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TAKING STOCK

Rammya Mathew: Women in leadership—not just an unattainable ideal

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Last month, as part of International Women's Day celebrations, the BMA hosted a webinar with an impressive line-up of eminent female GPs, who spoke openly and passionately about their individual leadership careers. I was on the edge of my seat, refuelling on their energy and soaking up their words of wisdom. At the end of the 90 minutes, however, I was still waiting to hear the secret to maintaining a fast paced leadership career while also managing the demands of home and family life.

Of course, this reveals my own biases: would I expect a panel of men to talk about how they organise pick-up and drop-off or how they make World Book Day a success? But it's also true that women (and not men) are the ones being told that they can be anything they want to be in their careers, while also continuing to be society's carers and homemakers.

Is the notion of "having it all" oppressive? Quite possibly so—but, if we live by our own definition of what it means to "have it all," we can liberate ourselves from the pressure of living up to an unattainable ideal.

At this point in time I couldn't manage a wild and unpredictable schedule or be away from home a lot of the time, but work is also a huge part of who I am, so neither could I imagine dropping my career ambitions or not using the skills I've spent years developing. Everyone's version of balance is different and, just as leadership is about learning to be your authentic self, it's also about being comfortable with your life choices. We can all help each other in this by recognising that there's no single right way and by respecting people who make life choices different from our own.

It's also the case that leadership comes in many guises. If we stop thinking about leadership as a position to earn and instead think of it as "contribution," success then doesn't need to depend on us giving up aspects of our lives that are important to us. We may not all believe we're able to put ourselves forward for the position of college chair, but we can all demonstrate leadership within our own sphere of influence.

None of this means we shouldn't be ambitious or should be ashamed of wanting to climb the career ladder. Quite the opposite: I hope that, in my lifetime, women taking up positions of power will not be a celebrated event but will become the norm. But, for this to become a reality, it's also got to become normal to expect a panel of male leaders to speak openly about how they thrive in their careers alongside juggling the demands of parenting and caring, in all their forms.

Competing interests: I co-lead Islington GP Federation's Quality Improvement Team.

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