“Family Well-Being Tied to Men’s Work Lives”
By Joan C. Williams and Anne-Marie Slaughter

The tsunami of response to Anne-Marie Slaughter's article "Why Women Still Can't Have It All" in the Atlantic's July issue shows that work-family conflict still shapes the geography of women's lives. But while the problem of work-family conflict disproportionately affects women, a large part of the solution lies in changing the lives of men.

"As long as it's viewed as more 'manly' for men to prepare for marathons than to spend time with their children, those of us who want an ambitious career and a healthy family life - whether men or women - will be professionally disadvantaged," a male former student wrote to Slaughter. This makes many men reluctant to share the care. Three-fourths of U.S. men take leave after the birth or adoption of a child, but most take off a week or less. And no wonder.

The ideal worker in the United States remains someone who begins working in early adulthood and works, full time and full force, for 40 years - in other words, a breadwinner. The provider ideal is not only a prerequisite to being seen as a go-getter at work, but it's also seen as a key component of being a good father, according to Nicholas Townson's 2002 study.

These work and family ideals are perpetuated by the flexibility stigma that often affects men who take family leave or request flexible work. An experimental study by Laurie Rudman and Kris Mescher found that men who requested a 12-week leave to care for a child or elder were more likely to be demoted or downsized because they appeared more feminine than other men.

In another study, Joseph Vandello and his colleagues found that, while men and women valued workplace flexibility equally, men were less likely to seek a flexible schedule if they believed (as did many) that doing so would make them appear less masculine.

Younger men, however, are growing increasingly restive and resistant to these inflexible workplaces. In 2011, law associate Ariel Ayanna sued his former employer, alleging that his "firm's culture equates masculinity with relegating caregiving to women and working long hours in the office." Ayanna claimed he was fired for taking Family and Medical Leave Act-sanctioned time to care for his children and ill wife.

Courts sometimes have a hard time understanding what gender discrimination has to do with men. The classic case is when, as in Lust vs. Sealy, a supervisor told a woman she wasn't going to be promoted "because you have kids." But men also face a gender straitjacket. If a man is fired, not promoted, or given less-desirable work when he takes leave or uses flexible work options, his employer is probably making unflattering assumptions about his work ethic. Why? Because real men don't do diapers. Coaching Little League is fine. Picking up a toddler from day care is not.
That type of decision is not an employer's to make. Employers face increasing liability for this kind of "family responsibilities discrimination." The Center for WorkLife Law reports that these lawsuits have increased almost 400 percent in past decade.

Lawsuits are often the first steps toward cultural change. They crystallize questions in uncomfortable ways that society often would rather avoid. What we ultimately need is a shift in culture surrounding gender roles and also what it means to be a committed and productive worker. The two are deeply intertwined.

Today, work commitment is typically demonstrated by long hours. "Guys try to out-macho each other," said a Silicon Valley engineer to sociologist Marianne Cooper. "It's not like being a brave firefighter and going up one more flight than your friend. There's a lot of see how many hours I can work, whether or not you have a kid."

In her study, Cooper saw engineers so exhausted they were often in a fog. Because working long hours was seen as heroic, engineers overlooked some basics of good management: planning and delegation.

The long-hours ethic that pervades elite jobs is more about masculinity than productivity. On this Labor Day, it's time to replace the outdated Ideal Worker, always available to his employer, with the new ideal of a worker who is judged on results rather than face time and who gets points for having a life.

The work-family debate has focused too long on mothers alone. It's time to change the workplace for everyone.