**Finding Time: The Economics of Work-Life Conflict.**  

Reviewed by Sara Helms McCarty, Samford University

In *Finding Time*, economist Heather Boushey provides a rich historical look at our labor practices and household well-being, and provides concrete suggestions for policies that would lessen the work-life conflict. Boushey suggests a holistic approach to agreements between employers and employees. In particular, she argues that all workers should have access to flexible and reasonable work hours, paid sick and family leave, and access to high-quality child care.

Over the past 50 years, the US workforce changed drastically. While only 37.7 percent of women participated in the labor market in 1960, by 2005 59.3 percent did (BLS). Boushey argues that the 1950s American Housewife was the firm's Silent Partner, who stayed home, cared for children and the sick, and kept the American household functioning smoothly so that the breadwinner could work. Instead of one (usually male) breadwinner supporting the majority of families, most households now have either two working adults or a single-parent breadwinner. In 1960, 78.3% of children under age 15 lived with a full time, stay-at-home caregiver in 1960, by 2012 that dropped to one-third (p. 43). As such, employers must now consider the impact of scheduling and expectations in concert with workers' caregiving responsibilities.

Boushey uses four words to characterize her suggested policy proposals. She argues for new policies addressing *Here* (the home), such as paid sick leave and family medical leave; *There* (the workplace), to help families balance the demands of home life and work; *Care*, which would provide families of all income levels access to high-quality care for their children and elderly; and she suggests that this only works when it is *Fair*—offered to all families and adhered to by all employers.

Boushey begins with a detailed history of labor market regulations in the United States. While Frances Perkins is more widely known as the first female member of the cabinet, her influence on President Franklin D. Roosevelt led to many of the New Deal policies. Boushey claims the New Deal “wasn’t a welfare agenda; this was an agenda to support work-
ing families and reduce economic insecurity” (p. 32). As such, she refers to these policies as “help-outs” instead of “hand-outs.” While there were many positive effects from the labor policies, these programs were not available to all workers, either explicitly or indirectly.

Boushey continually returns to the opposition of policymakers (including Presidents Nixon and G. H. W. Bush) to policies focused on work-life conflict, in the interest of preserving the American family. Boushey presents as fact that the “addition of ‘sex’ in the Civil Rights Act was meant as a joke” (p. 62). This is a disputed interpretation of history (see, for example, Highhouse, Risen, or Freeman for alternatives).

Once given the historical background, Boushey discusses the experience of the “stuck” low-income family (lowest third), the “stalled” middle class (the next 50%), and the “soaring” professional family (top 20%) from 1960 to 2012. Boushey first describes the experience of the stalled middle class, focusing on its stagnant wage growth. She posits that middle-class families responded by making adjustments: they lowered their expectations, women entered the workforce, and they took on more debt. The rise in women’s pay, from both longer hours and higher wages, overcomes the loss in salary to men, leading to small overall gains. Households borrowed to maintain their lifestyles, often using home equity in rising real estate markets to fund consumption. While the stalled middle class did not excel, it edged forward.

Next, Boushey considers the impact of globalization, fewer manufacturing jobs, lower military participation, higher incarceration rates, and a diminished union influence on “stuck” low income families. Among this group, men’s wages fell more than women’s increased, leading to lower income. This group has higher rates of non-marriage, divorce, and child-bearing out of wedlock. Families are faced with low pay and inflexible and unpredictable schedules. Combined with the high cost of child care and its low availability and quality, they are more likely to use relatives and friends for childcare instead of formal care, which contributes to higher levels of employee absence.

Boushey also considers the “soaring” professional class. The “over-worked rich” face employers’ expectations of long hours, and with rising equality face a high-pressure environment. From 1979 to 2012, women’s higher pay and longer hours increased family income by $33,000, with men’s higher pay adding nearly $25,000 more. This group is not stalled or stuck, and these professionals often work jobs that offer some degree of
flexibility, but they are asked to be “on” long past normal workday hours, a challenge even with their use of formal child care.

The book then proposes an economic framework for analysis and makes several policy suggestions. Using a modified circular flow model, Boushey evaluates the impact of various work-life-balance policies on households and firms. She returns to three main tools in evaluating policies directed toward work-life balance: (1) considering demand and supply effects for both firms and households, (2) calculating the hidden costs and benefits, and (3) calculating both long term and short term costs and benefits. She argues that pro-balance policies will benefit the economy by reducing employee absences, increasing productivity and tenure, and boosting overall demand. Despite her concern for identifying hidden costs and benefits, she ignores the actual cost of most policies.

Boushey’s proposals are organized by the words Here, There, Care, and Fair. For Here at Home, she advocates for paid sick and family medical leave. She argues that leave allowances enable workers to optimize their work-life balance without fear of retribution, leading to less absenteeism.

There at Work policies focus on the scheduling practices of employers and advocate for predictable scheduling and reasonable work hours. Flexibility with predictability helps firms save money, through lower turnover and less absenteeism. Again, she neglects to seriously consider the costs of the policy.

Care policies center on outside options for care; Boushey considers leaving the child or elder alone, or with a family member or friend, or paying someone to provide the care. She argues: “The importance of early childhood to learning and future behavior makes the quality of care a national economic issue” (p. 203). This holds despite the paucity of high quality care options. She proposes universal access to quality child care, a topic considered in other countries but not yet in the US.

Finally, the word Fair, which focuses on providing access to the many suggested policies for all households and ensuring that policies are followed by all employers. This includes a normalization of paternity leave, so that men are not ridiculed when using it. Adults responsible for caregiving are often penalized in the workplace and viewed as irresponsible. They are given fewer opportunities for advancement. Existing research finds that women who are mothers, compared to identically-qualified women who are not mothers, are not only paid less, but are also viewed
as less competent and less suited for promotions. This is in stark contrast to men, who earn a parent bonus. While Boushey’s proposal calls for policy to correct such misconceptions, she gives too little attention to the needed societal shifts in changing the status quo. She writes: “Fairness undergirds our vision of what governments, firms, and families owe one another” (p. 242). Agreeing on a definition of fair is far more complex than she leads one to believe.

Boushey’s worldview is given toward the end of the book:

Some contend that the market can decide or that it isn’t the role of the state to lay down these kinds of “rules of the road”. But there are good economic reasons to intervene. What’s good for one business may not be good for the whole economy. (p. 244)

She does not consider alternate viewpoints. She looks at her data and policy proposals through the lens of her worldview, and interprets accordingly. She repeatedly returns to a simplified circular flow model, but none of her analyses (found throughout the book) incorporate the downsides of the policies. She only includes the anticipated benefits, with no acknowledgement of negative consequences and little discussion of costs.

The book is an important addition to the literature on work-life conflict, but it can be off-putting. Boushey insists that government (through policy) needs to fix the problem. She expresses her views in deterministic language. For example, she writes that “Every job turnover costs employers money – and creates havoc for the employee who needs to find a new job and for their family who misses out on their income in the meantime” (p. 185). While this is true for workers who lose their jobs or whose life circumstances lead them to leave, it oversimplifies reality, as some workers leave a current job for a better job! While her viewpoints could be supported with evidence, none is given. She repeatedly appeals to unions as a means to solve workers’ difficult relationships with employers, but neglects to acknowledge any drawbacks of unions.

In considering the case of the professional class, she states that “Gender equity at work requires more gender equity at home” (p. 116). While the statement refers to men’s participation in family life, the reference to “gender equity at home” is not explained. This highlights a weakness of the book—her unstated assumptions. Basic economics recommends specializing by comparative advantage; can that apply here, or must parents be identically involved?
One last criticism is repeated phrasing that implies individuals are always acted upon, leaving little room for the individual’s agency. For example, she writes: “People like my sister quit their jobs—or, we should say, are forced out of their jobs—because of work-life conflicts” (p. 178). While her sister faced challenges in arranging a more flexible schedule, she chose to leave her job. The limits to what her employer could offer contributed to her decision, but to imply her choice to stay home was forced on her—when she voluntarily quit—pushes too far.

Christians are called to be concerned with the well-being of others, for “the least of these.” Economists are tasked with analyzing the world, and improving decision-making and policy. Both inside and outside Christianity, women are far more likely to work. Choosing to ignore the challenges faced by changing families, when the work landscape looks so different, is to pursue ignorance. This book is a thought-provoking approach to the work-life conflict literature. Whether one agrees with the author or not, her book challenges the reader to consider the impact of work-life policies on workers and their families.

Endnotes

1 Oddly, Boushey chooses *The Brady Bunch* as the quintessential 1960s middle class family. The blended family employed a full-time housekeeper who provided the family’s cooking and cleaning (IMDB).

2 In the technical appendix, Boushey acknowledges that she did not use the standard measurement of growth—economic peak to economic peak. Rather, she extends her data beyond the 2007 peak to 2012. This leads to an exaggerated decline in the well-being of both the low and middle class groups compared to their 2007 performance.

References


**Freeman, Jo.** (2008.) How “sex” got into Title VII: Persistent opportunism as a maker of public policy. In *We Will be Heard: Women’s Struggles for Political Power in the United States.* New York: Rowman &

