

# Family-friendly policies and equal opportunities: a contradiction in terms?

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*ABSTRACT This paper presents the findings from a research study of one large public sector organisation's strategy to promote gender equality and family friendliness. An examination was made of the organisation's policy documentation in this area and a questionnaire survey containing both closed and open-ended questions was undertaken across all staff in the organisation: women and men, professional, technical, administrative, secretarial, cleaning, catering and security staff. This paper reports the findings from this investigation. It analyses the informants' knowledge of, and views on, the impact of the equal opportunities strategy, and any suggestions they had for its development. Also, their views on gender equality more generally within society were interrogated to explore any interconnection between these views and resistance to change within their organisation. By exposing the complex nature of this equal opportunities/family-friendly (EO/FF) project in one organisation, the findings have potentially interesting implications for gender equality, which could benefit from further investigation.*

## Introduction

There has been a recent surge of research, which has primarily focused on the positive benefits that family-friendly policies bring to the workplace (for example, Dex & Smith, 2002). Specifically, it is argued that the availability of EO/FF policies within an organisation alleviates the conflict employees experience between work and personal life (Van Rijswick *et al.*, 2004; Warren & Johnson, 1995) and facilitates a better balance between the two spheres of life (Madsen, 2003; Tausig & Fenwick, 2001). EO/FF policies are also reported to improve organisations' competitiveness by increasing their ability to attract employees (Casper & Buffardi, 2004), inducing employees to exercise discretionary effort in performing their work (Konrad & Mangel, 2000) and helping them to be more productive (Eaton, 2003).

Other research even suggests that EO/FF policies have a positive effect upon employee attitudes irrespective of whether they are likely to use them or not. For example, Grover and Crooker (1995) assessed the impact of child care and flexibility

policies on the organisational commitment of parents and non-parents. They report that, whereas providing assistance with the costs of child care was not associated with higher commitment among either group, employees who had access to flexible working hours had greater affective commitment, irrespective of whether they were parents or not. Similarly, Casper and Buffardi (2004) report that EO/FF policies of flexibility and dependant care assistance increased employees' commitment to the organisation even if they were unlikely to use these policies.

However, there is a lack of consensus about whether the positive effect of EO/FF policies is universal for all employees or whether the effect differs for particular sub-populations. Roehling *et al.* (2001) explored the effect of gender, age and stage of family development upon the extent to which EO/FF policies contribute to employee loyalty to their organisation. They report that flexible time policies are associated with increased loyalty for men and women at all life stages but that the impact of child care policies varied by employees' gender and age of youngest child. McKeen and Burke (1994) found that women's age and parental status affected the value they placed on different types of EO/FF policies. Blair-Loy and Wharton (2002) report that, in a homogeneous sample of managers and professionals, different EO/FF policies were used according to different individual characteristics. Also, Konrad and Mangel (2000) argue that the productivity impact of EO/FF policies, reported above, will be contingent upon the types of workers employed by a firm. In fact, the nature of the current family-friendly policy framework is already being questioned in the US, where single and childfree employees feel discriminated against because they cannot take advantage of the 'special' benefits created for the family and there is also increasing evidence of similar views emerging in the UK (Burkett, 2000).

Another important element in the issue of the potential for EO/FF policies differential impact on different sub-populations of employees, is the effectiveness of their implementation. As Walker (1997) highlighted when examining a gender equality policy in South Africa, 'any policy is constructed within a particular social, political and historical context and prevailing lines of power' (p. 41). In a similar vein, Muller (2000) in her study of the implementation of EO/FF policies in Germany constructs a useful typology of three basic stages that institutions had achieved: active formation, reluctant opening, and passive toleration. These represent a spectrum of responses to EO/FF policies by organisations. Type one (active formation) is where policies have been fully implemented into both the structure and culture of the organisation. Type two (reluctant opening) is characterised by contradictory strategies with some implementation, but still allowing powerful actors to prevent them from being effective. Finally, type three (passive toleration), the most negative of all, was where virtually nothing had been achieved.

Ball (1993) usefully problematised the concept of policy as a 'product of compromises at various stages'. This also contributes the useful idea of 'localised complexity' and looking at organisations as sites of policy struggle, interpretation and reinterpretation where policies are 'decoded in complex ways via actors' interpreta-

tions and meanings in relation to their history, experiences, skills, resources and context' (p. 11). Ball (1993) argued that the translation of policy into practice and change involves 'social action, productive thought, invention and adaptation' (p. 11). Thus the implementation of policies rely on things like 'commitment, understanding, capability, resources' (p. 12) and ultimately power to effect change. Similarly, Wooding (1998) argued that EO/FF policies can only be effective if people in the institution are committed. To gain this commitment they need either *direct* experience of inequality, or *indirect*, e.g. through partners/daughters, or intellectual experience (training). It also requires an extra dimension, the interpretation of that experience as unjust.

Ball (1993) also argued that 'different interpretations of policies ... spread confusion and allow for play in the playing-off of meanings. Gaps and spaces for action and response are opened up as a result'. Just as policies arrive with 'an interpretational and representational history', they enter 'a social and institutional context. Policies enter existing patterns of inequality ... They "impact" or are taken up differently as a result ... Policy is not exterior to inequalities, although it may change them, it is also affected, inflected and deflected by them' (p. 17). Ball called this the 'underlife' of policies.

Therefore, using this useful concept of a policy 'underlife' and the awareness of the potential of differential impact of these policies on sub-populations of employees, a case study was undertaken by the author of EO/FF policies in a large public sector organisation which had a relatively well-established policy framework.

### **The study: the organisation's EO/FF policies**

The large public sector organisation that was chosen as a case study was well known to the author of the paper, and has been highlighted as one of the more active organisations in its sector in setting up and establishing relatively comprehensive equal opportunities structures, policies and practices. It has won several national awards for its achievements in putting policies in place in this field. At the case study organisation, an EO officer was appointed in 1994 and since then comprehensive EO/FF policies have been put into place. For example, codes of practice have been issued on EO in general, recruitment and selection, internal promotions, staff appraisal, harassment and bullying, disability, race and gender equality, the use of inclusive language, and ICT pornography. Training is provided in all these areas and a pilot programme of training and mentoring for women has been run. An EO statement is included on all advertisements and an action plan developed by all departments, which is annually monitored by the EO Committee. Family-friendly policies introduced, include maternity, adoption, paternity, compassionate and parental leave schemes, a workplace crèche/nursery, a school holiday play scheme, a formal scheme for flexible working hours and job share. However, the organisation is large (over 2,500 staff) and the workforce is diverse in terms of occupations, which would suggest a challenge in terms of the effective communication of policies and their acceptance and usage by all categories of staff.

## Research methods

An examination of the organisation's documentation on their EO/FF policies was undertaken, including paper documentation and their personnel website which indicated and detailed all the policies available. Also, a questionnaire survey was undertaken of a 25% random sample of all categories of staff at the organisation. A total of 634 questionnaires were distributed via the internal mail and 220 completed questionnaires were returned resulting in a 35% response rate. The questionnaire contained a mixture of both closed and open-ended questions allowing respondents to write comments on their answers.

The informants' knowledge of, and views on, the impact of the organisation's EO/FF strategy and any suggestions they had for its development were analysed. Also, their views on gender equality more generally within society were interrogated to explore any interconnection between these views and resistance to change within their organisation. The author wishes to acknowledge the limitations of this predominantly quantitative research method in studying the complexity of issues around the take-up of and views on EO/FF policies. However, it is being used as the first stage in the investigation of this case study organisation. To more successfully probe the 'underlife' of policies as suggested by Ball (1993) above, there will be a need for a follow up qualitative study using in-depth semi-structured interviews with selected informants within the organisation.

## Findings

There were more male respondents (55%) than women (45%). They were all predominantly white (94%) and non-disabled (97%), which reflects the composition of the organisation's workforce. More men were parents (61%) than women (53%), although equal proportions had dependant children (34%). More women (24%) were working part-time compared to men (8%). As Table 1 below shows, all categories of staff were represented, and again the respondents generally reflected the sex breakdown of different types of occupation in the institution.

## Awareness of EO/FF institutional policies

The level of awareness of the institutional EO/FF policies varied considerably as shown in Table 2 below. The vast majority of both women and men across all

TABLE 1. Categories of staff

	Women %	Men %
Professional	30	41
Admin/secretarial	41	8
Technical	4	31
Cleaning/catering	25	5
Security	0	15

TABLE 2. Awareness of institutional EO policies

	Women %	Men %
Policy statement on EO	86	91
Harassment & bullying policy	87	88
EO Committee	76	74
Work based crèche/nursery	75	66
Compassionate leave	70	58
Extended maternity leave	53	50
Flexible working scheme	53	48
EO action plans	50	48
Holiday schemes for children	42	35
Paternity leave	38	38
Parental leave	22	21
Women's training programmes	15	26

occupational categories of staff were similarly aware of the general EO policy statement, harassment and bullying policy, EO Committee, and the work based crèche/nursery. However, more women than men were aware of the compassionate leave scheme (70% compared with 58% of men). Then came a group of policies of which only around half of both women and men were aware. These included extended maternity leave, flexible working scheme and EO action plans. Other policies were less well known, including school holiday schemes, and paternity leave. Finally, less than a quarter of the respondents knew about parental leave and women's training programmes.

These figures reflect the findings from the latest British Workplace Employee Relations Survey (WLB2) (2004), which suggests that there has been a significant increase, since the first survey was carried out in 2000 (WLB1), in the reported availability and take-up of several (but not all) flexible working practices (Stevens *et al.*, 2004). However, despite this increase, employees' awareness of entitlements for parents (e.g. parental leave) was generally low. Interestingly, working parents were no more likely to be aware of these entitlements than other employees.

### Use of EO/FF policies

The use of EO/FF policies was considerably lower than the awareness of them. Only 22% of the women and 9% of the men had used any of the policies in the institution.

Employees' gender is likely to impact upon preferences for and use of EO/FF policies. It is well documented that working women are more influenced and impacted upon by experiences in non-work domains than men. Hochschild (1989) writes of working women performing a 'second shift' when they return home from paid work. Women continue to undertake and also to take a greater responsibility for the private domain of unpaid work (see Bagilhole, 1994, 2001, 2002, 2003; Dikkers *et al.*, 2004). Therefore, inevitably empirical research shows that on average, women

demonstrate a higher use of EO/FF policies than men (Allen, 2001; Thompson *et al.*, 1999).

Reflecting the research above, the vast majority of EO/FF policies that had been used by the women were child or family related (11% compassionate leave, 2% crèche/nursery, 1% extended maternity leave, and 1% parental leave). Only 4% of the women had used the harassment policy, 2% EO training, and 1% women's training. Of the tiny minority of men who had used EO policies most had used EO training (5%). Only 2% had used the harassment policy, and 1% paternity leave.

To explain this lack of use of policies, the workplace social context and the perceived appropriateness of utilisation are important factors (Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2002; Kirby & Krone, 2002). The WLB2 employees' survey found that men were more likely than women to consider that flexible working practices would damage their career prospects, particularly in the case of working reduced hours (56% of men compared to 45% of women) and leaving on time (46% of men compared to 37% of women). In addition, 48% of men thought that working fewer hours would also negatively affect their job security compared to 38% of women (Stevens *et al.*, 2004).

It is likely that many of the desirable outcomes associated with EO/FF policies will not be realised if employees do not feel free to use these policies. For example, Eaton (2003) reports that EO/FF policies are only related to organisational commitment to the extent that these policies are perceived to be useable. Usability issues apply to all employees, although particular problems are apparent for employees who are male and/or those who perform a managerial role (Barham *et al.*, 2001). Although EO/FF policies create new ways of working, prevailing cultures may still reward old ways of working such that employees who use EO/FF policies are negatively affected (Thompson *et al.*, 1999).

### Likely use of EO policies

Also, importantly, nearly two thirds (64%) of the women and the vast majority (82%) of the men stated that they were not likely to use any policies in the future.

TABLE 3. EO/FF policies used by sex

	Women %	Men %
Compassionate leave	11	
Harassment & bullying policy	4	2
Crèche/nursery	2	
Holiday scheme for children	2	
EO training	2	5
Job share	1	1
Extended maternity leave	1	
Parental leave	1	
Women's training programmes	1	
Paternity leave		1

For men, the reasons centred mostly on the fact that they perceived EO policies being for women only and certainly not for white, childless or heterosexual men.

‘No, I’m a single white, male—just what the organisation is designed for!’  
(Male, 31–40).

‘I’m a white, heterosexual male without children so there aren’t any for me!’  
(Male, 31–40).

‘As a white, middle class, middle aged male with no disabilities or other disadvantages, I’m already equal’ (Male, 51–60).

Even men with young children did not see the policies as related to them, or they felt that it was not fully accepted that they could use them and therefore that they may be penalised for doing so (again reflecting the WLB2 survey reported on above).

‘I assume that they have nothing to offer me’ (Male, 31–40, with pre school and school aged children).

‘The honest answer is that if you do the fear of being criticised and labelled a problem’ (Male, 51–60).

Again, the policies likely to be used reflected the sex differentiation identified in those already used. Women were far more likely to foresee using family-friendly policies (12% maternity leave, 10% compassionate leave, 5% holiday schemes, 5% parental leave, and 1% the nursery). However, interestingly, even though it is a small minority, equal proportions of women and men thought they would be using parental leave, and 9% of the women thought they would use the women’s training programmes.

**EO/FF policies respondents would like to see introduced or improved**

In line with previous research, the most important policy that women wanted to see introduced was more flexible working (16%) reflecting again their primary

TABLE 4. Policies likely to be used by sex

	Women %	Men %
Extended maternity leave	12	
Compassionate leave	10	2
Training for women	9	
School holiday scheme	5	
Parental leave	5	5
Harassment policy	3	3
Crèche/nursery	1	
Paternity leave		6

responsibility for family commitments. Next came raising awareness and profile of the policies generally, and better commitment from senior management (14% of women and 13% of men, and 12% and 7%, respectively). Interestingly, a minority of women and very few men wanted to see promotion and recruitment targets for women introduced. However, in contrast, a very small minority of men (3%) said there was no need for any more policies and those that existed should be less time consuming, and that they should focus on men as well as women and avoid what they saw as positive discrimination.

### **Benefits of EO/FF policies**

When asked about the benefits of EO/FF policies to women and men with children, and childless people, many of the male respondents claimed that they did not know whether they were beneficial or not. This revolved around the fact that they did not consider EO/FF policies to be relevant to them and had not had to consider or engage in thinking about them. The following comments from male respondents reflect this view.

‘Being male and having no children, I have no opinion’ (Male, 31–40, single, no children).

‘I don’t know. I haven’t read them’ (Male, 21–30, single, no children).

As shown in Table 6, overall just over two thirds of women (69%) and just under two thirds of men (61%) thought that EO/FF policies were beneficial for mothers, but less than half thought they were beneficial for childless women (42% women and 48% men). Also, whereas 42% of women thought they were beneficial for fathers,

TABLE 5. New or improved EO/FF policies

	Women	Men
More flexible working	16	3
Raise awareness and higher profile	14	13
Senior managers training and commitment	12	7
Promotion and recruitment targets for women	9	3
Greater and tougher monitoring enforcement	5	2
Greater transparency	4	1
Stronger harassment policy	4	
Training	2	1
Make more proactive	2	
Address women’s pay gap	2	
Parity of pay and conditions for term-time workers	1	
Longer compassionate leave	1	
No need for any more		3
Focus on men as well as women		3

TABLE 6. Perceived benefits of EO/FF policies to women and men broken down by whether they have children

	Women %	Men %
Mothers	69	61
Childless women	42	48
Fathers	44	29
Childless men	31	21

only 29% of men agreed. The group that were thought to benefit least by both women and men were childless men (31% and 21%, respectively).

The comments from respondents to explain their views on who benefited from EO/FF policies very much revolved around two axis: the axis of sex, and the axis of whether people had children or not, which in many cases overrides the axis of sex.

First, the sex axis manifested itself in the view by mostly male respondents that they did not benefit from EO policies because of their sex. The following comments illustrate this view.

‘I believe that many equal opportunities initiatives are in place for the benefit of women only’ (Male, 51–60, married, partner works part-time, children school age and over 18).

‘People are sensitive to equal opportunities for women, e.g. recruitment figures, harassment, etc. so regardless of whether they have children or not they benefit. Those with children benefit more because more policies affect them’ (Man, 21–30, single, no children).

This last comment leads on to the second axis which revolves around the view that people with children are the ones that benefit as this is the way EO/FF policies are focused. It was felt that the fact that either women or men had children was more of a factor than their sex in whether or not they benefited. Some felt that EO/FF policies were only geared towards those with family commitments.

‘Equal opportunities is biased towards children and the family’ (Male, 41–50, married, children school aged).

‘Specific provision exists for men or women with children. There seems to be no comparable support mechanisms for single people’ (Female, 31–40, no children).

There was also, amongst the respondents, the contrary view to all those above that women did not benefit, and particularly those with children.

‘Women seem to be held back—either with or without children, but more so with children’ (Female, 31–40, no children).

Also, some women voiced the negative feelings they had if they utilised EO/FF policies.

‘There is still the attitude that if women work then they should be treated as men, e.g. full-time with no time off for the children. Even though the policies are there you feel awkward and guilty taking any time off for children’ (Woman, 41–50, children of school age and over).

Some respondents, whilst agreeing that people with children benefited more from the policies, felt that fathers benefited less than mothers.

‘The institution assumes that men do not have child care/domestic responsibilities’ (Man, 41–50, married, school age children, partner works part-time).

Also, comments were made that the traditional view that men do not or should not take responsibility for family commitments still prevails.

‘The old fashioned and stereotypical attitude prevails—men should be at work even if they have children’ (Woman, 41–50, children over 18).

The idea that mothers benefit most from the policies was relatively frequently commented on in a rather negative way particularly by other women, as they viewed this as impacting upon their own work load and choice of time off. As most women work with other women, it is interesting to speculate about how much women are relying on other women when mothers legitimately make use of EO/FF policies, but perhaps sufficient support is not put into an institution to cover this.

‘Women with young children have many days off leaving others to pick up work/duties that cannot be left until the absentee returns to her position, thus everyone is overloaded’ (Woman, 51–60, married, children over 18).

‘From my long experience of work as a woman without children, I have had to “carry” those who have had to have time off to care for their children. This has been in the form of extra work—always having to work earlier and later hours and always having last choice of holiday dates’ (Woman, 51–60, married, no children).

## **Disadvantages**

Following on from the question about who benefits from EO/FF policies, respondents were then asked if they thought any particular group of workers were actually disadvantaged by them. This brought a mixed response shown in Table 7. However, in each case only a minority thought that any group was disadvantaged.

TABLE 7. Disadvantage of EO/FF policies broken down by sex and whether people had children or not

	Women %	Men %
Childless women	23	16
Mothers	21	18
Childless men	18	13
Fathers	14	16

Women, both with and without children, were seen as slightly more disadvantaged than men. Almost a quarter of the women respondents expressed this view.

Again, the rationale behind the respondents' views revolved around the two axis of different treatment by sex or by whether people had children or not. First, looking at the sex axis some respondents felt that EO/FF policies actually disadvantaged women by singling them out and perhaps signalling them as a special case.

'They make women a special case, second class employees. Makes committees extra alert for other shortcomings of candidates as reasons for not employing them' (Man, 51–60, married, children over 18, partner works part-time).

On the other hand, some respondents felt that men were disadvantaged.

'It benefits women to the point of disbenefiting men. There is nothing in the policies for men. All we get is a greater workload and greater competition' (Man, 41–50, married, no children).

Turning now to the views about who were disadvantaged according to whether they had children or not, again we see rather a mixed and at times contradictory response. Sometimes parents of both sexes are seen as disadvantaged.

'Managers may be discouraged from employing both women and men with children because of the amount of measures available' (Woman, 41–50, school age children).

Other respondents thought fathers were particularly disadvantaged.

'In practice child care is seen as a woman's role and men have difficulty negotiating work hours to suit school times. No account appears to be taken for the stresses and pressures for men of bring up a family' (Man, 41–50, married, school age children).

'Despite the "official" stance that men have same rights this is not translated into real opportunity as expectations are that women undertake child care, rearing, etc., and not men. The institution is still "prejudiced"

against men having the same opportunities for career breaks, etc. Paternity leave would place pressure on a father who took it in terms of his career. There are bad peer attitudes to men taking time off' (Man, 31–40, married, no children).

On the other hand, some respondents felt that EO policies disadvantaged mothers because although it was seen as legitimate for them to use them, their careers would suffer.

'The welfare of the children will always come before the welfare of the work place so people will sometimes avoid employing women' (Man, 60+, married, children over 18, wife does not work).

'Career breaks are damaging to career and influence women's promotion indirectly' (Man, 31–40, married, no children).

Finally, some respondents thought those without children were disadvantaged by the preferential treatment given to parents.

'We have no flexibility, and expectations to cover for people with children. Those with children have rights, not us. I resent the positive advantages for colleagues with children' (Man, 21–30, married, no children).

'Maternity leave sometimes causes problems, and a minority of women with children play the system, and cause resentment and then all women with children can be regarded as problematic' (Woman, 41–50, children over 18).

### **General views on equality**

Finally, respondents' views on gender equality more generally were interrogated. They were asked for responses to various statements on women and men at work.

As Table 8 below shows only a minority held the negative view that EO/FF policies prevent people getting ahead on merit, though more men (16%) than women (4%). However, a further 23% of the men and 27% of the women were neutral about this. On a potentially problematic note, 48% of women and 38% of men thought that parents were treated more favourably in terms of flexible hours and leave than childless employees. Also, half of the women (50%) and over half of the men (56%) believed that the workload of parents fell on others when they took time off for child care.

Some of the respondents' views on mothers working were quite traditional. A substantial minority thought that no one can take care of their children as well as their mother (17% of women and 22% of men). Also, even more significantly, half of the women (50%) and over half of the men (56%) thought that women should reduce their hours of work during their children's formative years. Over a third (34%) of women and 43% of men thought that it is hard for women to be reliable if

TABLE 8. Views on women and men at work by sex % (first number in each set represents women's views and second number men's views)

	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
EO/FF policies prevent people from getting ahead on merit	4/16	27/23	69/61
Parents are treated more favourably in terms of flexible hours and leave than childless employees	48/38	27/34	25/28
At the end of the day, the workload of parents who take time off work to be with their children falls on others	50/56	19/23	31/21
No one can take care of their children as well as their mother	17/22	19/24	64/54
It is important for a mother to reduce her employment hours during her child's formative years	50/53	20/33	28/14
It is hard for women to be reliable if they are responsible for little children	34/43	16/20	50/37
Women are less committed at work once they have a family	13/26	21/29	66/45
Women should not expect the workplace to change just because they want to work	26/28	20/31	54/42
Managers are often put off hiring young women in case they become pregnant	39/42	24/32	37/27
Managers are reluctant to promote women of child bearing years	31/34	37/36	32/31
Managers pay women less because they don't expect them to stay in their jobs as long as men	23/17	37/43	40/41
The way the labour market is set up makes it easier for women to care for children than for men to do so	67/71	17/22	16/8
Fathers of young children should work fewer hours in order to raise their children	34/41	40/33	26/37
Concessions to allow fathers to spend more time with their families should be incorporated into EO/FF policies	77/69	14/20	9/12

they are responsible for little children, although fewer agreed that mothers are less committed at work (13% of women and 26% of men). Over a quarter of the respondents (26% of the women and 24% of the men) thought that women should not expect the workplace to change because they want to work. This view was also mirrored in the WLB2 employees' survey, which found that in 2003 more employees agreed that business needs must take priority over employee demand for flexible working practices. For example, 60% of employees stated that employees should not expect to be able to change their working pattern if it would disrupt the business compared to 53% in 2000 (Stevens *et al.*, 2004).

A large minority of women and men thought that employers and managers discriminate against women. Over a third of the women (39%) and even more men

(42%) thought that managers are put off hiring young women in case they become pregnant. Nearly a third of women (31%) and over a third of men (34%) thought that managers are reluctant to promote women of child bearing years. Finally, nearly a quarter of women (23%) and 17% of men thought that managers actually pay women less because they do not expect them to stay in their jobs as long as men.

The majority of respondents (67% of the women and 71% of the men) agreed with the statement that the way the labour market is set up makes it easier for women to care for children than men. Over a third of women (34%) and 41% of men thought fathers of young children should work fewer hours in order to raise their children, with only 26% of women and 37% of men disagreeing. Finally, a majority of the respondents (77% of women and 69% of men) thought that concessions to allow fathers to spend more time with their children should be incorporated into EO/FF policies.

## **Conclusion**

The final picture in the case study organisation is a mixed one, but does tend to reinforce and reflect previous research in this field. There is a varied level of awareness of specific EO/FF policies within the organisation. The use of policies is low, and differentiated by gender. Unsurprisingly, the predicted likely use is similarly low and gender differentiated, with nearly two thirds of women and the vast majority of men unlikely to do so. There was a mixed response to the question of which policies the respondents would like to see either improved or introduced. Women wanted better FF policies, but both women and men mentioned that they wanted a higher profile and awareness of the policies and more commitment from senior management. Importantly, this latter response may contribute to the low take-up of the policies.

The policies were perceived as differentially benefiting different groups categorised by sex and whether or not they had children. Mothers were seen to benefit most, then childless women and fathers, and finally childless men were seen to benefit least. Also, a minority of respondents actually felt the policies disadvantaged some groups. Childless women were seen to be most disadvantaged, then mothers, followed by childless men and lastly fathers. So again we see a mixed picture and quite complex and sometimes contradictory reasons for these views.

The vast majority of respondents did not think that EO/FF policies prevented people getting ahead on merit, but at the same time felt that some groups benefited more and some groups were actually disadvantaged. Also, whilst over two thirds of the men agreed that concessions to allow fathers to spend more time with their families should be incorporated into EO/FF policies, only an extremely small minority had used or intended to use these type of policies.

From this, it can be deduced that the organisation in this case study also demonstrates that there is a need to qualify any statements on the positive benefits of FF policies, if they are enclosed within a framework that restricts certain policies, such as flexible working, to parents. They are viewed as, and can be seen to differentially affect different sub-populations in an organisation. Also, the research

reported here reflected previous work that highlights the underlying norms and beliefs that these policies are more appropriate for women, and that men are apprehensive about utilising them in terms of their careers.

This implies the importance of the institutional context of policies. If FF policies are not seen as fully supported within and at the highest levels of the hierarchy within an organisation, they will be viewed warily. It is useful to recall Müller's (2000) classification of organisations with different policy contexts. This case study public sector organisation can be seen to just about fall into her second type of policy context as previously detailed: reluctant opening. It shows a mixed picture, with some implementation and commitment to EO/FF policies, but still ineffective communication, lack of powerful support and encouragement within the organisation's hierarchy, and in places, quite powerful resistance to them.

National research on EO/FF policies shows that the organisation in this study is certainly in the mainstream of EO/FF developments nationally. So it is suggested that the gap between the rhetoric and reality of EO/FF may be relatively universal, and that this feeds into and allows a limited 'problem-centred' approach to equality issues. Hoque and Noon (2004) coined the 'empty shell' hypothesis to indicate that the majority of organisations' EO/FF strategies lack any substance.

As in this case study organisation, EO/FF policies tend to be initiated and controlled by the personnel or human resources department with the underlying assumption that the provision of detailed instructions on how to behave will result in improved practice. However, this type of bureaucratic approach, seen as imposed from above, without any apparent raising of awareness or ownership elsewhere in the organisation, can create perceived conflicts between different groups. In this case study, this conflict, manifest at times in resistance and hostility, can be seen to revolve around an axis of sex and one of having children or not. Interestingly, the perceived strong focus of the policies on family-friendliness can mean that this 'child dimension' overrides the sex axis.

Thus the adoption of formal policies which stand alone is not enough, and can actually be counterproductive. However, in the sort of climate and environment in the case study organisation the introduction of more radical EO/FF policies, although needed to allow them to be more effective, is liable to create more backlash. As Cockburn (1991) argues, EO/FF policies must have a 'long agenda' that includes serious measures to change the culture of the organisation and importantly the distribution of power. However, it is important to go further and acknowledge and deal with the disaffection of men generally, and resentment from fathers, and childless women and men to these policies.

Despite the potential advantages to be gained from the implementation of EO/FF policies, it must be acknowledged that some policies may have a differential impact on different sub-populations of workers by gender, age, stage of family formation, etc. It is therefore imperative that organisations consider the likely outcomes before deciding which EO/FF policies to provide, how and to whom. Knowledge about employees' preferences for EO/FF policies can assist employers and human resource managers to develop policies and practices that are perceived to be of benefit to important sub-populations of existing and potential employees.

Given differential use and entitlement to certain EO/FF policies the extent to which employees respond favourably depends to some degree on their individual characteristics and circumstances.

Secret (2000) also explored the likelihood that a sample of men and women would use different types of EO/FF policies. She agrees that employees with children were no more likely to use some EO/FF policies than employees without children, where the latter group are given access to them. She concludes that EO/FF policies can be valued by all employees, including those who are child-free if freely applied. Similarly, Roehling *et al.* (2001) report that employees value flexible work arrangements irrespective of gender or life stage. Also, Bardoel *et al.* (1999) suggest that, if EO/FF policies are to be effectively used to attract and retain a diverse workforce, these policies must be strategically designed to meet the needs of all key constituent employee groups.

Therefore, alongside training courses for all staff to address both confused and resistant attitudes, there needs to be an adequate support system and flexibility for those groups who are not traditionally considered to be the recipients of EO/FF policies, i.e. men and the childless. Otherwise, EO/FF policies will continue to be seen as benefiting only women generally, and mothers particularly, which inevitably leads to their failure.

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