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Conversations with the Experts

Taking on the Big Boys: Feminism and Work Family



Ellen Bravo

Bio: Ellen Bravo is a long-time activist for working women. She began working for 9to5, National Association of Working Women in 1982, when she helped found the Milwaukee chapter, and served until 2004 as its national director. Now Ellen teaches Women's Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, including masters level classes on Family-Friendly Workplaces and on Sexual Harassment, and serves as a consultant to 9to5. She coordinates the Multi-State Working Families Consortium, a network of state coalitions working for family-flexible policies. In addition to *Taking on the Big Boys*, Ellen co-authored (with Ellen Cassedy) *The 9to5 Guide to Combating Sexual Harassment* and wrote *The Job/Family Challenge: A 9to5 Guide (Not for Women Only)*. She's also written numerous articles and reports, including "Quality Part-Time Options in Wisconsin," funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, and an article in the March 2007 special issue of the *American Prospect*. Ellen is frequently interviewed by the media and is a leading spokeswoman on working women's issues. A business editor once described her talks as "moving, witty and sometimes bawdy."

Ellen has served on several state and federal commissions, including the bipartisan Commission on Leave appointed by Congress to study the impact of the Family and Medical Leave Act. She co-chaired the Economic Sufficiency Task Force of the Wisconsin Women = Prosperity project led by Lt. Governor Barbara Lawton and serves as treasurer for the campaign of Congresswoman Gwendolynne Moore. She is a member of several boards and committees, including the Working for Good Jobs in America Fund, the Work-Life Law Advisory Committee, the Ms. Foundation for Women Advisory Committee, and the Grants Advisory Committee of the Milwaukee Women's Fund. Among her commendations is a Woman of Vision award from the Ms. Foundation. Ellen lives in Milwaukee with her husband; they have two adult sons.

An Interview with Ellen Bravo

By Judi Casey and Karen Corday

Casey: In your title, *Taking on the Big Boys*, who are the "big boys"? How do they operate?

Bravo: The "big boys" are the powers that be. They are the people who control how and when we do our work, influence public policy, and often have a stake in maintaining the status quo, as they benefit from it. Some of the "big boys" are women, but the majority of men are not "big boys." "Big boys" often maintain the status quo in place by using approaches that trivialize, patronize, "catastrophize," demonize, and compartmentalize. When talking about the problems people face in managing work and family, they say things like "Well, women can do whatever they want! If they're not represented in the best jobs, it's because they have chosen not to pursue those jobs!" or "Men want to take leaves because they want to go hunting and fishing! They don't care

about their babies.” Another common response is “You don’t understand how business works, so you suggest these pie-in-the-sky ideas.” Finally, rather than addressing problems with the way work is structured, they suggest that if, mothers are unhappy with their lives, they should fight each other in the so-called “mommy wars,” as opposed to fighting for changes within the workplace and the home. My purpose in writing this book was to expose these tactics, explain how they work, and show that with the right analysis and organization, it is possible to take them on. The “big boys” try to imply that there is no need to take them on, that if workers are upset they need to change themselves, and even if you did attempt to take the big boys on, you can’t win. Giving concrete examples of how people have made changes in the workplace can inspire others to take action.

The good news is that some of the “big boys” get it and will be won over by an analysis of adjustments to today’s work arrangements and assignments. The more we can expand that group, the better it is for us all. I want people to understand the consequences that come from leaving the world the way it is now and the stake we all have in changing it.

Casey: Why do you think so few have so much power?

Bravo: I think it has to do with the way profit has developed as a driver. I make the case again and again that changing the way that businesses are run is not a favor to women; the changes are a better way to do business. However, this is only true if you care about the business itself. If individuals only care only about their own profit and don’t even consider the short term interests of the company, let alone the long term interests, they will fail. Unfortunately, lots of people with that mindset have lots of power. They are not only controlling businesses, they also play a role in who runs for office and how politicians conduct themselves. This affects public policy as well as the private sector. Therefore, the more we can make business about the entity itself rather than the personal needs of the higher-ups within companies, the better we all will be.

Casey: What are some of the negative consequences of the “big boys” behavior?

Bravo: For women, it obviously costs jobs, income, and opportunities. However, it isn’t just women that are hurt by this behavior; many men are hurt by it, and there are many men who want to integrate their work and family lives, just as women do. Studies show that men are favored when they’re fathers—that’s what “normal” is—but if they start to act like mothers and are invested in their families and want to organize their work to take this into account, they, too, suffer penalties. So, the behavior certainly harms families.

I think the behavior also harms businesses by hurting workers’ productivity and, causing more money to go into areas like turnover costs. It also harms the quality of work, workers’ health and well-being as well as income. If we judged workplace policy, and public policy, for that matter, on outcomes such as child well-being, family well-being, and social well-being, we’d have very different policies. Many countries do this—they say “If we do x, what will the impact be on y?” “Y” can be children, families, fiscal solvency, the environment, et cetera. Of course, we don’t do this—those who do just look at profits, and that is a problem. We talk a lot about family values, but in the United States, family values often end at the workplace door.

Casey: Why do women continue to earn lower wages than men?

Bravo: There’s a simple answer to this. Women earn less because they’re paid less. They’re paid less largely because of the undervaluation of women’s work both in the home and in the workplace. Why do we pay the people who take care of our kids less than those who take care of our pets, cars, or lawns? Why are people who do any kind of care-taking, be it the elderly or the sick, paid so little? It’s because they do for a living what women do in the home for free, a job that is considerably devalued in our society. Secondly, a majority of women are now doing jobs that they once were not allowed to do, like secretaries, bank tellers, and librarians. We have a historical record on this; these jobs were once held exclusively by men. During the Civil War, the government suddenly needed women to do these jobs, so they had to pass statutes to create work opportunities for women. Congressmen, who were only men at the time, made statements such as “I know many practically educated and industrious women who would be great clerks or librarians, and we can pay them half to two-thirds as much as we’ve been paying men.” Women were hired at this legally discriminatory rate, the thinking at the time being that women needed less money because they either would have or did have a man to take care of them, the man being either her father or her husband. The lower rate was justified in this way. Of course, there were many groups of women to whom this male caretaker model never applied, particularly immigrants and former slaves. Nevertheless, that was the thinking. Women were hired at this rate and did good jobs, so more women were hired and gradually, the discriminatory rate became the market rate. When the Equal Pay Act was passed in 1963, saying men and women doing the same work for the same company had to receive the same pay, most women and men didn’t do the same jobs, and most of the jobs

that women did paid less because they were now considered “women’s jobs.” The market rate had been influenced by this legacy of discrimination, and that continues to this day.

Another factor is that even when women are in professions with men, the “mommy penalty” often comes into play. The expectation is that parenting will make a woman an incompetent worker, so there are fewer promotions, smaller raises, diminished opportunities, and penalties for any time spent away from the paid work force.

Other causes include a lack of bargaining power. For me, when people say that women don’t negotiate as well as men, there is truth to that, and we need to change this behavior. However, more importantly, we need to remember that the majority of women don’t have the right to negotiate any aspect of their jobs, including their pay. Many workers are told that they will be punished if they talk pay with their co-workers. Secondly, why should any job’s rate of pay be decided by how well a worker can negotiate? The rate of pay should be determined by objective, transparent, and fair criteria. If a worker has more experience and skills and is doing a wider range of duties than another employee, fair enough that they are paid more. The other employee knows what he or she has to do in order to receive the same pay. One employee should not be paid better than others simply because he or she did a better job at speaking up.

Finally, there is an inequity for part-time workers. Women are more likely to work part-time, and there’s no law that says they should get the same base pay as a full-time worker, or equitable benefits. This certainly contributes to women’s lower income.

Casey: How would removing these pay inequities benefit families?

Bravo: Every family that gets more money benefits, obviously. If women are losing between half a million to two million dollars over a lifetime, anyone who lives in a household with a woman is also losing this income. Everyone benefits from equal pay for women. Likewise, families would benefit from mothers who don’t get fired because they have a sick child or dying father. It’s not just about money; we need to consider the other issues that need to change so that people can devote more time to their families.

A friend of mine, Lalease Thurman, gave a speech with her three children standing next to her at a rally in Milwaukee for a community benefits agreement. The agreement would say to the city of Milwaukee that if they are going to put public money into a development, they must also develop good jobs. Lalease said, “I’m a great mother and a great worker and all I want is a good job.” She defined a good job as one where she didn’t have to spend an hour and a half each way on the bus, one where she didn’t have to work from 12:00 to 8:00 or 1:00 to 9:00 and get home too late to help her kids with their homework, and one where she wouldn’t be punished if she stayed home with a sick child. She went on to say, “The school thinks I’m a bad mother because I can’t help my kids with their homework. My employer thinks I’m a bad worker because I stay home with my kids when they’re sick. I just want a job that recognizes all of those parts of me.” The vast majority of people are just like Lalease—they don’t want to have to risk their jobs to take care of their families, and they don’t want to put their families at risk in order to do their jobs. And yet, millions of workers every day are forced to face that very predicament.

For workers with higher level jobs, on paper, it may seem all right. Nevertheless, there is the pressure to do things like send their kids to work sick because they won’t be seen as a dedicated worker if they stay home with them. There are unspoken expectations. As far as I’m concerned, changing the policies in a systemic way that will most impact people at the bottom will actually help people all along the line.

Casey: What workplace changes could make it easier for working families to manage competing work and family demands?

Bravo: The phrase that I use is, “Let’s stop talking about the glass ceiling and start redesigning the building from the bottom up.” Whatever changes we implement must be attached to how work is designed. The policies include issues related to time, such as flexibility in terms of when and where one does work as well as the ability to adjust work schedules as needed and take time off, if necessary. Secondly, money is a work-life issue. People must have decent pay and must be able to afford time off. This is something that employers cannot do alone. I recently spoke in Canada, and the woman who introduced me had just come back from maternity leave. I asked her how much time she had taken, and she nonchalantly replied that she had taken “the full year.” Of course, I knew that she received fifty-five percent of her regular pay during that year. I looked at her and told her that in the States, we only get twelve weeks, and I didn’t even say that it’s unpaid or that many people are ineligible for the twelve weeks or that sixty percent of those that are eligible go back before the twelve weeks are up. I mentioned only talked about the length of time, and I said “Can you imagine?” Her

response was, “No, I just can’t.”

We also need support for dependent care, so workers know that there are good systems in place for both their children and their elderly relatives when they can’t be with them. This all needs to be not just on paper, but in practice. We need to create accountability mechanisms, so that billable hours pressure doesn’t take over. I urge employers to do an audit and see who gets promoted and rewarded and how does this compare to the usage of workplace supports. I also recommend job seekers use the “bathroom and lunchroom strategy.” Chat with people and ask what it’s like for someone who has a new child or sick parent. If they laugh, pay attention! If they say, “Oh, that’s why I stay here,” then that’s a good sign. Who uses the policies? Do men use them? Do managers? How do we communicate the workplace culture to our employees? When people leave, why do they leave?

Casey: What advice do you have for workplace practitioners who want to positively influence their workplaces’ cultures?

Bravo: I always tell people to trust what they know about the decision makers. If you don’t know enough, ask someone you trust who may not have the power to make decisions, but knows a lot about the people who do. Find out how to get the decisions makers’ attention—are they driven by data? Will stories impress them? Should you do a written presentation? Follow that advice, get their attention, and demonstrate what it’s costing the company not to do the right thing. For example, I know someone who helped get a child care center at a GE plant at a time when the current CEO, Jack Welch, was not in favor of such measures. She did a survey that showed that workers who didn’t have children but were thinking about having them in the near future were not planning to stay at GE because they didn’t see how they could manage both working and parenting. She showed what it would cost to lose these workers, and that convinced the head of this particular plant to create a child care center.

You also need to find your allies. Who will be persuaded and help you think about how to win over the more skeptical ones? Sometimes, we must be willing to engage the workers who are most affected and encourage them to raise their voices.

Casey: Would you use that same strategy to retain part-time workers?

Bravo: I always encourage people to involve the ones who need it most, and to get them to see that the best way to get what you need for yourself is to work with others on behalf of everyone. For example, if a worker wants to start working part-time, they will often report that their boss will say, “If I let you do it, everyone will want to do it!” My response to this is, if you can work out a good way to work part-time, the whole company will benefit from having several people do it. Don’t think about it in terms of “no one can know”! We need to think about how to involve part-time workers and their supervisors in making the case for what a good job they do and how it meets the business needs and encourages employee retention. Draw on the values that the organization uses to describe itself. If they call themselves “family friendly,” show which policies and aspects of the workplace culture might be barriers to carrying that out in practice. Whatever language the business uses, incorporate that into the business case.

Casey: What do you think could be done to develop more equality between men and women at home?

Bravo: I have a saying: “Housework is work to be done by those that live in the house.” It’s not mom’s work that others do or don’t help her with. More men would be involved in the home if they weren’t punished for it at work, so we need to change workplace policies. Secondly, assuming that men acknowledge women’s equality, it needs to be clear that men and women are not equal if the work done at home isn’t equal. This doesn’t just refer to chores, it also refers to thinking, analyzing, and arranging. There also must be an acceptance that both jobs are important and that the man’s job doesn’t take precedence.

Casey: How have other countries managed work-family issues? Why is the United States so far behind?

Bravo: We all know the numbers. Of the twenty richest countries in the world, all but the United States have paid family leave and/or paid sick days. Eighteen of those twenty countries have thirty or more paid sick days. When I was pregnant with my first child in 1977, a friend of mine who lived in France wrote to me and said, “I’m so sorry for you that you have to have your child in the United States.” I was stunned. She went on to describe not only the paid maternity leave, but the sliding scale for infant care, the free pre-school for ages two and a half and up, and the fact that child care workers are respected; they are paid and trained well.

Unfortunately, there is a knee-jerk reaction from many of the “big boys” against standards. They don’t want to be told how to run their businesses, and they justify it by saying that good employers will take care of their employees without government interference. The truth is, when the Family and Medical Leave Act was passed, two thirds of all the companies covered by the Act had to make at least one change to their internal policies, often because they hadn’t covered men, adoption, sick children, or sick parents. They had been obeying the Pregnancy Discrimination Act and making sure that their disability policy included pregnancy—most companies stopped there before FMLA. There’s a resistance to standards, but it is an appropriate role of government to say “What are the values of the country? What is the certain set of minimums that we need to have?” Unfortunately, historically, there’s been resistance to change. This was true of slavery, child labor, minimum wage, discrimination on the basis of race or sex—but in practice, they all needed to be changed. It’s time for a new set of minimum standards around work-family.

There has also been an unfortunate separation of family and child outcomes from decision making about workplace and public policy, as I mentioned before. If there was more cohesion on checking these impacts, we would have better policies in place.

Thirdly, the labor movement in our country has less of a voice than in other countries. The resistance to unions and the weakness of unions has hurt family policies; in fact, whatever shortcomings there may be among certain union leaders, the truth is that they have been champions of these issues for a very long time.

Finally, I think women as a group have less power in the workplace. Unfortunately, the decision makers often have a wife at home full-time and don’t understand the lives of the majority of the people that work for them. I tell the story in the book of Faith Wohl at DuPont. She was in the process of getting management on board with the new work-life policies, when a finance executive questioned the number of dual-income families within the company. He said, “Oh, I don’t believe those numbers. No one in my close circle of friends, in my church, or in my family has a wife that works outside the home. How could it be true that the majority of our staff have working wives?” If a person in charge thinks their world is THE world, we’re all in trouble!

Casey: Could any additional research move us forward on these issues? Do we need more information, or is it more about culture change?

Bravo: I don’t think there’s a lack of information at this point. But I always think it’s helpful to show not just the benefits of work-life programs, but the costs of not implementing them. The opponents of these policies talk a lot about the cost of implementation, and there needs to be more information about the costs of not having them in place. The Institute for Women’s Policy Research has done some good work showing the costs and savings of paid sick days. There’s a recent report from the Multistate Working Families Consortium called “Family Values at Work: It’s About Time!” It gives great statistics on replacement costs, which are high for all workers, regardless of their income levels. The more we bring that to people’s attention, the more they’ll see what’s at stake.

Some business owners are just unaware of how to manage arrangements such as part-time work. They don’t know how to implement alternative arrangements and ensure the completion of high quality work. Just showing examples of workplaces that have done it successfully is really helpful. This type of research can also inspire workers to band together to bring these changes to their workplaces, and it can help public policy makers as well.

Casey: Please describe your vision for a society that values women and provides them with opportunities to work.

Bravo: It looks a lot like a company like SAS. They have a 35-hour work week and close their doors at six o’clock, which means that no one, including the CEO, stays late and nobody takes work home. They understand that relaxed workers are productive workers. In my vision, it’s also important to have a more collaborative way of working, value every level of worker, and to make sure that everyone is special but no one is indispensable, so people can actually have flexibility. This should all be supplemented by public policy, so that parents of new children can share up to a year off, made possible by an insurance pool to which all workers contribute. These parents should also have access to quality, affordable child care that they can bring their child to after a year, going back to work for no more than thirty-five hours a week. There should be reasonable work days and a way to balance schedules so that children don’t have to be in daycare for an inordinate amount of time. For schoolchildren, there would be interesting afterschool programs. Workers would have the option of reducing their work hours without harming their benefits or advancement opportunities. Time off for caretaking may apply not only to children but elderly relatives or those with chronic illnesses. Advancement would be based on talent, leadership, and the ability to work well with others, not face time. In

fact, people who neglect their families and health would not be seen as leaders and role models and would not be rewarded for this behavior.

In their book *Families That Work: Policies for Reconciling Parenthood and Employment*, Janet Gornick and Marcia Meyers calculated what it would cost to be able to implement the policies I just mentioned, and they figured it was 1.5 percent of the Gross National Product. We could truly afford that, especially if we curtailed handouts to the big boys, which eat up five times that amount. We have to change our mindset of what's possible.

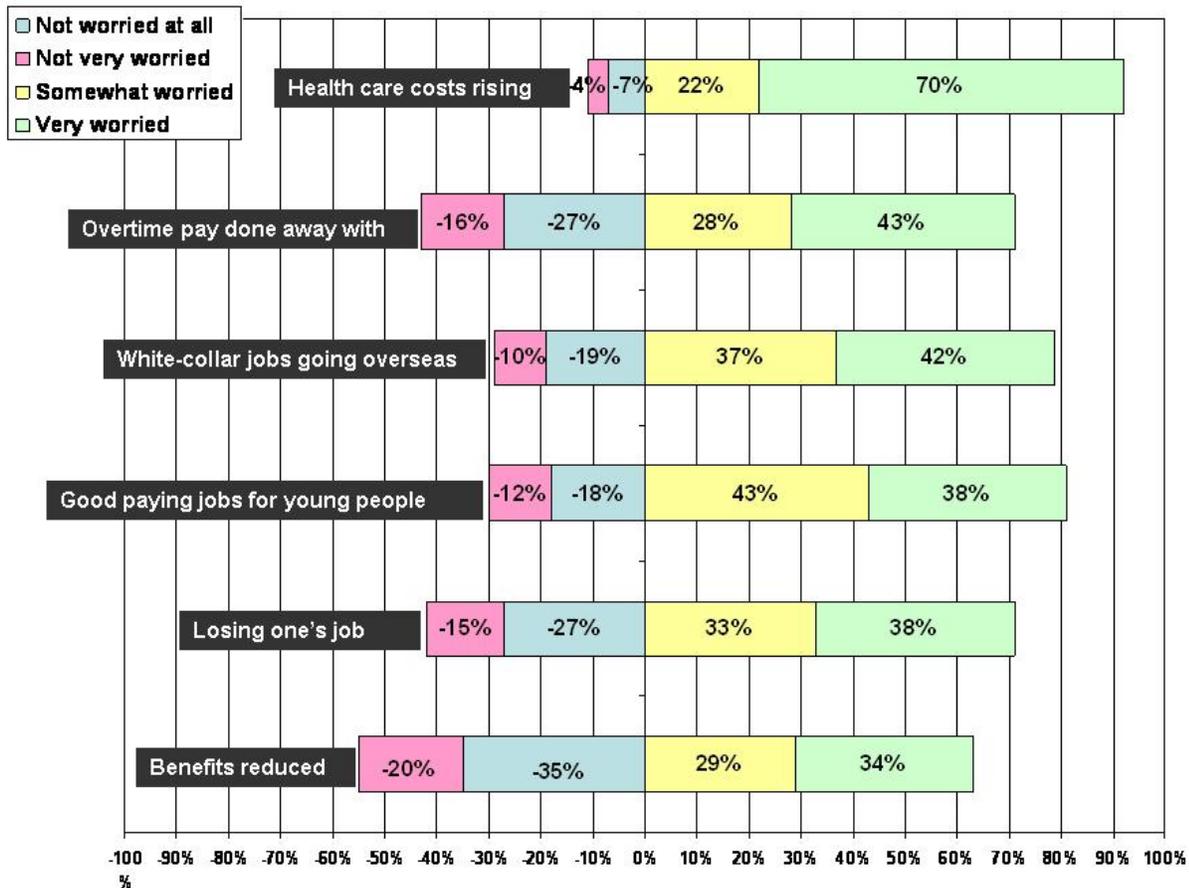
Casey: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Bravo: I work with a network of state coalitions called the Multi-State Working Families Consortium. Recently our member groups and others held press events in a dozen or more cities to call attention to the need for public policy change. Some 2300 school children in Prince Georges County had been suspended for failing to get their immunizations. That's not new—it happens all over the country this time of year. But what was new was this coordinated public response by diverse coalitions with a strong values-based message and credible messengers ranging from parents to school nurses to progressive employers and labor leaders, all linking child well-being to what happens to their parents at work. We connected these actions to a new national poll showing tremendous support for paid sick days and for family leave insurance programs, and the aforementioned report, "Family Values at Work: It's About Time!" All these activities were done in conjunction with ten national organizations, including 9to5, the National Partnership for Women and Families, Moms Rising and the AFL-CIO. The breadth and level of collaboration among these groups is what is changing the policy environment.

Taking on the Big Boys: Or Why Feminism is Good for Families, Business, and the Nation is available from amazon.com

Visit Ellen Bravo online: <http://www.ellenbravo.com/index.htm>

Leading Worries of All Working Women



Source: AFL-CIO. (2004). *Ask a working woman survey report*. Retrieved January 22, 2008, from the AFL-CIO web site: <http://www.aflcio.org/issues/jobseconomy/women/speakout/upload/aawwreport.pdf>

Additional Resources Related to Feminism and Work Family

9to5, National Association of Working Women: "9to5's constituents are low-wage women, women in traditionally female jobs, and those who've experienced any form of discrimination. Membership is open to all. Now in its fourth decade, 9to5's mission is to strengthen women's ability to win economic justice."

- To access the site: <http://www.9to5.org>

Equal Rights Advocates: "Equal Rights Advocates has led the legal fight for women's equality for more than 30 years. Since 1974, ERA's mission has been to protect and secure equal rights and economic opportunities for women and girls through litigation and advocacy."

- To access the site: <http://www.equalrights.org>

Hard Hatted Women: "Our mission is to empower women to achieve economic independence by creating workplace diversity in trade and technical careers." The site includes policy initiatives, economic equity services, and advocacy initiatives.

- To access the site: <http://www.hardhattedwomen.org>

WISER: Women's Institute for a Secure Retirement: "The Women's Institute for a Secure Retirement works to provide low and moderate income women (aged 18 to 65) with basic financial information aimed at helping them take financial control over their lives and to increase awareness of the structural barriers that prevent women's adequate participation in the nation's retirement systems."

- To access the episode: <http://www.wiser.heinz.org/portal>

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E-mail: wfnetwork@bc.edu - Phone: 617-552-1708 - Fax: 617-552-9202

www.bc.edu

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