

Dads' Army

The case for father-friendly workplaces

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Introduction

John Lewis is marketing a pushchair in response to 'dad demand' for a more masculine feel and colour than the traditional frills and lilac. The Micralite, designed by David Crisp, is the Jonah Lomu of buggies: black, chunky and rugged.¹

Comet, the electrical retailer, gives every father on its payroll time off to spend at home.² The head of Britannic Insurance quits his £340,000 a year job for a three-day consultancy role on a reduced fee; a senior civil servant negotiates to be able to leave work by 5.30 and have alternate Fridays off – both in order to spend more time with their children.

Dads, it seems, are everywhere. A cursory reading of *Hello!* magazine and selected newspapers would suggest that the gender wars are over, and that men and women have linked arms to jointly raise the next generation. The reality of course, is a bit more sober – but there are real changes afoot, nonetheless.

The dramatic story of women's lives over the last century is well-documented. The wave of women entering the labour market has transformed the British workplace and opened up new opportunities for half our citizenry. But the implications for the man of the house are taking longer to sink in, especially in this country.

In the space of a few decades, fathers have lost their wives to work. Twenty years ago, new fathers had partners who cared for the kids. Men worked at work. Women worked at home. But domestic roles are no longer clear-cut. As women have stayed in work, post-childbirth, expectations of fathers' responsibilities have skyrocketed.

So far the changes in men's lives have done little to dent company cultures built upon the 1950s version of Organisation Man. With these 'dinosaur dads' in most of the top jobs, this is perhaps unsurprising. Fathers with caring responsibilities often keep them quiet. And the issues faced by them remain, by and large, off the corporate radar.

This is about to change. As a new generation of fathers struggle to match new home demands with outdated working philosophies, firms which fail to provide 'father-friendly' workplaces will struggle to attract and retain talented men. Smart companies are realising that top-flight men tend to have children with top-flight women, who tend to continue their careers after children, and are therefore the most likely to be facing up to new parental responsibilities. The best men are the pressed men.

Smart companies are also realising that involved fathers are more motivated and loyal employees, with more progressive attitudes towards workplace diversity and better-developed emotional skills. Father-friendliness is becoming a business imperative. Firms that increase flexibility, enhance paternity leave and break the cultural deadlock of outdated gender assumptions will be the first to reap financial rewards from the new world.

The cause of fathers is the cause of feminists too. Only if men are encouraged and enabled to do more on the home front will women stand shoulder to shoulder with them as equals at work. Women currently face a hard choice between career and family that can only be eased by more fathers doing more fathering.

There is now a real danger that, unless the transformation in the public sphere is matched by changes in the private sphere and in the assumptions underpinning paid work, the cause of gender equality will stall or even go into reverse. Talented, highly educated women will continue to decide against the struggle of raising a family and thriving in an outdated culture and choose either childlessness or full-time motherhood. The birth rate will continue dropping. Men will become mere breadwinners again. The moment will be lost.

Businesses must wake up to the new face of family life and see the fathers in their midst. The government must move more quickly than molasses. Unless all of this happens men and women will continue to lead half-lives. Floyd Dell pointed out 85 years ago, 'any half, when it comes to life, is very near to none at all'.

1 That's why mum's gone to work!

“A brilliant wife is a plague to her husband, her children, her friends, her valet, everyone.” Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Over the last few decades, the workplace has been the site of a well-documented revolution. While not amounting to what some optimists have described as a ‘feminisation’ of work, the changes are dramatic. B. Seebohm Rowntree saw it coming in his 1951 Third Social Survey of York:

“A substantial number of working-class women, probably some 10% ... have formed the habit of taking paid employment to supplement the family income... An important proportion ... are actuated by a desire to meet other people and thus to lead a less restricted life. This is a sociological fact that may prove to be of significance...”³

Significant it has proved to be. And since the 1970s the pace of change has accelerated. There are now 13 million women in paid employment, compared to 16 million men. Thirty years ago, the proportions of working age men and women in paid employment were 91% and 56%, respectively. Today these figures are 84% and 73%.

The pay gap between men and women has also narrowed, with full-time female workers now earning 81 pence for every male pound, compared to 62 pence in 1975 – although in very recent years the rate of improvement has slowed.

And while the glass ceiling remains firmly in place, it has at least been given a few good dents. In 2002, 29% of executive positions are filled by women – more than double the proportion recorded just six years ago.⁴ In the US, women now make up 49% of managerial and professional jobs, while comprising 47% of the workforce, according to the Employment Policy Foundation.⁵ By 2030, the Foundation thinks the proportion will have reached 54%.

While the rhetoric about working hours is distinctly male in flavour, the real story of working time is the steady catch-up of women. Fathers' working hours increased by five percentage points between 1998 and 2001; but those of mothers rose by six percentage points. A major report on working fathers from the Equal Opportunities Commission – the biggest study of its kind undertaken in the UK – finds that:

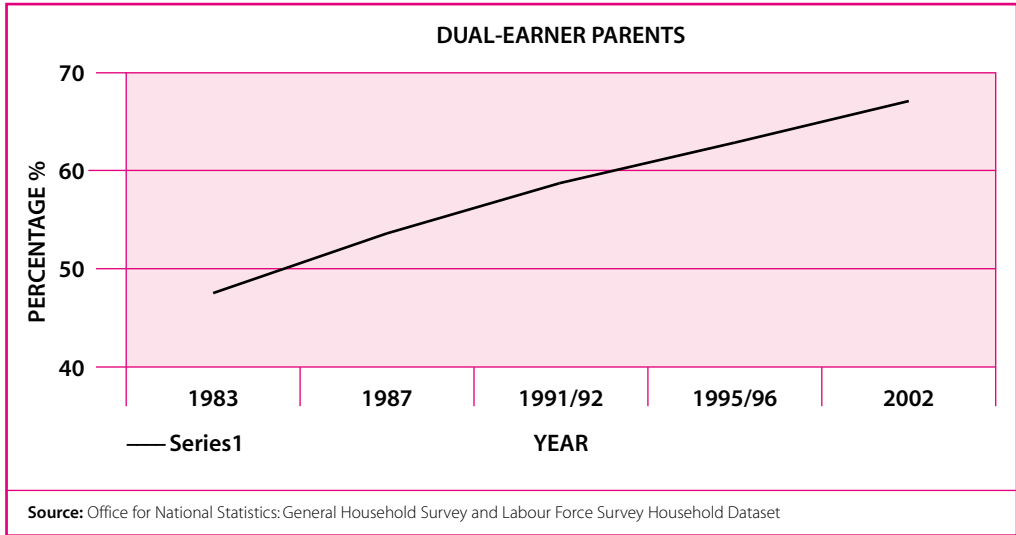
"The data show increasing proportions of mothers employed in full-time work (both longer full-time hours and shorter full-time hours) and an increase in the proportion of mothers working longer part-time hours. The proportions of fathers working longer full-time hours fluctuated over the period 1992 to 2001, with no absolute change between these two time points."⁶

As women have scaled the walls of the corporate compounds, so children and families have become a workplace issue. Thus far, however, only for women. For 'working parent', you can fairly easily read 'working mother'. Scan the hundred delegates at a work-life balance conference and use one hand to count the men. There are exceptions – such as a TUC conference on family-friendly working held early in 2002 at which 60% of attendees were male – but these prove the rule. When someone is discussing the problem of 'balancing work and children', they still have a woman in their mind's eye. Although this is a blinkered view, it is the prevailing one.

One of the clearest consequences of women's labour market activity has been the increase in demand for and provision of services and policies to support working mothers. The UK's maternity leave provision, will (from April 2003) run to a full year. The number of firms with leave arrangements that surpass the legal minimum has quintupled in the last decade. More than one in two working mothers are now in part-time work: a fifth are now in flexitime or term-time only working arrangements.⁷

The lives and expectations of mothers have been transformed. The male breadwinner/female carer model is being progressively replaced by a dual-earner model, as Figure 1, which contains a new Labour Force Survey analysis carried out for this paper, shows.⁸

Figure 1 End of the 50s fantasy family



A significant majority of mothers with children of pre-school age and who are either married or cohabiting – 59% – are now in employment.⁹ Women are returning to employment much more quickly after becoming mothers than their mothers did. More than one in three mothers in the 25-34 age group returned to work within a year of having their first child, compared to one in seven of those now aged 60-64.¹⁰

Among mothers with pre-school children, those in employment were in the minority just six years ago. Now they are the majority. And the rise in employment rates among mothers with preschoolers is not among the single mothers population – it is mothers with partners who are fuelling the rise.¹¹

The 'career woman' is thus becoming a rule rather than exception – which may explain why the phrase seems to be falling out of use. Most women expect to be employed and to secure jobs appropriate for their skills. Most men now work alongside women. Most firms realise that their workforce will contain mothers. The implications of these changes are well-researched and much-debated.

But the fact that mothers are now working means a profound change for fathers too: they no longer have a wife at home raising the children. The revolution in mothers' lives is beginning to have an impact upon father's lives, but so far this part of the equation has been largely unexamined. Men are the missing link in the work and gender story.

1.1 **The evolution of man** From the perspective of a father, the world has changed in the space of one generation from one in which their partners would remain at home to bring up their children, and allow them to focus on their jobs, to one in which their partner is likely to have a job. Given that employment rates among men are highest when their children are under five,¹² and that this is often a critical point in terms of career development, fathers thus face a 'triple whammy' – career pressure, new parental responsibilities, and a working partner. Even as their children grow up, many men are now taking on caring responsibilities for elderly and/or sick parents.¹³

Men are beginning to feel this strain. Data from the Working in Britain survey shows that 'non-work life' is being increasingly prioritised by men and that while there was no change in 'work-life balance' issues for women between 1992 and 2002, there was a marked increase in the proportion of men complaining that work was intruding into 'family time'.¹⁴

There are a number of factors at work here. Men, along with women, are reporting higher levels of workplace strain. At the same time, more men now want to spend more time with their children (see Section 2.3). But perhaps just as importantly, men are increasingly *expected* to undertake childcare and domestic work – and therefore experience work-life tension – because they are now sharing the load with their partner.

1.2 **Dad's home!** 'Housecleaning', wrote Helen Campbell in 1881, is 'a terror to everyone, and above all to gentleman, who resent it from beginning to end.'¹⁵ But when Phillips, the electrical goods manufacturer, recently produced a document titled *A Man's Guide To Ironing*, they were swamped by demand. At the last count, 50,000 people had asked for a copy. Admittedly, 40% of the

requests were from women who passed the publication on to partners and sons – but that still means 30,000 men wanted to know more about removing stubborn creases.

Manufacturers are responding to the changing market for household appliances, producing vacuum cleaners and irons with ‘turbo boosts’ and ‘triggers’ to appeal to the growing male clientele. This is what Ralph LaRossa calls ‘masculine domesticity’, in which ‘men inject their manliness into domestic work’.¹⁶

Over the last forty years, the amount of time men spend on cooking and housework has tripled. While women in full-time employment still spend twice as much time engaged in these activities as men, the gap is narrowing quickly and on current trends should close within the next few years.¹⁷

So men are more likely than they were to wield an iron or tend to the fishfingers: but the most dramatic change has been in the amount of time men spend with their children. Adrienne Burgess has drawn attention to the historical distinction between the differing contributions of men and women to their children: women’s role was involvement, men’s was investment, ie, financial support.¹⁸ But as she points out, this line is now being eroded from both sides. Women are earning a rising proportion of the household income. And fathers are doing more parenting:

“Today a father’s place is, increasingly, in the home. Because so many mothers are employed and are often choosing work which uses their qualifications rather than accepting jobs with hours that suit the family, fathers’ working hours are beginning to form part of working-time negotiations within families.”¹⁹

Fathers are also reacting much more positively, in terms of increased childcare contribution, to a decision by their partner to remain in employment. In 1981, fathers with a partner in full-time employment spent an average of 17 hours a week with their children; by 1997 the equivalent group were putting in 23 hours of kid-time each week.²⁰

In the mid-1970s, fathers with children under five spent less than 15 minutes a day to child-related activities. By the late 1990s, in spite of increased working hours, they were putting in an average of two hours with their children.²¹ The increase in the amount of time fathers spend with their children has been especially marked since the mid-1980s – a period which has also seen sharp rises in the proportion of mothers returning to employment.

It is of course possible to grossly overstate these changes. Social attitudes towards women with young children going out to work are lukewarm at best. Indeed, three-quarters of pregnant women say they wouldn't go back to work unless they needed the money. And there is nothing like equality in either the domestic or the public sphere. 'When men do dishes, it's called helping out', writes Anna Quindlen, a writer for the *New York Times*. 'When women do dishes, it's called life'. Even in households where both parents work, mum is the one who knows when the GP appointment is.²²

But it is important to recognise that real changes are taking place in our homes, in the lives of fathers – and therefore in our workplaces, too.

1.3 Boys' baby hunger While men are taking on more childcare responsibility, in part at least because their partners are more likely to be employed, and rightly more demanding of more equal share of the domestic labour, dads are also driven by a simple desire to play an important part in their children's day-to-day lives. Here is how one father, with an employed partner, sees his role:

"Communication, spending time with children individually ... it's this quality time thing ... Showing them new things, and to be there when they are upset or are finding things difficult or daunting. Then there's things like helping them to read."²³

One large study found that three out of four men with young children had engaged in one of the following activities in the preceding week: putting them to bed, taking them to nursery, reading a story or have sole care for them.²⁴

While the debate about the innate ability of mothers to care for children rages on, a number of studies have shown men to be just as capable as women of caring for children.²⁵ Concluding her study of single mothers and single fathers, sociologist Barbara Risman writes that 'men can mother, and children are not necessarily better nurtured by women than by men.'²⁶ (When the activity Risman describes as 'mothering' can be described as fathering or, even better, parenting, we'll really have made progress.)

Men not only can do it, they want to. Fathers increasingly want not only to 'invest' in their children lives, but also to be part of them: 87% of men think it is best for a father to be 'very involved in a bringing the child up from an early age'.²⁷

There is an inevitable tendency for debates about the lives of men and women to be conducted in terms of a zero-sum game: who is winning, who is losing. The truth is that men emerge as neither victims nor victors from the changes of the last few decades. Significant positive changes have already occurred – but now is when it gets interesting.

As Michael Kimmel, the leading US writer on masculinity, puts it:

"The second half of the transformation of gender is just beginning, and will be, I suspect, far more difficult to accomplish than the first. That's because there was an intuitively obvious ethical imperative attached to enlarging the opportunities for and eliminating the discrimination against women. But the transformation of the twenty-first century involves the transformation of men's lives."²⁸

That transformation, as this section has shown, is already under way. Right now, it is most obvious on the domestic front. Because mothers are active in the workplace, fathers are becoming more active in the home. But the dynamic that has been unleashed by women's progress is heading back, this time via fathers, to the factory and the office. Women have been juggling home and work for decades. Now men are starting to juggle, too.

2 Danger: dads at work

“Now there was a time/When they used to say/That behind every great man/There had to be a great woman.” Eurythmics

The phrase ‘working father’ – to describe a man who is in employment, but also has caring responsibility for children – is becoming a slightly less bizarre-sounding phrase. Men are shouldering more of the responsibilities outside the workplace. The ‘great woman’ is no longer behind him: she is in the office up the road, leaving a voicemail telling him to get home and pick up the kids because she’s running late from a meeting.

Ellen Galinsky, director and co-founder of the Families and Work Institute in New York, says:

“When we first started working with large companies, the groups of men and women sounded very different. If the men complained at all about long hours, they complained about their wives’ complaints. Now, if the timbre of the voice was disguised, I couldn’t tell which was which. The men are saying: ‘I don’t want to live this way. I want to be with my kids.’”

But the challenges faced by this breed of working fathers are generally below the corporate radar. The danger is that their new and changing needs are missed or ignored, which would be bad news for men who now want fulfilling work and fulfilling fatherhood; bad news for women who want genuine equality at home and at work; bad news for children who want both parents involved in their lives; and bad news for companies who lose talented women *and* men from their payrolls.

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- 2.1** **Stealth parenting** Fatherhood is being re-negotiated at home, but the debate at work has barely begun. Fathers want more flexibility but frequently lack the tools and language to ask for it. Women have had to fight, and continue to fight, for the right to more flexible working. In the process, they have developed a vocabulary and, in some cases, a sense of camaraderie among the mothers in a workplace.

Fathers are not yet in this position. For many, saying to a superior that they cannot do a late-night meeting because they have to pick up the kids is fraught with difficulty. This is not to say that women do not face these challenges: but some senior managers who are comfortable with female staff playing the 'family card' recoil when their male colleagues do so.

A study using a dummy request for unpaid childcare leave found that employers were more likely to reject the appeal if it was thought to come from a man.²⁹ A leading UK headhunter says that while firms expect requests for flexible working from women with childcare responsibilities, it would be the 'kiss of death' for a man to say he needs flexibility for this reason.³⁰

In discussion, fathers will cite a range of reasons for not speaking out for more flexibility. Often it is because their partners continue to do most of the childcare. But some feel that it would 'tag' them as less committed to speak up; others are afraid of appearing less masculine; and a few are concerned that their needs rank below those of their women colleagues and that it would be unfair to deflect attention towards themselves. One father in the public sector, with a wife in full-time employment, said:

"When I leave to pick up my kids, I always say I've got a client meeting off-site. I hate it, and I hate myself, but I know the looks I'd get from my boss if I told the truth."³¹

Another father in the financial services industry believes that men who admit to having childcare responsibilities will face the same discrimination as women:

"All the rhetoric about supporting mothers is great – and there are loads of policies and networks. But there are no mothers there at the top of the firm: it's shooting yourself in the foot to ask for help with childcare. They might give you the help, but that's your high-flying career over with. I always say I've had breakfast with a client [when I drop my children at nursery]."³²

The HR departments of companies frequently point out that there is little evidence that their male employees want more flexibility, longer paternity leave, etc. In fact, in many places, fathers do not even take up the policies that are already available to them. In one bank, the offer of five days paid paternity leave had not been taken up by a single employee.³³

One reason is that men fear a career crash – and often for good reason. A senior HR person in a US merchant bank, which had just introduced generous paternity leave, warns ominously: ‘We’re going to use it to feed out the losers.’³⁴

But there is also a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy about the absence of fathers’ demands. In many companies, little effort is made to contact fathers, make them aware of their existing rights or gauge any latent demand. One private sector HR manager says of their policy for fathers:

“I think, being truthful, we would not go out of our way to publicise it.”³⁵

Paper policies from HR departments end up inert, and fathers get forgotten. As James Levine, director of The Fatherhood Project in the US, explains:

“A vicious cycle sets in: men don’t make their needs apparent, and employers continue to define work-family balance as a women’s issue, which reinforces men’s reluctance to express their needs.”³⁶

Of course, not all men are clamouring for the chance to leave early to go to the school gates. The world would be a different place if they were. In most cases, fathers remain at best in a supporting role to their partners. But the homogenous picture of fatherhood – with a wife at home – is breaking up. Dads are becoming more diverse.

2.2 **Disappearing dinosaur dads** It is a cliché to point out that most organisations are based on a male construct of work: the full-time, uninterrupted, primary-breadwinner model. And it is blindingly obvious that women will be unable to

compete as equals in such organisations, although they can get close to it if they choose not to have children – if they become, in Heather Hopfl's phrase, 'quasi-men'.

But the contemporary workplace is not only constructed along gender lines. It is built on generational foundations too. Jobs and careers are constructed not simply with a man in mind, but with *a man with a wife at home* in mind. Until recently, of course, this was a perfectly reasonable assumption. Shirley Burggraf, a US economist, explains the change:

"The fact [is] that there used to be millions of invisible employees. Employers who once got two (an employee with a back-up spouse at home) are now most often getting just one."³⁷

We know a lot about the differences between the circumstances of men and women at work. But a new and important divide in the workplace is the one between fathers in their fifties and those in, say, their thirties. Most of the former group have wives who stayed home to raise their kids, at least in the pre-school years. Most of the latter group have wives or partners who work.³⁸ This is a dramatic change in the lives of men, the implications of which are only just beginning to be felt.

The prototypical 'ideal' worker, which never fitted women's lives, now doesn't fit the lives of many younger men. Of course, the older fathers – the dinosaur dads – are currently the ones in the most senior positions in organisations and so have a disproportionate influence on workplace cultures. Most continue to see the world through the lenses of their own generation's experience; ie, a world of breadwinning men and childrearing women. True, many of them have woken up to the fact that they now employ mothers. But few have paid attention to the fact that this inevitably means they now employ a different kind of father.

One dinosaur dad, now a grandfather, sees the change this way:

“If a man was caught washing the dishes in my generation, they would say ‘How can you do that? Let’s go down the pub for a pint’. My lad’s generation is different, he helps in a way I never did. I wish I could have my time again so that I could change that kind of thing.”

The same kind of changes are occurring at work – not washing up, perhaps, but doing the nursery run or staying home with a fevered toddler.

Of course, there are still plenty of men who will continue to reap the benefits of the current conceptions of employee commitment, productivity and behaviour – mostly those whose partners continue to bear the responsibility for the children and the home. It would be inaccurate to claim that all younger fathers are different to their bosses. But there are a growing number of men who both want and need to be more involved in the lives of their children and find that their workplaces were designed for an earlier male model. As Rhona Rapoport puts it:

“These *gendered* assumptions [about workplace commitment] continue to place constraints on *men’s* involvement on family life, even though there is a rising expectation that they will share the ‘second shift’ with their partners.”³⁹ (my emphasis)

Many younger fathers are now caught between the rock of antique working practices and the hard face of their demanding partner. Small wonder they are feeling the ‘work-life’ squeeze. It is difficult, especially for women, to feel too sorry for them: women continue to lose out on almost every quantitative variable. But the truth is that the next few years are likely to prove decisive to hopes of gender equality – and that men, particularly fathers, are the critical agents of change.

3 Mothers vs Men: BOUT CANCELLED

“Children might as well come from cabbage patches as far as most political and economic theory is concerned.” Shirley Burggraf

A change in the nature of fatherhood, and especially of the relationship between being a father and being an employee, is key to the drive for gender equality.

As things stand, men and women are both caught in a vicious circle. Men earn more than women, so when couples have children the smart economic decision is for the mother to give up or cut back on her work. (If there’s any doubt about this, the gap between maternity and paternity provision drives the economic point finally home.) Women who have taken on childcare responsibility then compete on an unequal footing with men in the workplace and therefore end up with lower earnings.⁴⁰ And so the wheel keeps turning.

There is heated debate within the policy community about where the ‘source’ of gender inequality lies: does the unequal distribution of domestic work cause the gap in earnings? Or is institutional discrimination causing the pay gap, which then creates the ‘economic’ case for mothercare? Here’s an example of each viewpoint:

“Until women achieve an equal place with men in the world of work, with equal pay and job status, then ‘common sense’ will continue to dictate in most families that the father becomes the main breadwinner while the mother is the carer.”⁴¹

“Women, because they are still expected to shoulder the lion’s share of that second shift, feel real constraints on their ability to succeed at work.”⁴²

The truth is that the causality runs both ways, and that a concerted effort to achieve gender equality has to recognise that equality at work and equality at home are inescapably intertwined. We can’t get one without the other. Heidi Hartmann hits the nail on the head:

“Low wages keep women dependent on men because they encourage women to marry. Married women must perform domestic chores for their husbands ... This domestic division of labour, in turn, acts to weaken women’s position in the labour market. *Thus, the hierarchical domestic division of labour is perpetuated by the labour market, and vice versa.*”⁴³
(my emphasis)

So any initiatives designed to narrow the pay gap at work – such as compulsory gender pay audits, called for by the EOC, TUC and others – are to be welcomed. One study shows clearly that the higher a woman’s salary in relation to her partner, the more able he is to take parental leave.⁴⁴ It’s not rocket science. But at the same time, it is important to recognise that women will *never* be able to achieve full parity in the labour market unless there is a redistribution of unpaid work towards men.

The vicious circle has to be attacked from all angles, as Margaret O’Brien and Ian Shemilt conclude from their authoritative study of working fathers for the Equal Opportunities Commission:

“It is perhaps likely that fundamental changes in *both* organisational culture and parental role division would need to occur, alongside increased provision, before behaviour begins to match aspiration.”⁴⁵
(their emphasis)

3.1 Widening the ‘mommy track’ Motherhood is a costly business for women, carrying a ‘penalty’ of some £140,000 in terms of lifetime earnings.⁴⁶ Economist Jane Waldfogel finds that childless US women now earn 90% as much as their male counterparts, while mothers earned just 73%. Among workers in their late 20s and early 30s, the pay of non-mothers has reached 98% of male wages.⁴⁷ So long as women choose not to become mothers, then, they can often thrive in a workplace designed for men whose children were cared for by others – a truth borne out by the disproportionate numbers of senior women who are without children.⁴⁸ This doesn’t feel much like progress.

Women who decide to combine motherhood and a career end up on a 'mommy track' – effectively a slow lane. Their promotion prospects, training opportunities and earnings potential all diminish, often in explicit or implicit exchange for less demanding roles. But the penalty is large, and may be widening: the gender pay gap between part-time male employee and part-time female employees actually rose slightly (from 40% to 41%) between 2000 and 2001. For this reason, many within the gender and work debates believe that unequal pay and low pay for women remains the most serious problem.⁴⁹

As long as women are doing most of the parenting, the mommy track will exist in one form or another. Under these circumstances there is no way to abolish it. But once fathers are sharing the load, 'coming out' to their employers as working fathers and demanding different and better ways of working, employers will be suddenly dealing with the majority of their workforce. And you can't put the majority on a slow track and hope to survive.

The only way mothers can enjoy equality in the workplace is if the men are also taking breaks to care for children, if they are also missing the weekly team meeting because little Jenny needs to go to the GP, if they also have to leave the office at 5.30pm on the dot to collect their children. The only truly mother-friendly workplace is one that is also father-friendly.

3.2 Devoted dads = new corporate men While much of the pay and seniority gap between men and women is the rational result of the actual distribution of parenting work, there remain some deep-rooted attitudes among men to women's correct roles which can hinder even those unencumbered by childcare crises and chocolate-covered collars.⁵⁰ How can we tackle these attitudinal barriers?

Kathleen Gerson, in *No Man's Land – Men's Changing Commitments to Family and Work*, suggests that there is at least one powerful way to make corporate men into new men: get them involved in their own family life. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 138 men, she sorts them into three groups – 'breadwinners,' 'autonomous men' and 'involved fathers,' with about a third of interviewees in each category.

Breadwinners are those who hold most staunchly to the traditional model of the father as financial provider, and whose partners were most likely to be full-time homemakers. Autonomous men were single, often divorced, and either childless or in infrequent contact with their children. The third group, involved fathers, were most likely to have a partner in full-time employment and were trying to balance the demands of work and family life. Gerson probed their attitudes to women working, and found that involved fathers had significantly more egalitarian views than the other two groups, especially in terms of the 'right of women to pursue their own careers.'

This is an intuitive finding: it makes sense that men who are sharing the responsibilities of family life with a partner who is in paid employment will be 'newer' in their attitudes. But it is a hugely important one. It means that men who come to work from the nursery drop-off or having changed five nappies since dawn are much more comfortable working alongside women, or for a woman boss. It is of course difficult to establish causality here – it is likely that men with progressive attitudes are more likely to end up with women who remain in employment, and to be more involved with their kids. But the fact remains. Involved dads are the new corporate men.

Helping and encouraging men to be more involved in childcare therefore brings a triple benefit for women at work. First, they have (life) partners who are able to share the load at home. Second, the corporate spotlight comes off working mothers, who are currently seen as the only ones with domestic responsibilities. And third, the attitudes of men towards successful career women become more enlightened.

3.3 Kids need care The debate about childcare is currently focused on the need for high-quality daycare provision, allowing mothers to remain in paid employment. This has arguably been the right strategy up until now: the expansion of childcare availability has transformed the life-chances of millions of women. But it is time to take a wider view.

Paid childcare has an important part to play in getting ‘women’s work’ done. But few people relish the prospect of a world in which mothers simply join fathers in being away from their children ten hours every day of the week. The imperative now is to help both parents provide childcare, as well as bring in the money. Rather than women conforming to a Jurassic ‘male’ model of work, men and women need to join forces to overthrow it. We have seen the rise of dual-career couples: now we need dual-carer couples.

We can’t ignore the fact that children need huge amounts of care, especially in the early months. Or that the best people to provide this care are almost always parents. This is not to say that children are harmed in any way by being in full-time childcare (this is a question on which the debate will run and run). But it is to say that our objective as a society has to be as much about allowing parents to care for their own children, especially babies, as it is about paying others to do it for them. And we should mean parents, not just mothers. The involvement of fathers in their children’s lives has been shown to have positive effects on a range of social and educational outcomes for children.⁵¹ Similarly, a ‘dad deficit’ is associated with lower self-esteem, especially in sons.⁵²

There is also an urgent need to factor the views of children into the analysis of work and family. Adults tend to assume that discussions of what’s ‘best for the kids’ need to take place after the nine o’clock watershed. But Ellen Galinsky’s work in the US, published in *Ask The Children*, shows a rich, thoughtful and diverse response from children to the dilemmas faced by working parents.⁵³ Comparable data is singularly lacking in the UK.

The new childcare agenda should be increased opportunities for parental care, rather than professional care. This does not mean getting women to go back to doing ‘women’s work’. It means recognising the importance of that work, and getting fathers in on the act.

4 The man the best can get

“We’re trying to do what women want of us, what children want of us, but we’re not willing to transform the workplace.” Michael Kimmel

Most companies are now in favour of ‘diversity’ – so much so, that the term is in danger of being too soggy to mean very much at all. To the extent that diversity means anything specific, it usually means more women and more people from ethnic minorities on the payroll. Both hugely important campaigns (although both also in danger of being side-tracked into ‘box-ticking’ exercises rather than thorough-going cultural and attitudinal change).

But the meaning of diversity must now embrace men, and in particular fathers. We have become accustomed to a diverse range of mothers – from full-time homemakers to chief executives. Now we have to get used to the idea that fathers are no longer clones. A few are primary carers; many more share care with their partner. Some, divorced or separated from their children’s mother, have caring responsibilities some of the time. Plenty have partners who still keep the home fires burning; plenty do not. Their attitudes to work, children, gender roles, working women and fatherhood differ dramatically.⁵⁴

One thing is clear: the pool of men who fit the mould of the archetypal organisation man is shrinking fast. Firms that continue to rely on ‘breadwinner’ men will not only miss out on the talents of women, but on the talents of increasing numbers of men too. Soon there won’t be enough dinosaur dads to go around. The few firms that can sense this shift in their workforce are starting to explore whether they are ‘father-friendly’ enough.

There is a very long way to go. Right now, 95% of firms provide bereavement leave but just 65% offer paternity leave.⁵⁵ In many organisations, then, men can take time off when someone dies, but not when their own child is born. But the pressure for change is building – and the benefits for firms that act now are considerable.

4.1 Firms are rightly anxious to attract, retain and profit from the skills of the most highly skilled, best-educated workers. The trends described in the early sections of this paper should therefore give them pause for thought. **Where have all the good men gone?** We know that the women who are most likely to continue working (and to continue working full-time) after having children are those in the highest occupational and educational brackets. We also know that these women are most likely to be married to or living with men with similar levels of education and occupational status. The men that companies most need are also the ones most needed at home.

Some companies are beginning to struggle to fill certain overseas posts, because the men who traditionally filled them, taking with them inelegantly dubbed ‘trailing spouses’, are now refusing to move because their partners have good jobs at home. Staff surveys on work-life balance are finding that men, especially younger men, are rethinking the relationship between work and home.

In a similar pattern to the one commonly seen among talented women, some men are now eschewing the corporate ladder for self-employment, as Michael Kimmel reports:

“Many of [the] involved fathers have left the pitfalls of corporate life altogether, starting their own businesses or going into professions that allow for more flexibility ... in this respect, the new man isn’t an organisation man at all. And by placing less emphasis on the importance of work success, these men present a dilemma for corporations that want to retain the best professionals.”⁵⁶

This may help to explain why father-friendly workplaces have a healthier bottom line. In a large study of the business impact of ‘family-friendly’ working practices, just two were found to have a positive association with above average financial performance – job-sharing and, most strongly, paternity leave.⁵⁷

Ellen Galinsky also finds that while all parents experience what she calls 'positive spillover' from parenting to work – more energy, better mood, more creativity – these effects are much stronger for fathers than for mothers. Dads who are hands-on at home are happier at work.⁵⁸

Involved fathers are also more likely to have some of the skills which the modern workplace is currently demanding – the 'emotional intelligence' comprised of empathy, patience, motivation and consensus-building. Tom Beardshaw of Fathers Direct believes up-to-date dads make better workers:

"A lot of the skill-set that employers want has been called 'feminine,' but it would be more accurate to say that they are 'parental' – they come from the experience of nurturing and raising kids. Dads who are actively involved in their children's lives will bring the same benefits to work as mothers do – that's why Volvo encourages fathers to take time off: they are better managers when they come back."⁵⁹

And Bill O'Brien of Hanover Insurance points to a paradox:

"It's ironic that we spend so much time and money trying to devise clever programs for developing leadership in our organisations and ignore a structure that already exists, and which is ideal for the job. The more I understand the real skills of leadership in learning organisations, the more I become convinced these are the skills of effective parenting."⁶⁰

The business case for more father-friendly working is, however, some way from being proven. Claims about recruitment and retention difficulties among fathers are currently largely anecdotal. And the link between profitability and paternity leave is far from proven as causal. It might be, indeed, that only successful firms feel they can 'afford' more generous provision (a problem which bedevils most studies of financial performance and family-friendly policies). Plenty of corporations are sceptical that helping fathers will help their bottom line.

In other words, the debate about helping working fathers is about where the one on working mothers was around three decades ago. But it is going in the same direction, and in the same way that companies which acted early to support women are reaping the benefits, so the first 'father-friendly' workplaces are likely to thrive.

4.2 Many companies are engaged in an apparently continuous battle to change their culture. The required buzzwords for the kind of culture they want are: flexible, empowered, energetic, creative, knowledge-sharing, diverse, fun, open, trusting, non-hierarchical, collaborative ... you get the picture. The words fall off the tongues of senior executives so easily that both speaker and listener enter a kind of nodding trance, lulled by the familiar clichés into a daydream of motherhood or apple pie.

Then, of course, everyone gets back to work in pretty much the same way as before. Most culture change initiatives fail, often in the face of the sheer inertia exerted by existing patterns, mores and models of work.⁶¹

We know two things about corporate culture. First, it is very important. Second, it is almost impossible to change (resulting in a bumper harvest for 'culture change' consultants). But there is some evidence that looking hard at and thinking hard about gender in the workplace can result in significant, positive culture change. The primary piece of evidence is the work by Rhona Rapoport, Lotte Bailyn and other leading international researchers on work and gender issues. They found that initiatives to reveal and scrutinise the implicit, gendered assumptions about employees' commitment and competence 'unlocked tremendous creativity and energy for change' in a wide range of companies.⁶²

In many cases, projects on gender equity led to improved financial performance – the 'dual agenda' – even though this was not an original objective. Rapoport and Bailyn *et al* suggest two reasons for this 'unexpected' link. First, the stereotypical model of the 'career primary' worker means that wasteful practices go unchallenged until they are unveiled:

“These assumptions ... that all employees fit the mould of the traditional middle-class married man: the family’s sole breadwinner, for whom work is the highest priority and who is willing and able to do whatever it takes to ‘get the job done’ ... often support work practices that are inefficient and ineffective in the current work environment. Hence the unexpected linkage between improved performance on the one hand and greater gender equity, with reduced work-personal life conflict for everyone, on the other.”

The study also suggests that commitment to a change process is higher when employees can see a tangible, personal benefit for themselves in it, as well as advantages for the firm. Whenever a new initiative is rolled out,

FATHER-FRIENDLY FIRMS

Cogent Investment Operations

This company, which offers outsourcing services to City fund managers, encourages all staff to work a nine-day fortnight, a huge bonus for fathers. The firm also promotes and supports home-working, with take-up equally strong among both men and women. ‘The key is flexibility’, says Ian Barnard, winner of the Parents at Work/Lloyds/TSB Best Boss competition 2002. ‘And we go out of our way to ensure that flexibility is seen as an option for fathers as well as mothers’. One father in the company now works from 7.00am to 2.00pm, in order to be able to collect his children from school.

Sainsbury’s

Supermarkets operate in highly competitive markets: but Sainsbury’s believes that supporting parents and supporting profits go hand in hand. ‘We recognise that a happy workforce has an impact on the bottom line,’ says a spokeswoman. ‘We see fathers and mothers as equally important – and we do not distinguish between them in terms of access to flexible work options. It’s a two-way street ; we are looking for forms of flexibility that work for the company and for our mums and dads.’ The company offers two weeks of paternity leave; allows new adoptive parents four weeks off; and new foster parents a week’s leave – all at full pay. There is even a policy allowing staff, men and women, paid time off for fertility treatment – corporate friendliness to aspirant, as well as actual, fathers!

MTM Products

This firm – East Midlands Employer of the Year 2002 – believes that attitudes are more important than policies. ‘Trust your employees,’ says managing director Ian Greenaway ‘and see that showing some flexibility on both sides is in all our interests.’ Greenaway, whose firm is in the printing and engraving business, has a policy of automatically agreeing any request for a new working pattern, so long as the immediate colleagues of the person making the request are in support. ‘The people on the ground are in the best position to know what will work,’ he says. One primary care-giving dad works two days one week, three the next. The company has an aggressive policy against ‘presenteeism’, with most staff working their contracted 39 hours a week. In the latest survey, 100% of staff said they supported the company’s work-life balance policies.

people rightly ask: what’s in it for me? Freeing-up time currently wasted on working practices built on a fading variation of organisation man is a powerful incentive, as an employee in one of the test companies told the researchers: ‘We are going to make this work. Because if it works, I might actually have a life!’. The research conclusion drawn is that:

“In this case and in many others in diverse work settings, we have observed the phenomenon of Dual Agenda initiatives achieving breakthroughs in solving seemingly intractable organisational problems. In every instance, *motivating work groups to engage in work redesign by legitimating personal as well as performance issues* was a key success factor.” (my emphasis)

Rather than shoving gender issues, including fatherhood issues, off into the ghetto of the HR department, companies can use the power of the personal to ignite real change.

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- 4.3** There is a strong case for organisations to begin thinking more creatively about the parents – rather than just the mothers – on their payroll. But
- Five steps to father-friendliness** while the field of ‘family-friendly’ policy is well-ploughed, there is little on ‘father-friendly’ working.

This section outlines some steps towards father-friendliness in the workplace.

i. 'Daddy diagnostic'

The first step is to find out what issues fathers are currently dealing with. One of the most effective ways of drawing out these often subterranean concerns is through focus or discussion groups, based around core issues such as hours, flexibility, culture and performance. James Levine has pioneered this approach in the US.⁶³ This can then be followed up by a tailored questionnaire. Any action which follows is contingent upon these diagnostics.

In the same way that women in different firms and different sectors have different needs, so the priorities of fathers are diverse. In one company, paternity leave was seen to be adequate – it was the unnecessary rigidity of working times that was most problematic, especially for those who were separated and had to leave early every other Friday to collect their kids.⁶⁴

The second part of the daddy diagnostic is a gender-check of existing HR policies. Wherever there is a policy for mothers, it is necessary to ask why the same provision is not made available to fathers. Is there a business case for helping fathers, as well as mothers, with childcare costs, for example? In some cases it may not be appropriate to go for full equality, but at the very least the question has been asked. In many cases, simply starting to think about men as parents is a powerful beginning.

ii. Paternity leave

Paternity leave provision in the UK is painfully inadequate, given the scale of the changes in family life. While two-thirds of companies currently offer paid paternity leave, the average length is only around three days. While from April 2003 all fathers will be entitled to two weeks of paternity leave, this is to be paid at the Statutory Maternity rate of £100 a week.

There is good reason to believe that many fathers will be unable to afford to take up this leave at such a difficult financial moment for the family.⁶⁵ And it is obvious to all that a few days is not enough time for men to become involved fathers.

The paucity of paternity leave provision means that offering any leave at all is seen as conclusive evidence of father-friendliness. In response to the question, 'are you father-friendly?', senior HR people will often reply, 'we've got pretty good paternity leave, I think! James Levine argues that we have become obsessed with paternity leave:

"Think about the faulty logic of what I call *paternity leave preoccupation*. A small percentage of fathers in any given company are new fathers. New fathers are 'new fathers' for relatively short time in the course of their parenthood. But when children are no longer infants, do they no longer need their fathers?"⁶⁶ (his emphasis)

Paternity leave, then, is not sufficient for father-friendly working. But it is absolutely necessary. Allowing and encouraging men a reasonable amount of time off to get to know and care for their child is a mark of a civilised corporation.

There is strong evidence that good maternity provision increases the loyalty of mothers to an organisation and while it is too early to say whether paternity leave will have the same positive effects, there is no reason to think it will not.

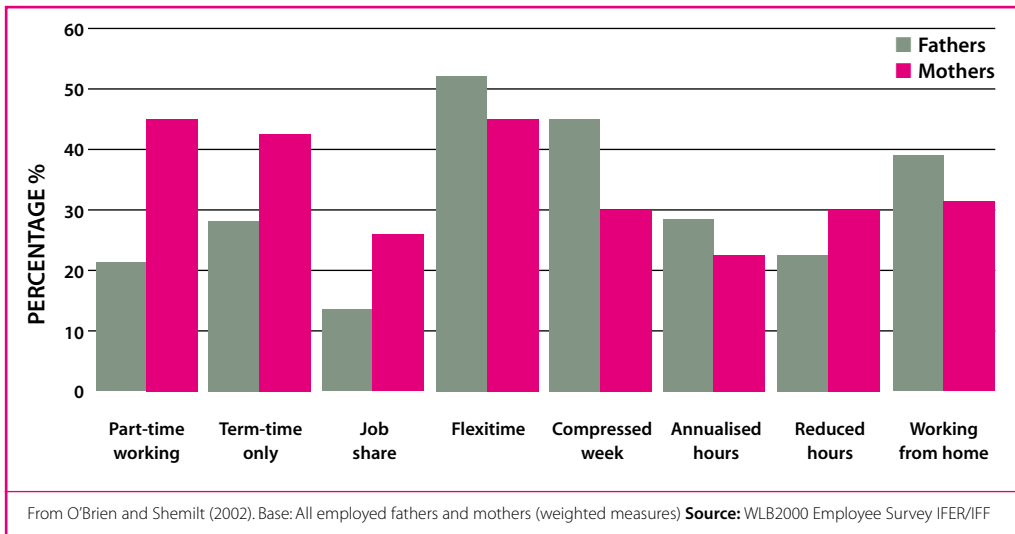
iii. Time sovereignty

Men are just as demanding of greater working time flexibility as women, according to the EOC's analysis of the DfEE Work-Life Balance Survey.⁶⁷ But there is a big difference in the kind of flexibility they are after. Fathers want flexitime, a compressed working week and the chance to work at home; mothers also want flexitime, but also part-time work opportunities and term-time only working, as Figure 2 shows.

These differences clearly reflect the existing distribution of unpaid work, with mothers seeking working patterns that fit with childcare responsibilities, in some cases with a drop in income, while men are looking for ways to increase their flexibility without dropping their hours or salary:

“Fathers were more likely to want flexibility of working hours over the day and week, whilst mothers preferred working practices that entailed greater reductions in discrete chunks of working time, perhaps linking with children’s requirements.”⁶⁸

Figure 2 What kind of flexibility?



Over time these differences are likely to narrow, but it is important that employers react to men’s current demands. It will pay firms to recognise that the war for talent is not solely conducted at senior levels – at present, the only ones where men are likely to have any control over working hours, according to recent research from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.⁶⁹

What fathers and mothers are both asking for is more control over their working time – what The Work Foundation has elsewhere dubbed ‘time sovereignty’.⁷⁰ In MORI research for the Equal Opportunities Commission, the desire for greater time sovereignty was a strong theme:

“To be honest I think it’s ridiculous that we have set hours ... Why can’t someone work from 8.00am until 4.00pm if that was best for them?”
(father of one, partner employed)

"I would like to see flexi-hours, flexi-time ...The children can wake up anywhere between 4.30 and 6.00 so my body clock is geared to early starts and early to bed. I am happy to get up at 4am or 5am and finish earlier in the afternoon." (father of three, partner employed)⁷¹

Working hours are stuck in the industrial era, when factories needed fodder. They are also stuck in an age where few employees had to worry about school-runs or nursery pick-ups. The Work Foundation has already called for legislation giving all employees the right to request a change to working conditions (which will be granted to the parents of young children from April 2003⁷²).⁷³

Granting employees more control over their hours has been shown to increase productivity⁷⁴ and the potential for IT to enhance flexibility is beginning to be reflected in the rapid growth in the number of people working occasionally from home.⁷⁵ More than any single policy change, the modernisation of company's attitudes towards working time will help working parents.

iv. Culture shift

Policies change little or nothing if they are papered over the cracks of an old culture. It looks as though examining gender issues helps to promote culture change (see section 4.2 above) but, at the same time, moving towards a genuinely father-friendly environment requires culture change in the first place. It is one thing to talk about progressive policies, another to create a climate that supports their take-up: people believe their eyes before their ears.

Leadership by example is, as usual, critical. If boardroom fathers work as if they were childless, the clear message to other dads is to keep their own issues to themselves. Conversely, senior men can achieve more through their own actions than a dozen policies or a hundred HR statements. James Levine cites the example of Apple Computer, which was struggling to persuade fathers that its family leave policy was for them. Then Jim Cutler,

one of the top hundred or so executives, took a month off to be with his new baby. Within two months, two fathers who reported to him had taken time off as well.⁷⁶ Microsoft UK reports a similar ‘trickle-down’ effect.⁷⁷

But the cultures based on a ‘dinosaur dad’ style of working is not created by senior executives alone. Everyone plays their part in creating the culture within which they work. All of us – men and women – have to look as much to our own behaviour and assumptions as those of ‘the boss’. James Levine’s work shows that many men engage in ‘a game ... called *blame the culture*’ – with many fathers reporting that while more flexible, parent-friendly employment sounds good, ‘they don’t allow that around here’:

“[The game] usually takes three to play: an employer, a father, and a mother. They all collude, without realising it, in perpetuating workplace cultures that conform to everybody’s expectations. The result is a continuous, self-perpetuating cycle. Fathers consider the culture and assume it is supportive, at best, of working mothers; companies look at lack of male participation in work-family programs as evidence that balancing work and family is a woman’s issue; and women feel they must take work-family issues on alone at the company, even though at home they need or want the support and involvement of their husbands.”

It is up to working fathers to break this cycle. Levine points out that when fathers talk about the fact that ‘they won’t allow it’, exactly who ‘they’ are remains vague. Senior managers? The board? The CEO? Management generally? No one seems sure. All too often, the truth is that ‘they’ are, in fact ‘us’. Each one of us plays our part in challenging, creating or sustaining a culture. Each one of us has to take responsibility for changing it. Pinning the blame on an ill-defined ‘culture’ is a way of abdicating this responsibility. The ‘culture collusion’ around ways of working will end only when men stop colluding.

v. Good work

There is another way that organisations can make life better for fathers: make their work better. There is good evidence that improving the quality of jobs, and of the working environment, has positive effects at home – much more so than reducing working hours, for example.

O'Brien and Shemilt cite a study showing that the extent to which fathers felt 'overloaded' by their work has a significant impact on the quality of their relationships with their children and partners, while long working hours in themselves have no negative consequences at all.⁷⁸

This finding echoes Ellen Galinsky's work on mood 'spillover' between work and home. Her survey finds that 37% of working parents say that they have often or very often been in a 'good mood with their child because of their job' in the preceding three months (compared to 15% who said their jobs had put them in a bad mood with their kids).⁷⁹ Galinsky reports that the parents (mothers and fathers) who are most likely to take a good mood home with them have the following characteristics:

"[They] have more job autonomy; feel their jobs are more meaningful; are more satisfied with their opportunities to learn on the job; and are challenged to keep learning and be creative on the job – that is, *have better-quality jobs*." (her emphasis)

But they are also more likely to work more days a week than average, an association that initially surprised Galinsky:

"One would expect parents who work more days to be more burned out. I think the explanation lies in the fact that many of us who work more tend to like our jobs more, so it stands to reason that work might be related to parenting in positive ways as well as negative ways."

The debate about family-friendly, and indeed father-friendly, workplaces, tends to be couched in quantitative terms: how to reduce the working

hours of fathers and mothers, for example. But the evidence suggests that it is the quality of work that is critical. It is not the quantity of work that dads and mums do; it's how they feel about it.

From an employer's perspective, providing jobs that stimulate and motivate their staff is (or should be) a central concern in any case. Levels of innovation, productivity and service are all enhanced by higher levels of employee satisfaction. It seems that an additional benefit is greater father-friendliness.

5 Patriarchy to paternity

“Half a life – cooking, clothes and children; half a life – business, politics and baseball. It doesn’t make much difference which is the poorer half. Any half, when it comes to life, is very near to none at all.” Floyd Dell (1917)

We are at a historic moment in the history of gender relations. A revolution has taken place in women’s lives. Nothing is now preventing women from taking their place as equals to men in our companies, legislature and public life – nothing, that is, except for the division of unpaid labour. Of course women can be CEOs, prime minister, priests and newspaper editors! Just as long as they don’t mind bringing up the kids along the way:

“[Women] are left at the end of the century having accomplished half a revolution – a transformation of their opportunities to be workers and mothers. This half-finished revolution has left many women frustrated and unhappy.”⁸⁰

Unsurprisingly, younger women are beginning to question the attractiveness of this deal. Earlier generations of feminists scored a range of successes in breaching the walls of public life – but precious few on the home front. Today’s generation don’t want to be ‘superwoman’. They see that ‘having it all’ is code for a stressful, unequal life.

Finishing the revolution led thus far by women requires a richer definition of the gender debate; a recognition that men and women are both losing out from the current trap; a revaluation of the private work of childrearing; and concerted action from organisations (see chapter 4), government, women and – above all – men.

5.1 1997 felt like a milestone on the gender equality journey. 120 women were in parliament, Labour were in government, many of the leading political feminists were in or close to positions of power in Whitehall, a Women’s Unit and ministers for women (unpaid, of course) were created.

Wake up, Westminster!

Five years on, much of the optimism has evaporated. The government has been much more supportive of women than the previous Conservative administrations – with the minimum wage, enhanced maternity provision, childcare and working family tax credits, higher child benefit, the New Deal for lone parents all notable achievements. But in terms of gender equality, Labour's sights have been set low.

In particular, the gendered assumption that parent = mother has gone largely unchallenged. Indeed, official pronouncements on helping mothers balance work and family have reinforced it. While the government has invested in childcare provision, the underlying presumption is that if mothers aren't parenting, a professional carer is required, as Fathers Direct point out:

“Looking after children is not presented as an opportunity, missed by many fathers; it is a ‘problem’ that must be resolved if mothers are to achieve equality in the workplace.”⁸¹

If the government is serious about its desire for gender equality, there needs to be much more radical action to allow fathers to do more caring. True, the government is moving, but continents have drifted faster. The paternity leave provisions from April 2003 – two weeks at £100 a week – are pitiful given the scale and urgency of change required. If, at minimum, these weeks could be paid at 90% of salary (ie, the same rate as early maternity leave), men would stand more chance of being able to take it.

The government also needs to rethink the six-month extension to maternity leave due for April 2003. No other country in the world has maternity leave as long as the existing provision of 40 weeks, let alone a year. Most of our continental European neighbours have maternity leave of around 12-14 weeks.⁸² Instead, they provide ample parental leave which can be taken by either parent. Why is the UK the only country dictating that only mothers care for children?

The balance between maternity leave and parental leave in the UK is already seriously awry. The new law will make the situation even worse. It is tempting to be grateful for any action, at all, after the desert of the Conservative years, but the current reforms are misconceived. The danger, according to Peter Moss, an international expert on childcare, is that 'doing something on the wrong footing may be worse than doing nothing at all.'⁸³

In the short-term, the government should scrap proposals to extend maternity leave and instead introduce six months of parental leave available to either parent following the six months of maternity. It is in any case likely that a successful sex discrimination case will be brought against the existing proposals, given that under EU law maternity provision is intended for pregnancy, childbirth and recovery. It would be difficult to prove in a court that women need a year to recover from childbirth – what we are really talking about is time for childcare, not recuperation. Depending on the specifics of the case, the EOC would be likely to throw its weight behind the plaintiff. But how much better if the government could be legislatively proactive, rather than legally reactive.

There are many other areas where a genuine focus on gender equality would suggest changes, such as family law, child benefit payment to separated parents, citizenship education, adoption leave, healthcare and so on.

But a shift in posture is as important as a change in policy. We need political leaders to make the case for full gender equality, which means equality in the home and in the family as well as in the workplace. We urgently need a public conversation about the kind of families we want, how we raise our children, and the real implications of women's advancement.

Right now, the agenda around fatherhood is a modest 'add-on' to initiatives designed to help working mothers and/or push organisations on equal pay. It is at best a sideshow. But the truth is that only changes in men's lives can generate genuine equality: fatherhood is now the key to feminism.

5.2 This is the point, however, at which, in Ralph LaRossa's phrase, 'the gender politics gets especially sticky ... because ultimately people get to gain or lose on the basis of where the line gets drawn.'

Sharing the apron strings

While men have clearly had the best of the traditional division of gender roles, women have at least been in command of one area of life: the family. LaRossa again:

"In the social world of parenthood, mothers ... are seen as the ones who have the knowledge and deserve the honours that go along with it. Fathers, in contrast, are not uncommonly viewed as less informed in the child realm ... and in some circumstances can be perceived as flat-out incompetent."⁸⁴

Given that parenting is the one area of life where women are acknowledged by both men and women as more expert, it is easy to see why women should resist 'intrusions' into it by men. Why give up the one monopoly you have?

Men who do want to be more involved can face obstacles thrown up by their employers, by societal expectations – but also by their partners. One study showed that men were much more likely to cuddle and play with their babies when their partner was not around.⁸⁵ Another shows that full-time dads suffer greater loneliness and stress than full-time mothers.⁸⁶ Mothers and fathers can both struggle to throw off the powerful conditioning that dictates 'mum knows best', making it harder for dads to become more experienced and skilful parents. The 'expertise' of mothers thus becomes yet another self-fulfilling prophecy.

Much of the fulfilment from parenting comes from feelings of competence: the sense that you are doing a good job, that your children are happy, loved, well-nourished and safe. Most men are simply unable to enjoy this sensation, for the simple reason that it takes weeks, if not months, to acquire the skills and confidence that fuel it.

One of the problems with the debate about gender and fatherhood is that the resources allocated to each are often seen as a 'zero-sum' game. Campaigners for women's rights are often wary of moves to increase father's rights, assuming that this somehow means less for mothers. Take the example of the reduction in maternity leave proposed. Women lose nothing from this proposal: if a couple decides that mum should do the caring, her rights to time off would be exactly the same as under the 2003 proposals. All the suggested reform means is that *if a couple chose to*, the father could use some of the time instead. This is a gain for everyone, not just for men.

Men are, of course, far from being convinced of the need to shift gender roles. While both sexes are becoming more progressive in their views, men remain more conservative than women. But we need to see a shift in attitudes among both men and women; one in two women does not think a mother of pre-school age children should be in paid work at all. Just 16% think a mother should work full-time even when her children are of school-age. A fifth believe that 'a man's job is to earn the money; a woman's job is to look after the home and children', and the same proportion believe it is 'not good if the man stays at home and cares for the children and the woman goes out to work'.⁸⁷

The assumption underlying these views is presumably that men should continue to be the chief breadwinners. Indeed, a study of people three years out of university shows that while 65% of young women graduates expect to take career breaks for family reasons, just 17% said they would expect their partner to do the same.⁸⁸

But women can only achieve full equality in the workplace if they achieve it at home, as Michael Kimmel argues:

"A society in which women and men share parenting will be a society in which they are also equally active in the labour force. A change in the private sphere will bring about dramatic changes in the public sphere."⁸⁹

This is also why, on the other side of the coin, men have a vested interest in helping women to achieve equality in the workplace, as Jack O'Sullivan points out:

“Unless women can bring home a good slice of bacon, too, we fathers are tied to our limited roles as breadwinners, often failing our children in other ways.”⁹⁰

We need the revaluation of the unpaid work of childcare long called for by a significant strand of the feminist movement. Ironically, the other feminist imperative to highlight the absence of women from the powerful, important and visible positions of public life now needs to be complemented by a drive to highlight the absence of men from the powerful, important and *invisible* positions of private life that women have been escaping from. As feminist writer Gloria Steinem puts it:

“The majority now absolutely believes that women can do what men can do, but the next step is to believe that men can do what women can do.”

Women have had to fight men so far. Now they need to befriend and recruit them, if they are to reap the full rewards of their struggle. This poses, as Tom Beardshaw from Fathers Direct argues, profound questions about the nature of feminism: is it for women, or for equality? Because they may no longer be the same thing. To move forward, it is important – as one of the contributors to The Work Foundation seminar argued – to create ‘no blame’ conversations. We are where we are; and everyone’s losing out. The key is to find ways forward.

Of course, all of this will remain a debate within the closed walls of the gender (ie, women’s) movement unless men become engaged. Women can rightly point to the paltry evidence that more than a handful of men sign up to the full equality agenda. What do men really want?

5.3 Let's be honest: most men are not bursting at the seams to do more childcare. Most men are content with the current division of labour.⁹¹ Most men are happy to be principal breadwinners. Very few fathers believe, for example, that parental leave should be equally available to men and women.⁹² Hence *The Economist's* claim:

"Other than scattered spottings in California's Berkeley, north London and a few Swedish suburbs, the New Man does not exist."⁹³

Right now, men are in reactive mode. If their partner decides to continue working, and demands a more equal distribution of labour, most men respond. Equally, if she decides she wants to stay at home, most men keep bringing in the bacon. The MORI research on fathers conducted for the EOC confirms this analysis:

"For many fathers, their role in the family seems to be determined by *circumstance as much as choice*. Traditional roles apply in a lot of families, but in families where the father has greater involvement in childcare this often comes from circumstances – such as shift work or the mother's desire to work – rather than a deliberate decision to share childcare responsibilities ... Many fathers do not think about the options, hence a mother's desire to choose her role can be a determining factor." (their emphasis)

Men's 'gender-consciousness' is likely to remain especially low in families with a traditional division of labour. In a survey of men's awareness of paternity leave, O'Brien and Shemilt for the EOC find that men who are sole breadwinners are significantly less likely than those with employed partners to think that paternity leave will be available to them in their workplaces.⁹⁴ Given that it is highly unlikely that there is an actual difference in availability, this finding suggests that fathers who have wives or partners at home are simply less likely to even think about paternity leave as an option.

A key part of the drive for gender equality has to be improving the deal on offer to men. Their desire to spend more time with their children, to be more involved in their lives, is already growing. If just a fraction of the effort that has gone into convincing women that engineering, the police forces or financial services can be for them can now go into convincing men that parenting is a desirable life-choice, a big step will have been taken. As another participant at the seminar argued, we need to find ways to make fatherhood 'fashionable'.

Men need to stop being passive parents, responding simply to what their partner wants. They have to reflect on their own wishes, their hopes for their own lives. Men are currently leading one-eyed lives, passive creatures in the breadwinner mantrap. Men need to start articulating their demands, and talking positively about parenthood. Forget deadbeat dads – we need upbeat dads.

Women's lives have changed. The lives of organisations, by and large, have not. And the lives of men are only just beginning to. Women have run lap after exhausting lap in the long race towards equality. It is up to men to run the last few.

Conclusion

Father's Day and Mother's Day are well-established rituals in the family calendar. Lie-ins, socks and soaps are the orders of the day. And, of course, cards.

Father's Day is an import from the US, and like (almost) all such imports, a mixed blessing. For we very nearly brought over a much more progressive Day. One which did not separate the roles of dads and mums, but saw them in the same light: a Parents Day. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, New York rallies were held in support of such a day and gained widespread support from the President down. But the commercial interests of the retail industry, especially confectionary and cards, won out in the end, with considerable financial support behind the campaign for a separate Father's Day. As Ralph LaRossa records it:

“The business community essentially had killed [the Parents' Day Movement]. Mother's Day followed by Father's Day was too perfect a set-up financially to allow something as gender non-specific as Parents' Day to muck things up.”⁹⁵

But if the interests of business were then ranged against the move towards parenting, as opposed to tidily distinct mothering and fathering, today the situation is reversed. Businesses are having to come to terms with the erosion of traditional gender roles for men as well as for women, with the departure of the dinosaur dads of yesteryear. The far-sighted realise that the future belongs to parents, and therefore to firms which embrace them.

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