

# **Problems of Backlash in the UK. Organizational Family Friendly Policies and Equal opportunities: A Contradiction in Terms?**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In the UK, particularly since 1997 and the election of the first New Labour government, there has been increased activity in developing EO legislation and consequently in the field of organizational EO policy-making, though there is also a level of scepticism as to what it is possible to achieve. A gap is recognised continuing to exist between 'principle, practice and interpretation' (Heward and Taylor, 1993: 76), and 'rhetoric and reality' (Burton and Weiner, 1993: 57). In fact, EO policies experience resistance and assessments of any change towards equality for women remain sceptical if not pessimistic.

It is important to analyse the effectiveness of EO policies, within their organizational context. Ball (1993) usefully problematised the concept of policy as a 'product of compromises at various stages' and identified organizations as sites of policy struggle, interpretation and reinterpretation where policies are 'decoded in complex ways via actors' interpretations and meanings in relation to their history, experiences, skills, resources and context' (11). Thus the implementation of policies rely on things like 'commitment, understanding, capability, resources' (12) and ultimately power to effect change.

Ball (1993) also argued that 'different interpretations of policies ... spread confusion and allow for play in the playing-off of meanings. Gaps and spaces for action and response are opened up as a result'. Ball called this the 'underlife' of policies. Therefore, using this useful concept of a policy 'underlife', a case study was undertaken by the author in a large public sector organization with relatively well-established EO policies.

## **THE STUDY**

### **The Organization's EO Provisions**

The organization employs an EO Adviser, has established an EO Committee and has a network of EO representatives within different departments. The organization provides training for its staff in areas such as recruitment and selection, training and mentoring for women managers, and harassment. It has EO codes of practice and action plans which are monitored, and it places a positive action statement on job advertisements. In terms of family friendly policies it has developed maternity, adoption, paternity, compassionate and parental leave schemes. It has a workplace, crèche, nursery and holiday play scheme, and allows flexible working.

## Findings

A questionnaire survey was undertaken of a 25% random sample of all categories of staff at the organization; women and men, professional and managerial, technical, administrative and secretarial, cleaning and catering, and security staff. A total of 634 questionnaires were distributed via the internal mail and 220 completed questionnaires were returned, a 35% response rate.

There were more male respondents (55%) than women (45%). They were all predominantly white (94%) and non-disabled (97%), which reflects the composition of the organization's workforce. More men were parents (61%) than women (53%), although equal proportions had dependant children (34%). More women (24%) were working part time compared to men (8%).

## Awareness of EO Organizational Policies

The level of awareness of the organizational EO policies varied considerably as shown in Table 1 below. The vast majority of both women and men were similarly aware of the general EO policy statement, harassment and bullying policy, EO Committee, and the work based crèche/nursery. However, more women than men were aware of the compassionate leave scheme (70% compared with 58% of men). Then came a group of policies that only around half of both women and men were aware. These included penalties for discrimination and harassment, extended maternity leave, and EO action plans. Other policies were less well known, including, holiday schemes for children, and paternity leave. Finally less than a quarter of the respondents knew about leave for sick children, and women's training programmes.

**Table 1. Awareness of Organizational EO Policies**

	<b>Women %</b>	<b>Men %</b>
<b>Policy Statement on EO</b>	86	91
<b>Harassment &amp; Bullying Policy</b>	87	88
<b>EO Committee</b>	76	74
<b>Work Based Crèche/Nursery</b>	75	66
<b>Compassionate Leave</b>	70	58
<b>Penalties for Discrimination/Harassment</b>	59	66
<b>Extended Maternity Leave</b>	53	50
<b>EO Action Plans</b>	50	48

<b>Holiday Schemes for Children</b>	42	35
<b>Paternity Leave</b>	38	38
<b>Sick Child Days</b>	22	21
<b>Women's Training Programmes</b>	15	26

### Use of EO policies

The use of EO policies was considerably lower than the awareness of them. Only 22% of the women and 9% of the men had used any of the policies in the organization. The vast majority of EO policies that had been used by the women were child or family related.

Also, importantly, nearly two thirds (64%) of the women and the vast majority (82%) of the men stated that they were not likely to use any policies in the future. Men's reasons centered mostly on the fact that they perceived EO policies being for women only and certainly not for white, childless or heterosexual men. Even men with young children did not see the policies as related to them, or they felt that it was not fully accepted that they could use them and therefore that they may be penalised for doing so.

*'I'm a white, heterosexual male without children so there aren't any for me!'*  
Male, 31-40.

*'I assume that they have nothing to offer me.'*  
Male, 31-40, with pre school and school aged children.

*'The honest answer is that if you do the fear of being criticised and labeled a problem.'*  
Male, 51-60.

### EO Policies Respondents would like to see introduced or improved

The most important policy that women wanted to see introduced was formalised flexible working (16%) reflecting again their primary responsibility for family commitments. Next came raising awareness and profile of the policies generally, and better commitment from senior management (14% of women and 13% of men, and 12% and 7% respectively). Interestingly, a minority of women and very few men wanted to see promotion and recruitment targets for women introduced. However, in contrast a very small minority of men (3%) said there was no need for any more policies and those that existed should be less time consuming, and that they should focus on men as well as women and avoid what they saw as positive discrimination.

**Table 2. New or Improved EO Policies**

	<b>Women</b>	<b>Men</b>
<b>More and Consistent Flexible Working</b>	16	3
<b>Raise Awareness and Higher Profile</b>	14	13
<b>Senior Managers training/commitment</b>	12	7

<b>Promotion and Recruitment Targets for Women</b>	9	3
<b>Greater and Tougher Monitoring</b>	5	2
<b>Greater Transparency</b>	4	1
<b>Stronger Harassment Policy</b>	4	
<b>Training</b>	2	1
<b>Make More Proactive</b>	2	
<b>Address Women's Pay Gap</b>	2	
<b>Longer Compassionate Leave</b>	1	
<b>No need for any more</b>		3
<b>Focus on men as well as women</b>		3

### Benefits of EO Policies

When asked about the benefits of EO policies, many of the male respondents claimed that they did not know whether they were beneficial or not. This revolved very much again around the fact that they did not consider EO policies to be relevant to them and had not had to consider or engage in thinking about them. The following comments from male respondents reflect this view.

*'Being male and having no children, I have no opinion.'*

Male, 31-40, single, no children.

*'I don't know I haven't read them.'*

Male, 21-30, single, no children.

As shown in Table 3 below, overall just over two thirds of women (69%) and just under two thirds of men (61%) thought that EO policies were beneficial for mothers, but less than half thought they were beneficial for childless women (42% women and 48% men). Also, whereas 42% of women thought they were beneficial for fathers, only 29% of men agreed. The group that were thought to benefit least by both women and men were childless men (31% and 21% respectively).

**Table 3. Perceived Benefits of EO Policies by Sex and Parenthood**

	<b>Women %</b>	<b>Men %</b>
<b>Mothers</b>	69	61
<b>Childless Women</b>	42	48
<b>Fathers</b>	44	29
<b>Childless Men</b>	31	21

The comments from respondents to explain their views on who benefited from EO policies very much revolved around two axis'; the axis of sex, and the axis of parenthood, which in many cases overrides the axis of sex.

Firstly, the sex axis manifested itself in the view by mostly male respondents that they did not benefit from EO policies because of their sex. The following comments illustrate this view.

*'I believe that many equal opportunities initiatives are in place for the benefit of women only.'*

Male, 51-60, married, partner works part time, children school age and over 18.

*'People are sensitive to equal opportunities for women, e.g. recruitment figures, harassment, etc. so regardless of whether they have children or not they benefit. Those with children benefit more because more policies affect them.'*

Woman, 21-30, single, no children.

This last comment leads on to the second axis which revolves around the more complex view that parents are the ones that benefit as this is the way EO policies are focused. It was felt that the fact that either women or men had children was more of a factor than their sex in whether or not they benefited. Some felt that EO policies were only geared towards those with family commitments.

*'Specific provision exists for men or women with children. There seems to be no comparable support mechanisms for single people.'*

Female, 31-40, no children.

Some respondents whilst agreeing that people with children benefited more from the policies, felt that fathers benefited less than mothers.

*'The institution assumes that men do not have child-care/domestic responsibilities.'*

Male, 41-50, married, school age children, partner works part time.

The idea that mothers benefit most from the policies was relatively frequently commented on in a rather negative way particularly by other women, as they viewed this as impacting upon their own work load and choice of time off. As most women work with other women, it is interesting to speculate about how much women are carrying other women when mothers legitimately make use of family friendly policies, but perhaps sufficient support is not put into an organization to cover this.

*'From my long experience of work as a woman without children, I have had to "carry" those who have had to have time off to care for their children. This has been in the form of extra work – always having to work earlier and later hours and always having last choice of holiday dates. Often mothers who have time to care for children tell of visits to hairdressers, beauty clinics, etc.'*

Female, 51-60, married, no children.

*'In my section all women with children have been given consideration. Leave early, have time off if children sick, change hours. This is not applicable to women without children. I could not just leave early, but a woman with children can and do.'*

Female, 51-60, married, no children.

*'Children seem to be the main ticket to getting what you want.'*

Female, 41-50, children over 18.

## **Disadvantages**

Following on from the question about who benefits from EO policies, respondents were then asked if they thought any particular group of workers were actually disadvantaged by them. This brought a mixed response, but women, both mothers and childless women, were seen as slightly more disadvantaged than men. Almost a quarter of the women respondents expressed this view.

*'They make women second class employees. Makes committees extra alert for other shortcomings of candidates as reasons for not employing them.'*

Female, 51-60, married, children over 18.

*'If women use EO policies it is assumed that they are less committed or different to men.'*

Female, 31-40, no children.

On the other hand some respondents felt that men were disadvantaged.

*'It benefits women to the point of disbenefiting [sic] men.'*

Male, 41-50, married, no children.

*'There is nothing in the policies for men. All we get is a greater workload and greater competition.'*

Male, 51-60, married, children over 18.

## **General Views on Equality**

Finally, respondents' views on gender equality more generally within society were interrogated to explore any interconnection between these views and resistance to change within their institution. They were asked for responses to various statements on women and men at work.

As Table 4 below shows only a minority held the negative view that EO policies prevent people getting ahead on merit, though more men (16%) than women (4%). However, a further 23% of the men and 27% of the women were neutral about this. On a potentially problematic note for the success of EO policies, 48% of women and 38% of men thought that parents were treated more favourably in terms of flexible hours and leave than childless employees. Also, half of the women (50%) and over half of the men (56%)

believed that the workload of parents fell on others when that took time off for child care.

Some of the respondents' views on mothers working were quite traditional. A substantial minority thought that no one can take care of their children as well as their mother (17% of women and 22% of men). Also, even more significantly, half of the women (50%) and over half of the men (56%) thought that women should reduce their hours of work during her children's formative years. Over a third (34%) of women and 43% of men thought that it is hard for a women to be reliable if they are responsible for little children, although fewer agreed that mothers are less committed at work (13% of women and 26% of men). A quarter of the respondents (26% of the women and 24% of the men) thought that women should not expect the workplace to change because they want to work, and a substantial minority (14%) of both women and men thought that women should ignore 'smutty banter' if they want to get ahead in their job.

A large minority of women and men thought that employers and managers discriminate against women. Over a third of the women (39%) and even more men (42%) thought that employers are put off hiring young women in case they become pregnant. Nearly a third of women (31%) and over a third of men (34%) thought that managers are reluctant to promote women of child bearing years in case they become pregnant. Finally, nearly a quarter of women (23%) and 17% of men thought that employers actually pay women less because they do not expect them to stay in their jobs as long as men.

The majority of respondents (67% of the women and 71% of the men) agreed with the statement that the way the labour market is set up makes it easier for women to care for children than men. Over a third of women (34%) and 41% of men thought fathers of young children should work fewer hours in order to raise their children, with only 26% of women and 37% of men disagreeing. Finally, a majority of the respondents (77% of women and 69% of men) thought that concessions to allow fathers to spend more time with their children should be incorporated into EO policies.

**Table 4. Views on Women and Men at Work by Sex % (Top figures in bold in each cell women's views and bottom figure in brackets men's views)**

	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Disagree</b>
<b>EO Policies prevent people from getting ahead on merit</b>	<b>4</b> (16)	<b>27</b> (23)	<b>69</b> (61)
<b>Parents are treated more favourably in terms of flexible hours and leave than childless employees</b>	<b>48</b> (38)	<b>27</b> (34)	<b>25</b> (28)
<b>At the end of the day, the workload of parents who take time off work to be with their children falls on others</b>	<b>50</b> (56)	<b>19</b> (23)	<b>31</b> (21)
<b>No one can take care of their children as</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>64</b>

<b>well as their mother</b>	<b>(22)</b>	<b>(24)</b>	<b>(54)</b>
<b>It is important for a mother to reduce her employment hours during her child's formative years</b>	<b>50</b> (53)	<b>20</b> (33)	<b>28</b> (14)
<b>It is hard for women to be reliable if they are responsible for little children</b>	<b>34</b> (43)	<b>16</b> (20)	<b>50</b> (37)
<b>Women are less committed at work once they have a family</b>	<b>13</b> (26)	<b>21</b> (29)	<b>66</b> (45)
<b>Women should not expect the workplace to change just because they want to work</b>	<b>26</b> (28)	<b>20</b> (31)	<b>54</b> (42)
<b>Women should ignore smutty banter if they want to get ahead in a job</b>	<b>14</b> (14)	<b>13</b> (27)	<b>73</b> (60)
<b>Employers are often put off hiring young women in case they become pregnant</b>	<b>39</b> (42)	<b>24</b> (32)	<b>37</b> (27)
<b>Managers are reluctant to promote women of child bearing years in case they become pregnant</b>	<b>31</b> (34)	<b>37</b> (36)	<b>32</b> (31)
<b>Employers pay women less because they don't expect them to stay in their jobs as long as men</b>	<b>23</b> (17)	<b>37</b> (43)	<b>40</b> (41)
<b>The way the labour market is set up makes it easier for women to care for children than for men to do so</b>	<b>67</b> (71)	<b>17</b> (22)	<b>16</b> (8)
<b>Fathers of young children should work fewer hours in order to raise their children</b>	<b>34</b> (41)	<b>40</b> (33)	<b>26</b> (37)
<b>Concessions to allow fathers to spend more time with their families should be incorporated into EO policies</b>	<b>77</b> (69)	<b>14</b> (20)	<b>9</b> (12)

## Conclusion

The final picture then is a mixed one, including a varied level of awareness of specific EO policies within the organization. The use of EO policies is extremely low, and differentiated by gender. The EO policies were perceived as differentially benefiting different groups categorised by sex and parenthood. Also, a minority of respondents actually felt the policies disadvantaged different groups. Childless women were seen to be most disadvantaged, then mothers, followed by childless men and lastly fathers. So we again see a mixed picture and quite complex and sometimes contradictory reasons for these views.

Interestingly, the general views of the respondents on equality for women and men at work did not necessarily correspond to their views, support for, or use of the organization's EO policies. The vast majority of respondents did not think that EO policies prevented people getting ahead on merit. But at the same time when asked about the organization's policies felt that some groups benefited more and some groups were actually disadvantaged. Also, whilst over two thirds of the men agreed that concessions to allow fathers to spend

more time with their families should be incorporated into EO policies, only an extremely small minority had used or intended to use these type of policies.

National research on EO policies in the UK (Bagilhole and Robinson, 1997) show that the organization in this study is certainly in the mainstream of EO developments in the public sector nationally. So it can be seen that the gap between the rhetoric and reality of EO is relatively universal, and that this feeds into and allows a limited 'problem-centred' approach to equality issues. Bureaucratic policies seen as imposed from above without any apparent raising of awareness and not winning the hearts and minds of people create perceived conflicts between different groups. In this case study, this conflict, manifest at times in resistance and hostility, can be seen to revolve around an axis of sex and parenthood. Interestingly, the perceived strong focus of the policies on family friendliness can mean that this 'child dimension' overrides the sex axis.

In this sort of climate and environment the introduction of more radical interpretations of EO measures, although needed to allow them to be more effective, is liable to create more backlash. It is important to acknowledge and deal with the disaffection of men generally, and resentment from childless women to these policies. Therefore, alongside training courses for all staff to address both confused and resistant attitudes, there needs to be an adequate support system and flexibility for those groups who are not traditionally considered to be the recipients of EO policies. Otherwise EO will continue to be seen as benefiting only women generally and mothers particularly, which inevitably leads to its failure.

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