

Conversations with the Experts

The Three Faces of Work-Family Conflict



Heather Boushey

Bio: Heather Boushey is senior economist at the Center for American Progress. Prior to joining the Center she was a senior economist with the Joint Economic Committee of the U.S. Congress. She was formerly a senior economist with the Center for Economic and Policy Research.

Dr. Boushey studies working families and trends in the U.S. labor market. She has written extensively on labor issues, including tracking the recession and its impact on workers and their families, women's labor force participation, trends in income inequality, and work/life policy issues. Her work has important to understanding how women have fared in recent recessions.

She has testified before Congress and given lectures nationwide. Dr. Boushey's research has been featured in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, as well as many regional papers, television and radio. Previously, Dr. Boushey worked at the Economic Policy Institute where she co-authored *The State of Working America 2002-3* and *Hardships in America: The Real Story of Working Families*.

Boushey received her Ph.D. in Economics from the New School for Social Research and her B.A. from Hampshire College.

An Interview with Heather Boushey by Judi Casey

Casey: What do you mean by the term, "the 3 faces of work-family conflict"? Can you give some examples of how these 3 faces are alike and how they are different?

Boushey: In a recent report that Joan Williams and I wrote, "The Three Faces of Work-Family Conflict," we focused on three kinds of families: the poor, the professionals, and the middle income. We identified that these families differ in terms of the type of work they do, their income levels, and their childcare options. They also differ significantly in the types of challenges they face in work-family conflict.

The poor often have very little to no workplace flexibility in terms of their schedules, etc. They often also have to work two or three jobs to make ends meet. Many poor mothers leave the workforce altogether, as they don't have the resources necessary for other childcare options. Poor families also get few benefits from their employers to help deal with work-life conflict, and often hold jobs with inconsistent or unpredictable schedules that exacerbate these conflicts. Government policies to help these families are too often insufficient and underfunded.

At the other end of the spectrum are the professionals. Employers are most likely to offer paid leave and workplace flexibility to these workers, yet require long hours that make achieving a workable balance nearly impossible to attain. Professional mothers are often thought to deal with work-family conflict by "opting out," even though most do continue to work.

We put professionals and managers into one category and middle-income families in another. A family is “professional-managerial” if the breadwinners earn income that puts them in the top 20% of all families and someone in the family has a college degree—13% of all families in 2008. The rest—53% of all families in 2008—are in the middle.

The middle-income families, called “the missing middle” in the report, a phrase created by Harvard University sociology professor Theda Skocpol, are very much affected by work-family conflict, yet have few options to help them cope. Families in the middle are likely to have dual-earners, like professional families, and struggle with mandatory overtime. However, they are less likely than professionals to get paid leave and workplace flexibility. Middle-income families struggle with affording the quality care families need and are not likely to be eligible for the kinds of benefits that low-income families may be able to tap into, such as subsidies for child care.

Casey: Please discuss the “missing middle,” including why this group has not received attention, and the reasons that their involvement is essential to the public policy debate.

Boushey: The public dialogue of work-family conflict has not typically focused on the challenges facing middle-income or working-class families, but rather too often on the issues faced by professional or poor families. In both cases, the narrative is one about mothers choosing non-work, which has not been the reality for most mothers, who have continued to be employed outside the home.

One of the most common narratives during the 2000s was the idea that professional mothers were largely “opting out” of the fast track in order to care for children. This portrait contrasts sharply with coverage of a different group of opt-out moms: “welfare-to-work” mothers. The narratives around “welfare-to-work” mothers are not typically framed as ones of work-family conflict. Rather, the stories of these women revolve around whether unemployed poor mothers should be cut off from the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or TANF program.

Neither portrait is helpful in constructing a strong partnership to advocate new public policy measures that would address work-family conflict. Both professional and unemployed mothers are portrayed in these storylines as lacking the personal and financial motivation to work outside the home. These inaccurate and hyperbolic narratives feed the arguments of politicians who actively use these narratives to reject moving forward on a work-family agenda.

In this storyline, the problem is the personal choices of a small group of mothers who are in families that are completely different from the typical U.S. family. Most mothers work outside the home, especially among working class and middle-income families where there is little choice about whether to work. Most families need the income that women bring into the home. Continuing to frame the narrative in terms of “choice” does a disservice to millions of families because it takes the responsibility off of policymakers to address the very real work-family conflicts that most families struggle with.

Casey: How does caregiver discrimination manifest itself for low-, middle-, and high- income workers, respectively?

Boushey: In “The Three Faces of Work-Family Conflict,” Joan Williams and I identify the different ways that workers experience caregiver discrimination. Discrimination against workers with family responsibilities occurs frequently in the American workplace and is forbidden only indirectly. Discrimination against low-wage workers often materializes in the form of pregnancy discrimination. Among low-income women, discrimination is commonly triggered when a woman announces her pregnancy at work—some are even fired upon revealing their pregnancy.

Alternatively, middle-class women are more likely to face discrimination upon returning to work after having a baby. The discrimination that stems from the motherhood bias is most often felt by women in historically male jobs. In contrast, a problem for men in the middle is employer hostility toward men who want to take an active role in family care. Workers in the middle also encounter discrimination with regard to their schedules.

Professionals encounter family responsibility discrimination along with their low-wage and middle-income counterparts, though in a different form. In this group, open pregnancy discrimination is probably infrequent. Nevertheless, professional women are repeatedly marginalized once they become mothers—overlooked for promotions or “mommy tracked.”

Casey: Are there any public policies that would support all 3 “faces” (groups) across the income spectrum? If so, what are they?

Boushey: From a policy perspective, each type of family needs four fundamental types of protections that American workers currently lack:

- Short-term and extended leaves from work, including paid time off for family and medical leave and paid sick days;
- Workplace flexibility to allow families to plan their work lives and their family lives;
- High-quality and affordable childcare so that breadwinners can concentrate on work at work; and
- Freedom from discrimination based on family responsibilities.

The Center for American Progress has outlined a policy agenda around work-family issues that consciously strives to develop policies that address the issues of all types of families. In “Our Working Nation,” which I co-authored with Ann O’Leary, Executive Director of the Berkeley Center for Health, Economic & Family Security, we highlight that this effort should include:

- Updating basic labor standards to account for the fact that most workers also have family responsibilities, by establishing the right to paid sick days, instituting predictable and flexible workplace schedules, and ensuring that workers have access to paid family and medical leave;
- Improving basic fairness in the workplace by ending discrimination against all workers, including pregnant women and caregivers;
- Providing direct support to working families with childcare and elder care needs; and
- Improving our knowledge about family-responsive workplace policies by collecting national data on work-life policies offered by employers and analyzing the effectiveness of existing state and local policies.

Casey: What advice do you have for legislators and advocates to help them construct an effective coalition to enact these policies?

Boushey: To modernize our public policies, we must address the realities of how families live and work today. This will require helping these families manage their daily responsibilities—to pick up a child from school, take an elderly mother to a check-up, or leave work early to nurse a partner through the flu—as well as the challenges faced when someone needs extended time off.

For too long, policymakers have implied that managing work and family obligations is not their responsibility. Unfortunately, American families have internalized that message. However, government can and should play a leadership role, not only by modeling best practices, but also by advocating and advancing the policy agenda.

In the end, the political party that addresses work-family issues in an effective and consistent way will strike an enormous source of political goodwill. Our analysis in the “Three Faces” report reveals that many of the stresses faced by American families stem from failures of public policy—the most obvious example being the lack of

high-quality, affordable childcare, which impacts all income groups. The lack of childcare keeps many low-income mothers out of the labor force and leaves many middle-income children in low-quality childcare. Both low- and middle-income families are forced to tag team, which often leads to exhaustion and higher levels of divorce. Even professionals are affected; highly trained women often cut back on work commitments because they see no other way that their children can receive quality care.

Casey: What additional research could be done to help move these policies forward?

Boushey: Additional research should be done to expand our knowledge about family-responsive workplace policies by collecting national data on work-life policies offered by employers and analyzing the effectiveness of existing state and local policies.

Additional research should also be done about how work-family conflict is experienced by additional segments of the population, and what families need to help manage these challenges. There should be more studies looking at the middle class as well, as they are often overlooked by policymakers.

Casey: What can employers do to support workers from different income groups with their work-family concerns?

We now know from decades of research that employers who help workers manage their work-family conflict experience benefits. There are many employers—although not enough—who design workplaces that allow their employees to do their jobs, as well as be responsible for family members.

The typical worker is now in a family in which all adults are working, children need supervision after school, the elderly are living longer, and ill family members sometimes need care. Employers who recognize the challenges facing workers can support their employees by addressing basic labor standards that seek to limit, rather than exacerbate, work-family conflict. Providing advance notice of schedules, including limiting mandatory overtime, and providing employees with paid time off to care for their kids or ill family members, as well as for employees to attend to their own health, are all important pieces of the puzzle. Basic fairness also includes ending discrimination against all workers, including pregnant women and caregivers.

We want to encourage employers to recognize that flexible work hours and paid leave should be made available to not only the highest-paid employees, but to all their employees. Employers who help their employees mitigate work-family conflict through a variety of policies—including flexible scheduling—see the results in terms of improved productivity and lower turnover.

The Sloan Work and Family Research Network appreciates the extensive support we have received from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation and the Boston College community.

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The Sloan Work and Family Research Network is funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation