“The Unfinished Sexual Revolution”
Anne-Marie Slaughter

In the United States, the revolution for equality between men and women is stuck halfway. Over the past 50 years, women’s roles have changed dramatically, with almost 60% of American women now in the workforce. Men’s roles, however, have barely budged.

Despite insisting on the equal dignity and value of men and women, we still regard men’s traditional work of breadwinning as more valuable and important than women’s traditional work of caregiving. The result is a profound social and economic imbalance that is holding back women and men alike.

The solution is to focus less on women and more on elevating the value of care and expanding the roles and choices open to men. Electing and appointing more women to powerful roles remains essential. But focusing on women’s advancement is biased toward tracking how many are rising to the top: the overall percentage at work, their average salaries, and how many become CEOs, senior managers, tenured professors, bankers, surgeons, law partners, parliamentarians, presidents, and ministers.

A focus on care, by contrast, opens the door to the dual problem of too few women at the top and far too many at the bottom. American women hold less than 15% of executive-level positions in Fortune 500 companies and 62% of minimum-wage jobs. As a result, one in three adult women are living in or on the edge of poverty, with the picture especially bleak for single mothers, almost two-thirds of whom are working in dead-end, poorly compensated jobs without flexibility or benefits.

What is common to both sets of women, and all the women in between, is that they are still charged with primary responsibility for caregiving – for children, parents, and other family members – in a system that devalues and provides little support for the care work they do. Although wealthy women can and do buy the care work of poorer women, many also choose to work part-time or flexibly to provide the stimulation and education their children need.

But many professional women’s career advancement is systematically blocked should they choose this path. If a young female lawyer or banker on a promising career track decides to leave the office “early” every day to be home with her kids for dinner, work part-time, or take time out to be a full-time caregiver, she is quickly knocked out of the competition for top jobs. And if she decides to devote herself to full-time caregiving, that time becomes a black mark on her résumé, a hole that she must vainly try to hide or explain away if and when she tries to re-enter the job market.

A woman at the bottom faces an even harsher reality. She is likely to be a single mother who has no choice but to be the sole breadwinner and caregiver for her family. Half of single mothers in the US make less than $25,000 a year. Compared to single parents in other high-income
countries, American single parents have the highest poverty rate and the weakest income-support system.

No US state provides affordable daycare, early education, and after-school programs that take up the caregiving slack. Only a few states provide paid leave that any worker can use when a child is sick. The result is that a mother with dependent children must patch together an unstable and unreliable network of caregivers in ways that sharply hamper her ability to succeed at her job and climb out of poverty.

Other advanced industrial countries are far ahead of the US in providing an entire infrastructure of care to help families invest in the next generation and care for their own parents. Indeed, virtually every developing country in the world is ahead of the US in at least requiring paid maternity leave.

But before foreign observers get too smug, consider the other solution to America’s unfinished revolution. Valuing care means valuing it enough to expect men to take on caregiving responsibilities to the same extent that we now expect women to take on breadwinning.

Of course, any couple will divide up breadwinning and caregiving work according to their individual circumstances and personalities. In a genuinely equal world, men and women would approach this division of labor the same way a same-sex couple does. When it is two men or two women figuring out how to provide an income for their family and to turn that income into the food, shelter, clothing, nurture, education, discipline, and moral support needed to raise children, they cannot rely on societally imposed default roles. They turn to different criteria: Who has the bigger income? Who is more ambitious? Who has the more flexible job? Who has a boss or company that better supports reconciling work and family obligations?

Attitudes about male caregiving are beginning to shift in the US. Only a third of millennial men believe in traditional gender roles. America’s biggest tech companies are beginning to compete for talent by offering paternity leave.

Scandinavian countries and Germany have led the way on paternity leave in Europe, yet many European men (and certainly Asian, African, Indian, and Latin American men) have a long way to go with regard to shedding traditional attitudes about the male/female division of labor. It is one thing to let women into the workforce; it is quite another to embrace full equality and create a cultural, economic, and social climate that encourages both men and women to support one another and their families equally with cash and care.

That is what it will take, however, to complete the unfinished business of the movement for women’s equality.