

**The Second Arab Women Leadership Forum, Women's leadership in organizations:  
Towards new conceptions of work-life balance. Session on recognising the role of men  
in achieving work-life balance in a globalised world**

Suzan Lewis. Middlesex University Business School, London, UK

### **1. Introduction**

“Work-life balance”<sup>1</sup> has become a hot topic in recent years in many parts of the world. The topic of work-life balance is not new, but reflects research and debates dating back to the 1960s on how women and men can combine work and family in gender equitable ways (Rapoport and Rapoport, 1965). It could be argued that women have come a long way since then: dual earner families are increasingly the norm across the industrialised world, and most countries have policies on equal opportunities for men and women, maternity and parental leave and other related policies. Yet most women continue to retain the major responsibilities for family care, and to be underrepresented at the highest levels in workplaces. Women have made great strides forwards, but things will not change further for women until men can be enabled to change too.

Men, women and families can all benefit from gender equitable work-life balance- that is time to spend with family and opportunities to progress in careers. Moreover, there is mounting evidence that businesses can benefit too from implementing changes that simultaneously take account of the work life needs of men and women employees and the needs of the organisation (Rapoport, Bailyn, Fletcher and Pruitt, 2002) However, there are currently many constraints and barriers to gender equitable ways of combining work and family. In this paper I discuss some of these barriers and the changes that are needed at various levels of society to enable more men as well as women to harmonise work and family. I will conclude with some examples of workplace changes designed to include men.

### **2. Separate spheres ideology**

Barriers in achieving equitable work-life balance can ultimately be traced to widespread ideology and assumptions about separate, gendered, spheres . That is, the public sphere of work has long been regarded as a man's world and separate from the private sphere of the

---

<sup>1</sup> This term has been much critiqued (see e.g Lewis, Gambles and Rapoport, 2007), but remains widely used

family, which is assumed to be women's domain . Hence men expect and are expected to be primarily economic providers and women primarily carers. This has a profound impact on gender identities and family and workplace structures. Although there are some differences in gender ideology and relationships across national contexts the notion of separate gendered spheres continues to impact on men and women, to some extent, across the globe (Gambles, Lewis and Rapoport, 2006; Crompton, Lewis and Lyonette, 2007).

This separate spheres model contrasts with the 21<sup>st</sup> century reality in which both women and men are more often in the workforce and also involved in family care and where boundaries between work and family are increasingly blurred. These shifts reflect not only the changing demographics of workforces, but also profound changes in the nature and organisation of work in the global economy. Global competition has brought a widespread intensification of work (Lewis, Brannen and Nilsen, 2009). At the same time information and communication technology allows work to invade the home, for example via email and mobile phones.

Many people feel they are working harder than ever and that the boundaries between work and home are increasingly permeable. This is often signified by metaphors about time such as “the time squeeze” or “time famine” as well as ‘time greedy’ organisations.

### **3. Barriers to change 3.1 Impact of separate spheres ideology on gender identities**

Societal norms and expectations about what is culturally expected of men and women shape gender identities, the ways men and women derive self-esteem and the ways in which they feel able to harmonise their paid work with the rest of life, and can be formidable barriers to change. Ideologies of parenthood are particularly powerful. Although the ideology of motherhood has largely expanded to incorporate an employment role, ‘ideal’ mothers are still widely expected to put the needs of their children and families first . Consequently many mothers are still often a reluctant to invest what they consider to be too much time in paid work and experience feelings of guilt if a satisfactory balance between work family cannot be achieved ( Lewis, 2009 ). The ideology of fatherhood is also changing to include more of a caring role in many contexts. However the notion that a father's role is to provide economically for the family also persists and can create conflicts and tensions (Daly, Ashbourne and Hawkins, 2008 ) as men are often reluctant to invest what they see as too little time in paid work. This creates conflicts and tensions among women and men in diverse national contexts. In an international study of work life issues (Gambles et al, 2006; Lewis,

Gambles and Rapoport 2007), these tensions were described by women and men in many different contexts. For example, a Japanese women reported: *'Men seem to be struggling with their identity and they have mental blocks over how they see it as possible to feel like a man. Their identity remains very closely connected to paid work.* An Indian women also talked about societal reactions to her husband working less in order to share care of their children: *'It's like society doesn't recognise it...Everyone would say 'oh ..what is he trying to do? He's such a loser.*

However, some “*transitional tensions*” appear to be necessary for social change to occur and working through these is an essential element of the processes of societal change. In a seven country European study of the transition to parenthood ( Lewis et al, 2009), we found more tensions associated with family roles in , for example, Norway ,where there is a strong commitment to gender equality in families and more social change, than in more traditional contexts, for example, Bulgaria where although women as well as men work full time it was taken for granted and accepted that women did all the family work. Because this was accepted as the norm there was little tension, but also no social change. There are many sources of *transitional tension* among those who strive to adapt towards more equitable gender roles. Some men may not want to change and give up the power associated with being the main providers and some women may not accept men entering domestic and care realms that have been so closely tied up with female identity over recent years. Working through these tensions can require processes of reciprocal changes. As women are more involved in paid work, men need to become more involved in unpaid caring and domestic responsibilities, and if they do so then women too need to change further and so on (Gambles et al, 2006). So deep change in the family is a long, reciprocal process requiring ongoing adaptation by both men and women

### **3.2 Structural supports and pay inequality**

Lack of structural supports such as childcare or elder care in some contexts can also be a barrier to change, resulting in a return to or persistence of a gendered division of labour. However, even if structural supports are available, the growing intensification of work- as fewer workers carry out heavier workloads -often make it difficult to find the time and energy for two jobs and family care . This again results in a return to traditional roles (Van Echtelt, Glebbeek, Lewis and Lindenburg (2009). Often this is the economically viable solution because of persistent

gender pay gaps. This, in turn is a consequence of workplace structures, cultures and practices that, again, stem from separate spheres assumptions.

### **3.3 Workplace barriers. The impact of separate spheres assumptions on workplaces**

In the context of the separate spheres ideology workplace structures tend to be built around a cultural picture of the ideal worker as someone who can work as though they have no social or caring obligations outside work- a male model of work (Bailyn, 2006) . The ideal worker remains one who works full time and often long hours. This makes it more difficult for men to modify work for family and for women with young children to conform to both organisational assumptions about ideal workers and societal definition of ideal mothers. This male model affects how commitment is defined and competences are valued (Rapoport et al, 2002; Lewis, 1997; Swanberg, 2004). For example in many workplaces commitment is defined in terms of visibility, especially the amount of time spent at work, with those who work less to make time for family regarded as not being fully committed to their work. This ignores all the evidence that long hours are not necessarily associated with greater productivity and may in fact be inefficient (Spurgeon et al, 2007)

The myth of separate and gendered spheres also leads to the valuing of certain types of behaviour more than others. There is often an assumption that stereotypically masculine characteristics are necessary to be effective in the workplace. Thus traditionally masculine values and behaviours such as competitiveness, fire fighting behaviour to deal with crises and the ability to work long hours, come to be associated with the ideal worker, (Millar, 2004) while more traditionally feminine characteristics and skills such as interpersonal skills and collaboration are often undervalued in workplace settings. Assumptions about competence are so linked with the idealized images of men and masculinity that it makes it difficult for women's achievements to be recognized unless women work in masculine ways, (Bailyn, 2006; Rapoport et al, 2002). These expectations are deeply embedded in workplace structures .

For example, in a French pharmaceutical company, most women with children worked a four day week. They retained a full workload, but condensed the work into a shorter week, to have a day with children, but their salary was reduced by 20%. The women accepted that they were in effect "buying flexibility". They were in fact more efficient than those, mostly men, working five days, but not only did they lose pay but they were also usually overlooked for promotions

because they were not visible at the workplace every day. Because commitment and value were defined in terms of constant visibility, the women's greater efficiency went unrecognised. (Lewis, 2009). It was taken for granted that visibility at work was more important for career advancement than work outputs. One exception was a manager whose small work team had adapted their working practices to accommodate one mother who worked flexibly. For example they banned evening meetings and made meetings short and efficient (which was not usual in this company). He recognised that was very beneficial because it made the whole team more efficient. However this was often overlooked because of the obsession with long hours and availability as criteria of good workers.

Another example is in a firm of accountants in the UK where there was a prevailing view that although some women were promoted to senior roles, they were "not really fully committed to the firm" because they insisted on going home on time to their families (Lewis, 2008). On further examination it transpired that the long hours worked by men of the men were often due to inefficient work practices, leading to crises while women were more often able to work in ways that avoided crises and therefore did not need to stay late to deal with them. If this had been recognised by the firm, all could have benefitted. Instead the continued assumption that those who worked longer were more valuable employees, obscured the value of alternative and more efficient ways of working.

Thus the male model of work and related ideology not only make it difficult for men to reduce their input to work in order to be more involved in families and also more difficult for women to advance in the workplace but can also make workplaces less efficient by a focus on visibility and availability rather than effective work output (Holt and Lewis, in press). Challenging these assumptions is crucial for enabling men to change.

### **3.4 Societal notions of choice**

The ways in which the notion of choice is socially constructed constitutes a further barrier equitable sharing of work and family roles. It is often argued that changes in workplaces or families are not necessary because women "choose" to trade off career advancement for more time to spend with children and that men choose to spend less time with family because careers are more important to them. However choices are always socially embedded and constrained and these constraints are often overlooked. This is important because if it is thought that people make unconstrained choices to work the way they do- whether for

example, long hours, or part time undervalued work, there is less incentive to challenge the status quo.

For people to be in a position to make real choices, it needs to be practically possible to choose a certain path (e.g to work reduced hours) or to choose not to do so (Lewis, J and Guillian, (2005) For example in the French pharmaceutical company discussed above the mothers condensing their work into a four day week and losing 20% of their salaries, and their managers, all saw this as a free choice. However, other “choices” were not available, such as the option to work a 4 day week with a reduced workload, to work a condensed week on full pay, or to work full time without having to do excessive hours or attend meetings in the evenings, or even to have their greater efficiency recognised. It was at best a constrained choice in the context. So how can some of these barriers and constraints be overcome

#### **4. Overcoming barriers 4.1 Public policies/regulation**

Laws and policies are essential to provide a floor of rights to workers. They have brought about some limited but very necessary change in many contexts. However this is just a first step because policies have to be implemented in workplaces where they can be undermined by deeply embedded assumptions about ideal, constantly available workers .

The most progressive policies in relation to changing men is the system of Daddy Leave that has been implemented in the Nordic countries and more recently also Germany. This provides for (at least) one month of parental leave for new fathers that is non transferable. That is, if the father does not take up this entitlement it cannot be transferred to the mother and so the family lose it. This is a progressive policy because it addresses family dynamics and challenges the sole responsibility of mothers for young children. It has been associated with a much greater rise in the numbers of fathers taking up leave than in other contexts where mothers can transfer some of their maternity or parental leave to the father, but there is no dedicated leave for fathers such as in the UK ( Fox, Pascall and Warren , 2009 ).

Nevertheless even when dedicated Daddy Leave is available , there are some workplaces where fathers taking leave is not acceptable and is regarded as career limiting (Brandth and Kvande, 2001; Haas and Hwang, 2007). Workplace context and assumptions about the nature of commitment can undermine even the most progressive policies

A much less interceptive or progressive policy is the right to request flexible working arrangements in the UK. This gives men and women the entitlement to ask to work flexibly which the employer must consider and only reject for good business reasons. Again this has increased the number of such request among parents , but requests are still made disproportionately by mothers and employers turn down more requests from men than women (Lewis and Campbell, 2007) . Thus policy developments need to be supported by workplace changes

#### **4.2 Workplace policies**

The development of voluntary workplace policies such as flexitime systems, part time work and job sharing schemes and working from home have increased in many contexts-in response to institutional pressures such as public policy, pressures from ( mainly women) employees and as employers recognise the potential benefits in terms of recruitment, retention, productivity, increased employee well being and engagement . However there is mounting evidence of an implementation gap between policy and practice in workplaces around the world ( Gambles et al, 2006) , largely associated with the ideal worker assumptions. This can undermine the potential advantages to such policies.

In a recent EU study of quality of working life we found across eight European countries, that employees taking up their entitlement to flexible working arrangements (teleworking, job sharing and flexitime) were either no more satisfied with or engaged in their work than other workers, and in many cases were less satisfied ( ). There are many possible reasons for this. It may be that flexible work arrangements do not really provide the autonomy and control that employees need ; that they enable people to work more because they blur the boundaries between work and personal life ; because heavy workloads or intensification of work undermines policy and because ,or because flexible workers are not valued because they do not conform to the ideal worker norm. All these processes have been found to undermine workplace policies, so policy alone is not sufficient,

#### **4.3 Changes in workplace practices- challenging assumptions**

As long as ideal workers are defined as those who work as though they have no family responsibilities, those who take up flexible working policies will continue to be marginalised. So, what is needed are changes in workplace practices that challenge ideal worker norms and

make it possible for women as well as men to work in ways that enable them to harmonise work and family. Challenging assumptions in this way and especially exploding the myth that the most effective workers are those who are constantly visible also makes it possible to recognise more effective ways of working and hence benefits employers too. ( Lewis, 2009 ).

## **5. Examples of successful organizational practices that include men**

### ***5.1 A French energy company***

In the French pharmaceutical company discussed above men did not take up the opportunity to work 4 days a week because they would lose a fifth of their income ( which challenges provide role identities) and also jeopardise their careers. In another French company, however, it was recognised that a condensed working week could be more efficient, benefitting employees and the organisation (Lewis, 2009) so efforts were made to encourage men to also take up this option by reducing the financial costs of working a condensed work week. A collective agreement was reached which allowed for a 32 hour week, that is just 3 hours less than full time in France, but this could be spread over 4 days. Extra payment was also provided to bring pension contributions up to the full 35 hours. Again workload was not necessarily reduced. Working reduced hours, became more normative, at least in some teams although initially more women than men used it for childcare and more men than women used it for other reasons. Nevertheless the normalisation of this way of working made it easier for younger men, who wanted to be involved in childcare to do so, and thus paved the way for enhancing gender equity.

### ***5.2 A firm of accountants in the UK***

In a study of a firm of accountants, discussed earlier senior women were criticised because they were not willing to work as late as men. Later we did some action research with them and realised that one reason for constant deadlines crises was that clients did not get information in on time . There was a widespread assumption in the firm that being professional meant always responding to whatever the client wanted or as they put it striving to “superplease” the client. So an ideal worker in this context was one who did whatever was necessary even if it meant working all night to please the client. Only men could do this. However, when we looked at alternative ways of doing things it became apparent that working with clients so that they felt like part of the team with rights and a responsibility for

getting information in on time could actually prevent crises. That required , not (stereotypically male ) fire fighting crisis management skills that were so valued, but interpersonal skills - something women are traditionally expected to be better at. Looking at the problem- ie how to manage workloads when clients get information late and too near a deadline) and challenging assumptions that there is only correct way of doing things thus led to the identification of more effective ways of working to benefit everyone (Lewis and Cooper, 2005).

If the way things are always done ( idealised male practices ), are not questioned inefficient practices are not challenged. Of course the solutions found are specific to particular workplaces and cannot be generalised. They depend on identifying specific problems, identifying and challenging assumptions on which working practices are based and then looking for solutions that meet a dual agenda of enhanced effectiveness and enhanced employee work life balance. The process but not the solution is transferable to different contexts. This is based on an approach developed by a team at MIT in the USA ( Rapoport et al, 2002), which demonstrated that such solutions have very clear bottom line benefits.

However, challenging the way that work has always been done and the assumptions that ideal workers do to need time for family is one very practical way of making it more acceptable and possible for men as well as women to work in ways that are compatible with family life without jeopardizing businesses and in many cases even enhancing performance. However, such processes take time and do not offer the “quick fix” that many organisations competing in the global economy want, although the long term benefits can be substantial. Will the global economic crisis which could challenge so many taken for granted assumptions about sustainable ways of working , result in greater reflection on what is an ideal workers, at least in some organisations? Will some men who have neglected time for family to be constantly available for work, only to lose their jobs or see businesses struggle in the recession, question the sustainability of their way of life? These are questions for further research of course. However, the economic crisis could just serve as a tipping point for some employers and employees to take a more long term view. Enabling men to change their work-life priorities and structures will nevertheless remain a long term project.

## References

Bailyn, L (2006) *Breaking the mold: Redesigning work for productive and satisfying lives*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

- Brandth, B. and Kvande, E. (2001) 'Flexible work and flexible fathers' in *Work, Employment and Society*, 15 (2) 251-267.
- Crompton, R., Lewis, S and Lyonette, C (eds) (2007) *Women, Men, Work and Family in Europe*. Palgrave
- Daly, K., Ashbourne, L and Hawkins, L (2008) Work-Life Issues for Fathers in Korabik, K, Lero, D, Whitehead, D. (Eds.) (2008) *Handbook of work-family integration*: Academic Press
- Gambles, R, Lewis, S. and Rapoport, R (2006). *The Myth of Work-Life Balance. The Challenge of our Time. Men, Women, and Societies*: London: Wiley
- Goodman, W , Crouter, A. Lanza, S and Cox, M (2008) Paternal Work Characteristics and Father-Infant Interactions in Low-Income, Rural Families *Journal of Marriage and Family* 70, 3, 640 – 65
- Haas, Linda, and Philip Hwang. 2007. Gender and organizational culture. Correlates of companies' responsiveness to fathers in Sweden. *Gender & Society* 21 (1): 52-7
- Holt, H and Lewis, S "You can stand on your head and you still end up with lower pay" Gendered Work Practices in two Danish Workplaces. (in press) *Gender, Work and Organisation*
- Lewis, J and Guilliani, S (2005) The adult worker model family, gender, equality and care: the search for new policy principles and the possibility and problems of a capabilities approach. *Economy and Society* 34 1 76-104
- Lewis, J and Campbell, M (2007) UK Work/Family Balance Policies and Gender Equality, 1997–2005 *Journal of Social Policy* 36 : 365-381
- Lewis, S and Cooper, C.L (2005) *Work- Life Integration. Case Studies of Organisational Change*. London: Wiley
- Lewis, S 1997) Family friendly policies. (Organisational culture change or playing around at the margins? *Gender, Work and Organisation*, 4 13-23
- Lewis, S (2007) Working time, client time and family time: accounting for time in the accountancy profession., in van der Lippe, T and Peters, P *Competing Claims in Work and Family Life* , Edward Elgar.
- Lewis, S., Gambles, R and Rapoport R (2007) The Constraints of a 'Work-Life Balance' Approach: An International Perspective *International Journal of Human Resource Management* 18 3 360-373
- Lewis. S., Brannen, J and Nilsen, A (2009) *Work, Families and Organisations in Transition: European Perspectives* London: Policy Press
- Lewis, S (2009) Flexible working policies, gender and culture change, in *Women in Science and Technology. Creating sustainable careers*. European Commission
- Millar, J (2004) Frontier masculinity in the oil industry: the experience of women engineers. *Gender, Work and Organization* 11 1 47-73;
- Rapoport and Rapoport, 1965 Work and Family in Contemporary Society *American Sociological Review* 36-55
- Rapoport, R., Bailyn, L., Fletcher, J., & Pruitt, B. (2002). *Beyond Work-Family Balance. Advancing Gender Equity and Workplace Performance*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
- A Spurgeon, J M Harrington, C L Cooper (2007) Health and safety problems associated with long working hours: a review of the current position. *Occupational and Environmental Medicine* 1997;54:367-375;
- Swanberg, J (2004). Illuminating gendered organization assumptions. *Community, Work & Family* 7 (1): 3-28
- Van Echtelt, P. Glebbeek, A. Lewis S and Lindenburg, S (2009) Post-Fordist work: a man's world? Gender and working overtime in the Netherlands *Gender and Society* 23, 188-21