

Gender and Employment in Local Labour Markets

Women's Career Development in the Local Authority Sector

Executive Summary

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Key findings

Experienced and committed women feel unable to apply for senior jobs within their capability because of the design of these positions and the cultural expectations surrounding them. Our survey of 1,370 women working in 4 local authorities shows:

- Fewer than 17% of women earning above £27,000 were contracted to work 30 hours or less per week.
- Many women with children were unable or unwilling to work full-time hours, and felt there was an informal rule that working flexibly or from home was not acceptable.
- Over 60% of women earning above £27,000 had never used their organisation's flexible employment policies.
- Women with and without children were reluctant to accept positions where they would be expected to work 'whatever time it takes to get the job done', and would always be 'on call'.
- Many women were working significant amounts of unpaid overtime. 55% of those contracted to work 31-37 hours were routinely working 38 - 47hours per week.
- They worked long hours because of: commitment to their jobs and the service they provided; constrained resources and heavy workloads; and a desire to enhance their career prospects.
- Women with children, or working part-time, felt disadvantaged by the requirement that a degree was needed for management jobs.
- Survey respondents were highly qualified - over half those earning £22,000-26,999, and 73% of women earning £27,000-£34,999. had a degree.
- Some women felt managers used appointments processes to ring-fence jobs for preferred applicants or to increase the status of occupational teams. This was seen as a barrier to progression for women in office cultures which favoured men.
- Women highlighted a working environment in which men had better access to information and were more likely to 'get noticed'. Senior women did not lack confidence in challenging this male-dominated culture, but felt weary from having to do so.
- Black women used the term 'concrete ceiling' to describe the lack of black women in senior positions who could act as role models for them.
- Women felt the organisational cultures had been maintained by a tendency to promote on seniority rather than merit, and on decision-making at departmental levels which allowed inappropriate behaviour to go unchecked.

These factors were having a disproportionate impact on women working part-time, usually because they have children.

Background

This study focused on women with educational qualifications who were already in jobs with career development potential. To understand the choices women make about their careers in local government, and when, why and how they are able to advance, we asked them about:

- Why they worked in the local authority sector and in their particular job
- Key stages in the development of their careers, and what had made these possible
- Their concerns about their future careers
- Their experience of training within their organisation and the difference it had made
- Their ideas about what else their organisation could do to support women's career development

We used a research design which included:

- a self-completion questionnaire about their work history and family circumstances (1,370 female respondents)
- focus groups with a sub-sample of those who responded (106 attendees)
- face-to-face interviews with 11 senior managers
- analysis of organisational documentation

We selected women in the focus groups according to their stage in their lives and careers, to capture the experiences of:

- mature women in more senior positions, focussing on how far their working lives had met their youthful expectations
- women in the 18-29 age group, focussing on their career aspirations
- women aged 30-44 – two groups, with and without childcare responsibilities.

These groups gave us the opportunity to examine the impact of age, generation and motherhood, and provided evidence about women's experiences, values, aspirations and needs, and any barriers to their career progression.

The fieldwork was conducted between March 2005 and February 2006. Four of the local authority partners in the *Gender and Employment in Local Labour Markets (GELLM)* research programme chose to take part in this study. They were:

- **Leicester City Council**
- **Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council**
- **The London Borough of Southwark**
- **Wakefield Metropolitan District Council**

Attitudes to paid employment

This study has shown that, irrespective of family situation or age, many women working within the local authority sector are highly committed to their jobs, enthusiastic about training and development, and aspire to have successful careers. They value the investment their local authority has made in training them, although most view their personal career development as their own responsibility. 46% of women in the study had received training from their organisation which they considered had helped them to advance in their career.

The women in this study appreciated the policies which their organisations had put in place to support their employees in achieving a good work-life balance. Some noted that equal opportunities policies at the point of recruitment had been crucial for their own success in joining their organisation. However, they considered that communication about these policies within their organisation, and their implementation by managers, was not consistent across their authority. Much depended on the approach of individual managers, and they felt some policies were undermined by cultural expectations at senior manager level.

Given the long-standing availability of these policies, there was a surprisingly low take-up of flexible working options, even among women with dependent children or who were carers.

Design and nature of senior level jobs

Lack of part-time opportunities

The survey and focus groups revealed a lack of part-time working arrangements in senior jobs (jobs where salaries were £27,000 pa and above). Among the sample, only 17% of women at this level worked part-time. Those who did often felt guilty about their 'partial' commitment to their employment, as the organisational culture at this level involved working full-time hours and beyond. They felt their workloads had not been adjusted when they reduced their working hours, and reported sometimes having to work longer hours to meet deadlines over which they had no control. Line managers did not always respect their working hours, and some expected them to attend meetings on their days off.

No authorities in this study routinely advertised senior jobs as possible part-time opportunities.

The majority of women in this study working part time had previously held full-time positions and had negotiated their reduced hours individually. Many had initially been apprehensive that this would not be permitted by their line managers. Once their managers had agreed, they were reluctant to develop their careers by considering vacancies in other sections, in case they were unable to negotiate the same working pattern.

Women working part-time also reported that their line managers were reluctant to release them for training once they changed to part-time hours, as their time was seen as 'more limited'. Some were convinced their pay grade was lower than that of colleagues working full-time in comparable roles.

In all four local authorities, women felt that to have a good chance of progressing, and of maintaining the status and reputation they had built up, they had to work full time hours. Many had accepted, sometimes reluctantly, the organisational view that senior positions had to be covered from 9am to 5pm and often involved longer hours. Even among women who could work full-time hours, some found they could not consider more senior positions, because flexibility in working hours was no longer an option. We found that many women in the study were working hours well beyond those they were contracted and paid to work.

Among the reasons given for working long hours, women cited external pressures on the sector, limited resources and constrained staffing. Some worked overtime out of their own personal sense of commitment to their job, and because of their authority's statutory obligation to deliver public services. This was most apparent among senior managers. Women also pointed out that most elected members and senior officers also expected them to 'always be available'. Some found the only way they could find time in the day to think and to plan was by working extra, unpaid, hours.

Intensity of work

Women felt the pressures in their jobs and the intensity of their work had a negative impact on their health and on their personal relationships with family and friends. They described complex timetables designed to meet their work and outside-work commitments. These arrangements were finely tuned, and relied on routinised start and finish times, car use, and - for some - high use of paid help at home, especially for household cleaning and out-of-hours childcare.

Senior women spoke of finding it hard to disengage from work, even when at home. Modern technology made work always accessible – in one example a woman spoke of checking her emails via a mobile phone while supervising her toddler in the playground on her day off.

Organisational culture

We found evidence in this study that organisational cultures hinder rather than support women's career progression. This was doubly the case for Black women, who spoke of a 'concrete ceiling'. Not only could they not progress - they often saw no Black women senior to them at all. The persistence of a white, male dominated, culture in some parts of the sector had a negative effect on women – and perhaps on some men too. It deterred women from wanting to work at senior levels; it made it harder for them to gain senior-level recognition of their abilities; and on a day to day basis, it required them to 'face down' inappropriate treatment, 'play along' with social cultures which favour men; and 'work harder' to prove themselves. Our interviewees felt these cultures persisted because local authority workforces were relatively stable, with long service very common, and claimed there was a history of promotions on grounds of seniority rather than management ability.

Life stage and women's careers

The study also explored how women's work orientations changed over the life course. The most marked differences related to younger women and women with caring responsibilities.

Younger women expressed a greater desire for training, and particularly sought opportunities to study for qualifications and to gain work experience which would allow them to progress to the next grade.

Women with caring responsibilities had often made difficult decisions before applying for more senior positions or taking up the study opportunities offered by their organisation. They weighed up how much time and emotional energy they could commit to their working lives after meeting the needs of their children, relatives and partners. Where their managers were not prepared to offer greater flexibility in working arrangements, or where family support was not available, some women had put these options 'on hold' until their caring demands reduced.

These constrained decisions left many women feeling frustrated and de-motivated because they felt they were unable to fulfil their potential.

Key Policy Messages

There are clear messages in this research for those at national, regional and local levels who are developing leadership programmes to prepare the sector for future workforce change and innovation.

If experienced and committed women feel unable to apply for senior jobs within their capability, it is likely the sector is not getting the best it could from its female workforce, and that some women are employed in the local authority in positions below their true potential.

The *Gender and Employment in Local Labour Markets* research programme has already uncovered other important evidence of this problem, which is a key feature of part-time employment in the UK. This study adds to the weight of evidence suggesting that organisations wishing to make good use of their investments in human capital must do more to create more flexible and more part-time jobs at senior levels.

For the authorities in this study, the new Public Sector Duty to promote gender equality, which will affect them in their roles as employers as well as service providers, provides an important and exciting opportunity. Required in law through the *Equality Act 2006*, it provides a new rationale to revisit existing efforts to tackle these issues, already an important focus through the Equality Standard for Local Government and the Best Value Performance Indicators process.

The new duty provides an opportunity to move work-life balance 'up a gear', so that it becomes part of the experience of leaders, is understood by all managers, and can begin to deliver significant change in the organisational culture.

About the GELLM project

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The national partners supporting the GELLM research programme are the Equal Opportunities Commission and the TUC. The programme's local authority partners are: Birmingham City Council, the London Borough of Camden, East Staffordshire Borough Council, Leicester City Council, Newcastle City Council, Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council, Somerset County Council, the London Borough of Southwark, Thurrock Council, Trafford Metropolitan Borough Council, Wakefield Metropolitan District Council and West Sussex County Council. The North East Coalition of Employers has also provided financial resources via Newcastle City Council. The team is grateful for the support of these agencies, without which the project could not have been developed. The GELLM project engaged Professor Damian Grimshaw, Professor Ed Fieldhouse (both of Manchester University) and Professor Irene Hardill (Nottingham Trent University), as external academic advisers to the project team, and thanks them for their valuable advice and support.

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Copies of the full report
Women's Career Development in the Local Authority Sector - Synthesis Report
can be obtained from www.shu.ac.uk/research/csi or
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