Discourse or reality? "Work-life balance", flexible working policies and the gendered organisation

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Abstract

Purpose. The purpose of this paper is to examine the impact of flexible working arrangements and particularly reduced hours working arrangements on a Dual Agenda of gender equity and workplace effectiveness, in a case study organisation employing a relatively high proportion of women scientists.

Design/Methodology Approach. In depth interviews based on the initial stages of collaborative Interactive Action Research (CIAR) are used within a case study approach. The interviews explored working practices, the assumptions underpinning them and their un/intended consequences.

Findings. The main form of flexible working arrangement used in the organisation, a four day week, is double edged and complex in its effects. It supports mothers, but at a cost because of gendered assumptions. Despite a commitment to flexibility and "work-life balance", the gendered construction of the ideal worker and ideas of competence conflated with hegemonic masculinity, remain powerful. This, together with a prevalent 'good mother' ideology, undermines both gender equity and workplace effectiveness.

Practical Implications. This paper is of value to both a researchers and policy makers. It shows that highly developed work-life balance or flexible working polices are not sufficient to enhance gender equity and points to the importance of surfacing and challenging gender assumptions in SET (Science, Engineering and Technology). It emphasises the need to move forward from policy to practice.

Originality, Value. This paper contributes to a growing body of work using initial stages of the CIAR methodology and showcases the theoretical insights gained by such an approach.

Key words Gender, Organisations, CIAR, Dual Agenda, scieintific careers
Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Women are underrepresented in scientific careers, and particularly at higher levels. For example women represent the majority (55%) of higher education students in Europe, but account for only 17 percent of graduates in engineering and 37 percent in science, mathematics and computing (Eurostat, 2009). In France, which is the context of the research reported here, in 2006 only 13 percent of women graduates qualified in mathematics, science and technology compared with 42 percent among their male counterparts (Eurostat, 2009). Women's participation in research in SET (Science, Engineering and Technology) is generally rather low in the EU (European Commission, 2006). Official statistics for 2007

within research and development (R&D) in the business enterprise sector show that only one in five employees are women in France and in Europe more broadly (Eurostat, 2009).

Not only are women underrepresented in the sector, but they also tend to opt out in increasing numbers (European Commission, 2006); a phenomenon known as the 'leaky pipeline'. This begins in education and continues through scientific careers. A number of explanation have been proposed for this phenomenon, including for example the paucity of female scientist role models and cultural pressures on girls to conform to traditional gender roles that exclude a scientific career (Blickenstaff, 2005). Once women enter a career in science there are a number of key 'attrition points', particularly after maternity leave and at mid-career level, when women either leave or fail to achieve the career progression experienced by their male colleagues (Hewlett et al., 2008). One strategy for, associated with the transition to and practice of motherhood, is the development of flexible working arrangements (FWAs) or work-life balance policies designed to enable women (and in principle at least, men) to combine career and family. However, looking beyond SET organisations there is much evidence of a widespread implementation gap between policy and practice in this respect (Lewis, 1997; 2001; Gambles et al., 2006). Policies are often undermined by non supportive managers (Lewis et al., 2009) and gendered workplace cultures (Haas and Hwang, 2007).

This raises the question of whether these initiatives are sufficient to bring about changes in dominant workplace cultures that have largely developed for primarily male workforces, even if the proportion of women scientists increases? This question is addressed in this paper. First however, we briefly outline some relevant aspects of the French context and then discuss the theoretical underpinnings of the study and relevant research on women in science.

The French Context
The French welfare state is based on the 'working mother model' and there exists a range of measures to support working parents (Fagnani and Math, 2008). France leads the European Union in the provision of childcare and benefits aimed at reducing child care costs (Gornick and Meyers, 2003, Fagnani and Math, 2008). There are also highly developed parental leave policies. In this context France has the highest fertility rates within the European Union.

Nevertheless, labour market activity rates differ: in 2007, 52 percent of women in France were in employment compared with 62 percent for men (Eurostat, 2009). Although rates of part-time work are lower than in many other Northern European countries, in 2007, 30 percent of women worked on a part-time basis compared with only 6 percent of men (ibid). This relates to the disproportionate distribution of caring responsibilities by gender, with women performing caring duties for over 10 hours a week compared with less than five for men. Similarly women spend nearly 14 hours a week on housework, compared with less than three for men (European Working Conditions Survey, 2005). Moreover as most primary schools close on Wednesdays and secondary schools at least half a day on Wednesdays most children attend school only four days a week. Given mothers' greater responsibility for childcare, it is therefore common for them to work a four day week.

The legally prescribed 35 hour work week in France provides some opportunities for flexible working arrangements, although companies now have the right to renegotiate working hours. Working hours in France are among the lowest in Europe, (European Working Conditions Survey, 2005). Generally employees who work more than 35 hours weekly can usually take

extra time off, although not all do so. Managers in particular tend to regard this as largely irrelevant.

As elsewhere there is a tendency for women and men to undertake different jobs An analysis of the French data of the 2005 Working Conditions Survey undertaken by Gollac and Volkoff (2007) finds wide differences between 'typical' men's and women's working conditions. Men are disproportionately exposed to physical risks and exertions; long or unsocial working hours; responsibilities; and visible work. Women on the other hand are more exposed to relational risks and involved in jobs where there is a high level of care. There are also differences in educational and career choices, as elsewhere in Europe.

In terms of career opportunities in Science, France's level of investment in R&D is relatively high compared with the rest of Europe. Nearly 25 billions were spent in 2007 in the business sector alone. This represents an amount nearly 18 percent greater than in the euro zone per country inhabitant (Eurostat, 2009). Among the nearly 215,000 R&D personnel in the business sectors in 2006 in France, 24 percent were women. However, the proportion of women researchers among R&D personnel diminishes as job level increases illustrating the 'leaky pipeline' phenomenon in Science in France as elsewhere.

Theory of Gendered Organisations

The careers and experiences of women scientists are influenced not only by national context but also by organisational or workplace context; most fundamentally by the gendered nature of organisations (Acker, 1990; 1998; Swanberg, 2004) The gendered nature of organisations has been described in many different developed countries, including those such as the Nordic countries, known for progressive gender equality policies and programmes (Haas and Hwang, 2007; Holt and Lewis, forthcoming)

The concept of a gendered organisation signifies "... that advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female" (Acker, 1990:146). As Acker (1990) points out, organisations consist of relations between people and can never be gender neutral. Organisations cannot therefore be adequately understood unless gender is acknowledged as a fundamental element of structure, culture and practice (Britton 2000). This requires that gendered assumptions are made visible (and challenged) (Rapoport et al, 2002; Bailyn, 2006) and that the constructions of masculinity and femininity, men and women, that shape and are shaped by organisational processes and everyday practices are understood (Benschop and Verloo, 2006).

In this approach it is argued that women's secondary position in the labour market in many contexts is at least partly attributable to the unintended effects of daily working practices and assumptions that can appear to be gender neutral but are grounded in a male model of work that positions the ideal worker as someone who can work as though they have no social or caring obligations outside work (Acker, 1990; Lewis, 1997; 2001; Kugelberg, 2006). This is pivotal to the understanding of gendered organisations.

The ideal worker and the ideal mother

The male model of the ideal worker and the associated working practices and gendered assumptions on which they are based can be traced to the ideology of separate, gendered spheres; that is, the public sphere of work as a man's world and the private sphere of the family as women's domain and responsibility (Rapoport et al., 2002; Bailyn, 2006; Haas and Hwang, 2007). The concept of 'a job' is thus implicitly a gendered concept, even though organizational logic presents it as gender neutral (Acker, 1990). This separation of family and working life that began with industrialisation, produced gendered structures that are remarkably resilient despite changing gender roles and relationships (Crompton et al., 2007). This separate spheres model contrast with the 21st century reality in which both women and men are in the workforce and also involved in family care, and where boundaries between work and family are increasingly permeable (Brannen, 2005).

This idealised male model affects how commitment is defined and valued in workplaces (Lewis, 1997; 2001; Rapoport et al., 2002; Rees and Garnsey, 2003; Swanberg, 2004). Commitment is widely constructed in terms of behaviours that indicate work primacy, such that time to spend at work is unlimited, and the demands of family, community and personal life are secondary. This reflects what Joan Acker calls the privileging and non-responsibility of organizations (Acker, 1998). Insofar as organisational processes continue to prioritise work over family and personal life it is assumed that social reproduction and care will take place elsewhere and are not the responsibility of employers. Social reproduction and care should not interfere with core workplace processes, structures, culture and goals. In this ideological context initiatives such as the development of FWAs or work-life policies may take place around the margins of organisations (Lewis, 1997) for those (mostly women with children) who do not fit the idealised male model, perpetuating their marginalisation, but more rarely lead to systemic workplace change. The myth of separate and gendered spheres thus perpetuates organisational silent discourses associated with deeply embedded and virtually unconscious male values (Schein, 1985; 2007). A discourse of gender equity or equality is increasingly common, in HR departments or more broadly, often embedded in diversity initiatives, but this frequently coexists with business focused discourses that position those who deviate form the traditional male model of work and careers as problematic (Kugelberg; 2006).

The myth of separate and gendered spheres also affects how competencies are defined and is associated with the valuing of certain types of behaviour more than others. There is often an assumption that idealised masculine characteristics are necessary to be effective in the workplace. Thus traditionally idealised masculine values and behaviours such as individualistic behaviour, competitiveness and self promotion come to be associated with the ideal worker, in the field of SET (Miller, 2004) as elsewhere, while more traditionally feminine characteristics and skills such as interpersonal skills and collaboration are often undervalued in workplace settings. Ideas of competence thus become conflated with hegemonic masculinity (Bailyn, 2006). That is, 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 (Rapoport et al., 2002; Rees and Garnsey, 2003; Bailyn, 2006). The deconstruction of structures and cultural norms at work and their underlying assumptions is thus a first step in analysing a workplace using a gender theory lens.

The ideal worker ideology contrasts with that of the ideal mother and can create identity dilemmas for women themselves (Lewis, 1991) as well impacting on the ways that mothers

and fathers are perceived in the workplace. Mothers continue to be widely perceived as having the primary responsibility for family care and fathers for family economic support and although the male breadwinner model is giving way to more diverse family models, progress is slow and uneven (Crompton et al., 2007). Separate spheres ideology together with the evaluation of the public economic sphere as competence-based and the private domestic sphere as "natural", defines the roles of ideal workers and ideal carers (particularly mothers). The ideology of fatherhood is changing in many contexts, but active fatherhood can also be constrained by the male model of work and ideal worker ideology (Brandth and Kvande, 2002). These socially constructed roles create structural and cultural constraints to the achievement of gender equity in both the workplace and the family (Rapoport et al., 2002). It is important to understand the processes at play here, which differ across diverse workplace contexts although the underlying principles are similar (Kugelberg,2006; Holt and Lewis, forthcoming)

The processes of constructing gender within organisations, particularly ideal worker ideologies, help to produce gendered components of individual identity (Acker, 1990). These, in turn, are related to beliefs about what is fair and equitable, that is , sense of entitlement, and therefore the outcomes that women and men, mothers and fathers, feel entitled to expect in the workplace (and other contexts) (Lewis and Smithson, 2001). Pressures associated with the ideology of motherhood and the competing ideal worker contribute to an understanding of why, for example, mothers often feel more entitled to take up flexible working options for managing work and family commitments than fathers, but not necessarily to be able to do so, without paying a career penalty (Lewis et al., 2009). Hence flexible working practices, if implemented in workplace cultures where they are likely to be taken up mostly by women, and where commitment is defined in terms of long hours at work, can perpetuate inequities at work and at home.

Women in SET

The characteristics of gendered organisations are particularly strongly evident in SET organizations. Wider societal perceptions tend to associate SET occupations with men (Glover, 2002) and this is reflected in male dominated workforces in most SET workplaces which tend to be masculine in culture (Glover, 2002; Miller, 2004). That is, they promote and value individualistic rather than collaborative behaviours, with commitment defined in terms of masculine norms of long working hours and total availability (Davis, 2001; Glover, 2002). However, there is also some evidence that women in science are often unaware of the gendered processes and power differentials (Benkert and Staberg, 2000) or adopt male values and practices as a strategy to survive or even thrive (Miller, 2004).

Most research on women in science (or SET more broadly) focuses on their experience as a minority group in male dominated organisations, particularly in engineering or in academic research. Less in depth research has focused on women in R&D and especially on the minority of organisations where there is an equal or relatively high proportion of women scientists. We therefore know less about the processes whereby gendered organisational systems are reproduced or challenged in these contexts. A critical mass of women scientists in itself is not sufficient to bring about systemic change in organisations based on male values and practices (Glover, 2002). Nevertheless a critical mass of women in a range of organisations in various sectors tends to be associated with greater institutional pressure on employers to introduce policies on work-life balance (den Dulk and van Doorne-Huiskes,

2007), which may be a necessary first step in challenging male structures. Wynarczyk and Renner (2006), for example, have argued that issues of work-life balance are more important than specific SET related barriers in holding back career development among women scientists. This could be an important avenue for intervention. On the other hand, the gap between work life balance policy and practice noted across many sectoral and national contexts is also reflected in policy and culture clashes in SET (Webster, 2005).

What appears to be needed therefore is progress beyond the "short" agenda of specific policies to improve position of women as a first necessary step (Cockburn, 1989), to the longer agenda of working towards more systemic change and transformation; changes in structures, cultures and practices and particularly the challenging of the male model of ideal workers without family time commitments (Rapoport et al., 2002; Bailyn, 2006)

A Dual Agenda approach
Gendered organizational theory has been developed and taken forward in a very practical way by Rapoport et al. (2002) who demonstrate that working practices that reproduce gender inequities can also undermine workplace effectiveness. Building on this insight they developed an action research process for changing workplace practices and assumptions to meet a Dual Agenda of gender equity and workplace effectiveness, known as Collaborative Interactive Action Research (CIAR). This is one approach for pursuing the "longer agenda" as the aim is for systemic workplace change; that is changes in structures, cultures and practices, which goes well beyond just policy development. Some authors have argued that framing interventions in terms of contribution to a Dual Agenda of gender equity and business success risks losing gender (Ely and Meyerson, 2000; Benschop and Verloo, 2006). However, Rapoport et al. (2002) emphasise that a Dual Agenda does not work unless both parts of the agenda are constantly kept on the table: losing either gender or the business argument undermines effective change. This is a central tenet of the CIAR approach.

 CIAR involves using a Dual Agenda lens to examine workplace practices, underlying (usually gendered) assumptions and their consequences, both intended and unintended. This approach has been used in a number of contexts to bring about positive organisational changes in working practices to make workplaces more equitable and effective (Rapoport et al., 2002; Lewis and Cooper, 2005; Bailyn, 2006). It emphasizes the importance of focusing on specific workplace contexts rather than attempting to generalise about gendered practices more broadly. Research focuses on working practices in terms of how the work gets done. It also encourages participants to reflect on the assumptions that underpin everyday working practices by exploring values, particularly what sort of behaviours are valued within the organisation and how success is defined (Rapoport et al., 2002). This focus on specific workplace cases is a promising approach for examining potential routes to systemic change in SET organisations that could begin to challenge gendered organisations.

The aim of this paper is to examine the impact of FWAs, specifically reduced hours working arrangements on a Dual Agenda of gender equity and workplace effectiveness, in a case study organisation with a relatively high proportion of women scientists. Specifically, drawing on theory of gendered organisations, sense of entitlement theory and using a Dual Agenda lens, the paper examines the processes whereby gendered organisational systems in a SET company, known for supporting women in science are challenged and/or reproduced. It does so by exploring dominant working practices, the assumptions underpinning them and

their intended and unintended impact on women (and men's) careers and on workplace effectiveness (the Dual Agenda).

Methodology

This project stems from the involvement of one of the researchers in an EU expert group examining issues relating to women in SET. The group brought together academic researchers and representatives of SET companies and scientific universities to collaborate on number of research studies on the careers of women in SET. The aim of the study discussed in this paper was to work with a SET company that already had well developed "work-life balance" policies and practices, compared to other organisations, in order to examine how these worked in practice, using a Dual Agenda lens. ScienceCo (a pseudonym), met these criteria and provided access for a case study. The initial agreement was for the early (data gathering) stages of a CIAR project (Rapoport et al., 2002) to uncover unwritten rules and barriers, with a view to consider ways of moving beyond the short agenda of policy implementation towards culture change to support women in SET[1]. The key informant who agreed to this left the company before the project began and her role was taken over by a colleague.

ScienceCo is a large multinational company in France with a very large R&D sector, which aims to provide sustainable development and innovation. There is a high proportion of women workers and the number of women in management roles is growing (just over half of all promotions are awarded to women). At present, among "cadres' (at least graduate level scientists or middle, as opposed to technicians) there is approximately an equal number of men and women, but this figure drops to one-third for managers, one-sixth for senior managers and women make up only just over 10 percent of its most senior executives. Within the organisation, there is a dominant discourse of the importance for the business of recruiting, retaining and developing women scientists. The company is generally regarded by the workforce as family friendly, supporting flexibility and a good place for women scientists to work. ScienceCo has a strong commitment to HR policies which it sees as intrinsically linked to economic performance. In particular, it stresses the importance of diversity, personal and professional development and the development of optimal ways of working. All these aspects are central to the 'Dual Agenda', making this organisation a prime candidate for inclusion in the study.

Data gathering involved 18 interviews (12 women and 6 men). Most were from R&D but three were from marketing and one from HR to provide contextual information and a range of perspectives. The convenience sample was selected by the key informant within the organisation to meet the researchers' criteria of a focus on women scientists with some men scientists and some participants from other departments. All participants were 'cadres', including some team managers.

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[1] Ultimately CIAR aims to develop experimental interventions to contribute to systemic change but this was beyond the scope of the current project.

The aim of this qualitative design was not representativeness, but rather, in keeping with the CIAR approach, to explore the accounts and reflections of selected participants. Interviews covered working practices (how the work gets done), how people are valued, notions of success, working relationships and what it is like to work there for women and for men. Participants were encouraged to explore the assumptions or unwritten rules that underpinned working practices as well as possible consequences for gender equity and workplace effectiveness. These interviews can be regarded as a form of micro intervention in that they encourage participants to reflect on the "taken for granted" (Rapoport et al., 2002).

Interviews were held at the premises of the organisation, and arranged by the HR. Most lasted for around 60 minutes. Efforts were made to provide as collaborative an environment as possible, with the participants encouraged to treat the discussion of particular topics as a conversation rather than an interview. Interviews were conducted in English where possible, with a member of the research team providing translation when necessary. All interviews were taped and translated verbatim by a bilingual research assistant. The data were analysed using a gender and Dual Agenda lens to develop a thematic grid. The analysis focused on identifying dominant working practices, the assumptions underpinning them and their impact on women's (and men's) careers and workplace effectiveness.

Findings and Discussion

The thematic analysis of the interview transcripts identified four main themes: i) flexibility and the four day week ii) mothers, fathers and choices; iii) working hours, visibility and availability; iv) and development and advancement. In this section we first consider the prevalent four day week and then analyse each of the other three themes in terms of some significant working practices and the assumptions that underpin these practices. Finally we look at some un/intended consequences of these assumptions and practices for the Dual Agenda.

Flexibility: The four-fifths week

ScienceCo operates a popular four day week policy as well as a flexitime system and considerable informal flexibility in R and D . While in theory, the four day week is available to both men and women, it is in practice largely taken up by women with children in order to cope with school times. This involves a 20 percent cut in salary, although workload is not usually reduced, so it results in some intensification of work. Mothers tend to regard this practice very positively and often conceptualise it as an opportunity or a luxury. One woman interviewee for example states:

> *In my opinion we have this luxury, this chance – ScienceCo gives us this freedom, which is good. I've never felt I was less recognised because I have children, because I'm on four fifths, because I have to leave early, because I took maternity leaves. (woman scientist)*

These women accept an implicit, and in some cases explicit, expectation that the workload will exceed the 80 percent threshold. Some women using this scheme do some work at home during their day off, while others work longer during their four days of work. They accept that they lose a fifth of their salary but maintain to a large extent their workload, effectively buying flexibility from the organisation. One woman illustrates this and details her working practice as:

> *I have a rule for myself: I don't work on Wednesdays at home. … But certain weeks I work at home on Monday or Tuesday, when the children are asleep, I finish my work at home because I have to leave in the evening. … I can leave early in the evening and finish what I didn't do at home, which is good for me.*
> *Interviewer: But you pay for that, in terms of salary.*
> *Yes. (woman scientist)*

She admits that this can lead to some intensification of work:

> *This year I'm more pressured than the previous years because I have to work four days a week. (woman scientist)*

Moreover, some of the women interviewed even feel that in order to prove that they are still dedicated workers they need to maintain potential or actual availability on their day off:

> *Usually I come to work one Wednesday in a month. Because there are meetings I want to go to. I want to show to my boss that the Wednesdays are not a problem. (woman scientist)*

The flexibility buy-out is not perceived as such by all, while for others, the dynamics are clear. One male participant, when asked if he would use this practice referred to it as a '*scam*'. Another, a woman, explained:

> *I asked for my Wednesdays, because it's easy in France, I asked this to my boss …and she said "I'm glad you asked because you're going to be paid 20% less but will do the same job!" (woman scientist)*

The four day practice is associated with a greater degree of work efficiency as well as contributing to personal well-being. This participant was typical in commenting:

> *In my opinion and I have discussed that with a lot of friends, I'm much more organised since I work four days. It's straight to the point: when I arrive I know exactly what to do and I have the feeling that I don't waste my time. … It's also psychological. I know that I have time to spend with my family, so I'm happy at work and happy at home, I don't feel frustrated. (woman scientist)*

This greater efficiency is not always recognised or valued by others, although one man interviewed voiced an awareness of the skills involved:

> *Because I don't have the time in five days to do everything I have to do. I'm not sure if I'm fully efficient but I think I'm quite ok and working four days would be even more complicated for me. (man scientist)*

The four day week is thus effectively a full time compressed work week but with an associated loss of salary. Although not formally made explicit, all those interviewed recognised this as an unwritten rule. They accept it because, as discussed below the ideal worker is constructed as one who is constantly available and visible (although there is no operational reason for this in R&D) and they regard the option to not be available at the workplace for one day as a concession, for which they are willing to pay. They construct this

as their choice, as discussed below. As it is not articulated as a problem it is not taken up by the unions and the employer is not challenged on it.

One of the intended consequences of the four day week is that it has a positive effect on retention. Indeed, many of the participants report that the flexibility and support that they enjoy as part of these working arrangements and on a day to day basis is very substantial in comparison with many other organisations. While the four day week is not uncommon in France, this may not be the case in other SET companies, most of which have a much smaller proportion of women scientists.

However, while this supportive environment has positive impacts on employees, there is also a feeling that it can trap them into the organisation. A flexible working environment serves as a form of non-financial 'golden handcuffs' (Gardner, 2002), preventing women from moving to other organisations, even though this may hold them back in some respects.

> *I'm ready to change, I asked for change, but I still want to have the flexibility ... I want to keep time for my personal life… For me and for many of my female friends, we won't that easily look for a job in another company because we have this flexibility, we have this comfort, we know the environment, we are well organised. Sometimes I think I should go somewhere else but I don't know what I will find in other companies, if there will be this flexibility. (woman scientist)*

Mothers, Fathers and Choices

To understand why mothers regard the common practice of condensing their workload into four days a week and forfeiting one day's salary as a privilege it is necessary to examine some of the underlying assumptions at play. Taken-for-granted assumptions about mother, fathers, ideal workers and choices are important here. In keeping with the separate spheres ideology mothers are regarded primarily as carers - although most French mothers are also employed - and fathers as main providers. Consequently earnings are viewed as less important to mothers. A related assumption at ScienceCo is that most mothers do no aspire to advancement, at least while they have young children. As part of this ideology, women are subjected to pressures emanating from the 'good mother' standard (Lewis, 1991; Kugelberg, 2006) and hence often feel they have to choose between having time for their family and caring responsibilities or developing and/or advancing in their career. The prevailing assumption is that women cannot, or do not wish to, concentrate on these two aspects at the same time. Some mothers can be regarded as ideal workers, but this will not be an automatic process and has to be proved, as a woman scientist and manager implies:

In my position, I proved myself so I'm ok now, but it was hard. It was harder for me as a woman. (woman scientis, managert)

However, while women are able to some extent to signify their intent to become ideal workers, as opposed to or as often well as, ideal parents, this is not an option extended to men. For them, the ideal worker model is the norm and they seldom are able to choose an alternative. Men rarely ask to work flexibly although some say that it would be acceptable to do so. This behavioural norm is supported not only by workplace expectations but also by wider societal expectations in French society that men will the main family earners. Fathers

discuss whether or not they take paternity leave after the birth- which is constructed as a personal choice. Most accept that it is not "in the culture" for men to work a five day week but do not frame this as a lack of choice. While mothers are clear about the "choices" they make and why, fathers have no such available discourse struggle to explain their actions:

I didn't [take leave when I had my children]. There are men in my team who took paternity leave. So it's not a problem. It was a personal choice. [...] I could have taken it but there was no obligation. [...] I don't know why. It's not in the culture. There are two women in my team who work four days a week, but I don't know any man who does the same. [...] It's not really in the culture. For example, it's also possible to work at home one day a week but men just don't. But it's not even discussed. (man scientist).

I'd love to for my daughter, but professionally, to answer your question, I wouldn't do it [work 4 days].... I don't feel any pressure not to, but there's something... If my wife would consider doing it, that's great, but financially I don't think it's viable. ...... Another aspect is that I have responsibilities within the group so I think I require the five days. ...

You said financially you can't be on four fifth but your wife can ?

No we earn the same salary.

So she couldn't take the four fifth either ?

She could. One of us could.

But you don't want to.

-No I don't. (Man, scientist)

There is a recognition that this can change, but it is seen as for the future, not a current issue

Because of the culture. But it can change. Mentalities evolve. For example, my father was a really busy man and he couldn't spend a lot of time with me, and if I have children, I want to spend time with them and my family. Change will come with new generations (man scientist, manager)

In contrast there is a dominant discourse of choice among mothers themselves. All those who worked a four day week of consistently report that "*it is my choice*" to condense their work into four days and lose 20 percent of their salary. It is assumed by mothers and others that they freely choose to sacrifice pay to make time for family, which justifies the process.. However, choices are always socially constrained. People choose from what is available. Lewis and Guilliani (2005) argue that to have the capacity to make real choices women (and men) must have the capability to make alternative choices. Those interviewed do not have the capability to, for example, choose to compress their work into four days for full pay, to work four days with a reduced workload for reduced pay or to work five shorter days. Neither are there real choices for mothers and fathers to both work four days a week to share childcare. The choices women and men make are constrained by both the workplace context and the

wider ideological context in which women are viewed as more responsible for family than men. However, the assumptions that people make free choices obscures these contexts and justifies the gendered processes whereby women earn less and may be marginalised.

The intended consequences of these assumptions are therefore that mothers adopt different working time patterns than fathers, which is assumed to be an unconstrained choice. However this also has unintended consequences for the Dual Agenda in the context of other prevailing organisational assumptions, as discussed in the next section.

Working Hours, Visibility and Availability

The impact of the four day week on gender equity is also undermined by assumptions about working hours, availability and visibility. Despite a discourse of gender neutral flexibility at ScienceCo,flexibility and the four day week co-exist with assumptions that most valued (ideal) workers are are available and visible at the workplace for long hours of "face time" (Bailyn, 2006). One woman responding to the question "what you would have to do to be more valued", reflected:

> *Maybe being visible later (to be valued). Or rather being available later. Because most of the time, if you want to see big bosses, if you want to have meetings with them, I don't know why but it's always during the evening. : So you have to be available and the hours must not be a problem. (woman scientist)*

The flexible working policies are not backed up by a valuing of employees' time. Hence many long meetings are held often in the evening or on Wednesdays when those working four days are not present. The higher the level of the job, the longer hours of work involved and the greater the expectation that meetings can be attended at difficult times. Meetings are widely viewed as overlong and largely inefficient, but because of the ideal workers assumptions there is little motivation to change the timing or make them more efficient. The socially constructed ideal workers will make time to attend them. Thus women (or men with family care needs) are disadvantaged and ineffective working practices are sustained, undermining both aspects of the Dual Agenda (Rapoport et al, 2002).

A disproportionate amount of importance is thus given to the traditionally male characteristics of availability and visibility within the organisation, as in other apparently gender neutral organisations that are gendered in practice (Holt and Lewis, forthcoming). Furthermore, visibility itself is gendered. Hours are flexible and many more women come to work early in the morning and then leave to collect children from school, while more men arrive later but work later in the evening. Those who are seen to be available in the evening rather than in the morning are much more highly regarded at ScienceCo as elsewhere (Lewis, 2007).

Development and Advancement

The importance of visibility also has implications for career development and advancement. Promotions criteria at ScienceCo are not always clear or unambiguous, especially for higher level positions, but visibility seems to play a significant role. This lack of clarity suggests an assumption the right people will be visible and put themselves forward for consideration - or will be noticed and encouraged to apply by their managers. Again this may disadvantage

women, largely because so many are working flexibly and may be less visible. Moreover, we found that more of the men than the women interviewed understand the "rules of the game" based on visibility. A male scientist explained that his manager had specifically told him what he needed to do to ensure promotion:

> *To get promoted, I think you have to meet the other people and to talk with them, about opportunities. I met about 30 people, just to see what the different job opportunities were and talk about it to the Human Resources. (man scientist)*

Many of the women with whom we spoke appear reluctant to push to be noticed, even if they know that these are the rules of the game, and therefore are disadvantaged by these informal rules.

> *Last year my group (achieved something special), so they congratulate us, told us we did good job but nothing more! I didn't get a bonus, nothing. I was surprised; I had worked a lot..... I've never asked (for a bonus for myself). I think that if I work well I don't need to ask, it's normal to get something. For me, no (I wouldn't ask for recognition). But my husband would. I think it's different; it's easier if you're a man. (woman scientist)*

The assumption that those who are most visible are also the most competent is an example of the conflation of competence with hegemonic masculinity (Bailyn, 2006). Certain interpersonal skills and behaviours such as networking, visibility and self promotion are more rewarded than others, such as the less visible communication and support work traditionally associated with feminine ways of working.

Not all the women or men interviewed wish to progress in terms of a traditional male career trajectory, but all desired opportunities to developed and grow and have new challenges. However women, especially those working a four day week are sometimes pigeon holed as specialists, but not assumed to need developmental opportunities, as this highly qualified scientist discussed:

> *Human resources consider that you're a specialist in your area and that it would be difficult for you to work on a different field. This is what they call the added value. If you change your job you have to start learning new things. In my opinion it's not impossible, it just requires the people and the company to accept that you sometimes need to learn. (woman scientist)*

This pigeon holing is an example of what, in Danish research, has been termed "Gliding segregation" (Holt and Lewis, forthcoming). This refers to the process whereby women and men at the same workplace, with the same levels of education, often end up doing different work tasks, with different opportunities for development and promotion because of assumptions abut men, women and ideal workers. Holt and Lewis draw on case studies of two Danish Organisations to show how structural and cultural expectations place women in predictable and routine work, and men in more developmental work. In one workplace with highly educated workers, interesting and developmental tasks are given to those (men) who are constantly visible and available. There is a discourse of gender neutral family friendliness, but flexibility is mostly taken up by mothers, thereby reducing their visibility and reducing their opportunities to be allocated such tasks. In the second workplace, lower educated men and women in a laboratory are allocated tasks on the basis of gender stereotypes. Here

assumptions about what women and men like and are able to do come into play; women preparing specimens for examination and men looking after the machines to carry out the examinations . This sustains different roles for male and female technicians. Although both sets of tasks are crucial, a higher value is attributed to the "male" task of working with expensive machinery, and this is the work that leads to promotion.

Un/Intended consequences of these working practices and underlying assumptions

These working practices and assumptions impact on gender equity. Women tend to earn less because they buy flexibility. Some women working four days a week have been promoted, up to a certain stage. Probing more deeply however, it is clear that by definition a working practice that limits "face time" also limits promotional and developmental opportunities. This also has negative consequences for the organisation. The four day week arrangement aids retention of women scientists but not necessarily development. The greater efficiency of mothers who condense their work into four days for lower pay tends to be obscured by assumptions that they are less committed to work because they are not as visible in the workplaces. One consequence of the culture of long hours, visibility and apparent constant availability for example to attend meetings at family unfriendly times associated especially with senior roles, is that many women limit their aspirations for promotion. Another consequence is that although there is considerable consensus that meeting are often inefficient, there is very little will to address the problem. Being available and visible and associated networking and self promotions skills thus becomes synonymous with competence or having the right qualities for promotion. As a consequence, women's skills within the organisation may not be recognised or optimally developed and the organisation loses out on that pool of talent. These practices reinforce the separate spheres ideology within the organisation because women have limited role models in senior posts and men have no role models of senior men involved in fathering. This, in turn, also reproduces gendered domestic roles and perpetuates women's disadvantage.

Thus merely recruiting more women into these scientific posts is not enough to ensure that they are equally valued. Neither is it sufficient to offer reduced working hours to mothers, without challenging deep seated and gendered assumptions about ideal workers. This enables mothers to sustain work and parenting, but is unlikely to reverse women's under representation at higher levels of the company. Moreover offering the four day week, in principle to fathers too is unlikely to be successful if there is a financial penalty, so the situation sustains the gender gap.

Discussion and Conclusion

We have examined gendered assumptions underpinning workplace practices in a case study organisation within the SET sector in France. Women are usually greatly under-represented in this sector but this organisation is more successful than most in developing policies and flexible practices and recruiting and retaining women scientists, although not necessarily in fully developing their human capital. This paper builds on and extends other studies that highlight a gap between policy and practice (Holt and Lewis, forthcoming) and highlights to gap between the discourse of supporting women and the reality of cultural and structural barriers. It demonstrates that even in an apparently flexible and supportive workplace it is important to interrogate the underlying assumptions underpinning work practices and their

intended and unintended consequences. Furthermore, the findings show that men and women adopt different discourses and practices, which is reflected for example in the acceptance among women of a loss of earnings while men rarely even considerate it.

While ScienceCo is a leader in addressing some aspects of gender inequality compared with many others, in France but also globally, the study also unearthed some difficult issues. In particular there are questions of organisational justice surrounding the four day week, insofar as it involves significant reduction in pay with no significant reduction in workload, as well as compromising promotion prospects. Ideal worker assumptions obscure this potential injustice and also contribute to mothers' own low sense of entitlement to be rewarded for their work outputs rather than their input of time (Lewis and Smithson, 2001). As a result, this practice is viewed rather positively by most, particularly women. The gap between the company discourse of gender equality and the reality of gendered assumptions undermining the impact of the four day week, appears less clear if women regard their options as unconstrained choices.

Within ScienceCo, the positive aspect of the four day week (high retention rates and women are happy with it) is voiced but the negative one is not. This creates a dilemma. If women are satisfied with this arrangement, then why change it? This view is the one adopted by the organisation. Another view might be the women display false consciousness in the Marxist sense, that is, that they hold false beliefs that are contrary to their social interests and contribute to their disadvantaged position (Jost, 1995). This however would be patronising - for many women this is an ideal solution within the options available and the powerful competing ideologies of motherhood and ideal workers. This working practice ameliorates the daily life of, predominantly, mothers - but also that of their families. The solution is not for women to work like men, but for those women or men who diverge from the norm of working patterns that conflict with family needs, while sustaining full workloads, to be valued. In addition assumptions that more senior roles always require long working hours need to be questioned and alternative, efficient ways of working be sought. These solutions would involve a challenging of deeply embedded gendered assumptions and the recognition that these assumptions not only undermine gender equity but can also undermine organisational effectiveness in the long term. . Valuing employees for the work they do and not for when they do it may appear to have short term costs while there are those who are content to buy flexibility, particularly in a difficult economic climate. However, rewarding and promoting the most efficient workers is likely to be cost effective in the long term. A move beyond current policy and practice will require sensitivity to taken for granted gendered assumptions further experimentation and some bold moves, but this must be the nature of the next stage of organisational processes to enhance gender equity while enhancing or at least sustaining workplace effectiveness.

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