Male and Female Managers’ Awareness of Gender and Desire for Family-Friendly Practices in their Own Lives and in the Workplace: A Preliminary Consideration of Self-examined Lives

Maureen Fastenau
Formerly School of Management, RMIT University

The introduction of family-friendly policies and practices facilitates women’s ability to maintain a workplace presence while meeting daily responsibilities for child care and domestic tasks. Organisational accommodation of employees’ family responsibilities may, however, result in the institutionalising women’s disadvantage — the ‘mommy track’ — rather than producing the equitable employment opportunities envisioned by the managing diversity approach to human resource management (HRM). This article presents a preliminary consideration of assignments submitted by 93 managers enrolled in an introductory graduate level HRM subject. The assignment asked the male and female managers to reflect on the impact of gender on their work lives and the implications of gender for organisational policies and practices. The observations of these managers suggest factors that will need to be considered if diversity management policies and practices, particularly those addressing work–family or work–life balance, is to facilitate women’s access to equitable employment and career advancement, rather than deflecting women’s careers to a ‘mommy track’ of limited opportunities.

INTRODUCTION

Increasing numbers of women, as a matter of choice and necessity, are making a commitment to long-term workforce participation and careers. In compliance with equal employment and affirmative action legislation, as a pragmatic response to changing workforce demographics, and perceiving possible organisational advantage, an increasing number of organisations are developing a variety of policies, practices, and programs to facilitate women’s workforce participation. A number of these organisational policies and practices recognise that many employees, and particularly female employees, must balance their work commitments with their family responsibilities. However, without corresponding societal and organisational culture change, the development of family-friendly initiatives designed to facilitate women’s long-term workforce participation can consign women to the ‘mommy track’ of limited career opportunities (see, for example, Burke 1999; McGrath, Driscoll & Gross 2005).

Ninety-three managers (47 women, 46 men) enrolled in an introductory Human Resource Management (HRM) subject as part of two graduate diplomas in business programs were asked to consider, in an assignment, the role gender played in their own
careers and to reflect on how gender was addressed or could be addressed in staff management practices. Their recognition of gender issues in the workplace focused almost exclusively on women’s significantly larger role in meeting day-to-day child care and family responsibilities as restricting their career opportunities. The observations of both male and female managers offer important insights into factors which will need to be considered by providers of management education and organisations themselves if family-friendly initiatives are to contribute to equitable employment and career development opportunities for women and achieve the advantages of a managing diversity approach.

**WOMEN’S WORKFORCE PARTICIPATION, 1986–2006**

**Snapshot of Women’s Workforce Participation, 1986–2006**

In 1986, the Australian Government enacted the *Affirmative Action (Equal Employment Opportunity for Women) Act*. It (and its successor, the *Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Act 1999* (EOWW Act), sought to improve women’s employment opportunities by requiring organisations employing one hundred or more employees to develop policies and practices to address forms of discrimination that limited women’s employment opportunities. Twenty years after the enactment of the *Affirmative Action Act*, women make up approximately 45% of the Australian workforce, having risen from 39.2% in 1986 (ABS 2007), and 60% of women aged 15–64 are in paid employment (Baird & Todd 2005, citing ABS data).

Women’s workforce participation, however, continues to be characterised by occupational and industrial segregation as well as by the glass ceiling (see, for example, Preston & Whitehouse 2004). Table 1 shows the occupational distribution of the Australian workforce by sex. However, this aggregated data obscures the hierarchical barriers (glass ceilings) and occupational segregation (glass walls) that characterise women’s employment in these categories. For example, women managers tend to be clustered at the lower and middle ranks of management, even in those industries and occupations where women predominate (see discussion below). Similarly, within occupational classifications, men and women tend to cluster into different areas. For example, while women today hold slightly over 50% of professional positions, women are more likely to be teachers and nurses than engineers; women in management are clustered in staff management positions rather than in the line management positions, which lead to executive management roles; women hold almost 50% of HR management positions, but only 12.3% of production manager positions, only 6.8% of engineering manager positions, and only 16.5% of production manager positions (ABS 2006).
Table 1 Distribution by sex by occupation of employed persons aged 15 years or more, Australia (percentage)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>1986</th>
<th></th>
<th>2006</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mangers &amp; administrators</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>77.5</td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>72.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professionals*</td>
<td>38.9</td>
<td>61.1</td>
<td>51.8</td>
<td>49.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Para-professionals</td>
<td>42.9</td>
<td>57.1</td>
<td>45.7</td>
<td>54.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tradespeople</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>89.9</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>90.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerks**</td>
<td>74.0</td>
<td>26.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salespersons &amp; personal service workers</td>
<td>62.9</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>72.2</td>
<td>27.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plant &amp; machine operators, drivers</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>83.5</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>87.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labourers &amp; related workers</td>
<td>33.4</td>
<td>66.6</td>
<td>36.3</td>
<td>63.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: data derived from ABS 1993; ABS 2006a.
*The dramatic increase in the percentage of women categorised as professionals can be attributed significantly to the inclusion of Nursing and Teaching, two occupations heavily dominated by women, which were previously included in the para-professional category.
**The two categories of Clerks and of Salespersons and Personal Service Workers were combined in 1998 and then divided into advanced, intermediate, and elementary; they have been combined into one category in this table.

Table 2 shows the occupational distribution of the male and female Australian workforces. The decline in the percentage of both men and women employed as managers/administrators is likely to reflect the ongoing impact of the downsizing and flattening of organisational hierarchies that characterised the 1990s. The dramatic increase in the percentage of women in the Professional category may be attributed to the re-classification by the ABS of Teaching and Nursing, female-dominated occupations, from the Para-professional to the Professional category. The significant increase in the percentage of both men and women employed as Para-professionals may reflect the creation and demand for new white-collar occupations requiring formally qualified skilled labour in technical, health and administrative fields. While these changes have occurred, women still tend to be crowded into a narrow range of
Male and Female Managers’ Awareness of Gender and Desire for Family-friendly Practices in Their Own Lives and in the Workplace

Occupational categories, particularly clerical and sales/service occupations, while men are much more evenly distributed across the categories.

Table 2 Occupation of employed persons aged 15 years or more, Australia (percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>1986</th>
<th></th>
<th>2006</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Managers &amp; administrators</strong></td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Professionals</strong></td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>17.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Para-professionals</strong></td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>12.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tradespeople</strong></td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>21.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Clerks</strong></td>
<td>32.6</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Salespersons &amp; personal service workers</strong></td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>48.0</td>
<td>15.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Plant &amp; machine operators, drivers</strong></td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Labourers &amp; related workers</strong></td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>16.9</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>9.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: data derived from ABS 1993; ABS 2006a.
*The dramatic increase in the percentage of women categorised as professionals can be attributed significantly to the inclusion of Nursing and Teaching, two occupations heavily dominated by women, which were previously included in the para-professional category.
**The two categories of Clerks and of Salespersons and personal service workers were combined in 1998 and then divided into advanced, intermediate, and elementary; they have been combined into one category in this table.

Glass Ceilings and Walls

The Affirmative Action Agency and its successor, the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency (EOWA), have documented the glass ceiling effect for women in various industries. In 1995 the Affirmative Action Agency (1995, p. 20) found that women were underrepresented at all levels of management, even in those industries where female workers predominate. For example, the Agency found that in 1995
women held only 8% of executive management positions and only 15% of senior management positions. In such industries as Education, where 65% of the workforce is female, women held only 7% of senior management positions; in Retail, where 53% of its workforce is female, women held only 12% of executive management positions; and in Hospitality, while holding 48% of junior and middle management positions, women held only 29% and 20%, respectively, of senior and executive management positions. (See also Doherty, 2004, which documents a similar pattern of promotional ceilings for women in the UK hospitality industry.)

Since 2002, EOWA has conducted a census of women in leadership positions based on a study of women’s participation in management in the Australian Stock Exchange top 200 companies (ASX200). The most recent survey (EOWA 2006) reported that while women make up 44.8% of the Australian labour force and hold 44.2% of managerial and professional positions in the ASX200 companies, this data hides both glass ceilings and glass walls.

There is an important distinction between line and staff management roles, with line management roles (those responsible for profit-and-loss or direct client service) being the stepping stones to top organisational positions. Women are disproportionately sequestered in staff management roles and hold only 7.4% of line management positions. This undoubtedly contributes to the low number of women in executive management positions: 12% (222 of 1856) of executive management positions are held by women (EOWA 2006). Further, the EOWA (2006) noted that in 39.5% of the companies, there are no women at executive management level, and in only 18% of the companies do women hold 25% or more of the executive management positions. This record is even worse for positions on Boards of Directors: women hold only 8.7% of board seats, and half of the companies did not have even one woman on their board, while only 13.5% had two or more women on their boards. (Similar patterns are found in other countries; see EOWA, 2006, which reports results of sister studies conducted in the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States; see also Straub, 2007, who reports on the participation of women in management in various European countries.)

There are, of course, numerous reasons why women have not broken through glass ceilings and broken down glass walls in numbers equivalent to their participation in the workforce. These include stereotyping (see, for example, Schein 1973, 1975, 2001; Heilman, Block & Martell 1995; Powell, Butterfield & Parent 2002; Yim & Bond 2002; Fernandes & Cabral-Cardoso 2003; Sczesny 2003; Catalyst 2005, 2006); gender socialisation (see, for example, Fels 2004, 2004a); and hostile organisational environments (see, for example, Acker 1990; Stephenson & Krebs 1993; Maier 1999; Vianen & Fischer 2002). Another factor which can hinder women in their careers and in the workforce is their family responsibilities.

Family-friendly Policies and Practices

Many organisations have adopted family-friendly/worklife balance policies and practices to address — or at least give the appearance of addressing — employees’, and particularly female employees’, need to balance work requirements and family responsibilities. Family-friendly practices include flexible time arrangements (e.g. flexitime, part-time), work arrangements (e.g. job share, work from home), and leave
arrangements (e.g. carer’s leave, 4852, access to unpaid leave). In many organisations these practices are referred to as ‘practices designed to enable employees to achieve worklife balance’, and are thus presented as equally available to male employees. However, men are less likely to access them than their female counterparts (see, for example, ABS 1997, 2003; Trifiletti 1999), and when they do they tend to access them for different reasons (e.g. flexitime or part-time in order to further professional studies rather than to meet child care or other family responsibilities, or to observe a child’s accomplishment or milestone, rather than to stay home with a sick child).

The occupational and industrial segregation which characterises the Australian workforce may also disadvantage women in the workforce with regard to family-friendly policies and practices. Women employed in female-dominated industries and organisations may be less likely to be working for organisations that offer family-friendly practices (see Pocock 2005, p. 27). On the other hand, women who work in male-dominated or more gender-balanced industries and occupations may be employed by organisations offering family-friendly practices, although these organisations may then penalise the women who access them, derailing them to the ‘mommy track’ of reduced career opportunities.

Research by Glass (1990) suggests that industries and occupations dominated by women are not characterised by employment conditions that accommodate women’s family responsibilities. Nursing is an example, with many female nurses choosing agency or nurse bank employment rather than ‘permanent’ employment with a hospital. The former allows them to select shifts compatible with family responsibilities whereas ‘permanent’ positions offer little flexibility.

Glass (1990) also suggests that employers in women-dominated industries and organisations may fear offering family-friendly practices, believing it will attract more women and thereby reduce, rather than enhance, competitiveness. In this view, organisations and industries that rely heavily on women’s labour — which maintains competitiveness and profit through reduced labour costs as women generally earn less than men for comparable work — would find any employment practice that potentially increased labour costs (e.g. family-friendly practices) undesirable.

Other research suggests that the introduction of practices generally identified as family friendly may actually offer little flexibility to employees with family responsibilities, instead allowing the organisation to address its flexibility requirements and thereby creating further work–family conflict (Strachan & Burgess 1998; Sheridan & Conway 2000; Pocock 2005, pp. 28–30). The introduction of supposedly family-friendly practices like flexible work hours has been found not to provide women employed in the female-dominated retail and financial services industries with the flexibility required to balance work and family commitments (Deery & Mahony 1994; Charlesworth 1996; Still 1997). Women who opt for part-time work as one strategy to cope with competing work and family demands are often denied training and promotion opportunities as well as facing effective or actual demotion.

The decentralisation of the Australian industrial relations system in the 1990s although accompanied by a government work and family agenda has proved to be more rhetoric than results oriented for many workers. Strachan and Burgess (1998) argue that increased casualisation of work, declining union membership and the push for
individual agreements rather than awards have hampered and will continue to hamper efforts to secure effective family-friendly arrangements in workplaces.

The changes under the Work Choices legislation in 2005, which continue and intensify the decentralisation and individuation of employee relations begun in the 1990s, suggest that employees (i.e. female employees) will face increasing disadvantage in their attempts to balance family responsibilities with employment requirements (Pocock & Masterman-Smith 2005, pp. 136–8; Pocock 2005; Watts & Mitchell 2006, p. 13; Jefferson & Preston 2007). Employees are under increasing pressure to enter into Australian Workplace Agreements (AWAs), and research indicates that these agreements are particularly damaging for women.

Women on AWAs earn less than those employed under collective agreements, and other changes to industrial relations regulation since the mid-1990s have increased job insecurity (Pocock 2005, pp. 23–5; Pocock & Masterman-Smith 2005; Preston, Jefferson & Guthrie 2006, 2007). With the high cost of child care, low pay rates make child care unaffordable for many women and therefore may discourage participation in the paid workforce, with adverse effects for their future employability and career development (see Baird & Todd 2005, pp. 3–4). Further, AWAs have been found to be less likely than awards to include provisions for paid (or even unpaid) maternity leave and paid sick leave (which many mothers use to enable them to care for sick children) (Pocock & Masterman-Smith 2005, pp. 133–6; Baird & Todd 2005).

AWAs have been promoted as offering opportunities for employees to negotiate terms and conditions of employment that would allow them to meet their family responsibilities. However, the most common family-friendly leave or working arrangement provision in AWAs was found to be bereavement leave, with only approximately 25% of AWAs containing parental leave and/or family/carers leave provisions (HREOC, SDU 2005, p. 91, citing a DEWR report). While many AWAs include provision for flexible hours, the Office of the Employment Advocate, which is charged with reviewing AWAs, has observed that ‘AWAs were being used less to enhance work and family balance than to extend working hours so that enterprises’ trading hours could be increased’ (cited in HREOC, SDU 2005, p. 91).

In 1998, Sheridan reviewed the adoption of affirmative action policies and practices in 288 Australian organisations required to report under the Affirmative Action Act. She found that the second most frequently mentioned policies and practices in these reports addressed work–family issues (23%). However, while these policies and practices may facilitate women’s ability to maintain a workforce presence while meeting family and domestic responsibilities, they appear also to serve to derail women’s careers to the ‘mommy track’. This leads not only to reduced access to promotion and other career development activities, but also to jobs of lower status and lower earnings (Rimmer & Rimmer 1994; McGrath, Driscoll & Gross 2005; Straub 2007).

Family Responsibilities’ Adverse Effects on Women’s Careers

A major factor identified as hampering women’s career and work opportunities is the heavier burden women carry for day-to-day family responsibilities, including child care and domestic tasks. While many organisations have adopted family-friendly policies,
the implementation of family-friendly practices is problematic. The discretion and attitudes of managers, female as well as male, has been found to present ‘significant barriers’ to effective implementation (Bond & Wise 2003, p. 60; see also Bond & McCracken 2005; Wise 2005). Further, the development and implementation of family-friendly practices is rarely accompanied by the organisational culture change required if the relevant employees, usually women, are not to be penalised for accessing such practices (Fastenau 2006; Burgess, Henderson & Strachan 2006; Wise & Bond 2003; McDonald, Guthrie, Bradley & Shakespeare-Finch 2005; Lewis 2001; Burke 1997; Bruce & Read 1994; Wood & Newton 2006).

The Association of Professional Engineers, Scientists and Managers Australia (APESMA 2007) recently published results of a survey of its women members who are employed as scientists, pharmacists, engineers and workers in the computing industry. Over 60% of more than 2,000 women respondents indicated that balancing work and private life commitments had affected their career advancement. Almost 50% of female APESMA respondents reported that their employer did not offer paid maternity leave, and over 80% of respondents did not have access to employer-provided on- or off-site child care. For those women apparently fortunate enough to work for organisations with family-friendly practices, it could be argued the offer of such benefits was a poisoned chalice: almost 60% of the women respondents with children believed that family responsibilities or accessing maternity leave had been detrimental to their careers.

Family responsibilities have also been detrimental to the careers of women lawyers. In the mid-1990s, studies of women lawyers’ careers in Victoria, New South Wales, and Tasmania (cited in Trifiletti 1999, pp. 8–9), found that women were significantly underrepresented in partnership positions given the number of women in the profession. For example, in Victoria, women comprised 39% of lawyers in the experience bracket from which partners are drawn, but women held only 12% of partnership positions. More recent data reveals limited progress: women lawyers in 2006 held 14% of partnerships in Victorian law firms (280 women cf. 1684 men) (LIV & VWL 2006, p. 2; see also Strachan & Barrett 2006).

The Law Institute of Victoria’s Survey Report of Legal Practitioners (1999, cited in Trifiletti 1999, p. 9) considered the career paths of male and female law graduates in the first five years of professional practice. It found that family responsibilities, particularly the birth of a child and child care responsibilities, had a more significant impact on women lawyers’ careers than on those of their male counterparts. Almost a quarter of the female survey respondents (cf. 1% of males) reported that the birth of a child interrupted their careers, and child care was cited by 24% of the women (cf. 1% of the men) as affecting their careers. Further, 94% of the female lawyers indicated that they were very involved in child care (cf. 22% of males), and male lawyers were more likely to report that their partner had a higher involvement in child care than their female counterparts (97% cf. 20% of females).

A more recent study (LIV & VWL 2006, p. 4) found that while more firms were providing options for flexible work arrangements, these were principally accessed by women. The study also found that there was a cost to employees — usually women, as they were more likely to access flexible work options — in accessing these options: less likelihood of promotion and other career development opportunities. The report
concluded that for those employees (i.e. for women) ‘the overall effect is that having a family is not good for your career.’

Another study into flexible work arrangements in the legal profession concluded that those lawyers accessing flexible work arrangements, as well as their colleagues and the partners in their law firms, ‘all perceived that working flexibly negatively impacts career progression’ (VWL 2006, p. 5). The assumption was that those who access flexible work options ‘manifest a lack of ambition’. It was also observed that ‘the status quo rewards lawyers who prioritise work over family’ (p. 5).

The adverse impacts of accessing flexible work arrangements are not restricted to scientific, technical and legal occupations. Rimmer and Rimmer (1994) found that family responsibilities, including, but not limited to, child care, adversely affected women’s careers regardless of whether they were employed in professional or non-professional occupations. They found that women employed in non-professional occupations generally took a backward step with regard to job status and earning capacity when returning to work after a period of absence to meet family responsibilities. Women professionals were less likely to find their careers taking a backward step, but Rimmer and Rimmer found they were much less likely to progress.

A more recent study undertaken in the United States (McGrath, Driscoll & Gross 2005) reported similar findings. The subjects of their study all held advanced qualifications (usually MBAs) and all had held high-level management or professional positions before ‘stepping out’ to meet family responsibilities. Many of the women maintained their skills while out of the paid workforce by undertaking significant volunteer or community projects that used their management and/or professional skills and expertise. But on returning to the workforce, they found their previous employers had little interest in rehiring them, and all were forced to take positions at a lower level than they had held previously.

While access to family-friendly practices is not restricted to women employees, it is a rare man, in most organisations, who would access them. The adverse impact of the decision to do so serves as an additional deterrent to men assuming greater responsibility for domestic and child care tasks (Bittman, Hoffman & Thompson 2004). A 1996 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) study revealed that while 69% of mothers in the paid workforce accessed various flexible work arrangements, only 26% of fathers did (ABS 1997, p. 10). A subsequent study in 1999 (ABS 2003, p. 6) found that 66.9% of fathers in families with children under 15, where both parents were employed, did not use any family-friendly work arrangement, while 69.2% of mothers accessed at least one family-friendly work arrangement. Almost half (49.1%) of employed mothers were in permanent part-time work (cf. only 6.3% of fathers) in order to meet child care responsibilities. And this pattern of married women with children under 15 remaining in the workforce on a part-time basis continues in the twenty-first century: in 57% of families with children under 15 both parents were in the paid workforce. However, in approximately 60% of these families the mother was employed part time while in less than 10% of these families was the father employed part time (ABS 2003).

The recent Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) discussion and final papers on work and family issues (HREOC 2005 and 2007) recognise that as long as work–family/work–life issues are seen as a woman’s concern only, ‘women will
Male and Female Managers’ Awareness of Gender and Desire for Family-friendly Practices in Their Own Lives and in the Workplace

continues to face discrimination in the workplace’ (HREOC 2005, p. ix). As long as employers continue to penalise employees who access family-friendly practices, employees who can more easily avoid doing so (i.e., men), will not only allow women to carry the heavier burden of day-to-day family maintenance, but will also be under little pressure to change organisational cultures to pay more than lip service to work–family/work–life balance.

MANAGERS’ REFLECTIONS ON THE EFFECT OF GENDER ON CAREERS

The Assignment and the Managers

Ninety-three managers (47 women, 46 men) enrolled in an introductory HRM subject were asked to submit essays exploring gender issues. The managers were asked to consider three topics in their essays: (1) explore their own employment experiences, including how childhood experiences and family background contributed to their choice of occupation and their employment history; (2) consider how their employment experiences, including career choice and development, may have been different if they had been born a member of the opposite sex; and (3) consider how HRM policies and practices could address gender issues which affected women’s employment.

The managers were enrolled in two graduate diplomas of business programs that were offered solely via distance education. They were provided with study materials that guided their consideration of weekly topics as well as with assigned readings for each topic. Diversity, particularly issues of gender, was an organising theme for this subject. The second study guide focused on managing diversity, and study guides on the HR functions (e.g. Recruitment and Selection, Compensation, Performance Appraisal, etc.) raised gender issues. For some weekly HR topics there was assigned reading that considered gender issues related to the specific HR function considered in that study unit.

Students were advised at the beginning of the semester to quickly read through all of the study guides to gain an overview of the subject, and it was suggested that before commencing the gender issues assignment, which was to be submitted about mid-semester, they read the study guide and assigned readings for the Managing Diversity unit (the second study guide topic). The issue of family-friendly policies was only raised in passing in the study materials (reference to child care in the study materials for the topic on Compensation/Reward Systems), and none of the assigned readings specifically addressed family-friendly issues. In other words, students were not ‘guided’ to address work–family balance or family-friendly initiatives in their consideration of HR responses to gender issues in the workplace.

Most of the 93 managers enrolled in this subject were middle managers. Several of the older managers had recently assumed their first senior management position, while the younger female managers were usually in junior or first-level management positions. The managers ranged in age from mid-20s to mid-50s, with most in their early 30s to mid-40s. Only one student was unemployed, although, as a recent immigrant to Australia, she had held management positions in her country of origin. All of the men were married while several of the younger women were single. All of the managers in their mid-30s and older had at least one child. Those managers, both male and female,
who did not have children indicated that they planned to have at least one child ‘one day’.

The discussion below is based on a preliminary and largely impressionistic consideration of the contents of the students’ essays.

The Essays

The essays were largely descriptive, particularly the first and second parts, in which the managers provided an account of their own lives with regard to occupational choices, work experiences, career advancement and the like, and considered possible differences to their lives had they been born a member of the opposite sex. While the managers identified aspects of difference (e.g. boys and girls played different games; different expectations regarding acceptable behaviour for boys and girls, etc.), they apparently had no analytical framework for identifying and understanding how gender might affect their own or other people’s occupational choices, workforce experiences or career opportunities, or how organisational policies and practices, informal and formal, might affect men and women differently, often advantaging men and disadvantaging women.

Given the widespread availability of discussions on gender in the popular media over the past twenty years, it was surprising how little either female or male managers knew about gender issues. The lack of conscious awareness of gender issues, and the absence of any analytical framework for organising and understanding gender experiences, suggests that managers lack both sensitivity to gender issues and the intellectual tools to consider and analyse the significance of gender in the workplace.

Many of the managers indicated in conversations with me that this was the first occasion on which they had considered gender as a facet in their own lives or as a factor structuring the society in which they lived and the organisations in which they worked. Neither management educators nor organisational change agents should, therefore, assume that managers, either male or female, have even a general awareness or understanding of gender issues. If gender issues are to be effectively addressed in organisations, management education must explicitly raise and discuss gender not only as an isolated specialised subject but as an integral part of every management subject. Similarly, organisational change programs must contextualise initiatives within an analysis of gender. The failure of educators and academics to recognise the importance of gender in employment practices is demonstrated in an otherwise fine article by Bond and Mc Cracken (2005) in which they discuss the importance of managerial training for effective implementation of family-friendly practices, but do not even once consider gender as a factor in managerial decisions authorising access to such practices, or as a factor that should be addressed in managerial training.

Manager Observations: Childhood Experiences

A number of the managers reported that their mothers had, as a matter of economic necessity, been in the paid workforce, usually in blue-collar jobs. All of them stated that they were aware as children that a mother in the paid workforce was not the norm. Several of the men clearly indicated that as a result of their childhood experience they
Male and Female Managers’ Awareness of Gender and Desire for Family-friendly Practices in Their Own Lives and in the Workplace

wanted a full-time mother for their children, yet none of the managers apparently gave any consideration to a father being a full-time parent.

The managers indicated that their mothers, whether they were in paid employment or were full-time homemakers, had principal responsibility for child care and domestic tasks. The father’s role was that of the family’s (sole or principal) breadwinner. Even in families where the mother had been in paid employment, traditional family and domestic roles based on gender persisted. Parents continued to model traditional gender roles for their children. The managers who wrote these essays also perpetuated, or indicated that they planned to maintain, this gender division of responsibilities in their own families. This lived experience undoubtedly has, and continues to have, implications for the development and uptake of family-friendly programs and practices and the development of women’s careers. (See Striking the balance, HREOC, SDU 2005, Chapter 3, for a current ‘snapshot’ of women’s significantly heavier burden of responsibility for family maintenance.)

A number of the managers, both male and female, asserted that there was no difference in the way they had been raised or educated as boys or girls. They reported that neither their parents nor their teachers discriminated on the basis of gender. Boys and girls, they insisted, could freely choose the toys they played with and the games they played — although they then described girls and boys generally playing games and with toys that are usually associated with their sex. Some women managers recalled a preference for playing boys’ games, but none of the male managers indicated any desire to play with girls’ toys or join in girls’ activities. Several students observed that girls had greater freedom, at least as young children, to choose boys’ toys and games but that this was seriously discouraged by puberty.

Although the managers described differences in the toys and games chosen by boys and girls, they returned to their assertions that there were no differences in their treatment by parents or teachers. They stressed that they had made their career and employment choices as individuals — ignoring, unaware, or denying that gender socialisation may have constrained their choices even if they had been unaware of it at the time, or that employment or career outcomes may have been positively or adversely affected by gender discrimination embodied in organisational policies and practices.

This denial of difference possibly arises from a conception of equality as process rather than as outcome: everyone must be treated the same rather than everyone being given an equal chance to achieve the desired outcome. Not only did the managers assert that they had not been socialised differently — treated differently — by teachers and parents on the basis of sex, they repeatedly indicated that they themselves ‘treated everyone just the same’, without questioning that in doing so they may possibly have advantaged some people and disadvantaged others. These managers certainly presented an unsophisticated notion of equity, which suggests that management education programs need to present alternative views and approaches in this area.
Managers Observations: Organisational Policies and Practices

In the third part of the essay, the managers were asked to consider HRM policies and practices which might reinforce gender discrimination and what policies and practices might be developed and implemented to create equal employment opportunities for women. All of the managers identified women’s disadvantage in employment as arising from their childbearing and childrearing responsibilities. (Only a few suggested any other gender issues which could result in disadvantage for women in the workplace, but they did not explore the HRM implications of these.)

Unsurprisingly, the only HRM policies and practices considered were the development of family-friendly initiatives. While both male and female managers saw it as desirable for organisations to develop family-friendly policies and practices, these were seen by both as principally, if not solely, for the benefit of female employees. While some of the male managers commented that they would like to spend more time with their families and that, therefore, such policies and practices were desirable for men as well, it is clear that they saw family-friendly policies and practices as facilitating a lifestyle preference rather than as a practical necessity.

The female managers indicated that as adolescents they had planned to work between completing their education and the birth of their first child. (Most of the managers had indicated that parents and teachers had conveyed an expectation that boys and girls would enter the workforce.) Only the younger female managers in the group indicated that as adolescents they had been interested in a career (as opposed to a job), but they too, like the older female managers, recognised the tension between work and family. The older women apparently accepted that the ‘solution’ to the tensions created by work and family demands was to leave the workforce to care for children, some not imagining they would want or need to return to it later in life. The younger women expressed greater awareness — and greater stress — about the demands of work and family, most expressing the hope of resolving this tension by establishing themselves in a career before having children and then either returning to full-time employment after maternity leave or keeping their hand in through part-time work. None of them indicated any awareness that accessing maternity leave and family responsibilities was likely to have an adverse effect on their careers.

The male managers recalled that, as adolescents, they had expected to enter the workforce after completing their education and to continue in employment until retirement. They had also assumed that they would marry and that their wives would have principal responsibility for children and domestic matters. The unspoken assumption in many of their essays was that their wives would not continue in the paid workforce or that paid work would be a secondary role for their wives, especially once they had children.

In their essays, both male and female managers realised and apparently accepted that women would have principal day-to-day responsibility for child care and family and household maintenance. Their expectations became their reality. Only one of the managers indicated that this was the product of a considered discussion between him and his partner: after discussion, they had determined to maintain traditional male and
female roles with regard to family responsibilities based on economic circumstances, as he earned twice his partner’s income.

The managers without children indicated that they expected to follow in traditional gender roles when they had children. The younger women expressed awareness that having children could have a detrimental effect on their careers, but they believed they could minimise any adverse effects by establishing themselves in their careers before having children. None considered negotiating a more equitable distribution of child care and family responsibilities with their husbands. This could be the result of an unexplored recognition that their partners were more likely to have the higher paid position or an unwillingness to challenge, at the personal relationship level, the gender disadvantage of traditional family roles.

These managers experienced a domestic division of labour in their birth and marriage families that arguably coloured not only their expectations about their own roles and those of their partners, but also their understanding and expectations regarding their employees and work–family matters. Family-friendly policies were welcomed by both the male and female managers because they were seen to enable women to continue to fulfill their traditional family commitments while participating in the paid workforce. The issue of work–family balance was not addressed in terms of redistributing family responsibilities more equitably between the partners, nor were the implications of women alone accessing family-friendly programs considered with regard to such issues as career development, promotion, recruitment and selection or training opportunities. In other words, neither female nor male managers considered the possibility that because family-friendly policies would generally be accessed by women rather than men, such policies could work to stigmatise women in the workplace (see Schwartz 1989).

The older women managers (late 30s–50s) and the younger female managers (mid-20s–early 30s) reported somewhat different experiences and expectations with regard to combining family and work responsibilities. The older female managers expected that they would leave the workforce upon the birth of their first child. Some had considered working part time or returning to the workforce when their children were older. In other words, they saw work and family as serial experiences rather than as concurrent ones. They did not, however, connect their experiences to such HRM issues as re-entry and retraining, promotion, job design (e.g. job sharing), evaluation of experience and skills gained in the non-paid workforce and so on.

The younger female managers were more likely to expect to combine family and career. They had expectations that various family-friendly initiatives are or will be in place to assist them meeting their family responsibilities while maintaining their presence in the paid workforce. They indicated no awareness of the fact that few employers provide any assistance with child care, that many employers are reluctant to actually provide flexible work options, even when they have policies in place, and that accessing maternity leave and flexible work options often relegates a woman to the ‘mommy track’, sidelining them from career development and advancement opportunities.

A number of male managers indicated that they wanted to spend more time with their families. They expressed support for family-friendly initiatives that would enable them to do so. Only two of the male managers, however, had made career decisions that
allowed them to achieve this. Both noted that they had ‘sacrificed’ career opportunities as a result, although neither seemed particularly regretful. It should be noted that, based on their comments, their wives apparently continued to bear the heavier burden of day-to-day child care and housekeeping: neither wife (at least on the evidence provided in her husband’s essay) seemed to gain a corresponding benefit to her career as a result of her husband’s ‘sacrifice’. (Interestingly, none of the female managers considered women’s family responsibilities in terms of ‘sacrifice’ nor did they observe that women’s heavier responsibilities for family maintenance not only enhanced their partners’ careers but that of their male colleagues generally.)

It is important to note that male and female managers saw the benefits of family-friendly practices in balancing work–family responsibilities differently. The female managers indicated that flexible work arrangements would enable them to meet their day-to-day responsibilities for child care, errand-running and housekeeping. Men desired flexible work arrangements to increase their leisure activities, either personal activities or those involving their children. For women, family-friendly initiatives allowed them to meet the demands of family care, in other words, for handling their ‘second job’. For men, family-friendly initiatives allowed them to increase their leisure time, whether for personal or family activities. Men saw family-friendly practices, particularly flexible time arrangements, as allowing them to see their child perform in a school play or to take them on a camping trip; women, on the other hand, saw flexible time arrangements as allowing them to take a child to the dentist or attend a parent–teacher conference, or to run errands for the benefit of husbands and children, or to do the grocery shopping and prepare meals and do the housework.

While male and female managers identified the advantages for themselves of family-friendly practices, none demonstrated any awareness that men and women saw family friendly initiatives differently: women as facilitating the balancing of two competing jobs (paid work and unpaid family labour) and men as facilitating greater leisure, whether for personal pleasure or to engage in social activities with their children or to witness their accomplishments.

As none of the managers recognised that men and women perceive the concept ‘family-friendly’ differently, they did not explore its significance for perceptions of male and female employees in the workplace. Given that men see family time as a leisure choice, it is reasonable within this context for male managers to see employees who do use family-friendly opportunities (usually women) as less committed to their careers and to offer them fewer opportunities for career development and advancement. The failure of both male and female managers to consider men’s and women’s different understandings of the purpose of family-friendly practices also means that they lack the awareness that would cause them to question the meaning that organisational cultures ascribe to those who access these options.

This lack of awareness also results in organisational failure to address the HR implications involved in creating and implementing family-friendly practices. Unless the ramifications of the flexibilities required to balance work and family commitments are addressed — for both individual employees and managers — there will be resistance from both quarters. A male manager agreed in principle with the introduction of family-friendly programs, but he thought they posed difficulties for managers and supervisors who still worked within time, budget and staffing constraints that had not been adjusted
Male and Female Managers’ Awareness of Gender and Desire for Family-friendly Practices in Their Own Lives and in the Workplace

...to accommodate the ramifications of family-friendly practices. In other words, while family-friendly initiatives supposedly offer flexibility to employees, organisations often do not consider the implications for managing work units with regard to meeting unit performance objectives when arrangements are not made to accommodate flexible work options. It is therefore not surprising that in practice many managers and supervisors, female as well as male, are hostile towards the introduction of family-friendly initiatives or deliver politically correct statements in support of them while proving reluctant to actually implement them.

Family-friendly initiatives were seen as generally beneficial to female employees in terms of allowing them to combine work and family commitments. None of the managers asked about the exercise of opportunities like flexitime or part-time work and might be detrimental to women if appropriate changes were not made to organisational culture (and thus the organisation’s interpretation of their actions or in organisational practices with regard to various HR functions). For example, are women working part time to be offered access to career development programs and promotions? Is a woman who must take a day off to look after a sick child seen as equally committed to the organisation and her career compared with a male colleague who is able to avoid such responsibilities because of his wife’s flexibility? Family-friendly policies and practices may actually work to further stigmatise women in the workplace unless organisational cultures change to recognise and accommodate employees’ private lives and cease penalising those who access them.

None of the managers asked how consideration of family–work balance might provide opportunities to develop more effective HR practices. For example, might re-designing jobs to permit job sharing as a family-friendly initiative not only facilitate work–family balance, but also enable better customer service? Could addressing the question of the significant amount of unpaid overtime expected of many managerial and professional staff reduce absenteeism and turnover? Might some of the long hours put in at work be more for ‘show’ than necessity? Might some of the late hours really be because employees are re-organising their eight-hour day: for example, male employees taking a long lunch to play a game of squash or have an extra glass of wine at lunch, then putting in a few hours after 5 pm to ‘pay back’ for their midday leisure time? Their female colleagues, on the other hand, may have worked diligently through the normal workday in order to leave promptly at 5 pm to pick up children from day-care and prepare the evening meal. Are male managers’ patterns of work supported by the unspoken continued organisational reliance on employees’ domestic support systems (i.e. a wife) to provide the necessary flexibility to accommodate their particular work commitments? What happens, then, to employees who are also the domestic support system? Do careers require an uninterrupted straight-line trajectory? How could organisations accommodate the re-entry of people into the workforce or facilitate career change?

Although several of the male managers recorded their recognition and appreciation of their wives for taking principal responsibility for child care and domestic matters, they did not, even when they seemingly had the opportunity, assume a more equal share of day-to-day family maintenance in order to assist their wives in balancing their work and family commitments. Women did not seem to expect that this would occur, although when imagining what it might have been to be a man, they expressed a wistful hope that they would have assumed greater responsibility than their real-life husbands for day-to-day child care and domestic tasks. Neither the male nor the female managers seemed to
recognise that organisations that offer family-friendly practices, but which have organisational cultures that penalise employees for accessing them, may make it difficult for both women and men to re-negotiate arrangements for family maintenance in the private sphere.

CONCLUSION

Family-friendly initiatives hold the promise of enabling women employees to balance work and family responsibilities. This promise will only be realised, however, if individual, social and organisational barriers to work–life balance are addressed. The essays on gender issues in employment written by managers in an HRM subject suggest some of the difficulties that are likely to be encountered in developing and implementing family-friendly programs as effective means for managing diversity. Family-friendly programs cannot be implemented without appropriate modification of other HRM policies and practices to ensure that employees accessing them are not disadvantaged in their employment. For example, part-time employees need to have access to training and promotion opportunities. Additionally, managers and supervisors cannot be expected to be supportive of family-friendly practices if they are required to accommodate employee flexibility without corresponding organisational support that enables performance objectives to be met.

While organisational practices alone do not determine the decisions individual employees make about their private lives, it is to deny reality to suggest that organisations’ employment practices do not influence those decisions. While there are numerous reasons why men may seek to avoid assuming a more equitable share of childrearing and domestic responsibilities, they certainly will not be willing to do so until organisations cease penalising, passively and actively, the employees, usually women, who access family-friendly practices. As these managers revealed, organisational cultures will need to change — not just organisational practices. Similarly, as these managers revealed, the failure of management education to address gender issues means that both men and women lack the analytical tools and necessary information to consider the impact of gender on their own work lives and workplaces. Until gender becomes a core component in management education content and a core consideration in the development and changes to organisational culture, family-friendly practices may contribute more to institutionalising women’s disadvantage in the workforce than to providing them with equitable employment and career advancement opportunities.

REFERENCES

Male and Female Managers’ Awareness of Gender and Desire for Family-friendly Practices in Their Own Lives and in the Workplace


McDonald, P; Guthrie, D; Bradley, L; and Shakespeare-Finch, J (2005) ‘Investigating work–family policy aims and experiences,’ *Employee Relations*, v. 27, no. 5: 478–94.


Male and Female Managers’ Awareness of Gender and Desire for Family-friendly Practices in Their Own Lives and in the Workplace


Strachan, G and Barrett, M (2006) *Down the pipeline? Are Women Reaching Senior Positions in Law and Accounting Firms?* viewed 21 August 2007; no web address provided; access via Google ‘women’s employment family-friendly policies’.


