

HOW WOMEN CAN USE WHAT THEY ALREADY HAVE
TO GET WHAT THEY ACTUALLY WANT

breaking the
GENDER
CODE

A close-up photograph of two hands, one from the left and one from the right, holding a stylized logo. The logo consists of a large orange 'C' on the left and a white 'Q' on the right, with a female symbol (a circle with a vertical line and a cross) integrated into the bottom right of the 'Q'. The hands are positioned as if they are presenting or holding the logo together.

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Introduction

Do you feel like you are never doing and being enough? Would you like to understand more clearly what ‘doing and being enough’ means? What difference would that make to your daily life? Would it give you more space and energy to do what matters to you without feeling guilty?

Whether you work full-time, part-time, or flexibly across the week, and no matter how pressured your role is, at times it can feel as though everyone constantly wants things from you and the days are just too short. Trying to be the glue that holds everything together is hard at the best of times and impossible when sometimes you are the one falling apart. Would you like a solution and to feel as though there is a point where you will have a sense of balance?

Could it be that the things you are trying to achieve, thinking they will save you—work-life balance, me time, having it all, happiness, leaning in, leaning out, shattering the glass ceiling—are actually getting in the way and stopping you from having what you truly want?

You may be working too hard to formulate plans and strategies, to find the perfect time management system and build efficiencies into your day. Are you becoming caught up in “Perhaps I just need to do more tasks, more meditation, more activity, drink less wine, get more sleep, do a course, join a networking group, sign up to the gym?”

You may make some changes and create a rhythm which you maintain for short periods, but pressure builds up until you are on that treadmill, running five times faster than you planned to.

You are not alone. Your problems are typical, but fortunately there are solutions.

What is causing this? How did we get here? Who is responsible? When did it all become so hard?

It's time to change the way you are thinking and acting

If you want something different, it is crucial to understand more about society and identify the established cultural beliefs and stereotypes that have become truth, to see them for what they are: myths and stories.

With mostly good intentions, structures of power have evolved to make sense of the environment and manage the people who live within it. We all live within certain structures—gender, race, colonial relationships and class—which provide the set of rules of how to belong, embedded into our cultures over millennia that have formed the codes we live by.

The code that impacts the lives of women struggling, striving and straddling is the Gender Code.

When you accept, understand and break the Gender Code, you can explore its rules and expectations. You can question whether the externally created expectations of past millennia are relevant to you today and how you may be subconsciously perpetuating them and subconsciously creating your own personal pressures and barriers. These barriers may be getting in the way and preventing you from feeling that what you are contributing is enough.

This book puts the Gender Code under the microscope. It scrutinises the equation of productivity + busyness = worthiness and it dismantles outdated motherhood myths.

Rather than living according to what you assume society expects, you will be able to question the norms and choose for yourself what makes sense and fits with your values and purposes.

This book also describes key attributes and values of incredible people—just like you—who move through the many challenging stages of leadership and life, curious and open and learning from their mistakes, living with courage and compassion whatever the difficulties and struggles.

Rewriting the old story

With information, insight and practical tips, I would like to help you rewrite the old story of juggling everything to achieve an unattainable 'balanced life'. New possibilities are revealed so that you can create a different relationship with work, family and community. You can choose

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to focus on what is most important to you and build your resilience so setbacks do not derail you—so you are able to cope and bounce forward.

You have enough internal resources right now. This book shows that all that you do now is valuable and that being a parent or carer is not only having a positive impact on how humans flourish but is also a powerful career asset.

You don't need more of anything

What helps is to be who you truly are and use that as a driver, to give yourself permission to claim and step into your personal power. With this power, rather than straddling two worlds of career and life, you can create your own new, evolved world: one that works for you, rather than against you.

The genesis of the Gender Code

Sitting in a cosy cabin on Lake Washington in Seattle, October 4th, 2017, the sun streams through the window, creating a warm spotlight on my body. The companionable silence is punctuated by occasional speed boats on the lake and chirping birds. The smell of freshly ground coffee provides a sense of comfort and familiarity in a foreign place.

My coach Pam and I are two days into our three-day intensive business coaching course. It is 9 am and I feel like I have hit a brick wall.

My head is clouded, my stomach is in knots and I am out of ideas about how to ramp up my business. The whole point of my being here is to build my coaching practice. I performed a massive feat of family related logistical gymnastics to get here and I am starting to question myself, wondering if I have made the right decision.

How did I get here, to this crux in my life?

Twelve years earlier I had thought I knew exactly what it took to be successful. I was committed and worked long hours, immersed in my roles. I was driven by achieving financial security, and also wanted a warm, lovely home and to be able to give any future children the best education possible.

When I became a parent in my early 30s my priorities changed. Concentrating completely on work was no longer what I wanted. I wanted to be an engaged and present parent, and realised that if I continued working at the same pace, in my mind, I would be a half-arsed finance professional and a half-arsed parent. Not good for a 100 per center—my preferred way of operating. I needed to decide which was more important and chose to focus on parenting.

Breaking the Gender Code

I was fortunate to be in a privileged financial position where I could take a career break so I stopped working. In terms of purpose and meaning, increasing shareholder wealth and bonuses for senior executives paled in comparison to investing in raising a healthy, happy human. My only view of the workforce and my place in it was all or nothing, so I decided to take the lead support role: lead parent, home CEO and supportive spouse.

One week I was immersed in the corporate world in America and the next week I was a mum. I had planned a fortnight's break before giving birth, but my son decided to arrive just after Thanksgiving, eight days early, the first sign that I was no longer in complete control. However, I felt it was where I was supposed to be, and my mission was to raise healthy, happy human beings.

Initially I viewed myself as a significant contributor to the marriage partnership and was able to use my strengths to achieve desired outcomes. We had a shared mission of running a home and raising children. My husband (let's call him Fred) had the breadwinning and career portfolio and I had everything else. I was the quintessential corporate wife with the added bonus of having worked in my husband's firm for three years in a senior finance capacity, so I knew the operations, politics and pressures from an insider's perspective.

When my main focus was kids, family and community, I felt valued. It was exactly where I wanted to be.

Fred was travelling 80 per cent of the time and, with three young sons aged one, three and five years old (the second and third were lucky shots between business trips), I was struggling to accept our situation. The cracks in our marriage were becoming chasms. I felt pressure to be hyper-responsible for everyone and everything and he only felt responsible for contributing financially.

I had assumed that being a parent would be a shared mission, but the reality was in stark contrast and difficult to navigate.

Following a family relocation to Beijing for a year, our marriage ended, and Fred and I established a new partnership to raise our sons. While he provided financial support for the boys, I needed an income to support myself and cover the shortfall in the monthly maintenance. I had to become a breadwinner as well as the primary care-giver—to create

something out of nothing and start from ground zero to build a business. It was important to me to have the flexibility of working when and where I wanted in order to be the parent I envisaged.

I struggled with the transition, because I had not really accepted that my model and definition of fulfilment needed to change. So I dragged myself towards paid work kicking and screaming, because I needed to be financially independent. I did not want to end up one of the growing number of women facing an uncertain financial future in their 40s and beyond. I needed to start earning and rebuilding my career. However, my heart belonged to the old model I had built my life on: I was convinced that it was not possible to be successful at work and be the parent I wanted to be.

I needed help.

I invested in myself professionally by becoming a coach and also financially by being coached by the best coach I could afford. This trip to Pam's home base in Seattle was the start of our one-year apprenticeship programme.

Pam could see that I was struggling and she said “You have got to get to know the people you want to support and coach better. What is going on for them? What are their biggest challenges? How can you help them?”

These few questions blew up my world and I decided that the people I wanted to support and work with in my coaching practice should be women who lead in their careers and also take on the majority of the parenting responsibilities—lead parents.

This was the birthplace of The Wonders of Women Leaders market research project.

Everyone has a unique context

I set out to understand my clients' particular perspective and how being a leader, taking on responsibilities in both major areas in their lives, affects their wellbeing. I also wanted to know how being a parent detracts from or enhances their performance as a leader and how being a leader enhances or detracts from their parenting capacity. Rather than focusing on two separate worlds, I wanted to see what works well across all areas and what strengths they bring and build in both.

To honour and respect the inspiring people who shared their confidences and insights with me, I have quoted them throughout the book, but I have not attributed names and titles in most circumstances to protect their privacy. There were well over 100 conversations and I formally interviewed and recorded 52 people (including four men) working at different levels in finance, banking, petrochemicals, the automotive industry, government, engineering, education, medical and health, recruitment, hospitality, not-for-profit, science, information technology, coaching, and journalism. The majority—70 per cent—work full-time and a quarter work flexibly across the week and are paid for three or four days.

While I started by interviewing women who are parents, I expanded the criteria and included men and women highly recommended by the research participants for their outstanding leadership and caring. Over 60 per cent had two children, 15 per cent had three or more children and 9 per cent had no children.

The burning questions

Although I worked from a list of questions (which is included in the Appendix), often the conversations would move in different and deeper directions. Starting simply, I would ask what a good day looks like and what gets in the way, and from there we would move to discussing the biggest challenges as a leader and a parent, what works well and what influences decision-making. Typically I would also ask about sources of support, how to build connections and community, ways to transition between work and home, helpful things they wish they had known years before and their greatest hopes for leaders of the future.

Confidential conversations

The people I spoke with all have demanding roles and often back-to-back meetings for weeks ahead, so I was grateful for the energy and attention they dedicated to this project. The appetite to share was huge, and the interview gave them a confidential space to be seen, heard and acknowledged without an agenda and with no performance outcomes attached. They felt safe to be honest and open.

What is really happening?

Of the many themes that emerged from the interviews and further research, I have identified the five that are key. Some themes were acknowledged and discussed, while others were not so obvious and deliberately or subconsciously hidden.

1. Leaders are lonely

I knew women are under pressure to do more with less but I did not realise to what extent they suffer. Some women leaders are lonely, and feel their wellbeing is not a top priority to anyone around them. They are trying so hard to be everything to everybody and to be hyper-responsible, and it is costing them. It is costing them in terms of their health, wellbeing, sense of values and contribution and the opportunities to progress in their careers.

2. Women are trapped

Women seem to be feeling trapped in a myth, believing that they should aspire to have it all, and depleting themselves in the process. They are so conflicted between working and parenting that they feel overstretched as they juggle, and feel judgment, shame and guilt.

3. Women are not feeling Wonder Woman worthy

What also emerged was that most women I spoke with place a high value on setting everyone around them up for success and human flourishing, yet are unaware of the extent of the positive impact this has. From the outside they look like Wonder Women (which inspired the original title of the project), performing at high levels of productivity and achievement, but not one felt she was worthy of the superhero title. They feel that the way they live and operate is just what they do and what they and society expect.

They find it much easier to see brilliance in others than in themselves.

4. What is surprising about parenting

Everyone I spoke with said that becoming a parent changed them fundamentally. This was no surprise, but what was surprising was how much

their contribution at work and their leadership style changed for the better, and how it impacted the people around them. The experience of being a parent was integral in helping them to further build their self-awareness, empathy and self-regulation—important emotional intelligence skills. They also built or strengthened other talents such as flexibility, adaptability, critical thinking, prioritisation, efficiency and creativity. These critical skills are desperately needed in the workplace, leadership and all areas of life.

5. Gender disparity is a massive hurdle

What also kept coming up were observations and experiences around gender disparities, pay inequality, discrimination and inappropriate treatment of women in the workplace. These disparities extended to home life and the unequal distribution of unpaid work.

Where did all of this come from? It all seemed so unfair. All I knew was that I wanted to fix it.

What began as The Wonders of Women Leaders market research project morphed into a grounded theory research mission. I searched, inquired, interviewed, read books, articles, blogs, magazines, social media, attended events, joined various networking groups and did everything I could in an effort to understand and make sense of the gender disparities most people experience on a daily basis—disparities implanted in our cultures over millennia: the Gender Code.

Universal truths

While most of the people I spoke to have leadership roles, the themes emerging from the research are universal truths which we can all identify with. I don't know exactly where you are at right now, but I guarantee that if you join me and read this book, my insights will help you see things through a different lens; you will understand you already have everything you need, and that giving the best you have is enough. You will be equipped to create solutions and step into a new world filled with opportunities for you and everyone you love, living life on your own terms.