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# Look How Far We've Come (Not)

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## Look How Far We've Come (Not)

Joan C. Williams, *University of California, Hastings*

**I**t was a different world when I was writing *UnBending Gender: Why Family and Work Conflict and What to Do about It* in the late 1990s.<sup>1</sup> No gig economy, no legislative gridlock, no African American president. But one thing hasn't changed: we still define the ideal worker as someone who is always available for work.

How true it is that resolving work-family conflict is America's *Unfinished Business* (to quote the title of Anne-Marie Slaughter's new book). Women's disproportionate share of care work remains.<sup>2</sup> So does the ideology that enshrines real men as breadwinners and good mothers as always available to their children. Gender has proven, to coin a phrase, unbending.

This is a battle my generation tried, and failed, to win. It's such a pleasure to hand over to Anne-Marie Slaughter, Brigid Schulte, Josh Levs, and Heather Boushey the struggle to create workplaces framed around the values people hold in family life.<sup>3</sup> As I look back over twenty years of work in this arena, what I see is that the norm of "work devotion" (to quote Mary Blair-Loy's wonderful phrase) is more pervasive and more unrepentant today than it was fifteen years ago.<sup>4</sup>

Slaughter's book provides a panoramic view of work-family conflict, along with some truly useful tools to help individuals address the problem in their own lives. Most notable are the conversation scripts she offers for women to have with their boyfriends ("your child has a temperature of 101 for the third day in a row" [200], when both you and your partner have important work obligations. Who stays home?). These scripts are important because most professional-managerial men will tell you they are feminists. When they do, they often are thinking about their beliefs about women—

<sup>1</sup> Joan C. Williams, *Unbending Gender: Why Work and Family Conflict and What to Do about It* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Abigail Bessler, "Even Today, Women Still Do Most of the Housework and Childcare," *ThinkProgress*, June 18, 2014, <http://thinkprogress.org/economy/2014/06/18/3450416/women-housework-childcare/>.

<sup>3</sup> Brigid Schulte, *Overwhelmed: Work, Love, and Play When No One Has the Time* (New York: Sarah Crichton Books, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2014); Josh Levs, *All In: How Our Work-First Culture Fails Dads, Families, and Businesses—and How We Can Fix It Together* (New York: HarperCollins, 2015); Heather Boushey, *Finding Time: The Economics of Work-Life Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Mary Blair-Loy, *Competing Devotions: Career and Family among Women Executives* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

not their conviction that they, as men, should be entitled to have careers unaffected by family responsibilities. Slaughter's scripts enable young women to tease this out.

Slaughter also highlights our family-hostile public policy and pinpoints with precision what we need to do if we are to join the civilized world: a lot—high-quality affordable child care, paid family leave, the right to request flexible and part-time work, a major investment in early education programs, job protection for pregnant workers, higher wages for paid caregivers, part-time equity, financial supports for single parents, better enforcement of age discrimination laws, and reform of school schedules. I recall, in the late 1990s, when we thought (briefly) we were going to get part-time equity—proportional pay for part-time work—into Democrats' legislative priorities. Then it sank like a stone; unions were opposed. I soon made a strategic decision not to work on national legislation. I'm very happy to see others do this important work, but I made the right decision for me. I just don't have the patience or stick-to-it-iveness.

Perhaps most innovative is Slaughter's insistence that changing conditions for women will require changing conditions for men. I remember during the writing of *UnBending Gender*, when my husband changed a chapter subheading I had called "Men Are Entitled to Be Ideal Workers" to "Men Are Entitled—and Required—to Be Ideal Workers." An important change; Slaughter's all over it. She gives sustained and useful attention to the need to change the state of play for men. Men need to be free to choose to be caregivers without encountering the flexibility stigma. We need to change the way we talk about fathers, to stop talking as if anything men do for their own children qualifies them for immediate sainthood. Women also need to stop judging men for failing to be ideal workers and to stop gatekeeping—insisting that men help with child care and housework but then undermining men's ability and confidence to deliver.

Mind you, this is different from the guy who passive-aggressively does a terrible job as a maneuver to escape sharing the care: my own dad, when he reluctantly agreed to do the dishes, proceeded to "leave to soak" pots that had been used to boil frozen peas. A different era, one hopes. But Slaughter is definitely right that feminism needs to place masculinity at the center of a feminist analysis.<sup>5</sup> Masculinity is the mainspring we've ignored for too long. Tinkering around the edges leaves domesticity largely intact.

Slaughter also gives a welcome contemporary spin to the now-established trope of workplaces restructured to allow people to live up to their ideals

<sup>5</sup> Joan C. Williams, *Reshaping the Work-Family Debate: Why Men and Class Matter* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

for both work and family. She points out that the gig economy, if its potential is realized and its risk of economic instability is contained, can play a role in giving workers the kind of flexibility so many seek. Slaughter is less successful in addressing the very different problems faced by hourly workers: schedules so short and unstable that many have two part-time jobs whose schedules change every week on three days' notice. "Flexibility" turns out to have been a poor choice of rhetoric, as employers extol this "just-in-time scheduling" as oh so flexible.

Slaughter's book is a pleasure to read, as is having her very considerable powers focused on work-family conflict. I fervently hope her focus on building a broad coalition and using a broad range of change levers will help her generation accomplish more than mine did. God knows we need it. |

## A Response

**Anne-Marie Slaughter, *New America***

**I am deeply honored** to have this particular lineup of thinkers and writers commenting on *Unfinished Business*, all the more as many were important sources and resources while I was writing. But it also has to be said that in many ways I opened the file to read through the commentaries with trepidation. The prospect of being reviewed in *Signs* is exactly why I *didn't* want to write a book on women, work, family, gender, or feminism. As a lifelong academic in another field, I was acutely aware of what I didn't know about all of these subjects. I knew there were vast literatures out there that I could not possibly conquer. And I knew that it was largely chance that "Why Women Still Can't Have It All" had gone viral when so many talented scholars, journalists, and commentators had been writing the same thing for decades. I thought I was writing a largely personal story for a relatively small audience; I happened to catch a generational wave.

The reason I changed my mind was the tremendous outpouring of reactions from people who wrote me to tell their stories. I realized that I had been given a very large platform, and I thought I could use it to publicize issues and arguments well known to the readers of *Signs* but far less visible to a mass audience.

Writing such a book, however, was far harder than I thought. Aside from the difficulty of deprogramming and resocializing myself to come around to an argument I never thought I would or indeed could make—that the

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