Ask The Experts: Improving the Plight of Working Moms (Excerpt from the Article “Best and Worst States for Working Moms”)

By John Keirnan

It’s clear that something must be done to increase workplace gender equality and ease the burden on working parents, but there is significant debate about what that “something” should be. For some added insight into the issue, we turned to an eclectic group of experts – from university professors who research gender roles and economics to the authors of some of the most popular career and women’s blogs. You can check out both our panel and their insights below.

Amber Rosenberg: Professional Coach, Pacific Life Coach

Erika George: Professor of Law, University of Utah S.J. Quinney College of Law

Jennifer Owens: Director, Working Mother Research Institute
Sara Sutton Fell: CEO & Founder, FlexJobs.com

Samantha Ettus: Bestselling Author, Host of the Nationally Syndicated Radio Show “Working Moms Lifestyle”

Emma Johnson: Author of WealthySingleMommy.com, Host of the Nationally Syndicated Radio Show “The Emma Johnson Show”

Katrina Alcorn: Author of WorkingMomsBreak.com & Maxed Out: American Moms on the Brink

Ryan Light: Assistant Professor of Sociology, University of Oregon

Daniel M. Roddick: Professor of Sociology, Rio Hondo College
• 1 **Is it becoming easier or harder for women to balance a career & family?**
• 2 **How can state & local governments improve the plight of working moms?**
• 3 **What needs to be done to promote gender equality in the workplace?**

**Is it becoming easier or harder for women to balance a career & family?**

“I believe it is becoming harder and harder for women to balance work and life. The phrase ‘you can have it all’ has somehow morphed into ‘you should have it all.’ Women have pressure from every direction to be the perfect mother, partner and employee. And, many working mothers feel that they’re coming up short on both the work and home front. Many working mothers feel as if they’ve failed both their families and their employers.”

– **Amber Rosenberg, Pacific Life Coach**

“In some ways it's easier, with the rise of 24/7 technology, more access to workplace flexibility and increasing hands-on parenting by men. But 24/7 technology has also made it harder to step away from work, while parenting demands on women have also increased in the past decade.”

– **Jennifer Owens, Working Mother Research Institute**

“Both actually. There are so many more demands on families these days and moms are generally the ones to do it all. Maintain a professional life, be present for school and extra-curricular activities, volunteer in schools or in the community, and run a healthy, well-functioning home.

The silver lining is that work flexibility is no longer as fringe of an idea as it used to be. More companies are adapting flexible options and recognizing that when a woman feels that her time and talents are valued outside of the traditional 9-5 cubicle model, she will be more productive and loyal.”

– **Sara Sutton Fell, FlexJobs.com**

“Women are the breadwinners in unprecedented numbers which means they are more in control than ever before. When women stop focusing on balance and juggling and start focusing on how to manage their own lives better, they can live up to their potential.”
“Easier! Employers are improving getting on board with family-friendly policies like flexible work schedules and better maternity/paternity leave. Technology allows us to blur the lines between career and family more seamlessly - including the huge and growing trend of self-employment, entrepreneurship and opportunities to work at home.

Plus, we are that much further along in the feminist revolution -- we are embracing the idea that we can be both successful professionals AND successful wives and mothers -- moving towards abolishing working-mom guilt which can sabotage both spheres.

To this point men are also getting on board more, understanding what it takes to raise a family and taking a more active role at home -- all of which means give women the space to succeed in all parts of our lives.”

– Emma Johnson, WealthySingleMommy.com

“I think it's becoming harder. Americans are expected to work longer hours than our parents did, and wages have stagnated. Families used to be able to live a middle class life on one income in the 50s and 60s, but we can no longer do that. Most families need two incomes. And yet, society and the workplace have not caught up to this change in our lives, so we're all living in a half-changed world. We're expected to do our jobs as if we don't have children, and then raise our children as if we don't have jobs.”

– Katrina Alcorn, WorkingMomsBreak.com

How can state & local governments improve the plight of working moms?

- Provide training on gender equality to management and human resources (and educate staff on nuances)

- Provide employees with quality, on-site child care facilities for all parents who work at the company

- Make sure that family leave and flex time is available to both men and women

- Showcase your company's successful women
- Publicize your company's efforts to promote gender equality and become a role model for other businesses”

— Amber Rosenberg, Pacific Life Coach

“The most basic offering would be to mandate paid sick dates for all employees, including working parents. From there, I would say a mandate for paid family leave is a given.”

— Jennifer Owens, Working Mother Research Institute

“San Francisco's recent Family Friendly Ordinance is a great example of reasonable legislation that is appealing to working mothers. By making it acceptable to request flexible work options, and requiring a company to take it under legitimate consideration, the city has taken real steps to eliminating the stigma and calming the fears of women who could do so much more with the right arrangements.

Another important move would be for local and state governments to embrace work flexibility for their own workforce, in addition to just FMLA. Telecommuting options and flexible schedules are two that make the most sense. If they started making real policies that are in practice on a wide scale, it would set a great example for the private sector.”

— Sara Sutton Fell, FlexJobs.com

“For a community to be attractive to working mothers it needs to provide things as micro as changing tables in the public bathrooms and as macro as affordable childcare. A public library and playgrounds – the conveniences of a thriving and healthy community – are the icing on the cake.”

— Samantha Ettus, “Working Moms Lifestyle” Radio Show

“New York City's (where I live) new full-day universal pre-K is a great, huge step that is obviously great for kids, but it is even better for working moms! Anything that guarantees quality, affordable (or free!) child care is an enormous benefit to working parents. I'd love to see more tax breaks for sole financial providers, increased deductions for child care and other educational expenses, like after-school activities.”
Municipalities can give tax incentives and other preferential treatment to companies with family-friendly policies to attract and retain these businesses to their communities.”

– Emma Johnson, WealthySingleMommy.com

“Parents need paid parental leave, paid sick days, more flexible scheduling options, and affordable, quality childcare. Ideally, we would have government and business owners partnering to create an environment where parents can raise their families and support them financially and keep themselves healthy in the process.”

– Katrina Alcorn, WorkingMomsBreak.com

“Protective legislation should include:

- Equal pay for equal work
- Equal recruitment, hiring, training and promotion for both genders
- Strict laws against any form of sexual harassment”

– Amber Rosenberg, Pacific Life Coach

What needs to be done to promote gender equality in the workplace?

“I think what needs to be done to promote more gender equality in the work place will be more than law. Gender discrimination can be something that looks like discretion masquerading as making assessments about who is doing what quality of work, or what value certain work has, or who is more valuable when that work is done. And I think what really has to be unpacked is perhaps assumptions that are explicit, sometimes implicit, about where women are positioned in particular industries or particular places within a company.

Some of the things that can be done to promote gender equality really have to center on not just pay discrimination, but presence – where women are in organization – and the perception of women in organizations. And I think successful companies will be able to set the tone from the top. And that may not necessarily mean having a female CEO, but it certainly means having someone in leadership who is mindful of how perceptions persist that help to support gender discrimination and gender inequality.”

– Erika George, Utah Law
“I think the first step is to realize that while gender discrimination certain still exists, what is actually more pervasive is unconscious bias, as in assuming a working mother wouldn't want a promotion because it involves travel or that an older employee might not want to learn a new technology. These biases undercut what companies must do build a diverse and inclusive workforce, one that will open up new markets and new business for them.”

– Jennifer Owens, Working Mother Research Institute

“Of course equal pay is an obvious answer. The idea that in 2014, women still do not make wages equivalent to their male counterparts is beyond understanding. Flexible work options are another big piece of the puzzle.

While the need for flexibility is not gender specific, the fact remains that women have to make choices between their career and their families more frequently than men do. Even when women choose to continue working after becoming a parent, the primary responsibility for handling the day-to-day and unexpected occurrences that come up, falls on them the majority of the time. When a woman knows that she can be there to take care of her family when she needs to be, the same focus and dedication she gives to them can be directed to her job.”

– Sara Sutton Fell, FlexJobs.com

“A gender equal workplace exists when the people at the top are committed and aggressive about hiring and retaining female talent. It happens through structured policies – like paid maternity leave - as well as a cultural commitment to being a female friendly environment with zero tolerance for a boys club mentality.”

– Samantha Ettus, “Working Moms Lifestyle” Radio Show

“The best thing employers can do is to help families thrive at work. This means flexible work schedules, opportunities to work at home whenever possible, generous health care, parental leave and other benefits. Find creative ways to express to your working employees that you value their roles in the office AND at home -- this could include paid-time-off to volunteer in your kids' school or coach soccer, for example.

This is a negligible cost to the employer, but sends an ginormous message to employees that they are valued and don't have to make Sophie's Choice decisions about work and
home. But my focus is on empowering women to build their very best lives, and the best way for most moms to do that is to build their own companies or otherwise be self-employed. There are so many opportunities today to make that happen, it's an incredibly exciting time to be a professional mom today.”

– Emma Johnson, WealthySingleMommy.com

“Even though women are now almost half the workforce, we're still stuck in traditional gender roles at home. Women do much more housework and childcare (or eldercare), even when both parents work. One of the biggest things we could do is encourage dads to get more involved at home, which would give women more support with their caregiving responsibilities, and it would also level the playing field in the workplace.

We also need workplaces to emphasize RESULTS over work hours. Often moms are more time-constrained than people who don't have to do the daycare pick up, and yet, they're incredibly productive when they're at work. But most workplaces penalize people for working fewer hours. Part-timers make less on a pro-rated basis, but in the U.S., they also make less per hour. This is partly how women get "mommy-tracked" and it doesn't have to be this way.”

– Katrina Alcorn, WorkingMomsBreak.com

“I agree with President Obama that workplace policies are an important source of gender inequality and agree that we should focus on making these policies more equitable. I believe that these policies should include paid medical and family leave. These policies are increasingly common for professionals, but not for all workers. Stigma may provide one potential barrier to the effectiveness of these policies. If employees are seen as deficient or less committed when taking leave, then the policies obviously will not reduce inequality. To this end, leave policies should explicitly include equal parental leave and male and female employees alike should feel comfortable taking care of their young children and other family members in need of care.

Classic sociological research identifies the deep cultural connection between work and gender. Our workplaces remain gendered spaces. I tend to agree with the idea that the ‘ideal worker’ in many workplaces is a male. Human resource policies often seem more directed towards protecting organizations against liability rather than building more equitably places of employment. This points to two things: First, federal and state legislation do have an effect by generating some focus on compliance. Second, we have a lot of work to do to change the culture of work.”

– Ryan Light, University of Oregon
“It’s unfortunate that we need the federal government to force us into these more equitable policies, but that often appears to be the case. It seems shortsighted for corporations to have policies that serve to discourage half of their potential workforce. One would hope that the success of firms having more enlightened policies would motivate others as well. Annual listings such as Fortune Magazine’s ‘Best Companies To Work For’ actually may serve as drivers of this change, attracting better quality workers to the best working situations and serving as a model for the companies that lag behind.

The essential question is whether or not we want both men and women to have equitable opportunities to utilize their talents in the workplace. Anything less than that reduces our overall productivity. And, if workers can only successfully participate by severely compromising their family responsibilities, then we all pay that price in the resulting social problems.”

– Daniel M. Roddick, Rio Hondo College