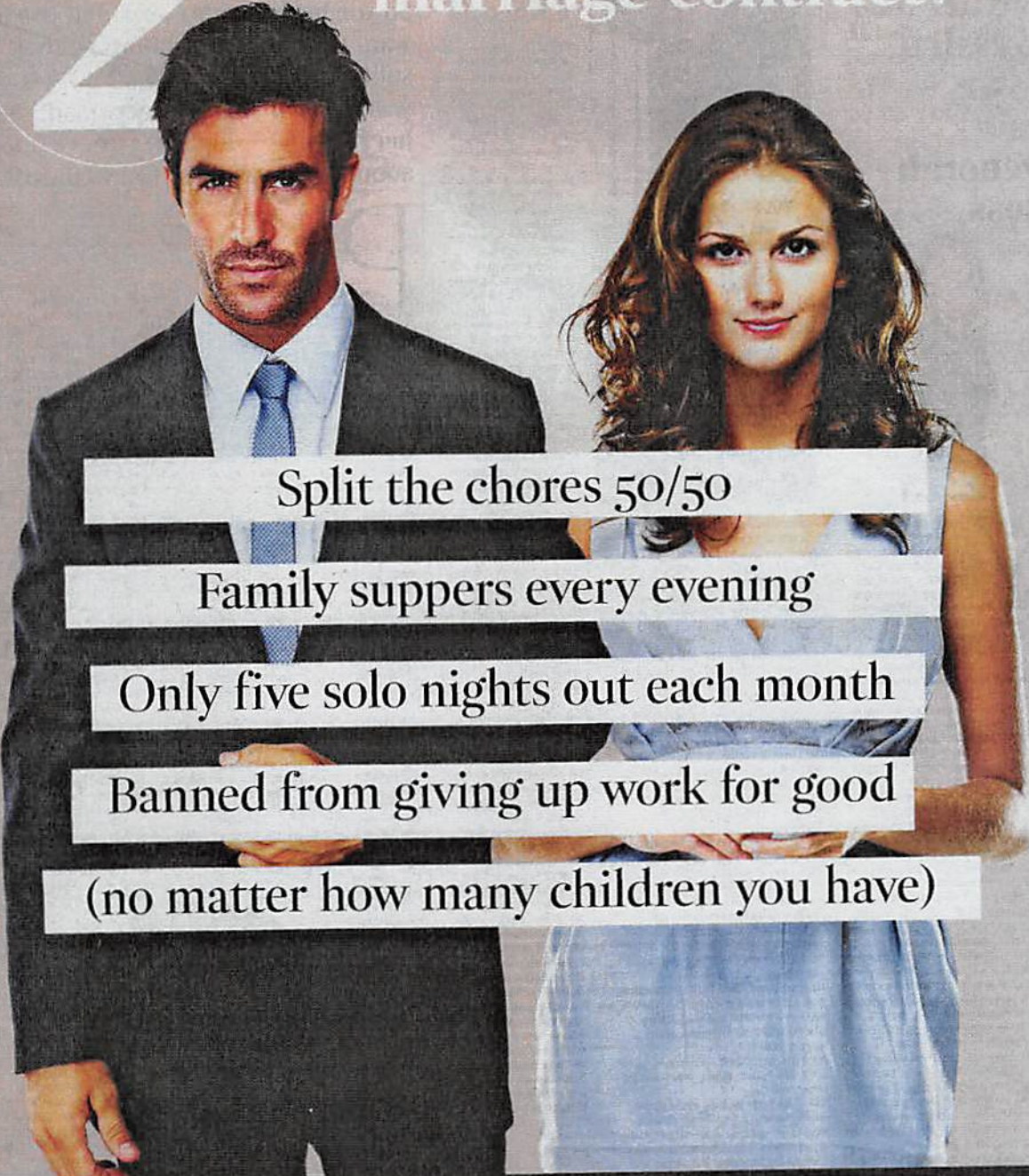


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Would you sign this marriage contract?



Split the chores 50/50

Family suppers every evening

Only five solo nights out each month

Banned from giving up work for good

(no matter how many children you have)

Tom Hollander: what the vicar said to Hugo Rifkind

times2

My guide to the art of dressing down — badly

Deborah Ross



You know, I once met an extremely rich person who told me his watch was worth £50,000, and when I asked him what the point of a £50,000 watch was, really, he said: "Because those who are rich enough to buy £50,000 watches will recognise this as a £50,000 watch." I had not recognised it as a £50,000 watch just as I can't, for instance, distinguish diamonds from zircon, or champagne from cava, or a must-have handbag from a knock-off one, or Impulse from a fancy perfume, and this, I'm afraid, is the sort of thing you just can't hide.

I thought of this while reading of a recent study by Harvard Business School that said that "dressing down" in an "upmarket situation" — by wearing your gym kit to shop in Chanel, for example — can make you appear "more successful". As in: I'm so successful, I don't even have to bother looking successful!

A double bluff, if you like, which is all well and good, but my first thought? It's not going to work for me. And Jemima Khan going to Chanel in a gym kit is one thing, but if I went to Chanel in gym kit it would be quite another. People just know.

Still, if successful people do wish to confirm their "higher status" by flouting conventional dress codes I can at least offer a genuinely excellent guide to unsuccessful dressing as I am quite the master of it. Here we are:

- 1) Buy a fleece for "only wearing around the house" but then wear it out and about, quite a lot. Same with cosy booties that aren't even Uggs and are just synthetic crap, basically. (Colour of fleece down to you but, just so you know, I favour bottle-green.)
- 2) Have yesterday's pants suddenly fall



A Budget to bolster bickering mums

Great. Just when I was beginning to think there'd been quite a lull in working mothers and stay-at-home mothers reaching for each others' throats and it was safe to come out, along comes yesterday's Budget to set the cat among the pigeons once again.

In fact as soon as I heard the Chancellor announcing that working mothers will receive up to £2,000 a year in a childcare subsidy, I actually started a countdown in my head ("10, 9, 8...") waiting for those first protests from the stay-at-home mothers, which started coming in at around the "7" mark. Three seconds. Quite slow, particularly when you consider that breastfeeders and non-breastfeeders can be at each others' throats in one second flat.

The stay-at-homes are up in arms. It's an insult, they are saying: don't we do an important job too? Aren't we doing the "best" for our children? Don't we also deserve state support? Maybe yes, maybe no. I just don't know. I can't even answer; does one person's gain always have to be another person's loss? I can only say what I think, which is that all mothers should simply let other mothers just get on with it and keep their mouths shut.

If you choose to work or have to work, then work. If you choose to stay at home or have to stay at home, then stay at home. It's no one else's business, no one is better than anyone else and all this fighting is just futile and boring. It's not even as if such fights ever take place late at night, in underground car parks, where bets are laid and some mothers are used as "bait mothers"... Now there's an idea. I am even printing off tickets as I write.

If you want an

So you both want to work and you both want time with the children? Then split everything exactly 50/50. That was the deal Sharon Meers made with her husband — and she wrote a book about it. Interview by Gaby Hinsliff

Perched on a red velvet banquet in a smart London hotel, Sharon Meers is cheerfully explaining how she just broke the rules of her marriage.

She is, the eBay executive confesses, "waaaaay out of line" on the contract she and her husband Steve drew up. But fortunately these aren't your average marital vows. Having set out to create the sort of egalitarian marriage of which bickering dual-career couples can only dream — one where everything from childcare to chores to the responsibility for earning a living is split 50/50 between them — their "family agreement" is their defence against backsliding. Solemnly committed to paper, it covers everything from who does what to the enforcement of an electronic curfew to preserve family time (no gadgets for their children Samantha and Max, aged 9 and 12, after 6.30pm; but also no e-mail for Meers or her property developer husband.) And then there's dinner.

"There are a handful of things we have agreed that are sacred. For us it's about 'when is family dinner?' There's a fixed time, it's 6.30 and we are both home for that," says Meers firmly. "And then we each have a budget of time we're allowed to be away. We've said it's five a month you can miss." Since she's in London for a three-day business trip — plus lecturing at the LSE, holding a public event on working motherhood with Mumsnet's Justine Roberts and otherwise promoting her book on how to have a 50/50 marriage just like hers — she's already blown it for this month. The contract, though, reminds her to make that time up — and to make every working minute count.

"I was very proud last year. I came in six days under budget," she says wryly. And if the idea of conquering the world while still being home for dinner reminds you of Sheryl Sandberg, the Facebook executive famous for "leaning in" ferociously at work but leaving at 5.30, that's no coincidence.

Because before there was Sandberg there was Meers — or Meers and her co-author Joanna Strober, who in 2009 published *Getting to 50/50: How Working Parents Can Have it All*, which

Sandberg says she "devoured" and then read aloud to her husband. In a foreword to the book's newly published British edition, Sandberg gushes that it "changed our lives".

The two women have known each other for more than a decade; they met through mutual college friends, when Meers was a newly pregnant investment banker based in San Francisco and Sandberg was just arriving in Silicon Valley. She was, says Meers, a "good, thoughtful person to talk to" about working motherhood: both believe not just in the need for equality at home so that women can pursue equality at work, but also in the importance of not giving up. Meers is all for her friend's controversial new Ban Bossy campaign to boost female ambition, which argues that girls shouldn't be criticised for displaying what in boys would be regarded as early leadership skills: "The expectation can't be that women have to defer."

So is Meers the woman who taught Sandberg to be Sandberg? Modestly, she demurs: "I feel like the exciting thing about what's happening right now is that we women are reminding each other that we can do more and helping each other get out of this traditional view that the rules are set."

Five years on, many of Meers and Strober's once-groundbreaking tips on breaking the rules have become mainstream: ditch the guilt about bringing shop-bought cakes to the school fête; bite your lip if your husband dresses the kids all in the wrong clothes (at least he dressed them). What remains eye-opening, however, is the clause written into the Meers' family agreement that while they could each quit work for a while if necessary, they were obliged to jump back in. There was never any option of staying home for good while someone else paid the bills.

Does she think that modern women have a responsibility as well as a right to work? "I find it much healthier to assume that I have that responsibility because it's balancing, against the boundlessness of responsibility you feel as a parent," says Meers. "We don't tell our sons it's a choice whether they work or not so why do we tell our daughters? It makes things very confusing."

Her own drive certainly seems to stem from childhood. Her Indian-born



equal marriage, sign right here



“We don’t tell sons it’s a choice to work or not. Why tell daughters?”

mother and psychoanalyst father had a conventional breadwinner-homemaker marriage, yet it ended in divorce. She thinks her father would have liked more time with his children, but felt under pressure to provide, while her mother struggled to return to work after a long break. The young Sharon resolved to “have the continuity” of not dropping out. However, the idea of a 50/50 marriage really started, she thinks,

with the mother of a schoolfriend who was a globe-trotting health policy specialist. “When my friend Melissa and I were probably about 14, she told us a story about all these young women who worked with her. She said, ‘They want to tell their husbands how to dress their children — if they do that it’s going to be their job. Don’t do that.’” Meers didn’t really understand what that meant at the time, but the idea stuck.

Meers is often asked how she hit lucky and found a man willing to share the load, but luck apparently had little to do with it. She grilled every date on their expectations of family life and, well, “I didn’t get married until I was 32.” Even Steve originally announced he thought mothers should stay at home, but luckily was open to persuasion. Her

tips for converting unreconstructed husbands include raising the issue of who does what away from home rather than in the heat of the moment, asking calmly, and not taking no for a final answer. After all, she insists, having a successful working wife is actually good for men.

She reels off research showing that men who help with housework have more sex (recent research suggesting the opposite reflected, she says, the views of 1990s wives with traditional views about husbandly roles). Having two earners also liberates men from the financial pressure of being sole breadwinners. And while working parenthood may feel during the toddler years like the eighteenth mile of a marathon, she insists it’s worth pushing through: “It gets better. I see the sunshine! When your kids read,

Left: Sharon Meers and her husband Steve Dostart

“If you tell him how to dress the kids it’s going to be your job

they do their own homework, they can pack their own bags, they make their own breakfast...”

True, all the negotiation involved in 50/50 marriage sounds exhausting (she and Steve have “weekly one-on-one meetings”), but the old-fashioned alternative of festering resentment punctuated with blazing rows about who didn’t stack the dishwasher is hardly any less draining. Scratch the surface a bit and she will admit it isn’t easy. The price of being home for dinner is sometimes rising at 4am to get work finished — and while Meers never “leaned out” she did arguably lean sideways for a bit. When her daughter was nearly 1 she quit an extremely high-powered job at Goldman Sachs (she’d been asked to relocate from San Francisco and didn’t want to). Although she never stopped working full-time — she’s now head of enterprise strategy at Magento, an e-commerce offshoot from eBay — she did give up the certainty of her Goldman salary and prospects.

And while she says breezily that fathers are more free than they think to ask for some flexibility at work, that usually “as long as you’re delivering high-quality work it’s doable”, British research certainly suggests that men are more likely than women to have a flexible working request turned down.

Still, as she says herself, the tide may be turning. It’s hard for pioneer couples to break the marital mould, but it may be second nature for their children: 72 per cent of Americans under 30 now think the ideal family structure is a 50/50 deal, according to a survey last year. Generation Y, often raised by working mothers, hardly seem scarred by the experience.

There’s a sad little story Sandberg included in *Lean In* about Meers’s daughter, who was asked to introduce her parents to her kindergarten class. “Samantha said: ‘This is my daddy. He makes buildings kind of like an architect. And this is my mommy. She works full-time, she wrote a book and she never picks me up from school,’” says Meers, who was mortified by the implied criticism. But while her daughter clearly did mind her being different from other mothers initially, the story has a happier ending.

Recently Meers read an essay her daughter wrote, robustly taking issue with a boy at school who claimed that girls couldn’t play basketball because they weren’t as competitive, and “almost cried” with pride: “She has a window on something I didn’t have, a diversity of options for women, many of which give her absolutely as much freedom to excel as her brother has.” And that, for her, is why it’s worth it. *Getting to 50/50: How Working Parents Can Have it All* by Sharon Meers and Joanna Strober is published by Piatkus at £13.99