

Managing motherhood in the Australian construction industry: work-family balance, parental leave and part time work

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ABSTRACT

A survey of women in the Australian construction industry was undertaken to examine women's work experiences in construction. Questionnaires were distributed to three hundred women in construction occupations and 109 completed and usable questionnaires were returned. Women were found to be seriously under-represented in site-based roles. Site/project engineers worked longer hours than other occupational groups and expressed significantly greater work-family conflict. Lack of flexibility and the inability to balance work and family were common themes in the qualitative comments made by many respondents. Even when women indicated that part time work options and maternity entitlements were provided by their organizations, many expressed a reluctance to use them and perceived career penalty associated with this usage. It is concluded that more flexible work schedules and the implementation of family-friendly policies may encourage more women into site-based roles in construction. The paper concludes that the rigid work practices presently in place act as a subtle form of discrimination. The provision of such policies will only be effective if cultural and attitudinal change is also achieved.

Keywords: Women, construction, work-family balance, part-time work, parental leave.

INTRODUCTION

Demographic and social changes

In the second half of the 20th Century women's role in Australian society underwent a dramatic change. The employment participation rate of women rose from thirty-six per cent in 1968 to fifty-four per cent in 1998 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1998 and 1994). During the same period, men's overall workforce participation fell from eighty-four per cent to seventy-three per cent. With this convergence, the number of employees participating in traditional single earner households fell and non-traditional family structures, such as sole-parents and dual-earner couples, became more common. At the same time as the demographic profile of the workforce was changing, so too was the world of work. The 1995 Australian Workplace Industrial Relations Survey revealed that work hours and work intensity had risen (Morehead et al., 1997). Thus, work has become 'greedier,' demanding more time and energy from employees. Jacobs and Gerson (2001) suggest that the change in family structure from predominantly single to predominantly dual-earner couples has led to increased time pressure on families. They argue that women are spending

more time in paid work than previously but that men's domestic involvement has not increased sufficiently to offset women's rising work commitment, thereby creating a 'time squeeze'. Furthermore, it is the well educated, professional and managerial employees who experience time pressure most acutely (Jacobs and Gerson, 2001; Roxburgh, 2001).

Work-family imbalance

Glezer and Wolcott (1998) report that, in late 1996, sixty-six per cent of Australian men and twenty-three per cent of Australian women were working more than forty-one hours a week. Of these, half of employed men and forty-six per cent of women felt work interfered with home life compared to less than a quarter of women and the small proportion of men who worked less than thirty hours per week. These figures suggest that many Australian workers experience what Hochschild (1997a) termed the 'time-bind'. Hochschild (1997a) describes a state of imbalance, in which the simultaneous demands of family life and paid work are perceived to be out of balance. In this state, there is a subjective feeling that the time and energy demands of work and family are both legitimate but cannot be met simultaneously. Furthermore, Hochschild (1997b) suggests that prevailing cultural values surrounding paid work have led to a 'takeover' of home life by work to the extent that fulfilment at work is often pursued as a 'release' from mundane family pressures.

Prior research has consistently demonstrated the ill effects of work-family imbalance. For example, work to family conflict is reported to be inversely correlated with job satisfaction (Kossek and Ozeki, 1998; Bruck et al., 2002) and psychological well being (Frone et al., 1992; Bedeian et al., 1988) in both men and women. In Finnish dual-earner couples work-family conflict is reported to have an indirect negative effect on marital function through job exhaustion and psychosomatic symptoms (Mauno and Kinnunen, 1999). Lingard and Sublet (2002) report that long hours of work predict marital conflict among engineers in the Australian construction industry. Negative spill over from work into family life has also been reported to increase the odds of problem drinking among employed, midlife adults (Grzywacz & Marks, 2000).

Gender, work and family

While men and women both need to balance the demands of work and home life, women still bear the primary responsibility for domestic duties in most households (Higgins et al., 2000; Demo and Acock, 1993). For example, Roxburgh (2002) reports that twenty-three per cent of men

and forty-two per cent of women perform more than ten hours of housework a week. Gender-based expectations and norms may explain the different amount of time and energy men and women devote to their work and family roles (Gutek et al., 1991). These normative gender-based beliefs suggest that women are more likely to experience conflict between work and home life in employment situations in which long and rigid work hours are the norm. In an analysis of data from the National Study of the Changing Workforce, representative of the US labour force, Tausig and Fenwick (2001) point out that although women and men in their sample experience work-family imbalance equally, this is because women work fewer hours than men. Once gender differences in hours worked were controlled, women were found to experience higher levels of work-family conflict than men. Research also suggests that women suffer more serious consequences as a result of work-family imbalance. For example, Aryee (1993) reports work-family conflict to be a determinant of 'burnout,' a psychological state of emotional exhaustion, among females in dual-earner couples but not among males.

The demands of parenting

Parenting introduces new demands and requires a great deal of time and energy. Roxburgh (2002) reports that, for both men and women, having children living at home increases subjective time pressures. Tausig and Fenwick (2001) assert that married working couples without children report greater work-life balance and the presence of children is significantly related to lower work-family balance. There is evidence that a 'time-bind' is experienced by Australian parents. For example, a report prepared by the Australian Bureau of Statistics states that in dual income couples, seventy per cent of all mothers and fifty-six per cent of all fathers reported that they always/often felt rushed or pressed for time. Only 25.2% of couples without children reportedly experienced this feeling with the same frequency (ABS, 1999).

The need to balance work and motherhood is increasing because many women in the child bearing and early child rearing age group are also now in paid employment. For example, in Australia employment among women in the twenty-five to thirty-four years of age group has risen from thirty per cent in 1960 to sixty-six per cent and is predicted to rise to seventy-nine per cent in 2011 (Squirchuk and Bourke, 2000). Statistics also reveal that Australian women are delaying childbirth due to changed career and social expectations. For example, at the time of the birth of their first child, one in ten Australian mothers is thirty-five years or over. The percentage of women aged over thirty-five who gave birth in Victoria rose from twelve per cent in 1992 to more than nineteen per cent in 2000 (Farouque, 2003). In 2002, the federal Minister for Aging, Kevin Andrews, noted that the declining fertility rate had been below the

population replacement rate for two decades (Age, 26 June 2003:12).

Family-friendly work practices

The changing profile of the workforce has forced some employers to consider the familial responsibilities of their employees, considerations that were less necessary when stay-at-home mothers cared for children and other family dependants (Hegtveldt et al., 2002). Flexibility has been the cornerstone of most 'family friendly' work practices. For example, Wolcott (1990:33) writes 'flexibility in arranging work schedules is considered to have the most positive effect on the ability of workers to manage work and family life'. Thus, support in the form of maternity and paternity leave, time off to care for sick children, part time work with benefits and flexible work hours has been the focus of corporate family friendly initiatives (Strachan and Burgess, 1998).

Research suggests that introducing flexibility in employees' work schedules can improve job satisfaction and employee loyalty and reduce absenteeism (Thomas and Ganster, 1995; Roehling et al., 2001) as well as favourably influencing job-seekers' perceptions of the attractiveness of an employment opportunity (Rau and Hyland, 2002). The availability of alternate work schedules seems particularly attractive to working mothers. For example, Burke (1997) reports that married women with children indicated a significantly higher level of interest in alternative career paths, such as flexible or part time work, than single or married women with no children. In Australia, many mothers work part time in order to better manage work-home issues, particularly when children are young (Glezer and Wolcott 2000). In other countries, notably those in Scandinavia, governments have legislated for family-friendly work practices (Age, June 26, 2003:12). However, Australia lags behind these countries in many important respects and, consequently in Australia, the availability of family friendly policies is largely dependent upon industry sector and size of company (MacDermid et al., 2001).

Women in non-traditional employment

Women are no longer excluded from many kinds of jobs on the basis of the dangers of the work or because certain jobs are deemed 'unsuitable' for women. Despite this, sex-segregation still exists (Gutek, 2001). This segregation is both horizontal (across jobs) and vertical (across levels of organizations). Construction is one industry in which this sex-segregation is very evident (Loosemore et al., 2003). The under-representation of women in construction has been well documented (see Gale, 1994; Court and Moralee, 1995; Fielden et al., 2000). In the mid-1990s the proportion of women in the Australian building industry was only fourteen per cent (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1995). Lingard and Francis (2001) highlight the acute under-

representation of women in site-based construction jobs. While structural barriers to women's entry into construction careers may have broken down it is possible that subtle forms of discrimination may still be at work (Dainty et al., 1999, 2000a; Hopkins and McManus, 1998).

One source of discrimination may be the limited availability of family-friendly work practices or the cultural impediments to utilising flexible work options that are available, even those that are required by law. In construction, the norm of rigid long work hours is particularly entrenched in site-based jobs. Lewis (2001) suggests that traditional models of work construct the ideal worker as one who works long hours on a full-time basis and does not allow family issues to interfere with work. In the light of changing workforce demographics, such traditional models of work may present a barrier to workforce diversity and gender equity. However, it appears that this model is entrenched in organisational cultures in the construction industry. For example, Dainty et al. (1999) report that women's motivation in construction careers declines when family issues become significant because male-oriented work practices prevent them from achieving a satisfactory balance between their work and family life. Fielden et al. (2001) also argue that overcoming barriers to women's entry into the construction industry is insufficient because the construction industry's inherently sexist culture limits the progression of women who choose construction careers, particularly when they are of child bearing age. Lobel and St Clair (1992) report that male managers perceive that developing women of childbearing age is a 'waste' because they believe the future performance of these employees is questionable. Dainty et al. (2000b) found that women's careers plateau in their early thirties and then progress in parity with men's after the age of thirty-five, suggesting that these biases exist in construction.

Maternity/parental leave: the situation in Australia

In 1990, Australia ratified ILO Convention 156. This obliges Australia to aim to enable people engaged in work with family responsibilities to work without being subject to discrimination and without conflict between work and family (Cass 1993). Laws exist at the federal level and in most Australian States and territories which impose requirements on employers in respect of the family responsibilities of employees. Such laws fall under the categories of industrial relations laws, anti-discrimination laws and affirmative action laws (Napoli, 1994). However, despite its commitment to ILO Convention 156, Cass (1993) asserts that in provision of maternity and parental leave, Australian policy and practice lags behind that of other OECD countries. Parental leave allows employees with a new child, either natural or adopted, to care for their child at home on a full time basis in the child's first year and still retain employment and accrue entitlements. Parental leave arrangements form an integral part of a company's work and family program.

Unpaid maternity leave for up to fifty-two weeks has been available to women employees in Australia since 1974, following the Maternity Leave Test Case. From 1990, the federal Industrial Relations Commission handed down the Parental Leave Test Case, which extended the maternity and adoption leave standards to paternity leave where an employee has had 12 months' continuous service with the same employer. The standard for unpaid parental leave has been widely adopted through legislation and awards. The decision also provided for either or both parents to work on a permanent part time basis, with pro-rata remuneration and conditions up to the child's second birthday or for two years after a child is adopted. This entitlement is only available subject to the employer's consent.

Further reform occurred in the mid-1990s. In 1992, the Sex Discrimination Act 1984 was amended to include a provision that workers could not be dismissed on the grounds of family responsibilities. In 1994, a decision of the Australian Industrial Relations Commission in the Special Family Leave test case created the possibility for workers to use their own sick leave to care for a family member who is ill, an entitlement which is now being adopted in many awards and enterprise agreements (Strachan and Burgess, 1998).

Despite these reforms, in terms of paid maternity/parental leave, the position in Australia is not among best practice (Cass 1993). Australia is one of the few OECD countries that do not have a national paid maternity leave scheme. Consequently, most private sector employees do not enjoy such a benefit. Furthermore, women employed on a casual or part time basis or those who do not have a sufficient period of continuous employment are also excluded. In the UK, the Maternity and Parental Leave etc Regulations 1999 extended the minimum entitlement to paid maternity leave from fourteen to eighteen weeks for all women and maintains women's entitlement to all contractual benefits, except salary during this period (McColgan, 2000). A report prepared by Pru Goward, Australia's Sex Discrimination Commissioner in 2002, found that sixty per cent of Australian women do not have access to paid maternity leave (Crabb & Milburn, 2003). This situation seemed set to continue, as maternity/parental leave was not mentioned in the latest federal government budget. Incentives for companies to introduce other family friendly practices, such as offering permanent part-time positions, were also absent.

This situation has led the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) to lodge a landmark test case with the Australian Industrial Relations Commission. Sharan Burrow, the ACTU president says the test case, which will be heard later this year has been introduced to bring about a 'cultural shift' in the way Australians look at work (reported in Balogh & Morris, 2003). The test case seeks to:

- ▶ Extend unpaid parental leave until a child is two;
- ▶ Allow eight weeks of unpaid leave for both parents simultaneously;
- ▶ Allow part time return to work after parental leave until a child is of school age; and
- ▶ Give employees the right to request to change their work hours to accommodate family needs.

Objectives of this study

This paper presents the results of a pilot study exploring the experiences of women working in the Australian construction industry. The specific objectives of the study were to:

- ▶ Compare the work-family experiences of women in site and office-based construction jobs and different occupational groupings;
- ▶ Identify the extent to which alternate work schedules are available to women in construction, through maternity leave (paid and unpaid) or part-time work options; and
- ▶ Identify women's perception about the career consequences of utilising alternate work schedule provisions.

METHODOLOGY

Data collection

A questionnaire was distributed to members of the Victorian Chapter of the National Association of Women in Construction. Completed questionnaires were returned directly to the researchers in unmarked, postage-paid envelopes provided for this purpose. Each questionnaire was distributed with a copy of a plain language statement describing the objectives of the study. The statement also explained the voluntary nature of respondents' participation and assured the anonymity and confidentiality of responses.

One limitation inherent in the sampling strategy was the fact that respondents were all members of the Victorian Chapter of NAWIC. There is a possibility that these respondents might not be representative of all women in construction and this possibility is acknowledged. This limitation raises opportunities for future research that should be undertaken to examine whether women who are not members of NAWIC have similar experiences of balancing the demands of paid work and parenting.

Questionnaire design

Demographic information collected included respondents' age, marital or relationship status and number of dependent children. Respondents were also asked to indicate how many years they had worked in construction and to select from a list of occupations, indicating their role in the industry. Respondents were asked to indicate whether they spent most of their time at work on-site, in a site office or in another office location.

Work-family conflict was measured using Small and Riley's spillover scale (Small and Riley 1990). This scale measures

respondents' subjective sense that work interferes with family life in a negative way. Perceived conflict between work and respondents' marital relationship and parenting role were included in the questionnaire. Items are rated from 'strongly disagree' (1) to 'strongly agree' (5). Example items include 'My marriage/relationship suffers because of my work' and 'Because I am often irritable after work, I am not as good a parent as I would like to be.'

Respondents were also asked to indicate how many weeks of maternity leave they are entitled to following the birth or adoption of a child and whether any portion of this leave entitlement is paid. If paid maternity leave is available, respondents were asked to indicate to how many weeks of paid maternity leave they are entitled. Respondents were also asked to indicate the likelihood that they would take maternity leave during their employment with their current organisation. Likelihood was rated on a five-point scale ranging from 'very unlikely' (0) to 'very likely' (4). Respondents were also asked to indicate whether their employer provides part-time work options for employees returning to work after the birth or adoption of a child. Those who indicated that part-time work options were available were asked to indicate for how many weeks part-time work is available. Respondents were also asked to indicate the likelihood that they would utilise part-time work options during their employment with their current organisation. Likelihood was rated on a five-point scale ranging from 'very unlikely' (0) to 'very likely' (4). Respondents were asked to indicate how they perceived taking maternity leave or part-time work options would affect their career advancement in their current organisations. Responses were rated on a five-point scale ranging from 'very positive effect' (0) to 'very negative effect' (4).

Finally, respondents were provided with a space within which to provide further comments.

Data analysis

In order to compare the work-life experiences of different groups of employees, one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted to compare the mean scores between respondents in different occupational groupings and who indicated they worked in different work locations. Descriptive statistics were generated to identify the frequency with which maternity leave provisions and part-time work options were available, were likely to be used and the extent to which their use would result in a career penalty. Respondents' qualitative comments provide a more in-depth insight into the work-family experiences of women in construction. These comments were coded and analysed using content analysis procedures (Tesch, 1990).

RESULTS

The sample

One hundred and nine completed and usable questionnaires were returned representing a response rate of thirty-six per cent. Most of the respondents (80%) were between the ages of twenty-five and forty-four. Architects made up twenty-two per cent of the sample. The next most common occupation was project/construction manager (13% of the sample). The majority of respondents (83%) worked in an off-site office environment. Only seven respondents (6%) indicated that they worked on-site in direct construction activity and twelve (11%) indicated that they worked on-site but mainly in a site office. These figures suggest that, even though women may be entering the construction industry in increasing numbers, their involvement is restricted to office-based jobs and they are not engaged directly in construction activities.

Many respondents (35%) were single. Thirty per cent of respondents were partnered without children and twenty-four per cent were partnered with dependent children. The number of years respondents had spent in the construction industry ranged from one to thirty-six and the mean was 10.5 years (SD 7.8). Respondents reported working a minimum of zero and a maximum of eighty hours a week and the mean number of hours was forty-three (SD 16.4). Sixty per cent of partnered respondents indicated that their partner was also in paid employment and ninety per cent of partnered respondents reported that their partner worked more than thirty-five hours each week.

Comparisons by occupation and work location

One way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were carried out to test for statistically significant differences in the mean scores for certain variables between women in different occupational categories. For the purposes of these comparisons, only the three most commonly cited occupations were examined. These were architects (n=24), project/construction managers (n=14) and site/project engineers (n=8). The results of these comparisons are presented in Table 1.

Variable	Architects	Project/ engineers	Site/project construction managers	F-ratio	p
Work hours	42	49	57	3.10	.055
Work-family conflict (spouse/partner)	14	13	20	8.71	.001***
Work-family conflict (children)	16	12	16	1.34	.321

Table 1: Mean comparisons of work-family experiences by occupational grouping

Table 1 shows some significant differences by occupational grouping. Most notably, site/project engineers report significantly more work-family conflict in their relationship with their spouse/partner ($F=8.71$, $p=0.001$) than other occupational groups. Site/project engineers also report working longer hours each week than other occupational groups and this difference approached significance ($F=3.10$, $p=0.055$).

One way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were also carried out to test for statistically significant differences in the mean scores for certain variables between women who work in different locations. These locations were on-site (n=7), in the site office (n=12) and in another office location (n=90). The results of these ANOVAs are presented in Table 2.

Variable	On-site	Site office	Other office location	F-ratio	p
Work hours	56	53	41	5.613	.005**
Work-family conflict (spouse/partner)	18	16	14	2.640	.079
Work-family conflict (children)	7	15	13	3.638	.042*

Table 2: Mean comparisons of work-family experiences by work location

These results show some significant differences. Respondents working on site or in the site office worked significantly longer hours than those in other office environments ($F=5.613$, $p=0.005$). Employees working in site offices also report more conflict between work and parenting roles than those in other office environments ($F=3.64$, $p=0.042$). Interestingly, women who work on site in direct construction activity report less conflict between the work and parenting roles than those based in site offices. This finding may be spurious because very few women in the sample were engaged in direct construction activity and, of these, only two were working mothers. Women engaged in direct construction activity reportedly experience greater work-family conflict in their relationship with their spouse/partner than do women who work in site offices. Similarly, women in site offices experience greater conflict between their work and their relationship with their spouse/partner than do women who work in other office environments. This difference approached statistical significance ($F=2.640$, $p=0.079$).

Maternity leave

Respondents were asked to indicate how much unpaid maternity leave they were entitled to in the event of the birth or adoption of a child. Sixty-one respondents (56.0%) answered this question. Five respondents (4.6%) indicated that they had no maternity leave entitlement. Four respondents (3.7%) indicated that they had between one and six weeks of maternity leave. The modal amount of maternity leave was fifty-two weeks, being indicated by

thirty-nine (35.8%) respondents. Four respondents (3.7%) were unsure of their unpaid maternity leave entitlements and two respondents (1.8%) indicated this entitlement was negotiable.

When asked what proportion of maternity leave was paid, forty-one respondents (37.6%) failed to respond. Forty-four respondents (40.4%) indicated that they were entitled to no paid maternity leave while twenty-four respondents (22.0%) indicated that they had some paid maternity leave entitlement. When asked to indicate how many weeks of paid maternity leave respondents were entitled to the responses ranged from 0.4 to fourteen weeks. The modal amount of paid maternity leave available was six weeks, being reported by seven respondents (6.4% of the total sample). Only five respondents (4.6% of the total sample) reported enjoying a paid maternity leave entitlement of twelve weeks or more.

When asked about the likelihood that they would take maternity leave in their present jobs, eighty-three respondents (76.1%) responded. Of these, nineteen respondents (17.4 %) indicated that it was very unlikely. Six respondents (5.5%) indicated that it was unlikely and nineteen respondents (17.4%) indicated that they were unsure as to how likely it was that they would take maternity leave. Twelve respondents (11%) reported that it was likely and twenty-seven respondents (24.8%) indicated that it was very likely that they would take maternity leave in their present jobs.

Part-time work options

Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they had access to part time work options if required. Thirty-eight respondents (34.9%) did not respond to this question. However, of the seventy-one who did respond, twenty-one (19.3%) indicated that part time work options were not available in their workplaces. Forty-eight respondents (44.0%) indicated that part time work options were available and two respondents (1.8%) reported that such options were negotiable or that they were unsure.

When asked for how long after the birth or adoption of a child, part-time work would be available in their present job, ninety respondents (82.6%) failed to respond. Eight respondents (7.3%) indicated that the length of time was negotiable; two respondents (1.8%) indicated that this was dependent upon position within the company; and three respondents (2.8%) indicated that they did not know. Four respondents (3.7%) indicated that part time work was available indefinitely. Only two respondents (1.8%) indicated that part time work options were formally permitted for between one and two years.

When asked about the likelihood that they would use part-time work options while in their present jobs, eighty-four

respondents (77%) responded. Of these, sixteen (14.7%) indicated that it was very unlikely and fifteen (13.8 per cent) indicated that it was unlikely that they would use such options. Sixteen respondents (14.7%) were unsure whether they would take part time work options in their present jobs while thirteen respondents (11.9%) considered it likely and twenty-four respondents (22%) indicated it was very likely that they would use part time work options available to them.

Perception of use of alternate work schedules

When asked how they thought taking maternity leave or using part time work options would impact upon their career advancement in their present jobs, eighty-two respondents (75.2%) responded. Of these, one respondent (0.9%) indicated she thought it would have a very positive effect, twenty-six (23.9%) indicated that they thought this would have a positive effect and one respondent (0.9 per cent) was unsure what the effect would be. Forty-one respondents (37.6%) thought using such provisions would have a negative effect on career advancement and thirteen (11.9%) believed the effect would be very negative.

DISCUSSION

Horizontal segregation in construction

Our results suggest that women are under-represented in site-based, supervisory and engineering roles. Site-based women reported working significantly longer hours and reported significantly greater negative spillover from work into their relationships with their spouses/partners than women who are based predominantly in off-site office locations or who work as design professionals. Site-based roles demand longer hours and often require employees to work a six-day week. This may pose a particular problem for female employees, most of whom will have partners also in full time work. Men, on the other hand, are still more likely to have partners in part time work or may participate in traditional family structures in which the male performs the role of breadwinner while the female manages domestic matters (Schneer and Reitman, 2002).

Comments made by several of the respondents reflect the difficulties faced by women in construction. For example one woman wrote:

So many men I work with spend 12-14 hours at work every day. We are encouraged to be balanced but not rewarded for being balanced so hours at work are scrutinised although no-one would ever say so ... women do have more pressure with regards to family and child rearing, it is not an easy industry.

Not only is women's under-representation in site-based jobs indicative of horizontal labour market segregation, it is also likely to result in vertical segregation. For example, Dainty et al. (2000a) report that women in construction tend to be allocated to office-based support positions,

which deny them the experience on major projects needed for promotion.

Maternity leave

In terms of unpaid maternity leave, our results suggest that most women in the industry enjoy the standard twelve months of leave. Those who do not enjoy this provision are the self-employed and those working part time, for whom the leave is pro-rated. However, in terms of paid maternity leave, the results were mixed. Of the respondents who answered the question about whether any portion of their maternity leave allowance was paid, 64.7 per cent indicated they were entitled to no paid maternity leave while 35.3 per cent indicated that they were entitled to some paid maternity leave. Our results suggest that some enlightened employers in construction are offering paid maternity leave to female employees, even though the duration of this entitlement falls short of standards in other OECD countries. Most women, however, do not enjoy paid maternity leave entitlements.

A large minority of respondents (22.9%) of the women in the sample indicated that it was unlikely or very unlikely that they would take maternity leave while working with their present employer. Reasons for this are not clear. These women may have decided to forego childbirth or may be reliant upon partners with better parental leave provisions. This finding warrants further investigation because Australia's population is ageing and the birthrate is declining. Australia's fertility rate is at an all time low, with 1.73 births per women of childbearing age (Farouque, 2003). The social and economic consequences of this are likely to be dire. For example, it is reported that by 2020 Australia will face a labour shortage of 500 000 (Age, June 26, 2003). Furthermore, those industries likely to suffer the most are those that fail to accommodate employees' family needs.

Comments made by some of the women in our sample suggest that an 'either/or' approach is taken to career and family.

For example, one respondent commented 'I do expect to have a family one day, potentially in the next five years and thus don't find career advancement that big a priority in my life'. Another respondent foreshadowed the difficulties she expected to face in balancing work and family in the following comment: 'I am extremely worried that should I choose to have a child that my job will be in severe jeopardy'.

Even though women are making these career and family choices 'freely', it is possible that subtle forms of discrimination are still at work (Gutek, 2001).

Part-time work

Many women often express a preference for part time work as a means of getting back into the paid workforce following the birth of a child (O'Connor, 2003). The ACTU report that

sixty per cent of working mothers, as well as an increasing number of working fathers, want to work part time (Balogh & Morris, 2003). Our results suggest that part-time work options are available to the majority of women working in the construction industry, following the birth or adoption of a child. The poor response to the question for how long part-time work would be available could indicate that these arrangements have not been tested and the period would be open to negotiation. The proportion of women indicating that it was likely that they would use part-time work options during their employment with their present employer and the proportion of those who indicated that they were unlikely to do so were similar, indicating that women are divided in their preference for part-time work. Becker and Moen (1999) suggest that part time work is one way that dual earner couples cope with work and parenthood. However, it is usually women who cut back their hours following the birth of a child with men, typically increasing their work hours. Part time workers can be under-valued and marginalised (Lewis, 2001). Furthermore, part-time workers are often over-skilled for the jobs they perform and are trapped into low paying workplaces with poorer security and employment protection, fewer benefits and limited career opportunities (McColgan, 2000b). Adams (1995) distinguishes between retention part-time jobs and secondary part-time jobs. The former are offered by organisations wishing to retain talented employees in higher paying jobs, while the latter are filled by less skilled, easily replaced individuals. Women who adopt a simultaneous career and family focus or who wish to sequence career, family and career interests, can benefit from retention part-time jobs because they permit women to balance work and family without foregoing the opportunity for career advancement. However, as both Lewis (2001) and Adams (1995) state, the extent to which women can achieve this depends on the prevailing organisational culture. Male-oriented work practices, which were established on the basis of the 'traditional' family structure, die hard in industries in which there is not a critical mass of female employees. In male-oriented work cultures, the availability and use of family friendly work options may result in resentment among co-workers who perceive their own workload to increase as a result. For example, men's traditional gender-role attitudes have been linked to resentment of the need to do extra work to cover for employees utilising family-friendly work options (Hegtvedt et al., 2002). Achieving cultural acceptance of part-time workers, male or female, may not be easy in many construction organisations, where the norm of long work hours and full time work is entrenched.

Almost half of the respondents in our sample (49.5%) indicated that they thought that taking maternity leave or utilising part-time work options would have a negative impact on their career. This may explain the large numbers of respondents who indicated it unlikely that they would

use such policies, even though they were available. This highlights a need to examine the social contexts in construction organisations, which may influence women's choices concerning utilising family-friendly policies. Blair-Loy and Wharton (2002) report that an organisation and work-group characteristics are linked to policy utilisation. In the absence of a strong work-family culture, organisational members may create their own 'cultural norms' about family-friendly policy utilisation. Work-group members' conversations about policy utilisation are reported to impact upon the use of family friendly policies and shape group members' beliefs about what constitutes 'use and abuse' of such policies (Kirby & Krone, 2002). A work team's attitudes towards the use of family-friendly policies are likely to depend upon the group's gender composition, racial diversity and the age and individual attitudes of members. Kirby and Krone (2002) report the pressure applied by work group members to be even greater than that of supervisors in determining policy utilisation. It is possible that in construction, some women may be reluctant to utilise family-friendly policies because they do not want to 'let the team down'. In contexts such as these, the ACTU's vision of a 'cultural shift' is likely to be particularly important.

CONCLUSIONS

Our results suggest that women are poorly represented in site-based roles in the Australian construction industry. Furthermore, women in site-based roles work longer hours and experience greater work-family conflict than women who work in other office environments. The provision of family-friendly policies in construction appears to be patchy. Most women in our sample enjoyed fifty-two weeks of unpaid maternity leave, which is consistent with the 1974, Maternity Leave Test Case. However, the majority of respondents indicated that they had no entitlement to paid maternity leave. Australia performs poorly concerning paid maternity leave compared to most other OECD countries and our results reflect this. However, our results show that some construction organisations are offering limited paid maternity leave, presumably in an attempt to attract and retain female employees. The majority of women in our sample reported having access to part-time work options following the birth or adoption of a child. However, a large number of women in our sample indicated that it was unlikely that they would use either the maternity or part-time leave policies while working with their current employers. This may reflect the respondents' concerns that to take up such options would bring unacceptable career penalties. These concerns suggest that, although women are free to enter construction careers, subtle forms of discrimination may be at work. We conclude that offering family-friendly policies does not mean that they will be used because usage is also dependent on attitudinal and cultural characteristics and the social context of the workplace. Cultural change is

unlikely to occur overnight. However, the outcomes of the ACTU test case are eagerly awaited.

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