



Innovative social policies for gender equality at work

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The project asked about policies to support work-family reconciliation among low-waged women in England. How are low-waged women constrained in their choices by limited and fragmentary social policies? We identified innovative social policies available in the international arena around parental leave, child-care, and time that could promote work-family reconciliation, more continuous employment and better quality jobs among low-waged women in England. Would these policies be attractive and better meet their needs in reconciling paid work and family?

First we identified key problems for UK low-waged women, relating them to innovative policies in European countries, which enable parents to reconcile paid work and childcare. Secondly, we used the *British Household Panel Survey* to investigate job quality and caring responsibilities among the lowest-waged working-age female employees. Thirdly, our qualitative research explored how innovative policies could enable low-paid mothers of younger children to access better quality, more continuous employment. We interviewed 35 male/female couples (70 interviews in all) with a youngest child of seven years or under. We asked about innovative policies to bring fathers more decisively into unpaid work: so we interviewed couples, with both parents in paid work, full- or part-time. We recruited 25 low-waged and 10 higher-waged mothers, and their partners, to highlight by comparison the contribution of low pay to mothers' choices.

Findings

- Policy assumptions have switched under New Labour from male breadwinner model to dual earner, with women's labour market participation increasingly assumed, and necessary, to avoid poverty and earn pensions.
- A one-and-a-half breadwinner arrangement persists, women earning half men's lifetime earnings. Motherhood brings major disadvantage. Mothers' lives bend to children's needs, reducing access to quality employment, working time, income and careers, especially for poorly qualified women.

- Innovative social policies for parental leave give equal rights to men and women and encourage them to share responsibility. Sweden has two months' paid leave dedicated to fathers, Slovenia 90 days' paternal leave, Iceland three months' paid leave for each parent and three to share between them.
- UK policies have focussed on mothers' employment, entrenching mothers' responsibility for childcare rather than enabling fathers'.
- Innovative parental leave policies offer solid social support for employment through the pre-school period. Support for parental leave is low in the UK: around 20 weeks of 'effective parental leave' compared with over 100 in Sweden and Hungary. Fathers and mothers favoured legislation and would use dedicated 'Daddy leave'. Mothers saw shared leave as building on their current childcare systems, enabling themselves to work and their partners to care. Fathers saw extended, shared parental leave as support for their partners' employment, and their own responsibility for children:

It would be good because if the Dad could have the leave, you could see if you wanted to go back to work after the baby, the Dad could (care for the child) rather than have to take childcare on straight away ... to see if it suited you (Gemma, low-waged, f-t).

It would be good initially because she would be able to go back to work and she'd have the peace of mind that she'd left it with her husband rather than a nursery or whatever, so she'd be able to get back into the working routine gradually, and then put him into nursery slowly. That would be better (Natalie, childcare worker, low-waged, p-t).

It would be fantastic wouldn't it, absolutely fantastic, yes. I mean I get two weeks paternity leave full pay anyway, as part of my salary contract, so I'm quite lucky ... I would probably have two separate months ... where I would take the

pressure of the home and away from Sarah's work and I'd take over the two children, so take over the child we'd already got and the baby (Jason, retail manager).

- Government support for 'universal childcare' brings significant ideological and practical change, but is not truly universal. Reliability, quality, access, affordability and government spending compare unfavourably with Scandinavian countries.
- A 120-week gap between the end of 'effective parental leave' and pre-primary admission compares with 30 weeks in Hungary and Sweden.
- Low-waged mothers highlighted their lack of childcare choice, limiting their scope for increasing working hours, gaining promotion or envisaging careers.

I'm just tired all the while, and (partner) is, cause he's like doing an eight-hour day and then he's doing a four-hour night with the kids so, tired. It's the only way we could do it really, other than like use childcare but it wasn't worth a go (Angela, retail sales, low-waged, p-t).

When I was pregnant with (my first child) I thought, no way, because I'd like literally be bringing home £50 a week or something, to myself, after I'd paid everything, and I was like I'm not doing it anymore (Sarah, low-waged, retail sales, p-t).

I mean I've been offered jobs like to go onto the customer service desk, which I know I can do, and I do overtime on there if I can, and I absolutely love being on there because it's a bit more of a demanding job, and when I've been offered a job on there I come home thinking, oh I'm so excited, I really want to do it, then when I think about it and think about all the problems that would go with it, I'm brought

back down to earth, and no, children are the priority, I have to wait. And that's where what I want and what I can do are two different things (Sue, low-waged, retail sales, p-t).

- Higher-paid mothers described a range of services they could use and trust:

They start off at the nursery club where they pick him up at quarter past three where they do kiddy things with them and feed them and then when they become of a certain age which was five they then move to the kids' club then when he's eleven he'll go to their older children's like a youth club as they call it they go right up to eighteen, so that is quite useful (Fiona, high-waged, sales, f-t).

- Pre-school hours are shorter than elsewhere in Europe. Respondents described the very part-time pre-school day as a source of stress for themselves and inadequate care for children, expressing a need for continuity and security:

It would be good ... it was so difficult when (child) was at pre-school, I used to have to come out of work at half past eleven and take him to his other nursery, it was an absolute nightmare (Erin, low-waged f-t).

That would be good – you would know that they were safe ... (child) used to go to (private nursery) after pre-school, so he was here and there ...I think it really was too much for him (Jodie, low-waged f-t).

- High-quality, publicly funded childcare, including longer pre-school hours, would be particularly helpful to low-waged mothers for whom quality, continuity and affordability are crucial:

Good childcare would be nice (Denise low-waged, P-T)

I think you'd get a lot more people back to work. If you think about how much the basic pay is, how much your childcare is, you have to be earning an awful lot to be able to go back to work (Megan, mod wage F-T).

(Partner) really had to change her career because of the childcare situation (James, local government officer).

- The gender pay gap for UK full-timers has reduced, but unequal working time – including career breaks and part-time work – damages women's earnings.
- Three strategies towards more equal working time are Sweden's policies to make women's working lives more like men's through (nearly) full-time employment, the Netherlands' Combination Scenario, using quality part-time employment to make men's lives more like women's, and France's shorter working week, bringing Western Europe's most gender-equal working time.
- Government sees freedom from Europe's 48-hour working time limit as an individual choice, ignoring parents' joint responsibilities, mothers' reduced choice, and the degradation of women's earnings as part-timers.
- Mothers perceived their working time and career-building as constrained by fathers' working hours. Fathers and mothers saw a shorter working week as enhancing care, increasing choice, improving work-family reconciliation, enabling low-waged mothers to realise career aspirations:

I think the country ... is expecting far too much from everybody. I think they see everybody as a single person that has got nothing but work in their lives. When you become a family you have another person's life to organise (Kimberley, mod-waged F-T)

I'd like to work shorter hours, but at the moment I do sometimes feel blackmailed ... they're holding the job over you, you've got to work the hours otherwise, well, leave (Luke, maintenance engineer).

Less quality time together as a family ... Dad's always at work and Mum's on her own... he's working long hours and he's at work a lot of the time... it's difficult, you feel bad because the Dad's not spending a lot of time with the children...it would be difficult for the children and if he's working long hours it would restrict the hours that she could work and the sort of employment that she could get (Rebecca, low-waged P-T).

- Part-time work is central to UK mothers' disadvantage: the European Part-time Work Directive and National Minimum Wage have modest impact. The Netherlands' Combination Scenario is an innovative approach, improving the quality of part-time employment for men and women. Mothers working part-time saw themselves as undervalued and the Combination Scenario as improving their status and income. Some fathers and mothers doubted whether governments could lift pay for part-time workers enough to make part-time work viable for men. Mothers, and some fathers, approved the Combination Scenario's challenge to traditional gender roles:

Equal rights for part-time and full time: I just think that should just be the way it is...it's not their fault if they've got kids (Hayley, low-waged, p-t).

The hourly rate working part-time, it just doesn't happen in this country ... it would be nice, as you'd ... see more of your children (Megan, mod-waged f-t).

It's not a bad idea at all ... if it meant me working less hours and sharing the responsibilities more (Nigel, manual worker).

Fathers tend not to spend as much time with their children as they'd like to ... Yes, I'd be well up for that (Graham, manager).

- Fathers emphasized the need for government support for more equal work and more equal care – whether for policies to support men taking parental leave to enhance fathers' responsibility for children (Gary and Alastair), or for fairer part-time work that would be attractive to fathers as well as to mothers (Luke):

I'd take it (parental leave) if it were supported by the government (Gary, manual manufacturing).

I've got friends ...well their relationship with their wife has suffered because the wife has bonded with the child and Dad is out at work, Dad comes back and almost it has developed into a us and him situation. So I think that that would be great ... for both people to get involved at the start ... that would be my view on it and we are trying for another child myself and Fiona and if that was okay in this country then I would want to be off (Alastair, technical manager, manufacturing).

And if employers could be encouraged to think of that type of thing, you get more money out of the people that's been trained. But unfortunately the Neanderthal type of British industry it's going to take legislation to force it (Luke, manager, automotive engineering).

- Low-waged women lived in strong male breadwinner households, contributing less than a third to the couple's total wage, and performing most housework. Most rejected the male breadwinner model in principle: they saw children as needing fathers' care equally with mothers'. With stronger government support through childcare, pre-school hours, regulated working time, mothers and fathers would welcome more gender equality in care and work:

Gone are the days when the woman stays at home and the man goes to work – that’s gone ... It would be very, very beneficial for them to spend time with the baby.... I would have spent more if I’d had the option (Paul, manual manufacturing).

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