

One step forward, two steps back

The proliferation of family friendly workplaces is a step in the right direction, but their efforts could be threatened by how child care strategies are implemented, writes *Santha Fernandez*.

The Family Friendly Workplace (FFW) has begun to proliferate, which is encouraging and a step in the right direction. However, at the centre of this study are not questions about access to family friendly provisions but their take-up rates. The method in which these provisions are implemented in these organisations may in fact be a two step back process for those who take up the services offered.

Research findings from a case study of a specific FFW show gender-related disproportionate take-up rates of family friendly provisions by a very specific, but significant, group of employees. Specifically, more female than male employees from couple families with dependent children are taking up the relevant family friendly provisions. These provisions generally provide parents time off paid work which arguably is 'extra' time devoted to child care and the related domestic work; a major component of unpaid work for this demographic group.

Questions then arise not about the validity of the FFW, but rather their implementation strategies and

organisational cultures. Organisations need to make a concerted effort to take on more socially responsive approaches in the implementation of work and family/life balance.

Current organisational trends tend to accord mothers special leniency in taking up the organisations' family friendly provisions. Such a trend long-term could adversely impact and undermine the progress and efforts made to-date of gender equality in unpaid work and by doing so, take us two steps back.

Gender-based differences in unpaid work have been a contentious issue among western nations ever since women entered the labour force. Various attempts to narrow the gap have been fruitful to some extent and critical given the growing numbers of women entering the paid workforce and the fact that the average total (paid and unpaid) number of hours worked by women per week exceeds that of men mostly because of the 'unpaid' work component.

In households where there are dependant children, child care and the associated domestic responsibilities constitute much of the unpaid work, thus working

women from couple families with dependent children are especially vulnerable to long hours in unpaid work.

There is evidence that since the 1960s and up to the late 1990s the gap between men's and women's contribution to unpaid work has been reduced and this is a milestone achievement for women's equality in unpaid work. But the rising popularity of contemporary family friendly workplaces and, more specifi-

comes to matters of caring for dependant children. Additionally, while debate on work and family life has begun to include the role of fathers, it nevertheless tends to be heavily focused on mothers.

The most relevant family friendly provisions for parents of dependant children fall into two main categories; leave options and flexible working conditions. These provisions provide employees with

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cally, current implementation strategies and organisational culture, appears set to reverse this progress made to date of reducing the gap.

Edith Gray in her 2001 study *Colliding spheres: Work and family initiatives and parental realities* noted that female employees with very young children had less access to family-friendly benefits and workplace arrangements than their male counterparts. This inequality in access was traced to two principal reasons: first, family-friendly benefits and flexible arrangements are generally made available to full-time positions and second, they are more prevalent in higher ranking than lower ranking jobs. This problem of differential access has been cited as a significant problem in Australian research on work and family.

However, when it comes to taking-up their organisation's family friendly provisions, the situation is reversed. When they have access to them, female employees generally find it easier to avail themselves of the family friendly provisions. This is because employers tend to have a more lenient attitude towards female employees, especially when it

either time off paid work (as in the case of maternity leave, carer's leave and parental leave) or they allow employees to reorganise work time (flexible start and finish times, job sharing and telecommuting). In taking up these provisions, employees effectively divert time off paid work and channel it towards child care and the associated domestic roles. This diverted time is 'extra' time in unpaid work, over and above a parent's otherwise normal unpaid work contributions.

Based on this argument it follows that female employees from couple families with dependent children, by being enabled easier take-up of their organisation's family friendly provisions, are more likely engage in 'extra' amount of unpaid work than the male parent.

It is possible that as this organisational culture of support and empathy directed in favour of female workers with child care responsibilities continues, family friendly organisations will ultimately provide a disservice to women by adversely impacting and undermining the progress and efforts made to-date of gender equality of labour in unpaid work

– forcing women to take two steps back. Of critical significance are the findings of a study reported by Adele Horin in her article “Less is more when sharing the workload” in the Sydney Morning Herald, 23 December 2005, which provides real evidence that the regress has already begun.

The results are drawn from a case study of an FFO, a Sydney-based international banking and financial services business which was a finalist of the 2002 Work and Family awards organised by the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI) and the Commonwealth of Australia’s Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR). At the time of the survey it had a total of 744 offices and around 15,879 employees across offices ranging from small to large in all eight Australian states and territories.

The research analysed the policies and statements of provisions of the organisation, the company’s formal submissions to the Work and Family awards and other documents relating to family and work initiatives. From these documents, a total of 50 family friendly provisions tendered as being offered at the time of application or by the time of the research were identified. Then questionnaires were distributed to 252 participants in four of the organisation’s strategic business units in the Sydney metropolitan area with a take up rate of 36.5 per cent.

The findings of the study indicated that the FFO’s work and family balance policies initiatives were gender-free, so access to the family (child) friendly provisions was not the issue.

The problem stemmed from the take-up rate of the provisions: more females than males make regular use of the provisions while males tend to use them on a one-off basis. Since access to provisions was not the issue, the issue was more likely related to organisational culture: one that regarded mothers as primary care givers and adopted a more liberal attitude towards them, at the same time frowning on and disapproving of fathers’ liberal use of the provisions.

The conclusion from these results was that the FFO needed to actively engage in a concerted effort to promote and encourage male employees with child care responsibilities to take-up family (child) friendly provisions offered. An on-going culture that either supports or denies a disproportionate gender take-up rate of family friendly provisions within the organisational setting has implications for the wider issues of gender divide in unpaid work.

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