

# ***The Impact of Partnership and Family-building on the Careers of UK Female Graduates: Issues for Effective Management Practice***

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(Organisational Cultures; Women at work and women in management: what are the different ways of working?)

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- In the UK, the proportion of couples who were 'work-rich' increased from 58-67 per cent between 1994/5 and 2005/6 (Simon and Whiting 2007).
- The proportion of couples with dependent children where both partners were in work increased from 57 per cent to 66 per cent.
- The UK now has one of the highest rates of participation and completion of higher education courses in Europe (OECD 2006)
- Women's participation rates have risen substantially in the last quarter of the 20th century - 7.2 percentage participation gap in favour of women
- Continued asymmetry in career outcomes for men and women, including gendered occupational segmentation and a significant gender pay gap
- Human capital explanations fail to account for inequality (re: discontinuity of employment associated with the greater tendency for women to take career breaks for family-building)
- Even prior to having children, this pay gap exists between male and female graduates and continues to widen over early career for those in continuous full-time employment

# Research Methodology

- Data drawn from two studies of a cohort of graduates from 38 UK higher education institutions who completed their undergraduate studies in 1995:
- *Graduate Careers Seven Years on* (2002-03) - Questionnaire survey of approximately 4500 graduates and a follow-up programme of 200 detailed, semi-structured interviews with a subsample of survey respondents.
- *Through the Glass Ceiling* (2005-06) - New qualitative data were collected in 70 follow-up interviews (*Ten years on*) with a sub-sample of the graduates previously interviewed, with the explicit focus on gender inequality and career transitions.

# Family-building, partnership and transitions

- A central issue was how best to achieve or maintain control over their careers and working lives in the face of changing values, attitudes and personal priorities/circumstances.
- Career decisions concerning changing jobs, relocation and accepting or pursuing promotion were increasingly made in the context of partnership, household responsibilities and family-building
  - Survey data suggested that compatibility with their partners' career and achieving a satisfactory work/life balance was an increasingly high priority for most respondents of both sexes
- For many, the transition from individual or parallel to dyadic career decision-making transpired to be more problematic to negotiate than anticipated.
- Decisions about divisions of labour within households, and the extent to which employers were committed to equal opportunities practice and facilitating career development that was compatible with parenthood, were of crucial importance in enabling - or obstructing - career maintenance.



# Family-friendly employment?

## Key themes:

- Interaction of formal policy and informal practice
- The importance of control
- The labour process and job content
- Line management
- Organisational culture

Cumulative impact on ability to successfully balance competing demands

# Good practice – Interaction of formal and informal practice

- *'If anything, I think they've valued me more since I've gone back, or it feels like that, with pay increases and this promotion, than when I was there doing a full-time job...*
- *... there is flexibility in that if there are problems, you know if my son isn't very well, then they allow me to work from home and obviously there's the freedom to go and get him out of nursery if he's ill and there's no hard feelings about that at all, it's just a case of you're a mother now and you've got work to do as well as your family life.... There's quite a good amount of flexibility and understanding...*
- *... [before taking maternity leave] I didn't realise they were quite so accommodating, but I guess that's... I put that down to my line manager, he's very good and he's a family man himself and understands the commitments...*
- *... I'm much more career focused since having my son... I've actually become more focused on what I want and the career is what I want. They're saying I have the talent to get to a senior management role. The conversation we've had is all about how quickly I want to get there and we've talked about a five-year plan...*
- *...I am expecting my second, but I expressed to the company that that doesn't get in the way of where I want to be in five years and if I have to work harder when I get back to get there, then that's fine. I don't want to be taken off the radar because I'm going back on maternity leave'. (Female, 31, Pensions manager, Manufacturing, married with children)*

# The importance of Control

- Control as multi-dimensional - 'time', career trajectory and the achievement of individual and collective ambition.
- Central to the success of non-standard working patterns was individual (at least, partial) control over when, how and where work was to be done.
- Several interviewees reflected on the fact that being able to set the parameters by which they work was central to fulfilling both their domestic and work responsibilities.
- At the most fundamental level this specifically relates to working time and having the ability to work predictable hours.
- However, in high level jobs, attainment of control appears more difficult than simply having set 'clocking off' times and relates to job content, organisational culture and the attitude and understanding of immediate line management.
- In the interviews, we heard evidence of where reduced hours working had been highly successful and had contributed to career success...
- ... but also of incidence where the blurring of work-life boundaries had resulted in a failure to balance competing priorities, mostly due to line management 'intolerance' or embedded organisational culture that overrode explicit organisational policy.



# Control and the labour process

- *'I'm doing recruitment [now]. It's really bringing external people into the business rather than focusing on internal resource management. That's the key difference... it's more manageable for me on a part-time basis because the resource role that I was doing I really needed to be there every day. But this... the recruitment side, I can manage my own diary and speak to external candidates when it suits me... It works well because I can manage my time and I know that, you know, I won't interview anyone after four o'clock because I've got to leave at five... it is down to me to manage my time effectively... [in my previous role] I had control over it - but things changed constantly every day and somebody needed to be there to respond to them... whereas because I'm recruiting external people into the business it's OK for me not to be there everyday'* (Female, 31, resource manager in ICT, married, children)

# The embeddedness of good practice

- *'... in the reward team there are another two part timers, so they're used to people with those kind of working arrangements'... there are other people that have commitments [that] they have to leave on time for, as well. I guess it is OK. You will get some kind of martyrs to the cause always [but] it's not frowned upon if you go home having done your hours. I think it's just expected you will do what you need to do to get it done'.*  
(Female, 32, rewards manager in banking and finance, married to civil servant, children)
- *'[My employer] goes out of its way to be as accommodating and flexible as it possibly can be for people with...well, not just particularly with children, but for any other reason. We have members of staff who have illnesses in their family and we have to be very flexible for them to work. So, yes, I've been flexible with my staff and I knew very much that the director would be flexible, although we didn't particularly discuss it when I was still there full-time, but he knew I think, that I would come back with some plan. The other head of department, the head of energy, also works flexible hours because she has young children as well, so there was already a precedent there'.*  
(Female, 31, Head of recycling in not-for-profit sector, married to civil servant, children)

# Standing in the way of control?

- *'... I started working for a head-hunters down the road from here who would let me work four days a week and I worked there for a year, but it became too tough to actually balance work and life, so I left there last November... I'm now self-employed...*
- *I think for me the [final straw] came in my last job was when my son had chicken pox and he needed to be off nursery for two weeks and I actually had to ask my sister to look after him because I wasn't allowed... **well, it was frowned upon** [researchers' emphasis] for me to take time off - and the most important thing in my life is my son, it's not work - but I had to choose work. That was very, very difficult and it was the nail in the coffin for employment for me and why I thought I really needed full flexibility.*
- *[The job] was all client-driven and clients don't understand that you have to leave the office at five thirty and not five thirty five... because it's a sales environment as well, you get pressures from management to hit targets... and it's got to be every month you hit those targets and, because your son's got chicken pox, it doesn't mean that you get some time off because no-one else does. I understand the logic of that, but it puts you in a situation where you can't carry on'. (Female, 32, self-employed property agent, formerly project manager in recruitment company, husband also self-employed, children)*

# Line management intervention

- *'... however other departments... I know this because my partner [who is] off at the moment on maternity leave... she is looking to return and her role is at the same level as mine [in the same employer] and she's asked to go back on a job share basis, on a part time basis, and that request has not so far been met with acceptance... they are not very positive about that, at the moment. So often, despite [name of employer] which is very committed to flexible working and stuff like that, it often depends who your line manager is really... It can vary from department to department'. (Male, 31, tax and finance manager in banking and finance, married, children)*
- *'... but as time went on [working a four day week] started to break down because my boss was a real workaholic and although he didn't want to say anything he really did struggle with it, and he was trying to be PC and saying 'no, it's fine' but he really, really struggled with the idea that I wasn't doing any work for one day. Basically I did a full time job in four days, I worked to the same targets as everyone else, absolutely everything, I just did it all in four days, which was really, really hard'. (Female, 32, self-employed property agent, formerly project manager in recruitment company, husband also self-employed, children)*

# Work processes and job content

- *'...I guess, overall, **you** [researchers' emphasis] have to make it work and I have to manage my hours much more so I can't stay till whenever at night... sometimes find you then bring work home: but I don't think it's any worse than it was before [going part-time]... I think that's just the level of job that I've been doing... there are times I've had to be flexible in terms of doing a different day off in the week just to try and get meetings arranged and that kind of thing, but it's not been to the point that it really, really bothers me...*
- *I got one of the biggest projects the department gets in the year to manage when I went back [after maternity on part-time contract], so there's never been a question of give them all the duff stuff because you're only in three days a week!...*
- *... we [now] work out of a project pool. Whereas before, you would have had a defined relationship and you did work for a specific part of the business, now it's very much project-based - but that really suits being part-time, because you only do as many projects as you can do in your three days. Given you are setting stuff up, or you are working with somebody from the start of a project plan, they know then what days to expect you in and plan the work around that, as opposed to you being there Monday to Friday for whatever comes up. So from that point of view, that's always been easier for me to settle back into it than it might have been previously... if I'm allocated to a project, it's just me doing that work. So there might be times when someone would have preferred to speak to me on one of my days off but I always tell them up front I can't do meetings on those days and then people are generally okay with that and then that means my colleagues aren't really having to pick up things generally in my absence'. (Female, Rewards Manager in Banking and Finance, married with children)*

# Work processes and job content

*'Lots of my other peers now don't have children and that, sometimes I find quite difficult because over the years I've put in a lot of hours and worked very late and lots of the guys in my team work very long hours, but I have to leave by 5:45 every night at the latest, so I do sometimes feel I am leaving them in the lurch'.*

[Interviewer: Is that you feeling that, or do you feel that you are getting some kind of negative response and resentment that you are leaving?]

*'I think it's me. I would say there's maybe ten per cent resentment sometimes when I walk out the door and some of the team are there until very late, I am sure there is. But I know when I've worked very late at their kind of level, anybody who gets to leave before you, you get a bit kind of miffed! ...it's a very demanding job and because the nature of the beast is that it's very responsive, ... So it does make it quite difficult to fit it all in, in one day. I get good weeks and bad weeks - I get weeks when I think I'm keeping ahead and other weeks where I feel like I'm drowning... I think if you are conscientious, you never feel like you're doing enough, do you?'*

(Female, 31, merchandising director in retail sector, married, husband self-employed, children)

# Summary

- The formation of stable partnerships and, particularly, the family-building 'phase' create significant 'pressure points' for the management of employee motivation, commitment, retention and recruitment
- Even among graduate women, female partners were most often those who had to make most accommodations to changing familial arrangements
- This was not, however, necessarily at the expense of *ambition* or *desire* for career progression, regardless of a period of entrenchment at the outset of motherhood.
- Interviewees clearly reported that when they felt that they were no longer in control of their working lives, they sought redress by finding or creating satisfactory employment opportunities.
- The obvious problem for employers is that this is likely to lead to the wastage of skills and experience and unnecessary costs associated with dysfunctional labour turnover.
- Effective conciliation of work and non-work cannot be facilitated by the provision of flexible working practices without an underpinning commitment to the objectives of these policies.
- Variability of employers' willingness and ability to accommodate non-standard work patterns and recognise employee's personal commitments.
- Need for organisations to address cultural and (micro-) political barriers to work-life balance, including ensuring consistent peer and line manager support, to ensure that those dealing with competing demands maintain 'access' to challenging work and career development opportunities.