

Bloomberg

What Mitt Romney Doesn't Know About Families

By Betsey Stevenson & Justin Wolfers - Oct 22, 2012

The biggest problem with Republican presidential candidate [Mitt Romney](#)'s views on women isn't his unfortunate comment about keeping them in binders. It's that his concept of the family is troublingly out of date.


In one of the most revealing moments of last week's presidential debate, Romney said he understood that "if you're going to have women in the workforce that sometimes you need to be more flexible." He boasted that as governor of [Massachusetts](#), he had allowed his female chief of staff to go home at 5 p.m. so she could fulfill what he apparently sees as a woman's responsibility -- making dinner for the kids and "being with them when they get home from school."

Romney's statements suggest he believes parenthood is a condition that afflicts only women, requiring employers to make special arrangements for them. Moms and dads alike should be outraged. He's ignoring decades of progress in gender roles and the challenges men face in balancing their work and home lives. His mistake echoes the worldview espoused by former State Department official Anne-Marie Slaughter in her [article](#) "Why Women Still Can't Have It All."

There's a subtle generational divide between the two presidential candidates at play here. When Romney became a father in 1970, [less than 40 percent](#) of married women with children were in the [labor force](#). Roughly half of those who did work provided less than a quarter of their family's income. Their place was at home. Dads were largely absent.

Disruptive Opportunities

For Romney's generation, women's desire to work was disruptive. Families struggled as women tried to "have it all," balancing their newfound opportunities with the expectations of motherhood with which they had been raised. As men's roles failed to keep pace, divorce rates soared: Marriages made in the 1970s fared worse than those of any other generation. (Remember the 1979 film "Kramer vs. Kramer"?)

By contrast, when President [Barack Obama](#) became a dad almost 30 years later, roughly 2 in 3 married women with children were working, and they were earning more.  home, the idea of men taking an active role in their kids' upbringing had firmly taken hold.

Today, there is no longer an “if” surrounding the question of women working. Nearly half of married women provide two- fifths or more of their family’s income, and they’re the primary breadwinner in 38 percent of couples in which the wife works. Men, for their part, are playing a more equal role at home. [Research](#) by the economists Garey Ramey and Valerie Ramey of the [University of California, San Diego](#), shows that both men and women are spending more time today with their children than did in Romney’s generation.

The changing roles create new challenges. Balancing work and family is now an issue for all parents, regardless of gender. To slightly modify Romney’s words, if you are going to have parents in the workforce, sometimes you need to be more flexible.

But greater equality has also [made families stronger](#). The divorce rate [peaked in 1979](#) and is now as low as it has been in two generations.

The improvement has been [particularly notable](#) among college graduates. This is not, as libertarian political scientist [Charles Murray](#) has suggested, a matter of moral superiority. Rather, college-educated couples have most rapidly embraced partnerships of equality. Meanwhile, the changing nature of marriage has made it more attractive to women with a college degree, who over the past few decades have gone from being the least to the most likely to marry.

Economic Incentives

The model of marriage that prevailed in Romney’s day was in large part a function of [economic incentives](#). Women specialized in domestic skills because these were valued in the marriage market, which -- thanks in large part to workplace discrimination -- represented their best path to prosperity. College education had little value in this market, and even revealed a lack of interest in it. Today, by contrast, changes in trade, technology, [birth control](#) and [labor laws](#) have sharply increased women’s earning potential in the marketplace and reduced the returns from becoming a household specialist.

Modern marriage allows couples to benefit from sharing their lives and goals, jointly raising their children and helping each other through tough times. It requires sacrifices from husbands and wives as they balance two careers and two peoples’ roles as parents. No one can have it all.

If Romney has managed to miss this transformation of one of society’s most fundamental institutions, one wonders what else he doesn’t know.

(Betsey Stevenson is an associate professor of public policy at the [University of Michigan](#). Justin Wolfers is an associate professor of business and public policy at the [University of Pennsylvania](#), and a non-resident senior fellow of the [Brookings Institution](#). Both are Bloomberg View columnists. The opinions expressed are their own.)

Read more opinion online from [Bloomberg View](#). Subscribe to receive a [daily e-mail](#) highlighting new View editorials, columns and op-ed articles.

Today's highlights: the editors on [Turkey's aggressive crackdown](#) on press freedom; William Pesek on what the U.S. can learn from [Japan's debt management](#); [Ramesh Ponnuru](#) on why [Barack Obama doesn't deserve another term](#); [Michael Feroli](#) on why the Fed should [tie interest rates to the unemployment rate](#); Richard Vedder on five reasons [college enrollments may be dropping](#).

To contact the writers of this article: [Justin Wolfers](#) at jwolfers@umich.edu Betsey Stevenson at betseys@umich.edu

To contact the editor responsible for this article: Mark Whitehouse at mwhitehouse1@bloomberg.net

©2013 BLOOMBERG L.P. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.