

#IWD2016 Book Review: Unfinished Business: Women Men Work Family by Anne-Marie Slaughter

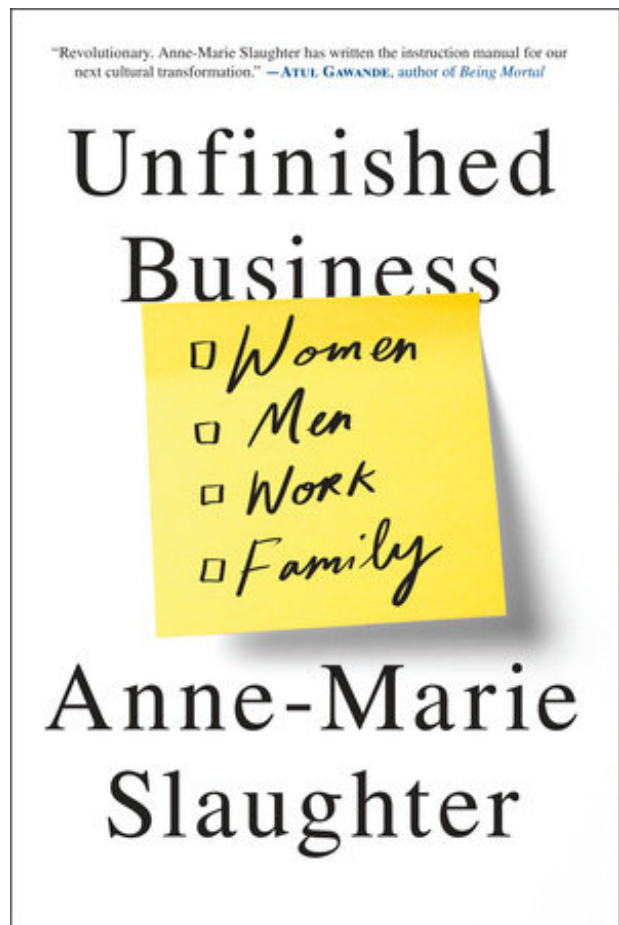
Is it really possible to 'have it all'? In ***Unfinished Business: Women Men Work Family***, Anne-Marie Slaughter unravels the 'half truths' that lie behind this claim, examining how the struggle to manage increasingly incompatible life and work pressures remains particularly potent for women due to the continued gendering of caregiving. Drawing upon her own experiences, Slaughter calls for us to forge a more meaningful and mutually beneficial relationship between work and family. *Unfinished Business* is therefore a compelling and accessible read for all those interested in gender, work and family politics in the twenty-first century, writes **Hannah Walters**.

This review is part of a theme week marking **International Women's Day 2016** (#IWD2016). March is Women's History Month and LSE is celebrating with *LSE Women: Making History*, focusing on #LSEwomen past, present and future. If you are interested in finding out more, please visit [the LSE History blog](#).

***Unfinished Business: Women Men Work Family*. Anne-Marie Slaughter. One World Publications. 2015.**

| 'It's such a pity you had to leave Washington.'

The opening sentence to Anne-Marie Slaughter's *Unfinished Business: Women Men Work Family*, these words were spoken when Slaughter was director of policy planning for the US state department working under then-Secretary of State, Hilary Clinton. The first woman to hold this position, Slaughter was edging ever closer to one of only a handful of higher appointments in Washington. But her job at the state department meant working away from her family home in Princeton, New Jersey, where her husband and two teenage sons lived. Commuting between home and work every week to spend weekends with her family, Slaughter – a self-defined career woman and a person 'shaped by and devoted to the opportunities, power and promise of the women's movement' – found herself entering an unstable and utterly unforeseen period of her life. As established in a deeply personal opening chapter, Slaughter articulates how, for her at least, the pressures of her family and work lives grew increasingly incompatible as her career progressed and her children reached their teenage years. With her home and work commitments each growing ever more demanding, Slaughter made the complicated decision to leave her life in Washington behind, and return to Princeton. Her family needed her.



Following this experience, Slaughter penned a piece for the *Atlantic* entitled ‘[Why Women Still Can’t Have It All](#)’ (something of an inflammatory title that she quickly came to regret). The piece became one of the most read articles in the publication’s 150-year history, with an estimated 2.7 million views (xix). *Unfinished Business* serves to explicate the central message of the *Atlantic* piece, as well as to respond to some of the numerous criticisms levelled at Slaughter upon its publication.

Focusing upon the seeming incompatibility of work and family in her own life, Slaughter’s central argument tackles the ways in which society values caregiving. For Slaughter, the lack of prestige and value society extends to all types of caregiving – within our own families as well as in professions such as teaching or nursing – is central to the career-life ‘balance’ with which so many women (and increasingly, men) struggle. Slaughter argues:

At least since the Industrial Revolution, we have split work and family into two different spheres, one the world of men and the other the world of women. As more and more women entered the world of work, the relationship between work and family became one of profound tension, each tugging at the other (255).

This is the central message running throughout Slaughter’s book, and the theme of its three sections: ‘Moving beyond our Mantras’, ‘Changing Lenses’ and ‘Getting to Equal’. Each of these are meticulously researched, and skilfully unfold Slaughter’s manifesto for all working men and women with families: namely, that we must deconstruct the tense relationship between family and work and forge a meaningful, synergistic and mutually beneficial relationship between these two near-universal nodes of modern people’s lives.

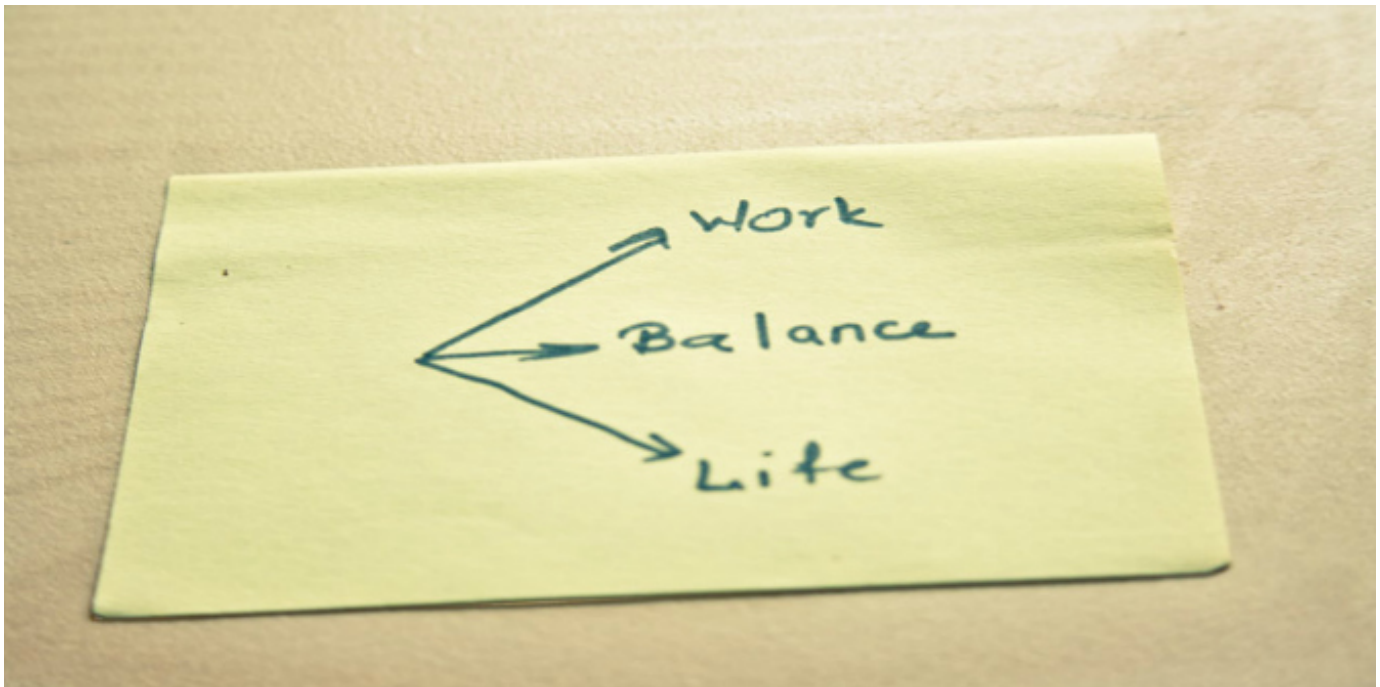


Image Credit: Work Balance Life ([pdpics](#))

Part One, ‘Moving Beyond Our Mantras’, explores ideas of ‘having it all’ through a comprehensive list of ‘half truths’, many of which are instantly recognisable from self-help books, women’s magazines and inspirational social media quotes. Through this detailed discussion, Slaughter demonstrates how these are not only half truths, but *damaging* half truths, leading to corrosive feelings of inadequacy, guilt and shame on the part of women who are struggling to manage this monstrous balancing act. For women, Slaughter outlines the following three half truths:

You can have it all if you are just committed enough to your career

You can have it all if you marry the right person

You can have it all if you sequence it right

These are followed with an exhaustive and meticulously researched discussion of each, detailing the research behind each claim and demonstrating, convincingly, that each of these statements is exactly as Slaughter categorises them: a half truth. Of course there's a nugget of fact hidden within them, but the image each depicts is a massive distortion of reality for most working women.

Slaughter subsequently elaborates on these half truths, filling in the lacuna in the reality each represents:

You can have it all if you are just committed enough to your career ... and you are lucky enough never to hit a point where your carefully constructed balance between work and family topples over.

You can have it all if you marry the right person ... who is willing to defer his or her career to yours; you stay married; and your own preferences regarding how much time you are willing to spend at work remain unchanged after you have children or find yourself caring for aging parents.

You can have it all if you sequence it right ... as long as you succeed in having children when you planned to; you have an employer who both permits you to work part-time or on a flexible work schedule and still sees you as leadership material; or you take time out and then find a good job on a leadership track once you decide to get back in, regardless of your age (35-6).

For Slaughter, therefore, 'family makes work possible in the same way work makes family possible' (255); for decades, men have enjoyed family and career success in part due to the fact that they had minimal domestic responsibilities. With more women entering the workforce, these responsibilities become complicated, thus the central tension between work and family.

While Slaughter herself has forged a glittering career across the fields of law, policy and academia, her analysis is not limited to these privileged few who are well compensated for their work. Rather, Slaughter makes a point of acknowledging her own privilege, even if this is the lens through which the central problem of *Unfinished Business* was originally viewed. Moreover, Slaughter explores the lives of America's millions of low-income hourly workers, for whom even the limited flexibility of the white collar world is unattainable – for these lower paid workers in the US economy, Slaughter notes that almost a quarter 'have been fired or threatened with job loss for taking time off to recover from illness or care for a sick loved one' (64). Slaughter discusses in detail the lived experiences of this economic uncertainty for so many Americans, and while the particulars may differ country to country, the broad strokes – punishing schedules, prohibitively expensive childcare, low-paid women feeling the crunch like no other demographic – are instantly recognisable to a UK audience.

But what makes Slaughter's book a truly unique read is the ways in which her own, deeply personal story is intertwined with the narrative. In addition to being a meticulously researched comprehensive overview of the titular *Women Men Work Family*, and how these four operate in the twenty-first century, *Unfinished Business* articulates one woman's personal relationship with her own feminist perspectives on work and family, and how these interact with the lived experience of a working mother. That said, to categorise *Unfinished Business* as anything other than an advancement of long-held feminist goals of equality is to misunderstand the book's central message: *Unfinished Business* is not an apology, but a manifesto. As Slaughter notes:

I am increasingly convinced that advancing women means breaking free of a new set of stereotypes and assumptions, not only for women, but also for men. It means challenging a much wider range of conventional wisdom about what we value and why, about measures of success, about the wellsprings of human nature and what equality really means. It means rethinking everything from workplace design to life stages to leadership styles (xx).

While *Unfinished Business* is a valuable contribution to current debates, both within the social sciences and at policy level, the book also makes for a compelling and accessible read for anyone interested in gender, work or family politics in the twenty-first century.

Hannah Walters is an ESRC-funded PhD student at the University of Glasgow. Her current research focuses on working-class girls, precarious youth transitions and imagined futures, with an emphasis upon the mechanics of social class and gender in hair and beauty vocational education. More broadly, her research interests include social class, gender, value and sexual and reproductive rights, as well as Bourdieusian and feminist theory.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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