It is graduation season in many countries, a time when classes of bright and fortunate young people don their caps and gowns, receive their diplomas, and hear advice from their elders. Some commencement speakers focus on the graduates’ accomplishments; others emphasize the career-related challenges that lie ahead. But there is another critical aspect to success and happiness that is often overlooked during these garlanded celebrations of academic achievement: family.

In fact, these ceremonies are about the graduates’ families – that is, those who have loved and supported them, regardless of their biological connection – as much as they are about the graduates themselves. Whatever each family’s experience, the result has been a child reaching a level of education of which many people can only dream.

Beyond noting and appreciating what their families have done for them, graduates must consider the kind of family that they want to nurture. And here they have no choice but to reflect on gender roles and relations.

Given the vastly different expectations and experiences of men and women – depending, of course, on the cultural context – the questions that they must ask themselves vary considerably. The question of how to balance work and family, typically posed to young women, is actually a critical consideration for young men as well.

The traditional male role as “provider” has often led work to take precedence over time spent with family. Indeed, in reflecting on their childhoods, many graduates may lament that their fathers spent too little time at home, or were less nurturing than they could have been.

Men must determine how to develop the caring side of their personality, in addition to the competitive side that will enable them to advance their careers. They must aim to love and give fully, not only as fathers, but also as sons, husbands, brothers, uncles, and even friends. To this end, they should ask their own fathers and grandfathers what they wish they had done differently – and plan accordingly.

Instead of waiting for challenges to arise, young men should begin establishing their priorities now. How can they ensure that their relationship with their future partner is equal? How will they adapt to enable their partner to fulfill his or her career aspirations? Will they be willing to move for their partner’s job? Would they be prepared to stop working or reduce their workload, in order to care for a child or parent?

Through all of this, men should remember that, by adopting a new approach, they are not abandoning their roles as providers. After all, providing care is every bit as important as providing cash. The reward is the close relationship with their children that women have traditionally enjoyed.
Women, too, must think carefully about the future that they would find most fulfilling. For many women, the challenge is abandoning the assumption that their work/family balance will have to tip in favor of family, that it is they who will have to sacrifice their careers. Of course, many women might choose to emphasize family (as would many men). The point is the choice: the choice of how much energy to devote to one’s home, the choice of a career based on passion, and the choice of a genuinely equal partner.

Upholding an equal partnership of caregivers and breadwinners will require compromises on both sides. A woman with great career ambitions should be able to find a partner who is willing to slow down or stop working to support her, just as a man should.

But bucking gender roles works both ways. Indeed, for such a dynamic to work, the woman must recalibrate her expectations of her spouse. If she wants to build a family with a man, she must not become caught up in traditional perceptions of masculinity. If she is uncomfortable, say, out-earning her husband, she is limiting both partners.

Simply put, the kind of support that young women’s fathers and grandfathers probably offered to their mothers and grandmothers is not the only kind of support a woman can or should expect from her partner. Her role should be determined not by old-fashioned rules, but by her individual strengths and ambitions. And her partner should have the confidence and competence to encourage her to fulfill her potential.

Finally, graduation does not mean that the family’s job is complete. Parents and grandparents must continue to play a critical role in reshaping expectations – or at least supporting the choices that their children and grandchildren make. This means accepting the decision of a son or grandson not to use his hard-earned university degree to become the primary breadwinner in his future household. And it means understanding that what a daughter or granddaughter needs may not be a traditional “provider,” but a partner who makes career sacrifices to enable her to advance hers.

Graduation is a day of ending and beginning. It is a day for young people to recall the sacrifices that their families have made for them, and consider the kinds of sacrifices they will make for their families. And it is a day to recognize that, if family comes first, work does not come second; rather, life comes together.