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This report has focussed upon two main issues. First, traditional and changing ways of working, and in particular the growth of flexible working time arrangements; and second, the participation of husbands and wives in family life, especially housework and childcare. With respect to the first of these issues, it was suggested that change in the direction of increased flexibility in the workplace has been slow and unevenly distributed. In general, men continue to work full-time, on fixed schedules, and often undertake several hours of overtime work each week. In general, women with family responsibilities work part-time or from home. This allows them to participate in the labour force while continuing to see to the running of their homes. Innovative ways of working were seen to exist, however. Flexi-hours, job-sharing, and high technology homeworking appear to be the most successful of the innovations that allow greater harmonisation of work with family life. Changes in the workplace that might improve the quality of family life are happening, in other words, albeit slowly.

There is one study, however, which suggests that for wives at least, increased flexibility in husbands' working arrangements should be avoided at all cost. In *Married to the Job*, Finch (1983) assesses the degree of wives' incorporation into their husbands' work by re-analysing numerous occupational and family studies. *Incorporation* is taken to mean the many ways in which wives undertake work-related tasks for their husbands, including entertaining clients, taking messages, providing moral support, and, of course, doing the domestic work which enables men to participate in employment. Finch argues – plausibly – that *all* wives are incorporated into their husbands' jobs, whether or not they have jobs of their own. Thus, rather than portraying women as carrying a double

burden of paid work and domestic labour, Finch adds a third burden to women's lives: their husbands' jobs.

Moreover, in what she calls *an interesting, and not entirely frivolous, exercise*, Finch outlines the types of husband to be avoided if a triple burden is not wanted. As three of the husbands to be avoided have relevance for the present report, Finch's recommendations are repeated as given (1983:132-3):

Any potential husband whose job has very flexible hours should be regarded with great suspicion. This will mean that you can never rely at his being at home, and therefore *you* will always have to be at home to cover domestic responsibilities. A nine-to-five man with plenty of holidays is a much better bet, because you stand a greater chance of being able to get him to take on a regular share of child care and domestic work.

Under no circumstances marry a man whose work is going to be based in your home, or even one who can work at home if he wants to. Not only will you never be able to rely on his being off work, but also you will have to organise the home *around* his work. The possibilities for being sucked in are endless, and are very difficult to avoid when the work is being done at home.

Beware the seductions of self-employment. Being your own boss may sound very attractive, but the man who employs himself often needs his wife's labour to make the business viable, and the rewards for you may be none too tangible.

The slight tongue-in-cheek approach adopted by Finch does not hide the seriousness of her recommendations, nor the apparent paradox in the relationship between flexible working arrangements and family life. The three types of working arrangements to which Finch refers – flexible hours, homeworking and self-employment – are, as she points out, valued and sought after by workers with a view to creating more congenial work environments. The essence of the present report has been to explore the possibilities for increases in workplace flexibility with a view to increasing the possibilities for greater harmonisation between work and family life. The paradox inherent in Finch's recommendations appears to suggest that far from increasing work-family harmony, flexible working arrangements may decrease the quality of family life – at least for wives. This paradox leads naturally to the question, flexibility for whom?

In answering this question, it is important to point out that changes in the organisation of working time, namely, increases in flexibility,

should not be considered in isolation from the organisation of family life and in particular, the domestic division of labour. It has been argued here that little has changed in most families' internal organisation, with women continuing to assume ultimate responsibility for the home, and men, ultimate responsibility as wage-earners. These two issues – two spheres of life – are, of course, simply different sides of the same coin. Men and women engage in paid employment on terms which enable them to assume particular roles in family life: men work full-time; and women juggle hours, weeks or places of work, find part-time jobs, work from home, leave the labour force if necessary, re-enter when it is convenient, and so on.

Thus, when assessing the contribution that greater flexibility in working time could make to increased harmonisation between men's and women's roles as family members and their roles as workers, one is confronted with a second paradox. Most women with family responsibilities *already have flexible working lives*, albeit individually created ones which are often disrupted and almost always subject to penalty in some way. What most women do not have are flexible working arrangements with career opportunities or with the rights and benefits enjoyed by their husbands and other full-time workers. What women require, then, is not just workplace flexibility, but flexible working arrangements without career or occupational or financial penalties, such as job-sharing instead of part-time working; or homeworking with full employee status. Paid work without penalties is what is missing from most women's lives, not just flexibility.

There are some signs, however, that employers are becoming more aware of the need to improve the terms and conditions of employment of their female employees, especially those with childcare responsibilities. Following a massive surplus of 18-24 year olds during the mid-1980s, resulting in unprecedented levels of youth unemployment, the number of young people available to employers over the first five years of the 1990s is expected to drop by at least one million, or about 30 per cent (NEDO, 1988). In contrast, the number of women entering the labour market during this same period is expected to increase, with women likely to account for some 0.8 million of an predicted 1.1 million extra workers. Women aged 25-44 years, returning to work following breaks for childcare, are projected to make up the largest single pool of new workers (IER, 1988). In anticipation of these demographic changes, many employers are increasing their provision of support services for women with families.

Of such support services, two in particular have attracted a good deal of media attention and employer interest: career breaks and workplace creches.

Career breaks

The availability of *career breaks*, whereby women leave full-time employment for a specific number of years in order to raise children and yet maintain links with their previous employers, is spreading through business, industry and the professions. The National Westminster Bank, British Gas, British Petroleum, IBM, Plessey, and Shell are just a few of the many corporations which have instituted career break opportunities for their women employees. Under the National Westminster's scheme, women are entitled to a maximum five years' break from full-time employment, provided they undertake two weeks paid work each year. The scheme is open to women who have demonstrated clear career potential; the bank guarantees re-entry at their original level of employment and provides any necessary re-training at re-entry. Schemes in other organisations allow for two and three-year breaks from full-time working hours, and eventual return on a part-time or flexi-hours basis. Some organisations allow their women employees to choose the career break variant which best suits their personal needs. Despite variation in operation, what all career break schemes share is a desire to retain well-qualified, committed women employees in whom the employer has invested considerable money and training. The financial loss to employers entailed in not keeping such women in employment provided at least one of the spurs to the introduction of these schemes. The Equal Opportunities Commission, an advocate of career breaks for women, sets out the benefits available to employers providing a suitable scheme:

Schemes for managing the career break will not only assist women in long term career planning, but will also ensure that the employer retains a group of trained people who will be returning to work, full-time or part-time or with flexible working arrangements, and there will be a consequent reduction in the time and money spent on the recruitment, selection, induction and training of new employees to take their place (EOC, REF: 11/6/8 BOOK).

The Engineering Council has quantified the costs to employers entailed in losing key, well-qualified personnel: in 1985, between

£14,000 and £20,000 went into the training of a Chartered or Technician Engineer; by 1988, these costs had risen to around £40,000: an investment that companies expect to recover within about five years' service by the employee. If the employee leaves and does not return, the company fails to achieve a full return on its financial investment (*The Engineering Council*, 1985:3): hence career breaks.

Moreover, although the early career break schemes were designed with *high flyers* in mind - well-qualified professional or managerial women - there is now some indication that employers, pushed by impending shortages of employees, are introducing similar schemes for wider groups of employee. British Rail, for example, has set up a three-tier system designed for all levels of staff. Professional or career women in BR are catered for by a scheme which allows three years at home or working part-time during family formation and offers a guaranteed right of return to work. Lower down the occupational hierarchy, women with family responsibilities are entitled to re-apply for work at their former level for up to ten years following resignation, although re-hire is not guaranteed. A still looser arrangement allows former staff to act as reservists, coming back to work during peak and holiday periods and to cover for absences. The British Rail scheme is among the first to be extended to all levels of women employees, and other employers are likely to follow the same pattern. Two major banks - the National Westminster and Barclays - began considering extensions to their career break schemes in early 1988, with the National Westminster announcing in November 1988 the decision to allow career breaks of up to five years for its 75,000 staff; Lombard North Central offers *preferential treatment* in re-hiring after breaks of up to five years to all staff with two or more years' service, with the option of returning on a part-time or flexible basis; and the Cabinet Office offers up to five years' away from work for any staff who have been employed for more than one year, with preferential treatment in re-hiring upon return.

Career breaks provide an alternative route to harmonising work and family life: they ease the double burden facing women over the years of family formation by allowing women the opportunity of leaving work without penalty; they allow employers to retain well-trained, qualified staff. For these reasons, career breaks are to be valued and their extension to women at all levels of employment should be encouraged. In practical terms, career breaks benefit all parties. However, the existence of schemes which allow women to

take time away from work to care for children tends also to reinforce expectations that it is the responsibility of women to provide such care. Although most schemes are officially open to all employees, they were in fact designed with the needs of women with domestic responsibilities in mind. Moreover, career breaks do little to change the overall organisation of working conditions: only a few such schemes allow women to return to work on other than a full-time, fixed-schedule basis. Career breaks, in other words, may do much to help working women, but they may do little to alter the organisation of either the workplace or the family unit.

Workplace nurseries

Ensuring adequate care for children during the times parents are at work is probably the single greatest problem to be overcome in the harmonisation of work and family life. A recent European Community report on childcare (Cohen, 1988) found that the UK, along with Ireland, the Netherlands and Luxembourg, has the worst record of all European countries, providing publicly-subsidised care for only one per cent of children under age three and the equivalent of full-time care for only about one quarter of children age three to school age. In sharp contrast, Italy, France and Belgium provide pre-primary school care for 85 per cent or more of children, for a minimum of six hours per day. In the absence of adequate public provision of childcare facilities, a few employers are beginning to provide on-site or near-site nurseries for their employees. At present, there are about 200 workplace nurseries schemes in Britain, found mostly among local authorities, educational establishments and health authorities.⁷ Two notable newcomers in 1988/9 among employers providing childcare facilities were the BBC (1989) and Midlands Bank, with the latter planning, over the space of several years, on opening up to 300 such facilities. The majority of schemes in operation are subsidized by the employer, to a level of about two-thirds of fees payable.

Since 1984, however, employer-subsidised nursery care has been treated as an employment benefit – a ‘perk’ – with employees required to pay income tax on this benefit. Not only, then, is there little public provision of adequate care for children, allowing parents to spend time at work without worrying about the safety and well-being of their sons and daughters, those few employees fortunate enough to have access to workplace facilities are taxed for their good fortune. This approach

to childcare stands in marked contrast to that of other countries. In Sweden, for example, the provision of childcare for employed parents is assumed to be part of the duties of the state:⁸

Public child care in Sweden includes care of small children of pre-school age and after-school activities in their early years of compulsory schooling. The aim is to provide children with a stimulating and secure environment while at the same time giving men and women equal opportunities to combine gainful employment with family life. Expansion of child care facilities was regarded in Sweden as the most important family policy issue of the 1970s and expansion enjoyed high priority.

Municipalities in Sweden are legally responsible for building, running and developing childcare facilities, which are financed through a combination of local tax revenues, parents' fees and state subsidies generated via employer payroll taxes, with parents charged according to their ability to pay. And although it is accepted in Sweden that the provision of care does not yet match the demand for such care (Moen, 1989), Swedish parents have substantially better facilities for their children than do their British counterparts.

The Government of Canada also sets out to provide adequate childcare as a necessary pre-condition not only for the harmonisation of work and family life but also for equality between men and women in employment. In 1987, the Federal Government of Canada stepped up assistance to parents by launching its *National Strategy on Childcare*, a \$5.4 billion mix of options including the creation of non-profit spaces for children; enhanced tax assistance to parents who pay for childcare, allowing tax deductions of \$4,000 per year per child up to age six and \$2,000 per year per child aged 7-14 years; and tax refunds for parents who care for their own children at home of approximately \$600 per year per child under age 6 years. In addition, and in order to encourage private provision, employers may deduct from income the cost of operating on-site childcare facilities or any amounts paid for third-party provision of childcare. Any physical premises built for childcare qualify as building property for capital cost allowances.⁹

Clearly there are lessons to be learned from other countries with respect to the provision of childcare facilities for working parents. The European Community report argues that a rapid expansion in the number of daycare places in Britain is vital if the estimated demand for care for about 2,000,000 under-fives is to be met. Research from

the United States suggests that considerable benefits accrue to both employees and employers through the provision of adequate childcare. In the 1970s only 50 US companies had childcare programmes; by 1986 this had grown to two thousand. The benefits which derive from the provision of childcare include lower absenteeism and lower turnover, improved productivity, higher employee morale and more successful recruitment (Petersen and Massengill, 1988).

The provision of adequate childcare facilities eases the double burden faced by women attempting to balance paid work with family responsibilities. Like career breaks, workplace nurseries operate to the benefit of both employees and employers. But workplace nurseries, also like career breaks, provide flexibility with only minimal disruption to traditional ways of working; and perhaps only minimal alteration in the traditional division of labour between husbands and wives. Both provide greater scope for women to enjoy the benefits of paid work and family life with reduced stress and fewer occupational and family penalties. But both may also make it easier for men to continue their lives along traditional lines.

In answering the question, flexibility for whom?, therefore, it must be reiterated that women already lead highly flexible lives. Innovations in the workplace such as job-sharing, tele-homeworking, career breaks and nurseries increase the options available to women; increase, in other words, women's opportunities for flexibility, while doing little to disrupt the lives of men. This is not to suggest that women would not benefit from increased flexibility in working arrangements. They clearly would do so, and would benefit even more from flexible arrangements that carried no career or job-related penalties. But it is, in fact, men's lives that are inflexible, not women's, and men that might benefit most from greater flexibility. Flexible working arrangements *could* free men from traditional fixed, full-time work schedules and *could* allow their equal participation in family life. To date, however, increases in flexibility at the workplace have led to few changes in the family lives of men. The motive force encouraging greater flexibility has been the desire for productivity gains, not gains in work-family harmonisation, nor gender equality. If the two spheres of work and family are to be harmonised in ways that promote the sharing of tasks in the family and equality of opportunity for women in the labour market, then the greater need is for men to change their expectations at work and their behaviour at home. The flexibility women can achieve, either through their own efforts or with the help

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of their employers, permits a relatively satisfactory harmonisation of work with family life: they can operate effectively in each sphere. Increased flexibility in the lives of men, both at work and at home, would enhance such harmonisation markedly.