

Rebalancing child-care equations ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

LONDON - As prize ceremonies go, the working mothers' top employers awards is not exactly in the same league as the Oscars, but the issues raised by the event chime with a very live debate in Britain right now over flexible working for parents.

At a low-key presentation in the basement of a central London hotel this month, judges handed prizes to multinational companies like Unilever and Royal Bank of Scotland for commitment to family-friendly working.

The main speaker related how only that morning she had witnessed a fellow senior female executive in the office parking lot performing a frantic handover of a feverish daughter (dressed in pajamas and wrapped in a duvet) to grandparents who had driven some distance to remove the sick child so the mother could attend an important board meeting. There was sympathetic laughter from an audience uncomfortably familiar with just such a situation.

It feels rather depressingly backward-looking to have a prize geared mainly to mothers, when it is so clear that until men start worrying about work-life balance and begin demanding flexible hours so they can help with child care, there will be little progress toward gender equality at work.

But the founders of Workingmums.co.uk, an online recruitment site that has been running the awards for several years, say they focus on mothers rather than parents because this reflects reality. Demand among women for flexible working hours to care for children massively outstrips that among men.

At RBS, which won a prize for its commitment to flexible working, at least 22 percent of employees have a formally agreed-upon flexible working arrangement, and 92 percent of those flexible positions are held by women.

Unilever, the consumer goods company, which won the overall prize for being the most family-friendly organization, has an "anywhere anytime, agile working program" in offices throughout the world. It is designed to allow greater flexibility for all staff members, regardless of gender and whether they have children, but the company says it is particularly eager to hold on to and promote female employees. Women, as Unilever points out in company literature, control \$12 trillion of the \$18.4 trillion of consumer spending globally.

The company's current gender balance leaves something to be desired. Although more than 50 percent of its graduate recruits are women, and 30 percent of its non-executive directors are women, the company's diversity strategy reveals that there is only one woman at "leadership executive level" (the next tier in the hierarchy).

The British government has also been trying to promote flexible working as something that men should take up as much as women, and it announced a series of measures this month aiming to help them take more time off after the birth of their children. But the full force of the initiative was ripped out at the 11th hour to cut costs.

Announcing the changes last week, Nick Clegg, the deputy prime minister and leader of the Liberal Democrats in the coalition government, said Britain's current maternity leave arrangements, where women are entitled to up to a year's leave, reflected an old mind-set that "families are still comprised of one breadwinner and one homemaker: Mum in the kitchen, Dad in the office."

Because it is often easier for women to stay at home after the child is born, the mathematics of family budgets get skewed toward keeping women in the caring role forever, and the gap between men's and women's pay (which in Britain stands at 14.9 percent, 42 years after equal pay legislation was introduced) will be hard to close.

"She gets the yearlong maternity leave; after that, the expectation is she'll continue to be the primary carer - so she's the one who goes part-time. That, very often, means she ends up on lower pay, with fewer chances for promotion, and it's at exactly this point that the pay gap begins to widen," Mr. Clegg said. "It's heartbreaking to see fathers missing out on being with their children. It's heartbreaking to watch women lower their ambitions for themselves."

A new system will allow mothers and fathers to share parental leave over the first year more easily, to remove the system's sexist bias. Plans to increase blocks of use-it-or-lose-it, nontransferable leave for fathers from the current two weeks of paternity leave had to be shelved because of the cost.

But mind-sets are changing. Unexpectedly, the London Olympics created serious new interest in the benefits of flexible working. Vast numbers of companies in London encouraged employees to work remotely to avoid transport disruption caused by the Games; many of

those who did were men who previously had no exposure to working from home. Research suggests that the experience has made employers think more positively about staff members working less conventionally.

Kate Grussing, founder and managing director of Sapphire Partners, a headhunting firm for women in senior positions, said that for the situation to improve, men needed to start demanding the right to work flexibly. "Men represent half of the parental team. Societies where female representation in the labor force is most developed are those where men are doing their share."

-reprinted from the New York Times

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