



soundview

Featured Book Review

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

Women, Men, Work, Family

by Anne-Marie Slaughter

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For many years, women were expected to make a choice: career or family. It was impossible, they were told, to have both. A woman could not devote the kind of time and commitment needed to climb the ladder of success while at the same time giving birth and taking care of children. Eventually, feminists began to fight back, rejecting the forced choice. It was possible, they declared, to build a successful career while still nurturing a family. It was possible, they eventually declared, to have it all.

In 2008, Anne-Marie Slaughter, author of a powerful new book on women, men and work called *Unfinished Business*, believed the mantra. It was indeed possible, under the right circumstances, to have it all, and she was proof. Slaughter had a very high-profile job as dean of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University. She also had a family, including a husband who was a tenured professor of politics and international affairs at Princeton, and two sons, ages nine and 11. With the support and participation of her husband, Slaughter was able to thrive in her position while still leaving the office at 6 p.m.

In 2009, Slaughter was tapped by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to become the first female director of policy planning. The position was, of course, Washington-based. In accepting it, Slaughter began a commuter existence, spending the week in Washington, then returning home on Friday nights to spend the weekend with her family.

Once again, it seemed that she had it all. But not exactly. Slaughter knew she really wasn't there for her boys. Her younger son, then 10, would cry on the eve of her weekly departures. (He once told her during one particular cry, "I don't want you to go. I don't care about the country.") After two years and much deliberation, Slaughter returned to Princeton and her position as dean of the Woodrow Wilson

School. And for the first time, she realized that women could not have it all. It was a bit of a revelation for her.

Despite all the progress that women had made to become accepted in the workplace, despite growing efforts by companies to create conditions where women could marry, have children and still have careers, despite the overwhelming number of husbands who were ready to share the housework and child-caring duties, women, Slaughter concluded, still had to choose, at some point in their lives, between career and family. In 2012, Slaughter wrote an article in *The Atlantic* explaining why this was so, using her own experiences as a launching point.

The article would quickly become one of the most read articles in the history of the magazine. Slaughter had clearly touched a nerve with both men and women, who had grown weary of hearing the "you can have it all" argument. This was especially true of working women who could not afford 24-hour nannies.

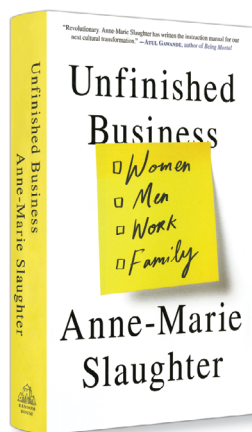
In the aftermath of her article, Slaughter traveled the country giving speeches about the dilemma of working women — and listening to both the support and pushback to her speeches and writings. For some, Slaughter was revealing the unfortunate truth. Women are the caregivers, and successful careers don't leave room for caregiving. For others, Slaughter was throwing

in the towel, wrongly accepting that women will never have the advantage of men, who are allowed to have both careers and family.

Readers of *Unfinished Business* will discover that neither camp is correct. The core of Slaughter's thesis is that women cannot have it all... yet. It is not impossible for women to build incredible careers while nurturing happy families; it is just not possible today.

Deceptive Half-Truths About Women, Men and the Workplace

The problem, according to Slaughter, is that those who are arguing that it is possible for women to balance work and family are basing their argument on a series of half-truths. The first half truth is that "you can have it all if you are just committed enough to your career." In fact, this argument is telling women to act like the men who sacrificed family life



for careers, barely participating in their children's lives. The fact is that those men knew that a parent — their spouse — would be home with the children. Most women today do not have stay-at-home husbands, which means there is no parent for the children at home. Making the decision to sacrifice family life for career under those circumstances is much more difficult.

Instead, women try to stay committed to their careers while juggling career and family life, which may work for a while until something — a child gets seriously ill or in trouble; an aging parent faces health-care challenges; a spouse gets a promotion, which reduces his time with the family — makes the entire balancing act tip over.

The second half-truth, writes Slaughter, is that “you can have it all if you marry the right person.” The idea is that a woman finds a man who shares the domestic duties 50-50. The problem is that 50-50 is not good enough if a woman truly wants to rise high through the ranks; the husband will have to do more, which also means that the husband will have to sacrifice his own high career aspirations.

Finally, the third half-truth that women hold dear, according to Slaughter, is that “you can have it all if you sequence it right.” The sequence might be to build your career, then have children when you are secure in your career. One problem is that depending on how long it takes to build the career, it may be biologically too late for children. And coming back to the workplace after having children doesn't necessarily mean you can step back on the ladder and continue on your merry way. The window of opportunity for a career to the top may be closed.

Half-truths about women are not the only half-truths that explain why women still cannot have it all. Slaughter also points to the half-truths about men that too many people have signed onto.

The first of these half-truths is that “men can't have it all, either.” This half-truth is meant to disarm the women and their allies battling for gender equality. And in some ways, it is true. Men who take advantage of parental leave, for example, might be stigmatized and find they have forfeited real advancement in the firm. However, to declare that men and women have faced the same problems in juggling firm and family would be, in Slaughter's terms, “revisionist history.” The cultural barriers that women have faced have been much more challenging for women who want to balance a career and a family than they have been for men.

The second half-truth related to men is that “children need their mother.” No matter how hard fathers may try to support their wives, the presence of the woman is needed. For Slaughter, this belief is a crutch. Obviously men can't get pregnant, give birth or breastfeed. But that is where it ends. The rest can be done equally well by men.

The third half-truth about men emerges from the Bible, which says that “a man's job is to provide.” This is an ingrained assumption about the roles of men and women that does not necessarily reflect reality. First, 40 percent of American women are the primary breadwinners in their families.

In addition, economic challenges often require a two-income family — the man cannot provide on his own.

Finally, according to Slaughter, the discussion about women successfully managing great careers and happy families is tainted by half-truths about the workplace. The first half-truth is that “work-life balance is a women's problem.” Slaughter argues that work-life balance is neither a woman's nor a man's problem. It's a problem based on the cultural perception of care. “It's a care problem” is a theme she explores in much more detail in the second portion of the book.

One of the most prevalent half-truths about the workplace is that flextime options are allowing women to build their careers while caring for their families. Unfortunately, while flextime is helpful, employees are often unable to access these programs. And even if they exist, taking advantage of such programs is often a “black mark” on the employee.

In short, the argument that women can have it all today is bolstered by half-truths that don't stand up to scrutiny and explain why women are still unsuccessfully fighting the battle to have the same opportunities as men — no more, no less. Men can have great careers and great families; will women ever be able to do the same?

The resounding answer from Slaughter is yes. After explaining why it's not happening today (no matter what some might say), Slaughter then launches into a compelling, inspirational how-to manual on how it can happen tomorrow.

Care and Competition

The first step is recognizing that half-truths are just that: insufficient maxims that don't tell the whole story. For men and women to truly have equal opportunity, there must be a serious shift in the attitudes of society — not about women and men but about care and competition.

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In blunt terms, caring for others is not valued in today's society. While we may all express the greatest admiration for motherhood, no one truly believes that saying, "I'm a homemaker" is as impressive as saying, "I'm chief marketing officer for a major corporation." The corporate ladder-climber wins the admiration points every time.

One of the telltale signs of this discrimination against care and caregiving, according to Slaughter, is in the low salaries that society is willing to pay for caregiving. Indeed, salaries in the care industry are among the lowest of any industry.

The most egregious result of this discrimination against caregiving is what Slaughter calls the "motherhood penalty." Career women, she writes, must pay a penalty for being mothers. That penalty is manifested in two ways. First, mothers who must occasionally take time off to care for their children are considered poor leadership material; they are not given the marquee assignments or other opportunities on which to build a career, and they are not offered promotions.

Another manifestation of the mother penalty is the woman who interrupts her career to spend time with her children; when she returns to the workplace, the years away from the office are considered wasted years. There was, in the minds of corporate decision makers, no value of any kind acquired through caring for children.

Slaughter challenges this assumption in a chapter provocatively titled, "Is managing money really harder than managing kids?" Why should caring for others be considered "easy" — even unskilled? Why should successfully competing in the workplace, in contrast, be considered difficult and a laudable accomplishment?

Slaughter's point, as she states explicitly, is not to devalue competition but to revalue care. There is merit to succeeding in the workplace, but there is equal merit in succeeding as a caregiver. After all, successful caregiving begins by turning "income into goods and services necessary for survival," which includes shopping, cooking, cleaning, washing, organizing and outsourcing. Successful caregiving also includes the emotional components of loving and nurturing. And most impressive of all, successful caregiving includes "teaching, discipline... coaching, encouraging, problem solving, character building and role modeling" — none of which sounds easy.

Having compellingly argued that caregiving is just as important and valuable as competing in the marketplace, Slaughter then denounces what she terms "the competitive mystique" — the idea that true success is measured by how effectively you compete. As long as the bias of the competitive mystique dominates our culture, women with families

will never be considered the equal of women who choose to focus exclusively on their careers.

The question is, how do we move forward? How do we defeat the competitive mystique? Slaughter answers these questions with another provocatively titled chapter: "The next phase of the women's movement is a men's movement." The heart of her argument remains the need to revalue caring, but in this case, this revaluation would be manifested in the way men are treated if they choose to be caregivers.

In short, stay-at-home dads are not treated with the same respect as corporate-ladder-climbing dads. And the lack of respect does not end there, since stay-at-home dads must often face the surprise of others that they are actually good at caregiving. The gender bias is so pervasive that our culture believes not only that "real men" should not want to be caregivers but also that "real men" are incapable of being caregivers!

Thus, to revalue care, Slaughter concludes, women must begin by letting go of society's expectations of who women should be and what women should do — and they should also let go of their own expectations of who men should be and what they are capable of

doing. "If we can let go of the mountain of assumptions, biases, expectations, double standards and doubts that so many of us carry around," she writes, "then a new world of possibilities awaits."

Four Action Steps

In the last section of her book, Slaughter moves from mindset to "concrete" action steps. She begins with the importance of changing the vocabulary — how we talk. We have come a long way since all women were expected to be homemakers and all men the breadwinners. We are no longer surprised at finding women as lawyers, doctors or CEOs (although not as numerous as they should be). What is often overlooked is how a two-letter word, Ms., had a significant impact in helping women break out of the perfectly coiffed and pearled homemaker stereotype. Unlike the title for men, Mr., the original titles for women immediately identified them as married or unmarried. Feminists believed (correctly) that marital status was not the most important piece of information concerning a woman. "Ms. gave women their own identities, regardless of marital status," writes Slaughter. A seemingly small change in language had enormous symbolic significance.

In many ways, language perpetuates our gender biases. A stay-at-home dad is referred to as "Mr. Mom." He's not really a dad; he's a male mom. And male employees with children are not referred to as "working fathers." The implied "correct" gender roles are obvious in the phrases

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“Mr. Mom” and “working mothers.” Slaughter argues that all of us should make deliberate attempts to avoid phrases and words that reinforce gender stereotypes. Even the phrase “stay-at-home” is unfortunate, as it assumes that going to work is the normal state of things.

Another step for “getting to equal,” according to Slaughter, is to plan a career that incorporates intervals when you are less focused on career and more focused on family. The best-laid plans, of course, are rarely realized, but thinking in terms of intervals can help prepare and manage family phases and work phases. Concepts such as career portfolios (of different jobs) and tours of duty also offer different career scenarios that build family-focused time.

The changing world of work also offers opportunities for men and women to have meaningful careers and still be successful caregivers. The on-demand economy, for example, allows for growing numbers of freelancers to work in flexible situations in which they can toggle from intense family-oriented activities to intense work activities. Slaughter also cites the open-work movement, in which employees define the rules of their work environment (in conjunction with the district manager). The changing world of work also calls for employees to take charge by “managing up” — learning how to collaborate and communicate with and even lead superiors in helping you to meet your needs.

The last of Slaughter’s four steps is focused on public policy, which includes building an infrastructure of care (e.g., high-quality affordable care, paid family leave for both women and men). Slaughter also believes that electing more women is important. As sexist as it sounds, research has shown that women in politics will work more on care issues and helping the disadvantaged.

What About Leaning In?

Although the book culminates in several action steps, the core of Slaughter’s message is that our culture must look at care and competition through a new perspective, or “new lenses,” to use Slaughter’s term. This focus on mindset and cultural assumptions is what separates *Unfinished Business* from women-empowerment and success books such as the phenomenally successful *Lean In*, by Sheryl Sandberg.

Slaughter admires Sandberg and has had experiences with readers of *Lean In* who have asserted themselves and become more successful as a result. *Lean In*, however, is about operating within the system, helping women to break down the barriers that keep them from the C-suite. For Slaughter, the conflict is not so much between genders but between the concepts of care and competition. In some ways, *Unfinished Business* is a manifesto for the liberation of caring — a call for us to value care as much as we value competition. It is a tall order, and perhaps taller in America than in other countries. Competi-

tion is the lifeblood of the American way; there is an almost survival-of-the-fittest attitude that permeates many of our policy discussions. Of course, Americans care about their children and their aging parents as much as anyone. But will a 24-year-old nurse working in an assisted-living facility ever be as valued as a 24-year-old Wall Street trader?

Unfinished Business is an audacious challenge to America to dramatically change some fundamental attitudes. As Slaughter writes, “Not valuing caregiving is the taproot, the deeper problem that gives rise to distortion and discrimination in multiple areas of American society. When we open our eyes and change our lenses to focus on competition and care rather than women and work, we can see new solutions and new coalitions that can open the door to progress and change. Care can provide a new political banner under which all women can unite.”

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The author: Anne-Marie Slaughter is president and CEO of New America. She is the Bert G. Kerstetter ’66 University Professor Emerita of Politics and International Affairs at Princeton University and the former dean of its Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. In 2009 Secretary of State Hillary Clinton appointed Slaughter director of policy planning for the U.S. State Department, the first woman to hold that job. A foreign policy analyst, legal and international relations scholar and public commentator, Slaughter was a professor at the University of Chicago Law School and Harvard Law School and is a former president of the American Society of International Law.



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