



An Institutional/ Organizational Turn: Getting to Work–Life Quality and Gender Equality

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Phyllis Moen¹

Hobson, B. (2014). *Worklife Balance: The Agency & Capabilities Gap*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. 320 pp. \$91.00 (hardcover).

Milkman, R., & Appelbaum, E. (2013). *Unfinished Business: Paid Family Leave in California and the Future of U.S Work-Family Policy*. Ithaca, NY: ILR/Cornell University Press. 168 pp. \$19.95 (paper).

Williams, J. C., & Dempsey, R. (2014). *What Works for Women at Work: Four Patterns Working Women Need to Know*. New York: New York University Press. 394 pp. \$24.95 (paper).

Abstract

This review essay examines three recent books contributing toward a broader reframing of approaches to and scholarship on the work–family–gender interface. They are part of an *institutional/organizational turn*, focusing explicitly on public and organizational policies and practices that constrain or facilitate both gender equality and work–life quality. This moves beyond microlevel studies of individuals and families to link and situate gender inequality, stress, and work–family conundrums in outdated state and organizational policy regimes, norms, and expectations that can be *challenged* and *changed*.

¹Department of Sociology, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN, USA

Corresponding Author:

Phyllis Moen, Department of Sociology, 1123 Social Science Building, University of Minnesota, 267 19th Avenue South, Minneapolis, MN 55455, USA.

Email: phylmoen@umn.edu

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U.S. Senator Kirsten Gillibrand recently recounted sexism in the form of banter about her weight by several of her older male Senate colleagues (one even squeezed her waist), a story I imagine most women readers can relate to. Scholars in Europe and the United States document ongoing gender disparities—in hiring, promotions, leadership positions, wages, pensions, and opportunities more broadly. And men and women workers are experiencing ratcheting job demands that extend well beyond the traditional workday. Clearly, gender equality and work–life quality have yet to be achieved.

In fact, Kathleen Gerson (2010) describes the gender revolution as “unfinished,” Paula England (2010) calls it “stalled,” and Gøsta Esping-Andersen (2009) concludes it is at “an unstable equilibrium.” The question we all confront is, “Why does gender *inequality* persist when most Americans and Europeans subscribe to and even endorse the more general idea of gender *equality*?”

Unfortunately, there is no single or simple answer, but, as these three books convey, there are a range of possible initiatives by different sets of actors (policy makers, organizational leaders, and managers, as well as individuals and households) that move from chipping away toward eliminating enduring gender disparities and promoting life quality at home and at work.

To address contemporary gender inequality as well as the ways it intersects with low work–life quality requires scholarship and action on three levels. First is the need to recognize institutionalized state *social and labor market* policies and practices perpetuating work–family conflicts as well as societal, organizational, and domestic gender disparities, developing ways of resetting policies to promote more equality and less stress given the changing nature of work and the workforce. Second are *organizational policies and practices* challenging the rigidity of work hours, the temporal organization of career paths, and the absence of a climate of support for successfully managing home and work. And third are *individual/household strategies* over the life course in response to lagging policies and practices in order to manage two careers, two sets of job shifts and retirement exits,

singlehood, single parenthood, and more generally family and personal care work in addition to paid work (and leisure) over the life course, strategies that often produce within-household inequalities between (even egalitarian) partners.

Most of my own scholarship has been about what Riley, Kahn, and Foner (1994) describe as *structural lag*, especially the mismatch between existing work time, life course, and career development policies and practices, on the one hand, and transforming economies, technologies, households, work, and workforces, on the other, even as existing social protections are being scaled back, if not eliminated. After more than 30 years of research, I have concluded that such institutional/organizational lag accounts for much of contemporary gender inequality and its cumulativeness over the life course (Moen, 2013; Moen & Roehling, 2005). The books I review below address important components of this mismatch, taking on a dynamic, contextual framing (also evident in the Work, Family and Health Network, see King et al., 2012, and my own as well as others' scholarship; Bailyn, 2011; Jacobs & Gerson, 2004; Moen, 2011; Perlow & Kelly, 2014; Pettit & Hook, 2009; Rapoport, Bailyn, Fletcher, & Pruitt, 2002) as part of a larger paradigm shift, an *institutional/organizational turn* in the (re)framing of gender inequality and work-life quality.

Gaps in Agency and Capabilities

As evidence of the importance of multilayered institutional and organizational contexts, the constraints of existing, outdated public policies and work time rigidities are addressed through the lens of a broad comparative perspective in *Worklife Balance: The Agency and Capabilities Gap*, edited by Barbara Hobson (professor of sociology, Stockholm University). Hobson introduces the book's ambitious goal in Chapter 1:

To develop a framework for analyzing agency and capabilities for work-life balance (WLB) in a complex and multilayered universe of constraints and possibilities and of rights and capabilities to exercise them, considering different institutional contexts across European and Asian societies (Japan). (p. 3)

Worklife Balance's key contribution is precisely this institutional/organizational turn: Rather than viewing the absence of worklife

balance (WLB) as private troubles of individuals and couples, the authors ground the *problem* in prevailing structural and cultural arrangements across firms as well as nation-states. The key concepts of agency and capabilities draw on Amartya Sen's theorizing of capabilities as the ability to function in a variety of ways. The book's 10 chapters are all based on this framing of WLB as an important dimension of functioning, with capability constraints lodged not in individuals but rather in different national and organizational policies and practices. In other words, the authors distinguish between individual ability and *socially constrained* capabilities, focusing on the latter. Constrained capabilities, in turn, drive the agency gap—that is, the degree of control people have over their choices and their behaviors. Agency is always situated in social relationships and institutional arrangements that reproduce gendered choices and inequalities in people's lives, at work and at home. This book provides useful insights and is innovative in applying Sen's concepts to work–family balance (WFB) and provides informative cross-national comparisons. Moreover, every single chapter contributes insights relevant to the institutional/organizational turn in the study of the complex intersections of gender, work, home, and personal life.

The volume is divided into two parts. Part I addresses “Individual/household and the Agency and Capabilities Gap: Policy Frameworks, Norms, and Work Organizational Cultures.” Susanne Fahlén, a sociologist doing postdoctoral work at Stockholm University, sets the stage in Chapter 2 by providing a comparative overview of the *agency gap* in WLB across 11 European countries as well as Japan. She first looks at institutionalized policies and gender norms providing the (often constraining) contexts in which individuals and households make work-related decisions. As an example of how all the authors conceptualize and operationalize capabilities, Fahlén defines the work time capabilities gap as “the differences between actual paid working hours and how many hours one would choose to work, whether it meant a loss or a gain in pay” (p. 35).

The other three chapters in Part 1 describe institutional factors shaping agency, capabilities, and WLB in Sweden, Hungary, Japan, Germany, and Spain. Sonja Drobnič and Margarita León, for instance, examine the capability set—individual and family resources and demands within the contexts of institutional and societal resources as well as normative expectations, all of which affect WLB—for German and Spanish men and women, as well as those in other European countries. They make a key point related to agency inequalities in WLB and

labor force participation given the absence of societal and institutional support for WLB:

Women who anticipate high work-life conflict are less likely to be employed in the first place or they “resolve” the conflict by not having children. In this respect, the situation in Germany and Spain resonates with low fertility in many other European countries . . . (p. 146)

Part II shifts the focus to corporations: “The Firm Level and the Agency and Capabilities Gap: Policies, Managers, and Work Organization.” The chapters in this section again speak to an institutional/organizational turn, underscoring real omissions in the extant literature on work–family issues as reproducing gender inequalities. For example, Laura den Dulk, Sandra Groeneveld (both associate professors of Public Administration at Erasmus University Rotterdam), and Bram Peper (also at Erasmus as an assistant professor in the Departments of Sociology and Criminology) challenge the typical focus on the number of policies offered by the state or organization to highlight the role of organizational policies as *supplementing* state policies in ways that translate into workers’ capabilities and agency to achieve WLB. I am on record (Moen, 2011) as reluctant to use the “balance” construct, preferring instead “work–life quality.” But that is because *balance* is typically viewed as a personal problem of individuals (such as “I need to balance better”) and applied more to women than men. By contrast, this book treats WLB as an organizational and governmental issue.

Unfinished Business

Turning to Ruth Milkman and Eileen Appelbaum’s new book, *Unfinished Business: Paid Family Leave in California and the Future of U.S. Work-Family Policy* (2013), after reading Hobson’s edited volume only paints in sharp relief the meager degree of institutionalization of work–family supports and policies in the United States. This volume also echoes the institutional/organizational turn, a framing that Milkman (professor of sociology at the CUNY Graduate Center) and Appelbaum (senior economist at the Center for Economic and Policy Research) have pursued throughout their careers.

This book provides a nice overview of unpaid and paid leave in the United States to set the stage for their study of the enactment in 2002 of the state of California’s paid leave law, “the first comprehensive paid

family leave (PFL) program” (p. 1) in the United States. But they go beyond analysis of the California case to discuss potential for the institutionalizing of paid leave across the United States. Milkman and Appelbaum point to the absence of paid time off as key to the wage disparities between women and men; these disparities accumulate over the life course, given that the weight of family care work falls disproportionately to women (Folbre, 2012). Indeed, as they show, the motherhood penalty is alive and well (Budig & England, 2001; Correll, Benard, & Paik, 2007).

This book demonstrates that PFL in California is a major milestone in work–family policy in the United States, providing almost universal coverage for those in the private sector (the least covered by other protections). Nevertheless, Milkman and Appelbaum demonstrate ways PFL in California perpetuates inequality. For example, they find that limited awareness of the PFL program fosters low take-up, as do concerns about job security, that is, worries that taking PFL might make their employer unhappy, reduce opportunities for advancement, or result in their being fired. Insufficient income as well as the hassles of applying are other reasons why those who knew about PFL did not take advantage of it.

For those who used the PFL program, however, it became an important source of wage replacement, especially beneficial to those in low-quality jobs who are seldom provided other forms of wage replacement. The authors find other important benefits, such as improved ability to care for ailing relatives, mothers more apt to breastfeed their newborns, and parents’ abilities to make childcare arrangements. This book should be required reading for those concerned about work, family, and gender in the United States, as well as for those interested in the processes and impacts of policy change.

Strategic Responses to Gender Bias in Organizations

Joan C. Williams (distinguished professor and director of the Center for WorkLife Law at the Hastings College of Law, University of California) and her daughter Rachel Dempsey (a student at Yale Law School) have teamed up to provide a perceptive intergenerational perspective on gender politics, gender bias, and even sexual harassment in organizations. Their very readable and informative book, *What Works for Women at Work: Four Patterns Working Women Need to Know* (2014), not only depicts the experiences of and challenges confronting

a wide array of professional women, but it also includes a rich depiction of the latest research evidence supporting their claims.

But the reason for reading this book (and you should, men as well as women) is that they give lots of *advice*, advice that does not blame women themselves for their situations but takes on the constraining realities embedded in the contemporary social organization of work. The two authors offer excellent hands-on suggestions and tips about what to do as an (woman) employee in the face of chronic patterns of gender bias evident to some degree in every organization. Williams and Dempsey propose two different paths:

Path one is to educate yourself. If you understand the biases working against you, you can learn how to “hack” them—manipulate them to lessen their impact or even work them to your advantage. Path two is to educate others. As long as we ignore unconscious biases, they’ll remain invisible. Only people who know their biases can rise above them. (p. 15)

This book is significant in that it identifies and responds to the *social relational* aspects of the institutional/organizational turn. It is divided into seven parts. The first four identify forms of bias and how to navigate them: Prove-It-Again, The Tightrope, The Maternal Wall, and The Tug of War. Part 5 documents how the experience of gender bias differs by race. Part 6 addresses the conundrum of whether to stay or leave a problematic work environment. And in the final section, Williams and Dempsey summarize 20 lessons as well, offering suggestions as to how to jump-start the stalled gender revolution, noting that *only* providing women with individual strategies to respond to gender bias is *not* the solution. They point out that “at the current rate of change, equal numbers of men and women won’t be CEOs of Fortune 500 companies for 276 years, and Congress won’t reach gender parity for nearly a century” (p. 299).

What is required, Williams and Dempsey conclude, is exactly what scholars and activists taking the institutional/organizational turn have recommended (including the authors of the preceding two books)—redesigning the clockworks of work time and career paths as well as business processes and salary systems.

These three books do not overlap at all in subject matter. And yet all three are tackling the *same* issue—structural lag in the organization of work, family, and gender—from different vantage points. Though some scholars (like Lotte Bailyn) have *been there* all along, others are joining together in this institutional/organizational turn.

This is the view of gender inequality and work–life quality for the 21st century that can promote social and organizational change. What’s next? A key component of the research agenda should be analyses of public and organizational differences (as in *Worklife Balance*), whether changes in state or organizational policies produce changes in gender inequality and work–life quality (as in *Unfinished Business*), or the effects on and options of workers in light of existing policy regimes (as in *What Works for Women at Work*). Quasi-experimental or experimental studies of innovations, investigating the impacts of changes in the social and policy environments of paid work and care work, are key to understanding these social processes, opening up new horizons in the study of work, personal life, and gender, and new possibilities for more egalitarian and less stressful ways of working and living.

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Author Biography

After 25 years at Cornell University (where she was awarded the first Ferris Family Chair in Life Course Studies), in 2003 professor **Phyllis Moen** moved to the Sociology Department at the University of Minnesota, where she holds a McKnight Presidential Chair. Her forthcoming book, *Boomers on the Edge: Risks and Renewal in "Encore" Adulthood*, addresses institutionalized age and gender inequalities in the second half of the adult life course.