hard study that come to an end, two bright young people of similar stamp catch each other's gaze through the tumult. There is something serene about them. As though their eyes were meant to meet, as though the new life out there waiting was meant to be their journey, *together* – first jobs, careers, home, little ones, happiness and fulfilment. In that precise moment in time, their eyes locked, a decision was waiting to be taken. And of course, because we believe that good and lovely things happen in life, they took that meaningful first step forward to each other that was to lead to a common path taken.

But what if they had stepped back, thrown a little perspective on that odd happening in such a noisy event? What if there was already a nagging question in their minds? No – not the one anticipating the mental state of the future mother-in-law – a question that says: *Is this person going to help me or hinder me in my professional ambitions?*

## **Career – and the couple – at a crossroads**

Couples change. Lives change. And many of these changes are associated with our jobs and how we evolve in the world of work over time. From beginnings that research has showed bring people together of similar level of education and career-oriented values, initial parity will likely give way to the career of one of the partners in heterosexual couples outpacing that of the other half. What happens then? Do the men among us swallow the fact that our spouse earns more, goes to cocktails and flies off to exotic locations on business trips? Do the women among us simply bury our dreams and sacrifice our careers to look after the kids and support hubby – who, incidentally, also goes to cocktails and flies off to exotic locations on business trips? Among the upper echelons of management, the picture is telling: according to *Catalyst*, a global nonprofit organization focused on empowering and accelerating women in business, as of June 2018, there were only 23 Fortune 500 companies lead by female CEOs. Why should that be?

The field of career development and especially women's career development has been widely studied and researched. This research, however, has mainly dealt with factors such as human capital development, motivations, bias, barriers and discrimination – leaving the view empty of other variables required to fully understand men's and women's career attainment.

This is where new research kicks in, carried out by Prof. Aarti Ramaswami of ESSEC Business School and her fellow researchers George F. Dreher and T.W. Dougherty. It focuses on the extent to which a life partner acts as a catalyst or inhibitor in the competition to reach the so-called C-suite – the corporation's top tier of senior executives. Returning to the Fortune 500 statistics, it is indeed during the final round of the career tournament that a life partner may play a particularly decisive role.

Prof. Ramaswami's research has led to four profile types of partner to be proposed and the various linkages and impact each of these has on a partner in reaching the C-suite. In addition, gender and culture dynamics are kneaded into the model to show how these variables affect and moderate the linkages.

Sheryl Sandberg, COO of Facebook, says in her book *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*: 'I truly believe that the single most important career decision that a woman makes is whether she will have a life partner and who that partner is.' In that light, Ramaswami et al propose the question: What would be the most advantageous personal situation for a high-potential woman to be in at mid-career if she aspires to be a senior manager? Here's what their research came up with.

### **The partner as Career Competitor**

Their first profile, the Career Competitor, takes on many of the characteristics of the alpha male/female who typically believes that his or her career is the lead career in the relationship with career ambitions at the very heart of their *raison d'être*. They are typically 'the leader' in the couple and lend little support to their other half. This is bad news for the couple, especially the one left behind – the development of the more powerful partner coming to be seen as an infringement on the development of the other's. Conflict naturally results, one of the main issues being that while one partner has to relocate to a higher salary as part of the promotion package, the second partner loses out with a lower increase or even decrease in earnings. Typically, the latter tends to be the female partner in the couple.

You might think that two educated people would find a middle ground. But here again, research shows that the spouse in command of the most resources is able to impose decisions and outcomes that further their own goals to the detriment of their partner's. Culture also plays a part. For those exposed to societal values that put emphasis on hierarchy, status and achievement, early career success will more likely spur those partners to believe that their career is the lead career in the relationship – to the detriment of the other partner even if catching up at a later stage. And what about gender? It seems that it's harder for male partners to accept that their spouse earns higher pay. As such, a high-earning female will tend to take on a higher amount of housework and chores in an attempt to relieve the male partner's unease with the situation – thus freeing up the lower-paid male partner to catch up the gap. In a nutshell, there are two lessons to be learnt from shacking up with a Career Competitor. First, that forming and maintaining a personal partnership with a career competitor will reduce the likelihood of reaching the C-suite. And second, that the negative effects of hitching up with a Career Competitor will be less pronounced for male contenders for the C-suite than for women.

### **The partner as Career Mentor**

Couples may start out with goodwill and perceive each other's career advances as beneficial to the development of each other's. However, as the climb to the top reaches ever-higher heights, it becomes increasingly difficult for couples to sustain two C-suite-oriented careers. To maintain stability in the couple, one has to give while one has to push on – and invariably it is the partner with the most family power that will see his/her career take precedence. The partner who gives way will then tend to take on a Career

Mentor role, stepping off the accelerator to their own career and using their acquired experience and networks to propel the other. This can come in the form of coaching, influencing and encouraging the other for key opportunities and roles, providing exposure and visibility to powerful others, and even protection from potentially harmful situations or people. For the ambitious C-suiter, this is a boon – having a high achieving partner who is willing to act as a broker within powerful networks, act as a mentor, provide support and understand career-oriented problems and stress factors, is advantageous when competing in the senior management career tournament. But here again, gender has an impact. And it's the man, of course, who has difficulty in asking for or accepting career advice from his female partner and who suffers the negative effect. For women, the Career Mentor coin has another, more advantageous side. Typically, their male partners will be older and their greater working experience and access to power resources to which women may not have, can be potent for helping their female spouses in striving for career success.

### **The partner as a Career Resource**

As mentioned earlier, one way in which to scratch the other's back in return for increased family income and stability is to scale back on your career and provide additional support to the lead careerist. This might take the form of taking up a part-time job, flexible hours, early retirement or even quitting work altogether to take up the role of stay-at-home spouse. A key contribution of the latter is the capacity to offer social support that saves the physical and mental resources of the working partner, and may even take the form of caring for children and elderly parents, entertaining, or even taking off some of the workload from the other by organising schedules, planning business trips or writing up memos and reports. All in all, because of the extra availability of time and a flexible schedule, possible ongoing income and knowledge of the workplace, this partner type has the potential to enrich their partner's career.

But there is a downturn. Because work in the office is more valued, staying at home – even with a workload – is a source of additional inequality between people. Very simply, it increases the decision-making and bargaining power of the employed partner. Moreover, men seem to benefit more from this type of partnership, mostly due to how we have been shaped by gender roles. Traditional fathers (with stay-at-home wives), for example, are perceived as being more stable, professional and requiring increased financial needs. All this leads organisations to boost male career advancement. The numbers crunched from research speak for themselves: married men with working wives earn less than married men with stay-at-home wives. And finally, women lose out because even if their male spouse stays at home, they will continue to perform a disproportionate amount of childcare and household work.

### **No Partner – lucky for some, less for others**

Being in the no-partner category produces forces working both for and against the likelihood of you reaching the C-suite. No Partner can mean the eternally single, the currently on-a-break, or even the divorced and widowed. The odd thing is that at first glance this category of individual may seem to hold the upper hand when it comes to career advancement: they have the time, lack of commitment, and – able to eat whenever they want – don't have to be present at 6.30 pm sharp with a napkin tied around their necks. However, think twice – being single presents its own set of problems to bear. Research shows that they are subject both to cultural biases and discrimination that have a negative impact on their capacity to reach the C-suite. Men are especially losers in this field because despite the increasing number of adults choosing to be single, cultural norms place a high value on marriage and married couples. Marriage signals maturity, family values and meaning in life with married men especially considered as more productive and effort-oriented. We even talk of a marriage premium of 15% higher wages. Lo-behold

the single guy – less responsible, immature, carefree and even delinquent. For a woman it is different: here the research leads to the conclusion that single women are likely to advance more than married women (with or without children) – they are likely to have more time for energy-intensive jobs than married women, have fewer employment disruptions than married women and are more likely than married women to be perceived as having financial need because such resources are presumed to be provided by married women’s husbands.

### **Bitter C-suite Symphony of Life**

Altogether, Profs. Aarti Ramaswami, George F. Dreher and T.W. Dougherty provide us with an interesting insight into the little researched area of the impact our partners have on our careers. The race to reach the C-suite for women may be handicapped from the outset – naturally so, because there is a universal preference found in virtually all cultures for women to prefer male partners who are three to four years older than themselves (or for men to prefer younger female partners). As such, this gives a head start for men in amassing both social, experiential and financial capital as they begin work earlier. It also means that women are more likely to fall into a relationship with an alpha male career competitor – the partner type that offers the greatest negative career consequences for becoming a top exec. Cultural context may also hamper a woman’s ascension to the summit – just think of Sweden compared to India, for example. All in all, choosing a perfect partner is a difficult thing. If you’re hell bent on reaching the C-suite, then it is a partner who acts as a career resource that helps most. And a partner who is a career competitor who hampers most.

Should we stop, step back and assess future career attainment each time that mischievous cherub harpoons us with an arrow? And what if we return to the beginning and the young couple whose gaze met on Commencement Day? Many of us have no doubt had such a moment – and it takes your breath away. Better to gulp in new air, step forward and see where things end up mid-career. After all, we want to believe in good and happy endings.

### **Key takeaways:**

- A personal partnership with a “Career Competitor” will reduce the likelihood of a person reaching the C-suite. It is less pronounced for male contenders for the C-suite than for women.
- Having a high-achieving partner who is willing to act as a “Mentor” is advantageous when competing in the senior management career tournament. Women benefit more than men.
- Having a partner in a stay-at-home “Career resource” role has the potential to enrich their partner’s career. This benefits men more than women.
- Having “No partner” produces pros and cons. Research shows that they are subject to cultural biases and discrimination that have a negative impact on their capacity to reach the C-suite. Single women are more likely to benefit from single status than single men.

FIGURE 1  
A Typology of Partner Types

