
Work–Family Conflict Is a Social Issue Not a Women’s Issue

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Kossek, Baltes, and Matthews (2011) identify several steps for closing the gap between the work–family practices identified by researchers as effective and the practices currently used in organizations. We agree with their recommendations but argue that another key change in the dialogue surrounding work–family conflict is needed before organizations are likely to view work–family initiatives as a strategic imperative. Namely, academics and practitioners alike should stop framing work–family conflict as a women’s issue.

Evidence that work–family conflict is largely construed as a women’s issue abounds. For example, careers that offer greater flexibility in exchange for fewer advancement opportunities are referred to as the “mommy track” (Mason & Ekman, 2007). Similarly, the media has profiled examples of highly educated women who reduce work–family conflict by opting out of the workforce (e.g., Belkin, 2003) and have described the “opt-out revolution” as a uniquely female phenomenon. Similarly, in academia, numerous researchers have advanced the hypothesis that work–family conflict is a more prevalent problem among women (see Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeaux, & Brinley, 2005 for a review).

The tendency to frame work–family conflict as a women’s issue is hardly surprising. Historically, women have occupied the role of caregiver, whereas men have occupied the role of breadwinner (Eagly, 1987). Although recent decades have seen dramatic increases in the labor force participation of women (Sayer, 2005), the longstanding tendency to classify caregiving as women’s work persists. Nevertheless, continuing to construe work–family conflict as a women’s issue is problematic for two reasons. First, it perpetuates the faulty assumption that work–family conflict is an obstacle faced by women alone. Second, it is an impediment to creating and sustaining workplaces in which work–family policies are a widely available, effective tool for enabling employees to be successful in both their work and family lives.

Why Work–Family Conflict Is Not a Women’s Issue

In contrast to the common assumption that work–family conflict is a women’s issue, evidence supports that work–family conflict is a challenge for both genders. Women report slightly more work-to-family conflict than men, and men report slightly more family-to-work conflict than women, yet gender explains less than 1% of the variance in these constructs (Byron, 2005). Men and women not only tend to experience similar levels of work–family conflict, work–family conflict also has negative consequences for both genders. Work–family conflict has

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been linked to decreased satisfaction with work and family, increased depression, poor physical health, and heavy alcohol use, and the magnitude of these effects does not significantly differ for men versus women (e.g., Ford, Heinen, & Langkamer, 2007; Frone, Russell, & Barnes, 1996). In addition to psychological and physical consequences, men and women who attempt to reduce work–family conflict by using work–family policies may also suffer career consequences. Both mothers and fathers who use parental leave policies are perceived as uncommitted and unlikely to receive career rewards, and the penalty associated with leave taking is at times greater for men than for women (e.g., Allen & Russell, 1999; Judiesch & Lyness, 1999). Similarly, both male and female faculty members who stop their tenure clocks for family reasons, such as the birth or adoption of a child, receive a pay penalty for doing so (Manchester, Leslie, & Kramer, 2010).

In all, evidence clearly demonstrates that both genders experience work–family conflict and that neither gender is immune to its negative consequences. Importantly, we do not purport that men’s and women’s experiences with work–family conflict are precisely the same (cf. Eby et al., 2005), or deny that work–family conflict is a more common cause of career exit for women than for men (Moe & Shandy, 2010). At the same time, we contend that continuing to frame work–family conflict as a women’s issue is problematic because it perpetuates the misperception that the challenges associated with work–family conflict are challenges faced by women alone.

Why the Gendered View of Work–Family Conflict Is an Impediment

Classifying work–family conflict as a women’s issue is not only inaccurate, it is also a barrier to the success of work–family initiatives. Women and mothers continue to be ascribed low status in organizations and underrepresented in powerful positions (e.g., Ridgeway & Correll, 2004).

Institutional theory suggests that workplace policies are unlikely to become widespread if the policies’ core constituents lack status and power (DiMaggio, 1988). Thus, the belief that work–family policies are targeted at women provides a likely explanation for why work–family initiatives continue to be “marginalized rather than mainstreamed” (Kossek, Lewis, & Hammer, 2010, p. 3). In addition, due to perceptions that work–family conflict is a women’s issue, men who use work–family policies are likely to be viewed as violating traditional gender-based roles. Deviation from social roles is a potential source of bias and discrimination (e.g., Allen & Russell, 1999; Eagly, 1987), which suggests that men may refrain from asking for and using work–family policies even if they experience significant work–family conflict (cf. Powell, 1997). If a large percentage of employees hide their desire for work–family policies, organizations are unlikely to see work–family initiatives as a strategic imperative.

Anecdotal evidence from outside the United States supports that degendering work–family conflict is instrumental in fostering family-friendly workplaces. In the Netherlands, use of work–family policies by men has increased dramatically and approximately a third of Dutch men now work part-time or fit a week’s work into 4 days—a phenomenon that has been dubbed the Dutch “daddy day” (Bennhold, 2010). In stark contrast to the United States, where use of work–family policies can lead to a “mommy-tracked” career, Dutch men take daddy days while holding high-power jobs as surgeons, managers, and engineers. The Dutch case is suggestive that when work–family conflict is not viewed as a women’s issue, organizations in which work–family policies are widely available and used without penalty are likely to follow.

Degendering Work–Family Conflict

We have argued that degendering work–family conflict is a critical next step for

increasing the prevalence and success of work–family initiatives, and there is some evidence that organizations are moving toward this end. Although the availability of work–family policies has always been a key criterion for making *Working Mother* magazine’s list of best companies, work–family policies are also becoming an important criterion for inclusion on lists of the best companies in general. For example, in *Fortune* magazine’s 2011 list, four of the top 10 companies for work–life balance were also listed as top 10 companies overall. Similarly, Kossek and colleagues note that some organizations now use the term “work–life policies” instead of “work–family policies” to mitigate perceptions that only a subset of employees benefit from such policies. At the same time, both practitioners and academics can take a number of additional steps to further reduce the assumption that work–family conflict is a women’s issue.

In our consulting experience, we have seen example strategies organizations can use to combat perceptions that work–family policies are intended for women alone. Because work–family policies were first adopted to integrate women into the workforce, they tend to be administered by diversity and inclusion departments. Moving oversight of work–family initiatives from diversity and inclusion departments to organizational effectiveness departments is one way to signal that reduced work–family conflict can benefit all employees, regardless of gender. Making use of certain work–family policies, such as flexible hours, the default work arrangement is another effective strategy, given that standardizing access to work–family policies is likely to mitigate perceptions that these policies target only a subset of employees.

Academics also have a role to play in degendering work–family conflict. Akin to Kossek and colleague’s recommendation that academics engage in advocacy, we encourage researchers to more actively disseminate evidence that work–family conflict is a challenge for both genders. In addition, scholars should continue to develop theories that capture the realities

of a changing world in which gender is an increasingly poor indicator of one’s investments in work and family (cf., Barnett & Hyde, 2001).

In advocating that gender should be deemphasized within the work–family conflict dialogue, we do not suggest that differences in men’s and women’s workplace experiences should be ignored. Empirical evidence paints all too clear a picture that gender-based discrimination continues to plague organizations (see Leslie, King, Bradley, & Hebl, 2008 for a review). Rather, we believe that continuing to frame work–family conflict as a women’s issue further reifies the notion that women are better suited for caregiving than for breadwinning and thus lack the traits necessary to succeed in the workplace. We therefore see efforts to degender work–family conflict as a mechanism for combating gender-based discrimination, not denying its existence.

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