

Resolving Work-Life Conflicts

Progressives Have Answers

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Introduction

The Obama administration this week is hosting a Forum on Workplace Flexibility at the White House, where the president and first lady will sit down with leaders from business communities large and small, with workers, and with public policy experts to discuss the challenges Americans face in balancing the demands of workplace and family obligations. The forum builds on the administration's understanding that addressing work-family conflict is a crucial component of its commitment to supporting middle-class families.

Indeed, as one of his first acts in office, President Barack Obama appointed Vice President Joe Biden to chair the Middle Class Task Force to ensure that the “economic challenges facing [t]he American middle class always remain front and center in the work of the administration.” More than a year later, in these tough economic times, focusing on “the importance of creating workplace practices that allow America’s working men and women to meet the demands of their jobs without sacrificing the needs of their families” (as stated by the White House) could not be more important.

Acknowledging and addressing work-family conflict is an effective way for progressives to address the economic anxieties of the broad middle class in America pragmatically and effectively. These work-life conflicts often leave Americans in the impossible position of having to choose between supporting their families or caring for them. Employers, too, face difficult decisions—ones that based on today’s workplace rules are often counterproductive to their companies’ bottom lines and to stronger jobs growth.

Families today are experiencing heightened economic anxiety due to the Great Recession, a slow economic recovery, and long-term structural changes in our nation’s economy that are coming home to roost all at once. Creating more jobs is a key way to reduce this anxiety, but the administration and Congress also need to address the longstanding underlying issue that is stressing families—how to provide care for loved ones when most families need all adults in the labor force and consequently have no one at home full time.

Over the past few decades, women moved into paid employment and out of the home, but our businesses and government have yet to adapt to this new reality. Family breadwinners need jobs, but they need employers to provide enough flexibility to ensure that holding a good job does not mean being unable to be a good partner or parent or to cope with caring for an ailing family member.

No doubt you'll hear conservatives arguing that with so many out of work, now is not the time to focus on extra "perks" or "benefits" in the workplace. But now is precisely the time to address work-family conflicts because this is not about perks and benefits, but rather about jobs, future economic growth, and the family realities of the 21st century. Making sure no worker is laid off due to a child care emergency or the need to take an afternoon off to help an ailing relative will go a long way toward easing families' concerns about keeping the jobs they have.

None of this will be easy, as we'll demonstrate in our analysis below, but much of it can begin now and will reap dividends for families, businesses, and our economy in the decade ahead.

Job creation takes time, but addressing work-family conflict can ease family anxieties immediately

The middle class is struggling not just with job losses but also with widespread anxiety about job stability. With so many Americans out of work, families are worried that their jobs will be next on the chopping block. The challenge for the 9 in 10 workers who still have a job is how to keep it. Middle-class breadwinners need assurance that they will not to lose their jobs when they need to pick up a sick child or care for an ailing elder. Addressing work-family conflict is a crucial component of an agenda to address the middle class's urgent economic concerns.

One of the challenges facing the administration is that the Great Recession was so deep and protracted. Economists agree that getting back to something like full employment may take years. Our economy would have to add nearly 250,000 jobs each and every month for the next three years just to gain back the jobs lost during the recession. Unfortunately, economists may be the only ones who find compelling the argument that the \$787 billion American Recovery and Reinvestment Act made things "less bad than they could be." For families deeply concerned about job security, that is a hard sell. The American people want to see action *now* to address their economic anxieties.

It is true, however, especially in these tough economic times, that a job saved is as good as a job created. Policies to address work-family conflict can help those with jobs keep them, among them:

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- 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 child care so that breadwinners can concentrate on work at work
- Freedom from discrimination based on family responsibilities¹

This is a compelling progressive policy agenda for families struggling in an economy beset with high unemployment.

Policies to address work-family conflict have mass appeal

There is a broad base of support for policies to address work-family conflict. Recent polling commissioned by the Center for American Progress and California First Lady Maria Shriver found a widespread appetite—among men as well as women—for government and business to address the reality of families without full-time caregivers. This poll, conducted by The Rockefeller Foundation and Time, Inc., surveyed more than 3,400 adults across the country in early September 2009 and found that overwhelming majorities of both men and women said that government and businesses need to provide flexible work schedules, better child care, and paid family and medical leave.

A full 85 percent of Americans agree that businesses that fail to adapt to the needs of modern families risk losing good workers, and 75 percent agree that employers should be required to give workers more flexibility. But the appetite for change is also broad based:

- Sixty-four percent of conservatives and 81 percent of moderates join the 89 percent of liberals who believe that businesses should be required to provide *paid* family and medical leave for every worker who needs it.
- Sixty-five percent of conservatives and 80 percent of moderates join the 85 percent of liberals who believe that employers should be required to give workers more workplace flexibility.
- Fifty percent of conservatives and 75 percent of moderates join the 85 percent of liberals who believe that the government should provide more funding for child care.

Also notable is that these kinds of “family-friendly” policies also find support among Americans who have traditionally supported a family values agenda, such as evangelicals. Among evangelical Christians, 74 percent believe that businesses should be required to provide *paid* family and medical leave for every worker who needs it, 71 percent believe that employers should be required to give workers more flexibility in work schedules, and

66 percent believe that the government should provide more funding for child care. This strong support for government programs among voters who otherwise trend conservative highlights the powerful potential of work-family issues to help meld a progressive coalition.

Work-family conflict: Not just for women

One of the key facts about work-family conflict is it's not just about women. Men now report higher levels of work-family conflict than women. We think that this may be because the typical man no longer has a stay-at-home wife and he—and she—are sharing the responsibilities (and joys!) of working outside the home and caring for family members. While some men struggle with the rise of women in the workplace, most have accepted, if not embraced, this new way of living.²

Addressing work-family conflict is not a frill for women, but rather a necessary policy agenda for all workers and their families. In two-thirds of families, mothers are either breadwinners or co-breadwinners. Few families have the luxury of an adult at home full time to provide care for children or ailing family members.

Families are three times as likely to be headed by working adults—either a single, working parent (22 percent) or a two-job couple (44 percent)—as they are to have a stay-at-home wife (21 percent). The problem is that men and women remain concerned about who's caring for the children and other family members. Helping these breadwinners work more effectively and care for their families more consistently builds better businesses and better communities for the common good.

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The Great Recession amplified the need for new work-life policies

Men have lost 7 in 10 jobs since the Great Recession began in December 2007, and millions of families are now relying on a woman's earnings to make ends meet. As families become ever more reliant on mothers' incomes, men are shouldering caregiving that traditionally was left to women.

As a result, middle-class Americans are at risk of losing their jobs when they find themselves caught between inflexible work schedules and family responsibilities. Take the mother who lost two jobs in a row because either her kids or her babysitter's kids kept getting sick and she couldn't get to work.³ Or the UPS package delivery driver who was fired for "theft of time" when he took off an extra hour and 15 minutes on two different days, without telling his supervisors, in order to help his wife who was sick with a serious breast infection while also taking care of an infant and a sick toddler.⁴ Or the press operator at *The Chicago Tribune* who lost her job when she overslept after staying up until midnight monitoring the blood pressure of her mother, for whom she was the primary caregiver.⁵

In the past, middle-class workers handled these problems by finding a new job. Today that strategy is less feasible. To make matters worse, employers' reluctance to take on new workers even as demand picks up as the economy slowly recovers means that, week in and week out, more parents are ordered to work mandatory overtime. In two-job families, this often requires choosing between partner's jobs, most often in situations where the family needs both jobs to pay the bills.

Progressive solutions to work-family issues will help resolve middle-class economic anxiety

The Obama administration recognizes that addressing work-family conflict is crucial to supporting middle-class families and to tackling the long-term challenges facing our economy and society. In the first annual report of Vice President Biden's Middle Class Task Force, the administration reiterated that creating good jobs is critical to middle-class families' economic stability. But the report also addressed long-term economic challenges that predate the Great Recession—challenges that include balancing work and family needs as our economy recovers and finding new avenues of growth alongside the more traditional issues of college access and affordability, and retirement security.

The findings of the vice president's task force are evident in the administration's fiscal year 2011 budget, which:

- More than doubles the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit, helping most families with incomes below \$115,000
- Provides the largest one-year increase ever (\$1.6 billion) in funding for child care programs for low-income children
- Establishes a \$50 million State Paid Leave Fund to move toward remedying the fact that the United States is the only country among the top 30 industrialized democracies in the world that lacks paid maternity leave.

In short, addressing work-family conflict demonstrates to Americans that progressive government policies can help workers and families help themselves and the broader economy recover and grow more competitive. Matching the 21st century workplace to the needs of the 21st century workforce is a crucial progressive goal.

Endnotes

- 1 Joan C. Williams and Heather Boushey, "The Three Faces of Work-Family Conflict: The Poor, the Professionals, and the Missing Middle" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2010).
- 2 Maria Shriver, *The Shriver Report: A Woman's Nation Changes Everything*, edited by Heather Boushey and Ann O'Leary (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2009).
- 3 Lillian B. Rubin, *Families on the Fault Line: America's Working Class Speaks About the Family, the Economy, Race, and Ethnicity* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), p. 94-95.
- 4 Joan C. Williams, "One Sick Child Away From Being Fired: When Opting Out is Not an Option" (San Francisco: Work Life Law, UC Hastings College of Law, 2006). The arbitrator upheld the grievant's discharge, pointing to an established arbitral history of discharge for "stolen time" and faulting the grievant for lying when he claimed overtime rather than admitting he had not been at work for part of the regular workday.
- 5 Ibid. The arbitrator reinstated the grievant after holding that her oversleeping, which lead to her tardiness, was an FMLA-qualified event because it resulted from exhaustion from her responsibilities as primary caregiver for her mother.