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Female Career Progression & Maternity Leave: An Irish Exploration

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Abstract

The persistent existence of the 'gender pay gap' in organisations, and the lack of females at executive level position in Ireland due to motherhood is the context for this paper. In particular, this study seeks to investigate why women's careers are impacted by childbearing. The study investigates if there is a correlation between taking maternity leave, and women's career progression in the work place. The increasing length of maternity leave benefits and flexible work arrangements results in elongated absence of females from the workplace. This leads to stereotypical role emergence by both men and women. Women take on the main responsibilities of home and child rearing, while men maintain and expand their careers. As a result, a marked absence of women exists at senior executives levels in organisations both in Ireland and internationally. Many studies have drawn attention to the challenges faced by women in reaching executive level positions in organisations. There is, however, very limited empirical research conducted with females, their co-workers, and managers, on the behaviour of women returning to the work place post maternity leave. In particular, there is a lack of research on the issues faced by individuals in Irish organisations.

A significant finding of this study is that women's careers are impacted by having children, but,

more significantly, by their prevailing roles as primary care givers to their families and home responsibilities. Enhancing the relevance of this study, key trends that emerged suggest that women's motivation concerning their current work remains constant, and they become more productive when they return to the workplace after maternity leave. This research found however, that the majority of women, post maternity leave, consciously decide to reduce their career ambitions and progressions, as family now becomes their highest priority. The primary findings of this study will contribute to the limited research in an Irish context of female career progression, and Irish maternity leave. Significantly, the study will contribute to the body of literature on gender 'pay gap', and gender equality, in the workplace and society. This study will be of particular relevance to managers and HR policy makers.

Keywords: Female workers, career progression, HR policy, maternity leave, glass ceiling, absenteeism, work behavior & ethics

1. Introduction

This research study is an assessment of female career progression in Ireland and Irish maternity leave. The study investigates if there is a correlation between taking maternity leave, and the ability of women to progress. According to IBEC (2010), women in Ireland make up 57.8% of the workforce and hold positions at all levels of organisations. Despite their increased participation rate in the workforce, women are still underrepresented in top management positions. The CSO (2009a), indicate that the average age of women having children in Ireland is 31 years. IBEC (2010), further indicate that at this stage in life, many women either are parents or are about to become parents. Likewise, many male employees are also working parents at this stage in their lives however; the presence of children has tended to have less of an influence on men's careers as it does on women's. Russell & Banks (2011), suggest that in Ireland, the pattern that has emerged shows that the greatest drop in employment occurs after a women's first child, followed by a further dramatic drop when a woman has a third child. Reasons for this drop include women's traditional roles as primary care givers to their children and the lack of affordable childcare for many working parents. Legislative policy has trended towards the provision of longer maternity leave and the availability of parental leave for both parents. As outlined by Focus Consultancy (2008), the fact that parental leave is unpaid, results in the gendered pattern of parental childcare provision remaining largely unchanged. Women continue to be the predominant care givers and the policy system reinforces the father's lack of involvement in the rearing of children. This results in a pattern of women reducing their involvement in the workforce which decreases their earnings, while conversely men increase their involvement as they work harder to make up for the shortfall in dual income households. Men are therefore more likely to be promoted and achieve higher earnings. This leads to the 'gender pay gap' experienced in the workforce.

Figure 1 illustrates the current situation of male and female career progression in Ireland. Specifically, it shows male and female career progression on an equal footing until the arrival of a child. At which point the woman's career level takes a downward trajectory while the male's career continues to trend upwards in the direction of executive level. While after some time, the trend for women's careers begins to grow, it levels off at middle management. In contrast, the uninterrupted career pattern of males enables them to reach the executive career level and thus reinforces the

‘gender pay gap’ experienced in the workplace and lack of senior females at executive level.

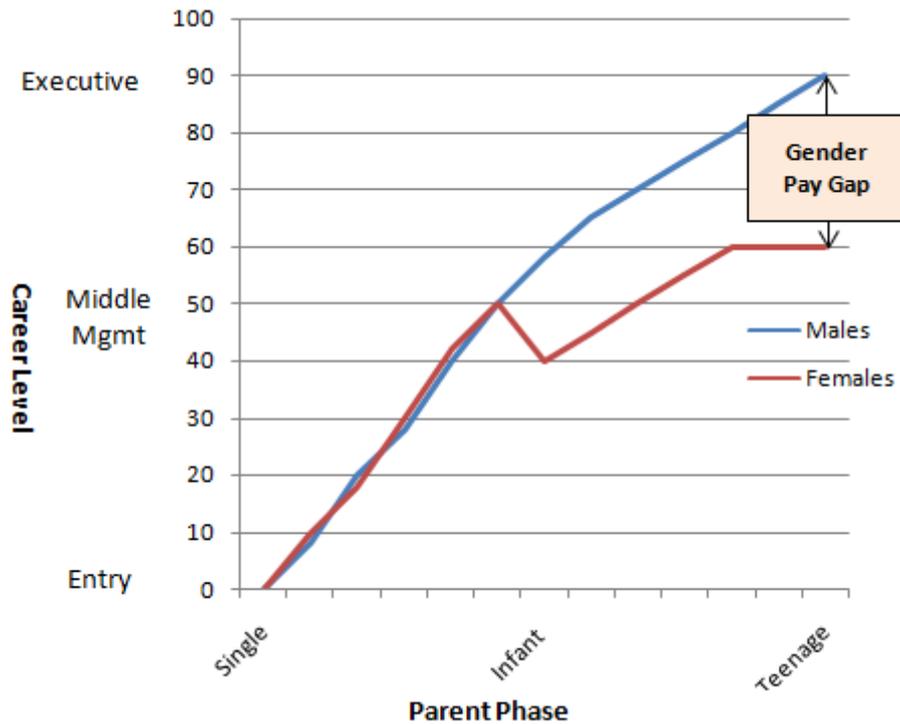


Figure 1. Women and Men’s Career Progression and the Impact of Childbearing

(Developed for study as rationale for exploration)

1.1 Narrowing the Gender Pay Gap

Russell & Banks (2011), suggest that the way in which women are reintegrated into the workforce after career interruption due to childcare is crucial for gender equality in the labour market. Therefore, alternatives to traditional roles which result in women becoming carers and men the breadwinners need to be altered by legislation to reduce gender discrepancies in the workplace. Legislative family policies play a significant role in the shaping of cultures. Therefore to reduce gender stereotypes in the workplace, social benefits provided by the state need to compliment the gender equality balance. Ideally, mandatory paid paternity leave should be implemented to reduce the child care responsibilities on mothers and expedite their return to the workforce after having children. Likewise, incentives for taking parental leave should also encourage both parents to spend time with their children rather than current trends which show women are more likely to take leave than men.

2. Methodology

The nature of the topic chosen for this research study of female career progression and maternity leave in Ireland fit appropriately with a phenomenological approach to conducting the research through semi-structured face to face interviews. The results of the interviews produced qualitative data. Ten individuals with knowledge of maternity leave rights in Ireland were selected for interview for the study. A snowball sampling method was applied to identify sample candidates for

interview. The data collected was rich and subjective. For the purpose of this study, the research was conducted initially with a review of secondary data and thereafter by collecting primary data specifically for the research project undertaken. Having carried out the literature review the researcher identified a gap in existing research which helped formulate the research question. From this, the researcher developed an interview guide to gather qualitative primary data from a target group by conducting individual semi-structured interviews. The researcher selected a representative sample of individuals that had experience on the topic of female career progression and Irish maternity leave. The central question to this current study is on female career progression and Irish maternity leave. There has been significant interest in the question of maternity leave and female career progression by many researchers including Russell & Banks (2011), Brizendine (2008), Calvert *et al.*, (2009), Cross & Linehan (2008). The concept of the self imposed glass ceiling presented by Cross (2007), suggest that both individual (career, phase and family life-cycle stages) and organisational factors (culture, stereotypes work life balance, networking) lead women to create a self-imposed glass ceiling on their career aspirations. This current study seeks to understand many of these factors particularly, the length of maternity leave and also legislative initiatives which impact female career progression.

3. Literature

3.1 Introduction

Women made up 56.4% of the Irish paid workforce in 2010, (CSO, 2011). Historically, the OECD states that “despite the sometimes strong employment gains of women in recent decades, a substantial employment gap remains in many OECD countries,” (2002: 1). More recently the OECD (2010a), suggest that despite numerous improvements in women’s employment outcomes, there are still many gender gaps that need to be addressed. On average across OECD countries, the proportion of women in paid work is high (62%), however, women earn 18% less than men. Approximately, one-third of managerial posts are held by women. More women work in part-time jobs than men (25% and 6% respectively). These gender differences are even wider with the presence of children, since women are more likely than men to adjust their employment practices, upon the arrival of a child. Previously, McGuinness *et al.*, (2003) suggest that “the existence of a large and pervasive pay gap would suggest that females may be penalised as a consequence of undertaking family responsibilities, and it may also be indicative of insufficient levels of support surrounding the need to achieve a work life balance,” (2003: ix). Ramb (2008), found that overall; the employment gap between the number of men and women in employment was decreasing in the European Union twenty seven member states (EU-27). Compared with 2000, the 2007 gender gap was noticeably narrower in the age group 25-54. Ramb, further outlines that the cause for the gap reduction is a result of the general economic conditions and a variety of measures stimulating female employment specifically, better childcare facilities and more possibilities for flexible working time arrangements.

3.2 Participation Rates of Women in the Workforce

According to Dublin (1946), women have always worked but it was not until the 1800’s that they entered employment outside the home. Until then, it was entirely unpaid labour. Hamilton (1941) posits that “in the period from the 1920s to the 1970s, women were persistently represented as

marginal to the workforce. Repeated government reports and policy documents, as well as more popular writing, declared that ‘women’s work’ did not demand skill or strength, it required the exercise of ‘feminine’ characteristics such as dexterity or maternal qualities, and it was located in woman-employing niches in industries, services or professions. The explanation of the association between women and such work lay in what were usually referred to as ‘natural and conventional’ factors. These were the temporary place of paid work in a woman’s life cycle, and its unimportance to a woman relative to domestic concerns, because of her prior orientation to marriage and motherhood, which biologically, socially and morally dominated her life. Married women who worked were depicted as engaged in irksome toil. They were doing double employment, paid and unpaid: running a home in the hours left over from factory or domestic or casual employment,” (1941: 12). According to (Honey, 1984; Summerfield, 1989), demands to increase the labour force during World War II changed the role of women in America, where women filled jobs previously held by men.

According to Hirsh & Jackson (1989), the major rise in the level of economic activity among women throughout the seventies and eighties was impacted by the changing role of women in society, specifically influenced by the Women’s Movement, the increase of service industries and part-time employment, the changing nature of the family, and women marrying later, having fewer children and living longer. Dunlop (2009), suggests that the strengthening economic independence of women across the rich world is one of the most significant revolutions between 1960 and 2010. Dunlop further states it is noteworthy because of the extent of the change: millions of people who were once dependent on men have taken control of their own economic destiny. The EU target rate for women in employment by 2010 was 60%. This target was met by Ireland in 2007 and 2008, but not in 2009 or 2010, when the rate had fallen to 56.4% (CSO, 2010).

DeLauro (2010) observes that “two-thirds of women in America in 2010 are either the sole breadwinner, or co-breadwinners in their families. Women are also more likely than men to graduate from college. They run more than 10 million businesses with combined annual sales of \$1.1 trillion and are responsible for making 80 percent of consumer buying decisions,” (2010:2). Research by Ibarra & Morten (2010) reveals that in 2,000 of the world’s top performing companies only 29 women (1.5%) hold CEO positions. The global list of Fortune 500 companies is slightly higher where women make up 2.6% of CEO positions. According to The Economist, “the number of female bosses of large firms remains stubbornly small,” (2011: 61). O’Doherty (2011) outlines while Ireland has had equality legislation, an economic boom with unprecedented employment and two women Presidents both of whom were mothers, still the country has a strong attachment to the traditional role of woman as full-time home-maker.

3.3 Barriers to Career Advancement for Women

One of the most important events in a woman’s life course that impacts her continuation in the labour force is having children, due mainly to the conflict between childbearing and female employment, as well as to the costs (both direct cost and opportunity cost) that come about from interruptions of labour supply in conjunction with childbearing (Willis, 1974; Easterlin, 1980; Brewster & Rindfuss, 2000). The OECD outline that “women still have not attained equality with men and that their productivity potential is not used at its best: unemployment rates are higher for

women than for men in most OECD countries; there is continuing gender differentiation in job opportunities, pay and working-time arrangements; and a continuation of the belief that care work is mainly the responsibility of women, wherever it is performed,” (2003: 3).

3.3.1 Gender Pay Gap

Ray (2008) states that “traditional gender roles that involve women as caregivers and men as providers, and the typically lower earnings of mothers (relative to fathers) in the labour market, create strong incentives for women to reduce their employment and take on a large majority of child care responsibilities. The most obvious problems associated with such outcomes are that women bear a disproportionate burden of child care responsibilities and pay both a short and a long-term penalty in the labour market. A related issue is that traditional gender roles and labour-market outcomes work together to deprive men of the opportunity to participate actively in providing infant and child care,” (2008: 3).

As outlined by Munoz–Bullon (2010), the pay gap between males and females in the USA has narrowed as the participation of women in the labour market has increased. In 1970, for example, 43% of women were in paid labour; by 2004, that number had increased to 59%. Similarly, the percentage of women in higher-paying jobs also increased—the proportion of women in management positions climbed from 24% in 1980 to 42% in 2006. However, despite the increased participation rate of females in the workforce and particularly among top management, gender differences in salary still prevail. Kulich *et al.*, (2010), suggest that, having children tends to result in higher wages for men. Women, however that are mothers earn less than women who do not have children. Employers’ perception of women’s competence drops when they have children.

3.3.2 Removal of the Marriage Bar

Clancy *et al.*, (1995), outline that in the 1930’s, the marriage bar in Ireland was rolled out in teaching and the public service and was widely in force in a less formal way in private sector white collar employment, such as banking. Pyle (1990), posits that the marriage bar meant that women working in clerical jobs in service industries, banks, local authorities and semi-state bodies were required to resign from their employment when they got married. In 1977 the Employment Equality Act made it unlawful to discriminate on the grounds of marital status or gender in the recruitment for employment. As outlined by Trauth (2000), although the marriage bar no longer existed after 1977, the underlying rationale remained. The culture of the time meant that if jobs were scarce, they should be rationed and shared. As a result, there was a negative attitude toward married women working.

3.3.3 Hurdles to Promotion

Davidson & Cooper (1992) found that promotion was not an issue for the small number of women that have made it all the way to executive positions in the companies in which they work. However, the vast majority of women find it very difficult to advance their careers and achieve executive level positions. They face challenges at all levels as well as difficulties in the relationship between their job and home. Specifically, they contend that many promotional advances in industry require national and sometimes international relocation. Cooper *et al.*, (1988), outline that frequent relocation puts dramatic pressure on executives and their families. While financially beneficial the

effect on the family in terms of social and psychological issues can be difficult to deal with. Frequently, managers will relocate on average every two to three years until the age of 50. This may not be much of a problem for single women, but for married female managers, and particularly those with children, it is extremely difficult. Brizendine (2008) suggests that opportunities for promotion to senior executive typically come available when professionals are in their forties. Brizendine states that “at that phase of life, women with children already have a lot on their plates. Not only are they usually expected to handle the lion’s share of responsibility on the home front (even when both members of a couple hold fulltime jobs), but their own brain chemistry makes it hard for them to do otherwise. For reasons important to the survival of the species, women in childbearing years undergo changes that intensify their focus on the viability of offspring. It’s a passing phenomenon, but ill-timed for those with career ambitions,” (2008:1).

3.3.4 Maternity Leave

According to the National Childcare Strategy (2010), during the years 2006-2007 significant increases were made in paid and unpaid maternity leave in Ireland due to recognition from the Government of the importance of the first year of a child’s life and the cost impact and pressures experienced by parents caring for their new born children. Paid maternity leave increased to 26 weeks and unpaid maternity leave increased to 16 weeks. (See the following table).

Table 1. Irish Maternity Leave Entitlements Pre 2006-2007

| | Pre-March 2006 | March 2006 | March 2007 |
|------------------------|----------------|------------|------------|
| Paid Maternity Leave | 18 weeks | 22 weeks | 26 weeks |
| Unpaid Maternity Leave | 8 weeks | 12 weeks | 16 weeks |

(Adapted for this study from National Childcare Strategy 2006-2010)

As outlined the ILO, “protecting maternity has been among the first concerns of the ILO. It was during the first International Labour Conference (ILC) in 1919 that the first Convention on maternity protection (Convention No. 3) was adopted. This Convention was followed by two others: Convention No. 103 in 1952 and Convention No.183 in 2000, which progressively expanded the scope and entitlements of maternity protection at work. The core concerns have been to ensure that women’s work does not pose risks to the health of the woman and her child and to ensure that women’s reproductive roles do not compromise their economic and employment security,” (2010: v).

Almost all OECD countries have public income support payments that are tied to taking maternity leave. In some countries (Australia, Germany, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden), there is no separate regulation for maternity leave with stipulations integrated into the parental leave scheme,” (2011a: 1). According to Schweitzer (2007), the United States does not provide, or mandate employers to provide paid maternity leave. This places the United States behind the majority of the world for instituting family-orientated job policies. As outlined by Byrne *et al.*, (2005), “the Maternity Protection Act, 1994 is the main legislation on maternity leave in Ireland. It operates in conjunction with the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work (Pregnant Employees) Regulations, 1994 which govern safety, health and welfare protections and the European Communities (Social Welfare) Regulations, 1994 which cover paid entitlements, safety and health and maternity leave. These

regulations and the 1994 Act were enacted by the government to implement Directive 92/85/EEC (the Pregnant Workers' Directive) on the introduction of measures to encourage improvements in the safety and health at work of workers who have recently given birth or are breastfeeding," (2005: 225). According to the Citizens Information Bureau (2011a), Maternity Leave in Ireland consists of 26 weeks of paid leave with the option to take a further 16 weeks of unpaid leave. At minimum, two weeks need to be taken before the birth of the child up to a maximum of 16 weeks before the birth.

The ILO outline that "there has been a gradual global shift towards longer maternity leave periods. The proportion of countries providing less than 12 weeks of leave has decreased from 19 to 14 per cent from 1994 to 2009. Indeed, more countries are now providing longer leaves, as the percentage of countries providing 14 to 17 weeks of leave has increased from 29 to 35 per cent, and the proportion providing at least 18 weeks of leave has increased from 9 to 13 per cent," (2010: 10). "The two regions with the greatest number of countries that increased the length of maternity leave between 1994 and 2009 were the Developed Economies and EU region and the Middle East region. Among the Developed Economies and EU countries, 12 countries have increased the length of leave. For example, Poland increased it from 16 to 20 weeks, Portugal from 90 days to 120 days and Ireland increased it from 14 weeks to 26 weeks," (ILO 2010: 12).

3.4 Payment during Maternity Leave in Ireland

As outlined by the Citizens Information Bureau (2011b), female workers in Ireland are entitled to superannuation and pay during the period of maternity leave. The payment amounts depend on the terms set out in employment contracts with employers. Women may be entitled to Maternity Benefit which is a payment from the Department of Social Protection. Payments however, are dependent on the person having sufficient social insurance contributions. Maternity benefits are paid at a rate of 80% of the mother's usual pre-tax wages (or net earnings, in the case of self-employed women). The payments themselves are not taxed, and must be between €217.80 and €262.00 per week. Depending on employer policies, an employee's contract could provide for additional rights to payment during the leave period, so that, for example, the employee could receive full pay from their employers less the amount of Maternity Benefit payable.

3.4.1 Paternity Leave

According to the OECD, "paternity Leave is employment-protected leave of absence for employed fathers at the time of childbirth. Paternity leave is not stipulated by international convention. Periods of paternity leave are much shorter than for maternity leave. Because of the short period of absence, workers on paternity leave often continue to receive full wage payments. In some countries, father specific leave entitlement is part of the parental leave scheme, rather than established as a separate right," (2011a: 1). According to the Equality Authority (2011), currently in Ireland there is no legal entitlement to paternity leave, rather it is provided to fathers of new born children only at the employer's discretion. Focus Consultancy (2008), concur that paternity leave in Ireland is not recognised by law. No paid or unpaid system exists and it is at the employer's discretion to award leave typically three or four days in length at the time of the birth of the child. The ILO outline that "paternity leave is seen as an important reconciliation of work and family life for men, as well as assistance to women. Paternity leave is a short period of leave taken by a father

around the time of the birth of his child. Paternity leave provisions are becoming more common around the world, reflecting evolving views of fatherhood and parenting roles and the needs of men as well as women for reconciling work and family life. This shift in relationships and perceptions may herald more gender-balanced approaches to care giving and unpaid work,” (2008: 4). As found by Heyman *et al.*, (2007), having conducted an analysis of 173 countries from the Project on Global Working Families team they found that fathers have a paid entitlement to paternity leave or paid parental leave in 66 nations around the globe. “Legal entitlements for paternity leave or father’s specific quota of parental leave exist in just over half of OECD countries. It is considerably shorter than maternity leave, at two weeks or less in most countries,” (OECD 2010b:22).

According to Arnarsona & Mitrab (2010), in Iceland for example, the Maternity/Paternity and Parental Leave Act of 2000 brought about significant alterations to previous legislation. The leave was extended from 6 to 9 months, and working parents received 80% of their average salaries during the maternity/paternity leave. It allowed parents to distribute the leave time between them. It specified that mothers could take 3 months leave, fathers could take 3 months’ leave and the remaining 3 months could be shared by both parents the split would be determined by the parents. In contrast, Nepomnyaschy & Waldfogel (2007), found that the US does not have a national paternity leave policy for fathers taking leave after the birth or adoption of a child. Despite there not being a national policy entitling fathers to take paternity leave what typically occurs is that fathers take a week of leave from work at the time of the birth. As outlined by Nicolas (2011), in the UK significant changes were enacted in April 2011, enabling parents to share maternity/paternity time between them during the first year after the birth or adoption of a child. This gives fathers the right to take up to 26 weeks’ leave (this is in addition to the existing two weeks standard paternity leave).

3.4.2 Parental Leave

As outlined by the Citizens Information Bureau (2011c), both mothers and fathers have an equal separate entitlement to parental leave. Parental leave in Ireland entitles parents to take 14 weeks per child until the child reaches the age of eight. In the case of adoption, if a child was between the age of 6 and 8 when adopted, leave can be taken up to 2 years after the date of the adoption. Where children have disabilities, leave may be taken up to when the child reaches 16 years of age. Where employees have more than one child, leave is limited to 14 weeks in any 12 month period of time. This restriction is not applicable in the case of a multiple birth, such as twins or triplets. The OECD state that “in Ireland, fathers can enjoy up to 14 weeks of parental leave, but they receive no financial support during this period,” (2010b: 22). Ray *et al.*, (2009) suggest that Parental Leave laws provide support to parents in two ways, first, by providing job-protected leave and second, by providing financial support during parental leave. EGISSE (2005) contend that “there is evidence that countries with paid parental leave. . . have higher participation rates”. Haas & Hwang (2008), note that in Sweden for example, paid parental leave set out by the government has been available to both parents since 1974. The policy was designed to encourage gender equality with both parents given equal responsibilities and opportunities to partake in care and economic contributions to their families. Ray *et al.*, indicate that “France and Spain allow both parents to stay at home – and return to their prior job or a comparable one – until their child’s third birthday”

(2009: 6).

3.5 The More Children, the Lower the Employment Rate for Women

According to the Eurostat (2011), employment rate for women aged 25 to 54 decreases as the number of children increases, while for men in this age group the pattern is almost the reverse. In the EU27 in 2009, the employment rate for women aged 25 to 54 that did not have children was 75.8%, meanwhile the rate for those women with one child was 71.3%, compared with 69.2% for those with two children and 54.7% for those with three children or more. For men in this age group without children, the employment rate was 80.3%, while it was 87.4% for those with one child, 90.6% for those with two children and 85.4% for those with three children or more. In Ireland, for women without children, the employment rate was 77.7%, decreasing to 67.2% with one child, 61.5% with two children, plummeting to 49.6% for women with three or more children. Employment rates for men in Ireland without children was 73.6% increasing to 77.7% with one child, 82.4% with two children and regressing to 80.4% with three or more children. The pattern emerging at EU level is that the employment rates for women decreases as the number of children increases. This is confirmed in the vast majority of the twenty seven Member States. The OECD found that “labour market participation of mothers with three or more children is significantly lower than mothers with one or two dependent children in many countries,” (2010c:1). Maternal Employment Rates for Women with three children in Ireland is just over 40%, with two children it is close to 60%, while mothers with one child experience approximately 70% employment rates.

3.5.1 Childcare Cost

Tong *et al.*, (2009) suggest that due to the increase of women returning to work after having children there has been a concomitant increase in the demand for non-parental childcare facilities to help look after the child while the mother is working. This increase in non-parental care has led to a dramatic change in the traditional child-rearing methods. OECD (2004), suggest that in comparison to the most countries, childcare provision for preschool children in Ireland is not co-ordinated, inconsistent in quality and in short supply. A report by EGISSE (2005), found that in Ireland, very little public funding is provided for childcare. As a result, costs for childcare are twice the EU average rate. Specifically, the high costs are a particular issue for disadvantaged or single-parent families and higher income families with more than one child. National Children’s Nurseries Association (2008), suggest that childcare is an enormous expense for parents. Those with two or more children frequently pay higher amounts monthly on childcare than on household mortgage expenditure. Due to the high cost many families decide that one parent should stop working to care for the children as continuing to work does not make economical sense. Specifically, the Association recommends that “the introduction of supports for working parents must be a critical element of any government strategy in the future in order to ease the burden on these already overstretched families

4. Discussion

4.1 Time Spent at Work after Returning from Maternity Leave

Respondents in the study reveal that the majority of mothers returning to their jobs after maternity leave reduce the amount of time spent in the office, in comparison to the hours they used to spend

at the office, before having children. Specifically, respondents mention the need to pick up their children from day care, absenteeism due to sick children and separation anxiety experienced on behalf of both the child and the mother. What may be extrapolated from these responses is that women in the majority of cases become the primary care giver in the home. “For the most part, when they come back to work they are on a strict timeline to leave on time to pick up kids. So, they were less inclined to stay late in the office or take on extra work”. There were two exceptions mentioned by participants regarding senior level female executives who returned to the office shortly after having their children. These individuals continued to spend the same amount of time in the office as they had before going on maternity leave. These examples tie into the concept that senior level executives earn high amounts of compensation and therefore can afford increased childcare support (in home nannies versus childcare). This in turn, enables them to maintain their previous work schedule.

4.2 Increased Demand for Flexible Work Arrangements after Maternity Leave

70% of respondents mentioned increased demand for reduced work week or flexible work arrangements. “Some people came back and most of them found it difficult to do a five day week. . . The most of them changed their work hours to suit their family situation for a while”. As couples have children, the need to balance competing demands of work and family life increases. Policies supporting family friendly practices include career breaks and flexi time with the guarantee of job security. The magnitude of the importance of flexible work arrangements is well articulated by the following interviewee when referring to flexible work arrangements: “without flexibility you are trying to juggle everything and not doing anything really well. What can happen is that women will give up work because priorities are elsewhere”.

4.3 Women’s Level of Dedication at Work after Maternity Leave

Participants’ feedback regarding women’s dedication showed that 80% agreed that there was no noticeable change in the level of women’s dedication when they return to work from maternity leave. What respondents did highlight however is that women are less inclined to take on responsibilities above and beyond their specific roles after maternity leave. This finding may also be attributable to work life conflict as home and childcare responsibilities increase when women have children. “Family comes first, work comes second. Work is not the centre of their life anymore”.

4.4 Women’s Productivity Levels Increase after Maternity Leave

Half the respondents to this study raised the point that in several cases, women’s productivity increases when they return from maternity leave. Points raised by respondents include women are more organised, productive, focused and efficient. “If they have to leave early or on time, they have to work a lot harder during the day. Several will work through lunch and they will do their role”. The point is further reinforced by another respondent: “When you have a deadline to pick up a child from a babysitter, you just don’t have the luxury to stay on later at the office like you would before having children. Work is done more efficiently. Dedication didn’t change but the social aspect did”.

4.5 Women's Career Progression after Maternity Leave

Half of the respondents interviewed acknowledged that the careers of women that returned from maternity leave were negatively altered. Impact on their careers was in some situations due to the length of the leave but overwhelmingly, due to a shift in responsibilities as the majority of women became the primary care givers to their children. The high cost of childcare was also highlighted as contributing factor impacting women's career progression. The high cost of childcare lead couples to decide that one parent (in most cases the mother), stops working as the costs and gender pay gap outweigh the income benefit of going out to work. "With the cost of childcare, higher tax and the costs associated with going out to work we would essentially be less well off at the end of every month. My husband has been promoted to Vice Principal so his earnings have increased. For our family to work, I have to be at home". This point is further supported by another respondent: "I think that (the cost of childcare), is the main reason people give up work, especially, if you have a couple of kids. It doesn't make financial sense". One respondent makes a notable recommendation regarding childcare costs: "either the government should contribute to it or provide a tax break".

4.6 Women's Motivation Levels towards Work after Maternity Leave

Motivation may be more closely linked to personality traits rather than a result of changes in a woman's work-life situation. The key points that emerged from respondents regarding women's motivation levels after returning from maternity leave showed that 80% agreed motivation levels do not change. However, women returning to work after maternity leave are less likely to take on more responsibilities in the workplace, as their priorities alter and care of their children becomes more important to them. "In general what personally motivates them doesn't change but. . . other priorities in life do and that is what their focus is. . . work isn't number one for them anymore,".

4.7 Impact of Maternity Leave on Business Productivity

The study found that maternity leave did impact business productivity in varying degrees. In situations where the jobs were filled by other individuals the impact was minimal whereas, when the jobs were not filled or shared out among remaining staff the impact was significant. Policies regarding maternity cover vary depending on the capabilities of firms to free up other employees or to hire replacement staff in the absence of the worker gone on maternity leave.

Unfortunately, there is a lack of existing literature on the topic of the financial impact of maternity leave on business and productivity. Respondents however, provided interesting feedback on their experiences in the workplace sharing firsthand knowledge of the impact on both the business and employees. This current research found that small companies do not have the capacity to hire temporary staff to backfill positions; therefore, productivity is negatively impacted. Both human and financial resources are spent on recruiting and training temporary staff to replace women that go on maternity leave. Some companies spread the workload to other employees, therefore increasing the burden of work for those remaining in the workplace. "Sometimes we would replace people if we need to. Another individual would be brought in on a fixed term contract to replace the individual on maternity leave. In cases where we do, the company has the added expense of another salary, added expense of training another person, and administration. If you don't get a person to replace the person gone on maternity leave you are spreading things among other

employees. That obviously has an impact on productivity also which can be difficult. It is a ‘lose, lose’ situation from the firms point of view”.

4.8 Length of Maternity Leave in Ireland

Maternity leave in Ireland increased from 18 to 26 weeks between 2006 and 2007 (National Childcare Strategy, 2010). In comparison to other OECD countries, Ireland has one of the highest lengths of maternity leave ranking fourth behind Greece, the UK and Bulgaria (OECD, 2011a). The majority of respondents in this current study outlined that the length of leave was difficult to manage from a business perspective, but was appropriate in length from the perspective of child development and work life balance. Respondents to this study who considered maternity leave entitlements too long, also suggest that the length of leave can be an impediment for women returning to work. For example, in highly regulated industries, it can be difficult for women to reengage after long absences due to maternity leave as so many changes will have occurred during their absence. “When they come back it is like having a new employee all over again bringing them back up to speed”. However, 60% of respondents to this study acknowledge the benefits of long maternity leave on the development of young children. They feel that it is important for parents to be able to spend a significant amount of time with a child in their first year.

4.9 Ideal Length of Maternity Leave

The core reasons behind maternity leave policies have been to protect the health of the woman and child, and to ensure that being a mother does not adversely affect their economic and employment security. When asked what the ideal length should be, respondents provided significantly different recommendations for the ideal length of maternity leave, varying from three months to two years leave. Interestingly, the respondent that recommended the least amount of time off for maternity leave did not have children. “Not having children, I think three months is enough time off”. While in contrast, a mother of two young children suggested two years leave would be appropriate. “I think a lot of mothers would like to be able to spend more time at home with their kids when they are younger and would love the option of a two year maternity leave”. Beyond the length of leave, respondents provided noteworthy suggestions regarding implementation of maternity leave and recommended a transition approach for return to work.

4.10 Phased or Transition Return to Work

Current maternity leave entitlements in Ireland, can result in women being absent from the workplace for up to a year when paid maternity, unpaid maternity and annual leave are exhausted. “Having people out for almost a year is very difficult to manage. Some individuals have specialised knowledge and their absence for such a length of time can have material impact on productivity. Being out for so long with no contact with the office is ridiculous. It may not suit all individuals, but if there was some type of system where women could after a certain time re-engage with the office again even if it was working from home after the fourth month for a day a week and build it up that way”. Several respondents in the study suggested that, significant benefits can be drawn from a phased reengagement with the workplace.

4.11 Impact of Maternity Leave on Women with High Potential in the Workplace

Discussions with respondents regarding the impact of maternity leave on high potential females in the workplace provided interesting findings. Several of the respondents outline that women (regardless of level), consciously take a step back from their careers upon returning to work after maternity leave. By doing so, women reduce their work hours and career ambitions. Husbands/partners have higher earnings than women, and therefore, it makes economical sense for wives to reduce their work-week to balance career and family responsibilities. This finding is in line with Bellamy & Rake's suggestions which outline that there is a vicious circle for women with caring responsibilities in the labour market. This leads to a gender pay gap due to women taking time out of the labour market to care for family. "My husband earns more than I do so, it made sense with the cost of child care for me to reduce my work week".

Due to organisational culture, different rules can apply in companies impacting high potential senior level employees as outlined by one respondent in this current study: "If a branch manager and another person (for example at my level of mortgage advisor) working the same hours and same weeks, both due baby at same time, the mortgage advisor would be expected to take paid and unpaid leave but it would be expected of the branch manager to come back not to take 16 weeks unpaid. It would never be said but that was the culture of the organisation". Another respondent in the study had experience of a colleague returning to work after maternity leave and her position being downgraded as the company could not accommodate flexible work arrangements she required to balance work and family responsibilities. "She is the one who needs to pick up and drop off her daughter which means she will not have the ability to attend after hours events. We (at the company), said we could not offer that level of flexibility outlining that her role is events and sponsorship and she needs to be at these events. . . .The other option we gave her was to come back at a more junior role with greater flexibility on a lower salary".

4.12 Paternity Leave

Although the arrival of a child can be life changing experience for parents, currently policy only provides time off for the mother of the new born. Paternity Leave in Ireland is currently at the discretion of the employer. On average, fathers are given approximately three days off at the time of the birth of their child. Where companies decide not to offer paternity leave, fathers typically take annual leave around the time of the birth. Subsequently, national legislation and company policies by default assign the primary care giving role to women.

Respondents to this current study outlined that paternity leave should be formalised to become part of national legislation. "The State needs to consider the role of fathers in the entire maternity leave process to make it more equitable," By doing so, firstly, fathers would be enabled to take on a more significant role in the rearing of their children. Secondly, early establishment of equal responsibilities would reduce the current reliance on women as primary care givers. "I think paternity leave should be a statutory entitlement just like maternity leave is. Currently, it is at the discretion of companies which means it is not always offered". Iceland has a very equitable approach for example, "the Icelandic system is that they get to take 9 months between the couple. 6 for the mother and 3 split between mother and father".

4.13 Parental Leave

All respondents agree that current Irish parental leave policy which entitles parents to 14 weeks of leave is adequate, and it provides good flexibility for working parents to spend additional time with their children. Unfortunately, in Ireland parental leave is unpaid. “I think parental leave is a great facility to have but is probably severely under-utilised in Ireland as it is unpaid, so people can’t afford to take it. The fact that the mechanism of how it is taken is left up to the organisation, can be restrictive in that if they insist it is taken in blocks, it makes it more difficult for people to afford as they can’t spread the cost”. The UK Fatherhood Institute (2011), suggest that several fathers do not take up flexible working arrangements as they fear it could damage their career. “As a father of three children I am entitled to parental leave but, I’m the main earner in our household, plus my job requires a lot of travel. I am a managing director in a global technology company; going on parental leave would not be well received by my management. They would be politically correct about it, but reality is that it would go down like a lead balloon and so would my career,” Along with national legislation supporting families through work life balance policies, organisations also need to embrace family friendly initiatives to ensure greater equality for both men and women.

5. Recommendations for Practice

1. Paternity rights for fathers should be standardised and part of legislation rather being left to the discretion of employers.
2. Employees should be paid during Parental Leave. This would encourage more couples to exercise their right to parental leave and would also encourage fathers (who typically earn more than women); to take the leave as the family income would not be impacted.
3. Maternity leave structure should be re-examined to explore transition return to work earlier in the maternity leave timescale to reduce the stress on child, mother and impact on companies who have an employee out for up to one year.
4. Ireland should consider adopting the Icelandic or the UK’s maternity/paternity leave systems which allows parents to split maternity leave between them. This would reduce the time for women being away from work while ensuring the child is still in the care of a parent. This approach would also reduce employers concerns regarding long absences by women due to maternity leave.
5. Communication levels between employers and employees should be increased during the period of maternity leave to enable both parties to openly plan return to work strategies.
6. Companies that do not pay maternity leave top up, are saving money when women go on maternity leave. During this time they are not paying salary while women are receiving maternity benefit from the Department of Social Protection. Ideally, these savings should go towards paying for replacement staff during the maternity leave period. This would reduce the work burden on co-workers and would also reduce the impact on the productivity of the companies.
7. Financial supports such as tax credits offered to UK residents should be offered by the Irish State to parents to reduce the burden of childcare costs. Currently in the UK tax payers may receive up to 70p for every £1.00 spent on childcare depending on income level maxing out at £300 for a parent or parents with two or more children in childcare.

5.1 Model for Practice – Transition Return to Work from Maternity Leave.

Based on the empirical findings of this current study, the following diagram illustrates the current maternity leave policy (blue line), whereby, mothers take maternity leave for up to eight months and have no interaction with work during that period of time. They then return to work full time. This situation results in a transitioning period after the woman returns to the office, as the child and mother become accustomed to new schedules and routines. Frequently, absenteeism occurs as the mother and child become accustomed to the new schedule. Flexible work arrangements are often sought by mothers returning to work to enable the adjustment to their new childcare responsibilities. The actual attendance is indicated on the green line showing a dip in attendance at the time the mother returns to the workplace, with a gradual upward trend to 100% attendance over the course of three months. Alternatively, a transition return to work is proposed, whereby the woman still receives the same maternity leave benefit in days but starts to re-engage with work after the third month of maternity leave. This may commence initially with phone calls, building up to one day a week and steadily increase to 100% work place participation.

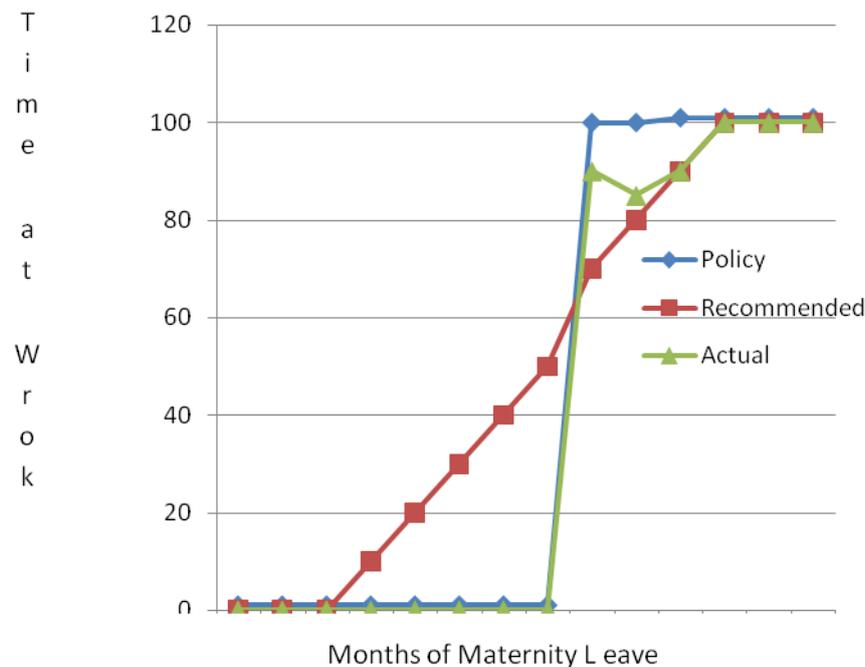


Figure 2. New Model for Transitioning Back to Work After Maternity Leave

Benefits of this method are outlined as follows:

- *Employer benefit:* regain the expertise of employees earlier in the maternity leave process.
- *Employee benefit:* reengage with the workplace and reduce the impact of maternity leave on their career due to elongated absence. Reduced stress due to phased return to work process.
- *Child benefit:* reduced stress due to phased transition to childcare facility. Although a transition approach may not be feasible for professions which require the worker to be

physically present to perform the job, this model would be suitable for several service related roles where work may be performed remotely from home by computer or phone.

6. Final Conclusions

Women's traditional roles as caregivers and homemakers infringe upon their ability to dedicate their efforts to their professions. Drivers of these obstacles include social norms, organisational culture and national legislation all which label women as caregivers and men as breadwinners. There is a growing trend across several jurisdictions to increase family friendly policies to enable dual income households to achieve work life balance. If policy does not compensate parents while on leave or stipulate mandatory leave for fathers, however, these family friendly policies further reinforce women's roles as primary caregivers and maintain the gender gap in organisations. Fortunately, some countries have recognised the need to achieve gender equality in the labour market and promote the sharing of care giving responsibilities between both parents. In particular, policies that mandate sharing of maternity leave between parents is a significant step towards achieving gender equality. For women to achieve their full potential, company and national policies need to recognise and support gender equality both in the office and also in the home. By doing so, it is possible to reduce the burden of care giving on women and enable them to reach senior levels in organisations.

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