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Education Multipliers

Mehrsa Baradaran

I teach banking law, and I would say that what makes banks unique institutions is that they are money multipliers. Money goes into a bank, and when the bank lends and leverages that money, it multiplies and increases much faster than it otherwise would.

I would like to make the case that, similarly, women are education multipliers. I will illustrate this point by telling you about my grandmother Mehri. She lived in a remote part of Iran on the Iraqi border in a primitive town called Ghasreh Shirin, which deceptively means “Sweet Castle.” Her family didn’t have electricity or running water. They had no refrigerator and cooked over a fire stove. The rest of Iran wasn’t as primitive, but Ghasreh Shirin was off the map and behind the times.

My grandmother’s relatives worked the land, and none of them had received a formal education; many of them were illiterate. My grandmother was given away in marriage when she was nine years old to my grandfather, who was 20—and her first cousin. (The fact that my grandparents were first cousins has had absolutely no negative effect on me genetically. My 12 toes have actually come in quite handy in my life—lots of increased stability.) My grandmother had her first child when she was 13, and then she had nine more, eight of whom lived. My father was her third child, her first son, and her favorite.

My grandmother never entered a classroom—obtaining an education was not something women did at that time and in that place. But she was determined to learn to read, so she taught herself how from the only book in the house: the family Qur’an. She would sit for hours memorizing passages in the book until she was fully literate. She must have worked hard at this, because the Qur’an was in Arabic, which is very different from spoken Farsi. My dad says that she had most of the book memorized and would recite passages from it.

My grandmother also taught herself how to make beautiful Persian rugs. My aunts say that she would go into town once a month and stare at the patterns on the rugs; then she would come home and replicate them.

Learning to read motivated my grandmother to educate her children. She was determined to send my dad to school, even against the wishes of my grandfather—who was a great and kind man but who was not yet sold on the value of education. My dad would sometimes hide in the outhouse and study for his exams against his father's wishes but with his mother's help and support.

My dad became the first person in his extended family to graduate from high school. He became a schoolteacher, and then he decided he wanted to be a doctor. He took the qualifying exams and was accepted into the University of Tehran—a difficult school in which only about 10 percent of the entering class graduate after six years. My father studied hard and became a brain surgeon. To pay for school he worked for the Shah's police as a surgeon and then later for the Islamic Regime, where he had to work on the front lines of the long war with Iraq. At one point during the bloody war, he was performing about 20 brain surgeries per day.

Then my father sent his two little brothers to graduate schools—one to a school in Turkey and the other to a school in Iran. He even sent one of his little sisters and several of his nieces and nephews to school. He married a college-educated woman: my mother graduated with a degree in economics from one of Iran's most prestigious universities.

Most of my family eventually moved to Tehran, and education became a part of their lives. All of my female and male cousins, who live in Iran, have college degrees—and most are professionals. I have three female cousins who are doctors and other cousins who are engineers, dentists, and architects.

In my immediate family, one of my sisters is a law professor and the other is a doctor. My little brother will be entering BYU as a freshman this fall with hopes to become a doctor.

I credit all of my family's educational achievements to my grandmother, who was an education multiplier. She took the opportunity she had to learn—the one book in her home—and multiplied it to create a posterity of educated professionals. It took just one generation for her to create this heritage. My grandmother passed away many years ago, before I could meet her, but I hope she is now fully aware of her profound influence on our lives.

And her legacy lives on. I have three daughters. My oldest daughter, who is in kindergarten, created a book about herself. On the last page she drew a picture of a woman behind a podium—what she wants to be when she grows up. She says she wants to be a professor at BYU. I hope that all of

my girls continue in the tradition of education started by my grandmother and that they pass it on to their children as well. I hope that you do, too.

My father kept studying throughout his life. In fact, he had to complete his education all over again when we immigrated to America. He was 40 years old and had to start from scratch with no money and a huge language barrier. He worked diligently, and 10 years later he reestablished his medical practice in America. Every mental picture I have of my father—from when I was growing up and even now—is of him reading something.

My parents were adamant about education. These are the wise and inspiring words my dad told me about going to law school: “Mehrsa, why don’t you want to be a doctor?”

Allow me now to sell you on why you should come to BYU Law School and get a JD—or, as my dad would call it, an ND, for “not doctor.” I also want to discuss a few of the issues you women might have, mainly how to manage motherhood and a career. If you aren’t conflicted about this, that’s great, but I know from talking to many women in your position that this is a major—if not *the* major—issue some of you deal with. And I similarly dealt with this issue when I was deciding what I wanted to do.

Let me also lay a couple of myths to rest: First, somehow you need to devise a plan for your life right now in order to be successful. Truly, life will not always unfold as you expect it to. And second, you can do it all. You *can* do it all, just not at the same time and not without making some sacrifices.

The “Life Plan”

Before when I saw successful professionals with wonderful families, I assumed that they had always known where they were going and that they had followed a well-designed plan. I have since discovered that this is not the case for most people. Most successful people stumble a few times before they reach their destination. I am not sure what my destination will be, but my life thus far has gone from one prompting or opportunity to another. Before I was a “not doctor” student, I studied pre-med. Then I felt like I should go on a mission, so I did. Then I met my wonderful husband, and I got married. Afterward I decided that I wanted to go to law school, and I did. I had kids, and I am still just making sure I am worthy and qualified to take all the opportunities that present themselves to me. Meanwhile, I have managed to get both a job and a family that I love.

But here is one thing that I always did—and a bit of advice: try your hardest to do well in everything you do. That’s how you give yourself options and the ability to leap from one plan to another as your life unfolds.

Let me be specific about what I mean by working hard. It means studying hard—even if you need to study in an outhouse—getting good grades, doing well at work, and working hard to become the person God wants you to be.

In all of my professional life I have never seen success that didn't abide by the law of the harvest, meaning that you cannot reap what you do not sow. You cannot ace your classes and get a great LSAT score or be really good at anything without putting in lots and lots of effort—and sacrificing some leisure time.

So it's great if you do have a plan for your life, but if you don't, don't worry—just do really well along the way and look for opportunities.

Having It All

Ecclesiastes 3:1 reads: “To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven.”

There is a season to work, a season to learn, a season to raise children, and so on. And sometimes those seasons overlap, and I am not going to lie to you, sometimes it can be difficult to manage it all.

It is absolutely crucial to have a supportive spouse to make it all work. Another added bonus is having good babies.

As some of my students and colleagues can attest, my baby, Ramona, came to school with me for the first year and a half of her life. She would sit on my office floor and play and take naps, and I would feed her in between student meetings. Sometimes I would have student meetings in a whisper so as not to wake her up. I was very blessed that she was a late crawler and a late walker and hardly ever cried.

I have worked full-time and part-time, and I have stayed home with my kids. I am still trying to figure it out—one decision at a time—like when I quit my Wall Street job because I just couldn't stand being away from my newborn so much. I believe that the Lord has guided me each step of the way as I navigate motherhood and my career. And He will guide you too.

I have friends who have handled their careers in a variety of ways—taking a little or a lot of time off or finding flexible careers. Others who have no interest in working outside the home still use their education in a variety of ways to enrich their families and communities.

So I guess I don't have an answer to this motherhood-career dilemma because I am still in the midst of it. But there are many examples of women who are figuring it out one way or another. I will tell you that you will never regret your education.

Gifts of a Law Degree

You will especially not regret a BYU law degree. What a gift to be able to graduate from law school without much debt! I was fortunate enough to do that (though not at BYU), so when I wanted to quit my job and stay home with my children, I had that option.

Another question you might have is, why law? My first year of law school was the most mind-expanding time of my life. Studying the law teaches you how to think critically, analyze problems, and articulate your viewpoints. Learning law is really a chance to peek at the wizard behind the curtain. It demystifies what is so elusive to so much of the world. It puts you in a position of power—true power—to lift burdens.

No matter what you do with your life, the skills you learn in law school will help you. A law degree is the most flexible advanced degree. I have friends with law degrees who work in government, business, and law firms. Some do public service work and others stay home with their children and use their law degree to teach their children about the world.

If you are trained well and are good at what you do, you can do a variety of meaningful part-time and contract work without working full-time. And even in those seasons of life in which you are not working at all, you can still be useful to family, friends, and your community by participating on boards, giving advice, and lending a hand to the disadvantaged or marginalized.

I strongly believe that happiness and growth come only from continued learning. When you go to law school you not only learn during those three years, but those three years lay the groundwork for learning for the rest of your life. I always tell my students that law school is such a luxury—I see them walking around talking to each other about Locke and Montesquieu and what they *really* think about Constitutional originalism vs. legal realism, and I think what a privilege it is to be able to immerse yourself in new ideas for three years.

Sometimes I think about my grandmother, who could never have dreamed of such an opportunity but still did the best with what she had.

What a blessing you and I have to learn and be educated. I hope that as women we seek those opportunities, show gratitude for them, and become education multipliers.

This address was given to prelaw students at Brigham Young University on March 12, 2012. Reprinted from the Clark Memorandum, fall 2012, 4–9.

Mehrsa Baradaran received her JD from New York University in 2005, was an associate at Davis, Polk & Wardwell in New York City 2005–2008, and taught at BYU Law School 2010–2012. She is currently teaching at the University of Georgia School of Law.