

*What gets measured gets managed:
gender (in)equality in the local government sector*

INTERIM REPORT FOR IMPACT LOCAL GOVERNMENT DIVISION



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1 Executive summary

IMPACT trade union Local Government Division has commissioned this research in response to issues raised by its workplace representatives and members. Gender equality in the workplace is a core consideration for IMPACT, with its recent #ClockedOut campaign on the gender pay gap being a prominent example of its work in this area.

Within the local government division, representatives have raised a particular dimension of this wider problem. Despite the fact that women are over represented in the public sector, they are very under-represented at senior levels – an issue no less pertinent in the local government sector than other aspects of the broader public service. Women continue to undertake the majority of unpaid care work, and therefore family-friendly policies, enabling workers to reconcile their caring and work responsibilities, are a critically important component of women’s career progression. Such work practices allow women to maintain their participation in paid work over time, so that they can build the skills and experience required to secure promotion. And yet such policies can also be a double edged sword for women, because of a perception that those who avail of such practices may be less committed to their careers, and/or that these policies may not be accessible to women at senior levels. By and large, Irish local government has a lamentable record in implementing progressive family friendly flexibility – even compared to other sectors of the Irish public service. Accordingly, IMPACT wishes to examine vertical gender segregation in the local government sector, and explore the extent to which formally stated family friendly policies are in fact accessible to those they are intended to benefit.

The original goal was for this research project to be completed in time for conference. However, a gaping data deficit has frustrated this ambition, and a different methodological approach is now being taken; the objectives of the project remain unchanged:

- Map (as far as possible) the extent and nature of gender segregation in local authority white-collar employment, including the proportion of women in junior, middle and senior grades in the sector;
- Create greater understanding of the barriers to women’s advancement in local authority white-collar employment, and factors behind the local authority ‘glass ceiling,’ including management attitudes to the implementation and operation of family-friendly policies and practices;
- Make recommendations for union and management actions to address barriers to female career progression in the sector; and
- Inform the union’s ongoing campaign on this issue.

The next phase of the research project is to compare family friendly flexibility in local authorities with other sectors in the public service, and to survey local authority HR Directors and senior IMPACT representatives in each local authority to explore how family-friendly policies are implemented in practice.

A key driver for the increased availability of such policies has been a change in the composition of the workforce, with a significant increase in women’s participation over the last two decades being particularly marked. At the end of 2016, there were marginally more women employees in Ireland than men. The trend is more pronounced in public sector employment, where women now account for over half of the workforce. While there are some limited publicly available data on vertical segregation in the civil service – demonstrating a consistent pattern of under-representation at senior levels – there is no structured system in place to



monitor gender segregation in the broader public service, nor in the local government sector more specifically. In fact, the only such data publicly available are from an Irish Independent newspaper survey a number of years ago. The Minister for Housing, Planning, Environment & Local Government has however recently committed publishing a gender analysis by grade in each local authority later this year, and on an annual basis thereafter.

While formal gender equality strategies have been in place in the civil service for a number of years, there is no equivalent applying to the broader public sector – despite a commitment in the last *National Women's Strategy*. Neither has the local government sector, which has undergone significant structural change in recent years, taken the opportunity to mainstream a gender equality approach into its workforce planning. However, the new *National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020* does contain some important commitments in this area.

A number of broad points can be drawn from the literature on family friendly flexibility. The business case for such practices is now well developed, and empirical work has shown that employers with experience of implementing such policies find them to be cost effective.

A key point is that “flexibility *per se* is not indicative of family friendliness”; the test is that flexibility is designed to meet the needs of employees, and is mutually agreed between employer and employee. A related dynamic is that the mere presence of such policies in a workplace does not mean that all workers have equal access to them e.g. access may be dependent on grade, length of service etc.; some flexible working arrangements are not available to senior staff. In addition, being able to avail of flexibility is rarely an automatic right, but rather decided on a case by case basis in line with employer needs. These issues may go some way to explaining a ‘take-up gap’, i.e. the gap between employees’ expressed desire for family friendly flexibility and the lower relatively low levels of take up that have been found in many workplaces.

The “the attitudes, skills and behaviours of line managers” have been identified as being centrally important to the successful implementation of family friendly flexibility: mixed messages about the ‘acceptability’ of availing of flexibility, lack of guidance for managers, confusion about roles and responsibilities all contribute to poor implementation. In workplaces with a long hours culture, and/or which are under-staffed, these challenges can even be exacerbated by family friendly flexibility.

From an employee perspective, the literature also identifies a number of barriers to take up. These include information gaps, heavy workloads, a concern about how availing of family friendly flexibility will be perceived and how it might impact on career progression, and particularly for lower paid workers, being unable to afford the reduction in income associated with reduced working hours.

In sum, the successful implementation of family friendly flexibility requires cultural change at the organisational level. In Ireland, a key challenge in progressing this issue is the dearth of data on the nature and extent of work-life balance policies in Irish workplaces.

The most recent data available in this regard are from the *National Workplace Survey* conducted in 2009. Analysis of the Survey found that the vast majority of public service managers identified employee needs for family friendly flexibility as a key driver of change in their workplace; significantly, the most intense pressure they were experiencing in 2009 was in relation to coping with the economic downturn and budget cuts. Public service managers reported increased barriers to delivering greater flexibility compared to 2003, most particularly structures and practices making it more difficult to adopt family friendly flexibility. In the local government sector, the most pressing constraint identified by managers was budget constraints.



While the formal availability of family friendly flexibility appears widespread in the public sector, researchers caution that this does not necessarily translate into high take up, and the NES 2009 reports significant gaps between the availability of such work practices and the degree to which employees are actually availing of them – an issue identified in the academic literature. Analysis also finds that, contrary perhaps to expectations, that accessing such policies does not necessarily benefit the employee; gender analysis reveals that in Ireland, women in the public sector often experience an increase in stress when availing of such flexibility.

However, these analyses do not explore differences in this regard between different areas of the public service, nor differences in implementation across different sites e.g. across the 31 local authorities.

To summarise, there is a gaping data deficit in relation to gender equality and access to family friendly policies in the local government sector. If 'what gets measured gets managed', we should not be surprised at continued gender equality within local government. The next phase of this research aims to make some contribution to addressing that information gap.

2 Introduction

This is an interim report of research commissioned by IMPACT in relation to gender equality and access to family friendly work practices in local authorities. The original intention was to have the research fully completed in time for conference, however, a gaping data deficit has frustrated this ambition. While the dearth of relevant data indicates that the level of commitment to achieving public policy goals is wholly inadequate, it is also a confirmation that the impetus for the research, grounded in the experience of IMPACT representatives and members, is well founded.

The research project aims to explore the following hypothesis: it is well known that women are largely absent from senior positions in local authorities, and dominate lower paid grades. Progressive family friendly policies have been shown to be effective – in other sectors and countries – in tackling the ‘glass ceiling’ that hampers women’s career progression, enabling consistent participation in the workforce over time, allowing women to build the experience, skills and networking that leads to promotion to senior positions. However, research has also identified that where women feel that availing of such policies signals that they are less committed to their careers and/or that such flexibility is not available at senior levels of the organisation, they are less likely to apply for promotion in the first place, creating a vicious circle. By and large, Irish local government has a lamentable record in implementing progressive family friendly flexibility – even compared to other sectors of the Irish public service. Accordingly, IMPACT wishes to examine vertical gender segregation in the local government sector, and explore the extent to which formally stated family friendly policies are in fact accessible to those they are intended to benefit.

While the research is now being conducted in two phases as a consequence of the dearth of data, the objectives of the project continue to be to:

- Map (as far as possible) the extent and nature of gender segregation in local authority white-collar employment, including the proportion of women in junior, middle and senior grades in the sector;
- Create greater understanding of the barriers to women’s advancement in local authority white-collar employment, and factors behind the local authority ‘glass ceiling,’ including management attitudes to the implementation and operation of family-friendly policies and practices;
- Make recommendations for union and management actions to address barriers to female career progression in the sector; and
- Inform the union’s ongoing campaign on this issue.

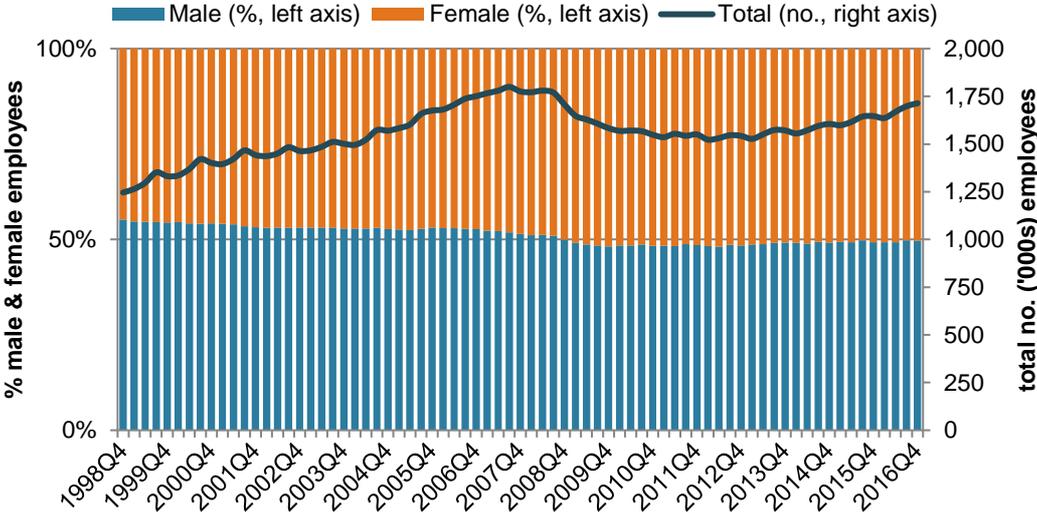
This first phase of research sets the context, over-viewing gender dynamics in the Irish labour market over recent years, and in public sector employment. This interim research reviews key literature in relation to family friendly flexibility generally, as well as in relation to the civil and public service. The literature review includes a particular focus on the role of family-friendly / work-life balance policies in enabling a more gender balanced workplace, as well as the challenges in implementing such policies.

3 Women and men in the Irish labour market

3.1 Women and men in the workforce in Ireland

The last two decades have seen a very significant increase in women’s participation in the Irish labour market, to the extent that by the end of 2016, there were marginally more women in employment than men. While some of this dynamic is explained by a ‘levelling down’ during the course of the recession, in that more men than women lost their jobs, there is no indication that women’s level of participation is likely to recede.

Figure 1: Male and female employees aged 15 & over



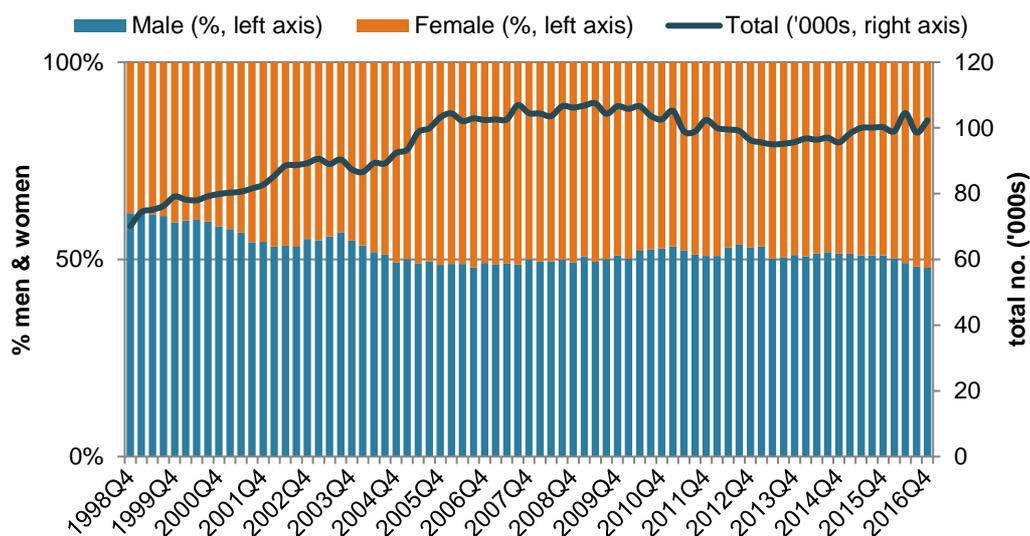
Source: Quarterly National Household Survey, table QNQ19

This trend is more pronounced in public sector employment, with women now accounting for 52% of all working in the ‘Public administration and defence, compulsory social security’ sector, having accounted for less than 40% in this sector in 1998¹.

It is not possible to disaggregate this category any further e.g. to analyse local authority employment specifically. The Department of Public Expenditure & Reform’s Databank records a total of 26,793 whole time equivalent workers employed in local authorities at the end of 2016; applying the gender breakdown above would mean that there were just over 12,800 local authority posts held by men, compared to just under 14,000 women.

¹ The Quarterly National Household Survey disaggregates those in employment using NACE codes – a standard statistical classification of industrial activity. In addition to the category of Public administration and defence, compulsory social security, there are categories for Education and Human health & social work activities, however these categories are not solely comprised of public sector workers.

Figure 2: Males and females aged 15 & over employed in public administration & defence, compulsory social security



Source: Quarterly National Household Survey, table QNQ03

The 2009 National Workplace Survey (p.42) found that among public sector employees, two thirds were employed in either health or education, with 11% in both the civil service and in local government, 8% of public sector workers are in the Gardaí, prisons and defence, with the remaining 3% being employed in non-commercial semi-state bodied.

3.2 Women and men in public sector employment

The National Women's Strategy 2007-16 (2007:96-97) included specific targets in relation to women's representation at senior levels of the civil service. Specifically, the Strategy (under Objective 14) committed to:

- Ongoing review of Civil Service and broader public service Gender Equality Policy:
 - Review the Civil Service Gender Equality Policy, and develop a new Civil Service Gender Equality Strategy based on the Review by early 2007 (Actions 148 and 149);
 - Develop Gender Equality Strategy for the Public Service modeled on the Civil Service Strategy through establishment of a working group, to report by end 2008 (Action 150);
- Percentage of women in management position in levels in the Civil and Public Service:
 - Continue to monitor target of 33.3% for female Assistant Principal Officers within the Civil Service (Action 151);
 - Set a target of 27% for female Principal Officers within Civil Service by Government decision and incorporate target in Departmental Strategy Statements and Annual Reports to reflect these commitments; target to be achieved within five years (Action 152).

While these were not the most ambitious of targets, data on the gender breakdown of these grades has been made available in Strategy Progress reports, and most recently in a Parliamentary Question from 2015 (26126/15); progress has been modest.

Table 1: Percentage of women at senior grades in the civil service

	2009	2013	2014	2015
Secretary General	19%	26%	23%	20%
Second / Deputy / Assistant Secretary	19%	24%	26%	28%
Principal	27%	34%	36%	36%
Assistant Principal	37%	42%	44%	44%

Source: Progress Report on the National Women’s Strategy May-15 & PQ 26126/15

However, in relation to Action 150, developing a Gender Equality Strategy for the Public Service, both Progress Reports and the Mid-Term Review of the NWS in 2014 are silent, neither is there any reference to such a Strategy on the Department’s website. It would appear that this action was simply not implemented.

In responding to the above Parliamentary Question (which requested a gender breakdown across grades in Government Departments), the then Minister for Public Expenditure & Reform highlighted a number of activities (e.g. a mentoring programme) underway to support greater gender balance at senior levels of the civil service, but made no reference to specific strategies or actions applying to the broader public sector.

3.3 Women and Men in the Local Government Sector

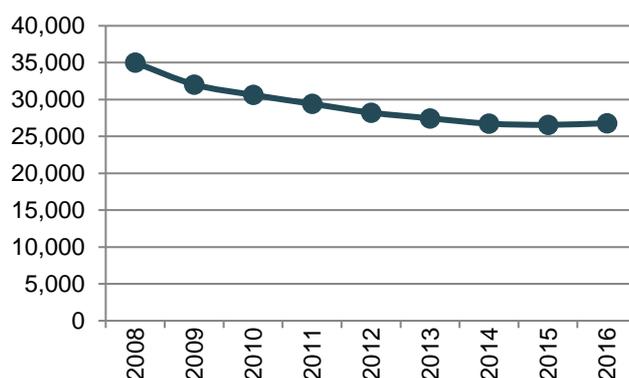
This research aimed to highlight the gender dynamics of local authority employment, however, there is **no centralised or structured system in place to monitor horizontal or vertical gender segregation in the broader public service, or in the local government sector more specifically.**

The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform has developed a Databank, making available a wide range of information on public expenditure, including on the numbers employed in the public service. This is a valuable resource. However, while the Databank details the numbers (WTE) employed in each local authority, by quarter (from 2008), it does not disaggregate these numbers by either grade or gender.

These data show that there has been a very significant reduction of 23% in the overall (whole time equivalent) numbers employed in local authorities between 2008-2016. The scale of reduction has not been even across local authorities, ranging from a high of around a third in Sligo, Roscommon and Wicklow, to a low of around 15% in Monaghan and Wexford². This represents “the highest proportional staffing reduction of any public service area ... involving significant reduction in senior management grades” (DECLG, 2012:x).

² Laois County Council had the smallest percentage staff reduction of 11%.

Figure 3: Total employment in local authorities (WTE)



Source: DPER Databank

Given the scale of change, it is important to be able to analyse the impact of such a significant staff reduction on a number of domains, including the impact on gender equality. The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform aims to provide a “comprehensive” Databank, and notes that it is “keen to respond to suggestions from the public, or from researchers, about additional information that could be released via the Databank” (<http://www.per.gov.ie/en/databank/>). Given the over-representation of women in public sector employment, and the longstanding issues of vertical and horizontal gender segregation the sector, the capacity to disaggregate public service employment by grade and gender would be a good place to start.

The startling fact is that the most recent data available on gender segregation in local authorities is from a survey conducted by the Irish Independent newspaper in 2013. Key findings from this survey included:

- 10 of the (then) 34 local authorities had no women employed at managerial level, while at the best performing local authority, only 21% of senior staff were female;
 - Just three CEOs were women;
 - Women comprised only a fifth of Directors of Services;
 - Around one in eight Heads of Finance were female;
- Overall, less than 30% of staff earning a salary of more than €50,000 were women; while 83% of those at Grades 3–4, earning between €23-43,000 were female.

These data show not only a significant issue with gender equality in the local government sector, they also indicate substantial variance between local authorities in relation to their performance on this metric.

The article is revealing of a rather detached view of central government responsibility in this regard. Significantly, despite the fact that the NWS clearly allocated responsibility for taking action to improve gender equality in the public service to each line Department, the article states that the “Department of the Environment – which funds councils – said it had no role in promoting equality”.

This ‘hands off’ approach was also reflected in the Action Plan published by the Department in 2012 to implement the programme of structural reform in local government. While the importance of gender balance is given some recognition in this action plan, concern is limited to the elected members of local authorities. The irony is that the rationale and actions identified in the Action Plan to increase women’s representation as

elected members are just as relevant to the staff of local authorities. For example, the document (DECLG, 2012:156) notes that:

"There are tangible and intangible barriers to women's participation that local authorities will have to address. For example, women are more likely to have responsibility for childcare and authorities will have to make appropriate arrangements to ensure that the way that they conduct their business is more family-friendly and welcoming. This will involve a change in culture."

"The Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government will consider, in consultation with local authorities and their representative bodies, how local authority business practices and supports for councillors could be adjusted or developed."

The 2012 Action Plan simply does not consider how, in attempting to improve the quality and efficiency of the local government sector, adapting its own employment practices to be more accommodating of diversity can play a role. Perhaps unsurprisingly then, when it came to workforce planning in the context of these structural reforms, gender was not given any consideration.

To develop the 2012 *Local Government Workforce Planning Report*, produced by the County and City Managers' Association (CCMA), the Planning Group had access to "extensive data³ on the make-up of employment within the Local Authority sector on a grade by grade basis, together with substantial data on age profiles across the sector" (2012:6) – conspicuously, no gender breakdown appears to have been requested, even though this is clearly a core consideration in workforce planning. While the report was primarily concerned with the management of Employment Control Framework targets and the structure of the local government workforce in the context of local government reform, this was an opportunity to mainstream the issue of gender into core workforce planning – an opportunity that was not taken.

In response to a Parliamentary Question (17060/17) this year seeking a detailed gender breakdown of local authority employment, the Minister for Housing, Planning, Environment & Local Government confirmed that while his Department does collect quarterly data on local authority staffing, no information is sought on gender. The Minister did state however that his Department will work with the sector to address this, with the aim of publishing a gender analysis by grade in each local authority later this year, and on an annual basis thereafter.

Subsequent to this, the new *National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020* was published. The Strategy includes some progressive elements on gender equality in the workplace, such as the commitment to require companies of 50 or more employees to complete a wage survey periodically and report the results (Action 1.23) – a welcome response to IMPACT's #ClockedOut campaign on the gender pay gap.

The Strategy (p.57-60) notes some relevant actions under the *Civil Service Renewal Plan*, including the target for 50/50 gender balance in senior level civil service appointments⁴. A further range of actions were proposed by the Civil Service Management Board (CSMB), and are intended to support staff at all levels of the organisation, these include:

³ The report notes that data was provided with the assistance of the CCMA Programme Management Office, the Department of Environment, Community & Local Government, and Office of Local Authority Management (OLAM)

⁴ This includes the stipulation that where two candidates for an Assistant Secretary position are deemed of equal merit by TLAC, priority should be given to the female candidate where women are under-represented on the Management Board of the Department/Office in question

- 
- supporting women during and after maternity leave;
 - extending flexible working;
 - increased mentoring and focus on career development;
 - raising awareness of gender inequality and unconscious bias; and
 - monitoring trends as we progress towards a more equal workplace.

The Strategy includes a number of actions in relation to the goal of achieving greater representation of women in senior positions in the civil and public service, including:

- Research with the ESRI on barriers preventing women from application for senior positions in the Civil Service, and follow-up action. This is to be conducted over 2017-20, with the DJE and DPER taking lead responsibility (Action 4.9);
- Conduct a mapping exercise on gender balance in senior positions in the public service and assess possible barriers to achieving greater representation of women in senior positions. Based on the outcomes of actions to increase gender balance at senior level in the Civil Service and related learning in the public service, evaluate and prioritise actions which could increase the representation of women in senior positions in the public service (Action 4.10).

Action 4.10 bears an uncanny resemblance to the unimplemented Action 150 in the last NWS. Nonetheless, these are positive recommendations which could, and it is argued should, be extended beyond the civil service and into the broader public service, including specifically in relation to the local government sector. It is also important that the mapping exercise on gender balance within in public sector gives particular consideration to the local government sector.

In addition, there are a number of institutions which could play a more proactive role in promoting gender equality. These include the Public Appointments Service (PAS), which manages recruitment and promotion campaigns within the civil and public service, including internal promotion campaigns for senior roles in local authorities, and it's sister organisation, the Commission for Public Service Appointments (CPSA), which regulates public service recruitment and promotion panels.

PAS does not routinely publish gender analysis of its campaigns, and while it did commission a *Diversity Report* to exploring issue in relation to immigrant workers in 2009, this appears to be the only examination of the service from an equality perspective. Given the widespread recognition that women are underrepresented at senior levels of the public service, routine, published analysis of the gender profile of applicants, shortlisted, interviewed and recommended candidates would be useful.

The CPSA publishes Codes of Practice in relation to public service appointments. Its recently revised general Code of Practice doesn't refer to gender, but notes that "the Commission wholly opposes any form of direct or indirect discrimination, whether active or passive. The selection process adopted and the way in which it is applied must be undertaken with full commitment to equality of opportunity" (CPSA, 2017:15). The CPSA has the capacity to conduct audits on the process e.g. by focusing on individual office holders, auditing on a thematic basis, or reviewing specific recruitment programmes (CPSA, 2017:24). To date, the CPSA has conducted 13 audits, one of which focused on the local government sector (published October 2012). However

it would be difficult to draw out gender dynamics from that audit as the four positions were in areas which are traditionally gender segregated and male dominated⁵.

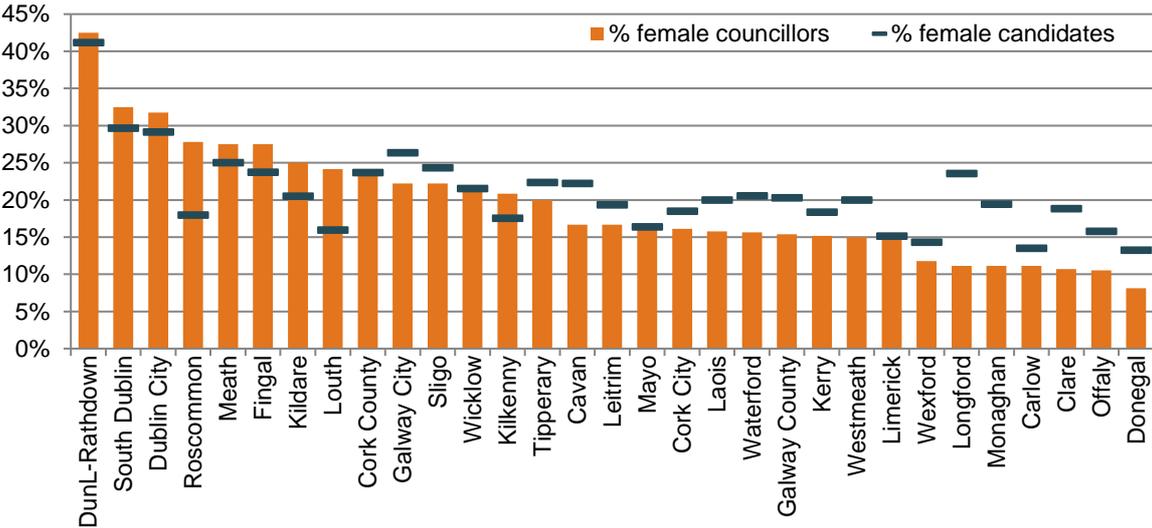
Another potential avenue through which these dynamics could be examined is via the recently (2014) established National Oversight and Audit Commission (NOAC). NOAC has a very wide ranging remit, extending to any function undertaken by local government, including overseeing the implementation of national policy for the sector, and evaluating the implementation of public service reform, by local government bodies. For example, in its most recent report on performance indicators in local authorities, it examines implementation of policy and practice on sick leave. NOAC could therefore be requested by the Minister to examine gender balance in local authority employment, for example, or to scrutinise the implementation of work-life balance policies.

To summarise, there is a gaping data deficit in relation to gender equality and access to family friendly policies in the local government sector. If 'what gets measured gets managed', we should not be surprised at continued gender equality within local government.

Women's representation in local government decision making

The final area in which gender balance in local government can be considered is in relation to the members themselves. Women are substantially under-represented among the elected members of local authorities: in the most recent local elections in 2014, only about a fifth (21.6%) of candidates were women, and only about a fifth (20.8%) of elected councillors are women.

Figure 4: Female candidates and female councillors, 2014 local elections



Source: DHCLG Local Elections 2014: Results, Transfer of Votes and Statistics

This does represent a marginal improvement on the 2009 and 2004 local elections, where just 19% of councillors elected were women. However, there is considerable variance across the 31 local authorities. The

⁵ The four recruitment campaigns audited were for a Senior Executive Engineer in Louth County Council, a Senior Planner in Laois County Council, an Executive Engineering Manager in Dublin City Council and Chief Fire Officer in Roscommon County Council.



percentage of local councillors who are women ranges from a high of 43% in Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown, to a low of just 8% in Donegal.

4 Family friendly policies in the workplace

4.1 What does the literature tell us about family friendly work practices?

In research conducted for the National Framework Committee on Family Friendly Policies, Drew et al (2003) draw out a number of findings from the literature on family-friendly / work-life balance work practices.

The business case arguments in favour of facilitating work-life balance are familiar at this point, summarised by Drew et al (2003:22) as reducing staff turnover, and therefore recruitment, induction and training costs, along with retaining the skills and knowledge of experienced staff; reducing casual sick leave, which is sometimes how employees manage when they don't feel confident about requesting access to family friendly practices; improved morale and productivity resulting from lower employee stress, and possibly stronger employee loyalty; and becoming an employer of choice, capable of attracting the best quality staff. In this context, Dex & Smith's (cited in Drew et al, 2003:22) analysis of data from the UK *Workplace Employee Relations Survey* found that around 9 in 10 employers found them cost-effective, with improved productivity and performance being associated with family friendly policies including paternity and parental leave, job-sharing, and being able to change from full-time to part-time hours.

Danish research conducted by Hojgaard notes that while workplace flexibility is critically important in facilitating employees to reconcile work and family life, other factors such as the degree to which working hours are evenly distributed between the sexes, the availability and cost of childcare, as well as the "general workplace culture and its attitude towards measures for reconciling work and family life' are also important (Drew et al, 2003:19).

While the significant increase in women's labour market participation and the decline of the traditional 'male breadwinner' model is a key driver for wider availability of workplace flexibility, it is important to remember is that it is not just employees with children who may need access to such practices – increasingly, staff will also need to be supported to reconcile work with caring for an older relative. In this context, Philips et al stress that "a 'one size fits all' approach to flexible working is important". Families are more diverse and multi-layered now, so these work practices "need to develop in a way which is responsive to the work-life balance needs of single person households, that may not have caring responsibilities, just as, in the past, it focused almost exclusively upon the needs of the heterosexual, two-person family, with dependent children" (Drew et al, 2003:21).

A critically important point, picked up in Watson et al. in their (2010) analysis of the National Workplace Survey, it a point highlighted by Kodz et al. (2002): "the availability of family friendly working arrangements within an organisation does not necessarily imply that these are offered equally to all members of staff. In many organisations, some options and flexibilities are dependent on grade or length of service. At one level, options like job-sharing are often not available to professional or management staff as it is felt that their roles can only be performed by one, full-time member of staff. However, in other instances, certain options or flexibilities are regarded as more of a perk for particularly valued employees. In any case, family friendly working arrangements are rarely available as an automatic right, with organisations reserving the right to judge each request on its own merits and only agreeing if changes can fit in with business needs" (cited in Drew et al., 2003:25).



Drew et al note that while a wide array of arrangements are frequently grouped under this heading, “it is not always obvious which working arrangements facilitate the reconciliation of work and family life and which do not” and that “flexibility *per se* is not indicative of family friendliness”. In this context, the Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research and Training (ACIRRT) suggest that to be considered ‘family friendly’ “flexible work arrangements must be genuinely directed towards the needs of employees and mutually agreed by employers and employees” (2003:19). This dynamic is worth further investigation, not least in the context of the impact of austerity on the public sector, and most particularly in local authorities, where staff reductions have been considerable: to what extent is workplace flexibility aimed at ‘doing more with less’, and to what extent focused on helping employees manage both caring and work responsibilities.

This finding about the efficacy of family friendly policies is also picked up in O’Connell & Russell’s (2004) study on workplace equality policies, flexible working arrangements and the quality of work, which that “involvement in flexible working arrangements is associated with both work pressure and stress, but the effect is not always in the direction anticipated”. They found that part-time work appeared to do most to promote work-life balance, with flexitime/flexible hours producing the next best outcome (reducing work pressure, but not stress when other factors were taken into account). In contrast, working from home was found to be associated with greater levels of work pressure and stress, suggesting that this type of flexibility may undermine rather than promote work-life balance. The findings for work sharing were somewhat surprising, in that it was found to be associated with increased work pressure at the organisational level, and greater levels of stress among job-sharing men (2005:65) note.

The orientation of workplace flexibility, and whether it meets the ACIRRT definition of ‘family-friendliness’ may also go some way to accounting of the ‘take-up gap’ identified by Kodz et al (2001, cited in Drew et al., 2003:25) – that is, the gap between employees’ expressed desire for family friendly flexibility and the lower relatively low levels of take up that have been found in many workplaces. As O’Connell & Russell (2005:64) note “flexible working arrangements are often implemented in response to organisational imperatives rather than to accommodate the needs of individual workers and that they are not always to the advantage of the employee”.

Managers can experience in putting family friendly policies into practice; Kodz et al. (2002, cited in Drew et al., 2003:26) emphasis the lack of guidance given to managers, who may have difficulty deciding who should be able to access them, and how to ration limited opportunities while ensuring parity of treatment amongst their staff. Other significant barriers identified in the literature include:

- Mixed messages about the perceived ‘acceptability’ of accessing workplace flexibility, resulting from a lack of visible support from senior management;
- Ambivalence or lack of clarity between line managers and HR units about roles and responsibilities in implementing family friendly practices;
- Senior managers’ lack of capacity to manage the ‘people side’ of family friendly policies, and as a consequence of their implementation, failure to redesign work patterns and roles effectively.

In this context Steinberg et al. (2002, cited in Drew et al., 2003:26) argue that it’s “the attitudes, skills and behaviours of line managers” that ultimately determines success. Their work indicates that it is not so much the existence of family friendly policies that creates difficulties and resentments, rather “in situations where there is already under-staffing, excessive workloads and last minute, unpredicted tasks, the existence of family friendly working arrangements is likely to exacerbate the situation”. This is a particularly pertinent



finding in the context of this research, given the staffing reductions and significant structural change that has taken place in the local government sector in recent years.

Drew et al. (2003:27) summarise the factors that have been identified as important in deterring employees from taking up family friendly work practices as follows:

- Not knowing what's available or acceptable and an absence of supporting infrastructure and technology;
- Heavy workloads: this is particularly challenging in workplaces where there is a 'long hours' culture and/or where there are staff shortages. Kodz et al (2002) report that some staff felt that their workloads had not been reduced in line with their hours, with the result that they were taking work home with them for which they weren't being paid;
- Being worried about the reaction of managers and colleagues;
- Concern in relation to career prospects: this issue is "strongly reported" in the literature that is, a fear that availing of such flexibility signals less commitment to one's career; in particular, this was an issue for men. This concern is often exacerbated by a lack of role models accessing such arrangements among senior staff;
- Being unable to afford the reduction in income associated with reduced working hours: the financial consequences of working fewer hours can be particularly difficult for lower paid workers and those in single income households. O'Connell & Russell (2005:65) find that flexible working arrangements are related to job quality. Part-time working is associated with lower earnings, and both part-time and job-sharing were found to be associated with lower levels of autonomy. This is because of the kind of jobs, sectors, and organisations in which part-time workers are employed.

Drew et al (2003:28) conclude that apart from information on statutory provisions, quantitative research on family friendly working arrangements is limited. Subsequent to their research, the National Workplace Survey (see below) has contributed further data in this regard, nonetheless, the dearth of more recent research in this regard in Ireland is striking.

A key point stressed by Drew et al. (2003:28) is that "future development of family friendly working arrangements needs to be responsive to the increasing diversity of family types and their dynamic character". While it is undoubtedly the case that women continue to shoulder a disproportionate share of domestic and caring responsibilities, increased diversity in family structures, and the growing salience of caring responsibilities other than for children, most particularly older people in need of care, mean that such policies should be considered as core aspect of human resources management and workforce development for all employees.

Most importantly, Drew et al (2003:28) stress that successfully implementing family friendly working/work-life balance arrangements "implies implementing a programme of cultural change. In effect this implies challenging the way work is done within an organisation and whether this needs to continue to be the case". Given the absence of such considerations from local government workforce planning, it is far from clear that the need for such cultural change has yet been fully recognised within the local government sector.

Finally, it is informative to note the conclusions of research conducted by Fleming et al. (2001:85) that their "research highlights an apparently less favourable picture in relation to flexible working arrangements in Ireland compared to other OECD and EU countries. One of the real difficulties in quantifying the extent of family friendly/flexible working arrangements is the lack of comparable statistical data to enable informed



comparison. There is clearly a need to measure better, and monitor the usage of flexible working arrangements at national level. Equally, at the workplace level, the findings research suggest that, within both the commercial and non-commercial sectors, there is a need for a more systematic recording of data in relation to participation in family friendly/flexible working arrangements. Better recording and monitoring of such data would also greater facilitate evaluation and comparison of the effectiveness of existing schemes". While this research is fifteen years old, these conclusions appear as relevant today as they did then.

4.2 Work-life balance policies in the public sector

Two National Workplace Surveys (NWS) – in 2003 and 2009 – have been conducted in Ireland under the auspices of the National Centre for Partnership and Performance⁶, and represent the most comprehensive survey of workplace attitudes undertaken in Ireland. The failure to maintain this mechanism leaves us with very limited data on the demand for, orientation towards, and availability of the kind of flexible work-life balance polices which can be of such critical importance in enabling women in particular to combine career progression with family life. Nonetheless, the findings do provide useful information in this regard, and prompt questions requiring of more detailed research.

The main aim of the NWS was to explore the attitudes of employers and employees to change and innovation in the workplace, including the adoption of work-life balance polices. Below, relevant findings from the 2009 survey, produced in two volumes, one on the findings from employers (Watson et al, 2010) and from employees (O'Connell et al, 2010)⁷ are outlined.

The changing composition of the workforce is reflected in the greater demands expressed by employees for equality and family friendly policies. O'Connell & Russell (2005:21) cite findings from the 2003 survey, reporting that among public sector managers "almost all (98%) were experiencing pressure for change from employees' needs and preferences for greater flexibility in the workplace". The 2009 NWS found that these pressures had not abated, with 99% of public sector managers reporting employee needs for greater flexibility, and 84% reporting the (internal) pressure to achieve greater equality and diversity in the workplace, as factors leading for pressure to change in the workplace. Unsurprisingly, the most intense pressure for change reported by public sector managers in 2009 was in relation to coping with the economic downturn (87% reported intense pressure) and budget constraints (85%).

The 2009 NWS (p.63) found however that the barriers to change that public sector managers experienced had grown in importance over the preceding six years; most particularly, structures and practices which made in more difficult to adopt flexible employment practices were much more prominent in 2009 compared to 2003. These factors included the promotion process, which 41% reported as a barrier in 2009, compared to just 5% six years previously; management structures within the organisation, identified as a barrier by 28% in 2009, up from 4% in 2003; while 29% cited the hierarchical nature of the organisation, up from 6% in 2003.

In exploring barriers to change the Survey (p.60-61) also found significant differences across sectors. For local government, by far the most important factor was budget constraints, identified by 91% of managers. Interestingly, while recruitment constraints were found to be relatively less important for both the civil service

⁶ The NCPP was established in 2001, and dissolved in 2010

⁷ Note that the employer survey (Watson et al, 2010) provides more detailed breakdown between public and private sector workplaces, and within the public sector itself, than is provided by the employee survey (O'Connell et al, 2010) on the questions which are the focus of this research.



and local government, a distinctive barrier identified in the local government sector (51%) was uncertainty about the future. In their analysis of these findings, Watson et al (2010:63) note that these barriers are issues over which public sector managers have limited control, and were likely to become more salient as the public service reform agenda was rolled out.

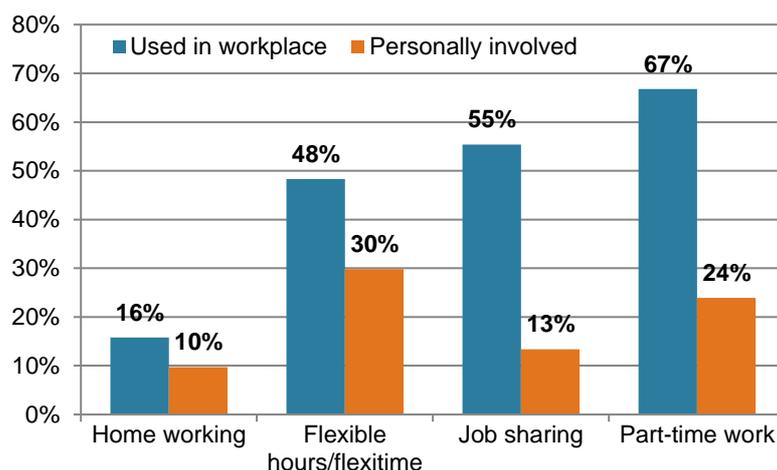
A further dimension included in the Workplace Survey (p.69) was managers' general strategic response to the pressures they were facing. Comparing public and private sectors, there was "striking difference between the public and private sectors, with a high proportion of public sector employment in organisations where management consider a range of strategies 'very important'". However, the authors "cautioned that this may reflect familiarity with the language of the *Transforming Public Services* agenda, it does not necessarily indicate that change has taken place in public sector workplaces" (emphasis added). This is an important distinction, making the gap between policy and practice a particularly important dynamic to explore.

A similar proviso applies in relation to whether various employment practices were in place; here we focus on the existence of formal equality policies and a number of flexible work practices. The NWS (2009:85) found that 97% of public sector employers had an explicit policy on equality/diversity; 98% reported that there were arrangements for work-life balance; 87% reported the use of part-time staff, and 75% that flexible working times were currently in place. These figures were all higher in the public than private sector; this is not a surprising finding as such practices were also found to be associated with larger rather than smaller organisations (almost all public sector respondents were in the largest category of 250 employees or more) and to be more prevalent in workplaces that recognised trade unions.

However, in their analysis of the findings Watson et al (2010:83) stress that the fact that a certain work practice was in place, or planned, "does not tell us how widespread a practice is in the organisation. For instance, the fact that temporary or part-time workers are employed tells us little about the proportion of staff who work part-time or on temporary contracts". They further note that this proviso is particularly important for large organisations, "where a practice that is in place in a small part of the organisation, or for a small proportion of employees, may not generally reflect practices in the organisation as a whole" accordingly, these data do "not tell us how many employees are covered".

O'Connell et al.s (2010:39) analysis of findings indicate that this is an issue requiring deeper exploration. Data for public sector workers is shown in Figure 7 below, showing a considerable disparity between the formal availability of flexible working arrangement in the workplace, and whether the employee is personally accessing those work practices.

Figure 5: The extent of flexible working arrangements as % of all public sector employees



Source: O'Connell et al (2010:39) Table 2.7

A different analysis of the same datasets (Russell et al, 2014:38-43) indicates that women in the public sector experienced a decline their degree of 'job control'. Job control is measured in relation to employee control of tasks, timing, and organisation of work. While the analysis found no difference in job control among men between 2003 and 2009, it does show "significantly lower job control for men in the public sector in both years" compared to private sector workers. However, there was "a marked drop in control for women working in the public sector between the two years". The authors conclude that "women's over-representation in the public sector is not a protective factor in terms of job quality in recession. In fact, the opposite is true. In 2003 female public sector workers did not report lower job control than private sector workers did, but job control had dropped significantly for female public sector workers in 2009 without a change occurring for women workers in the private sector."

Russell et al (2014:43-47) also consider changes in work pressure over the two periods. Work pressure measures the difficulty workers experience in meeting work demands; this analysis measures both pressure at work (mental and physical) as well as time pressure e.g. working above formal hours in order to get the job done. Overall, women were found to experience greater work pressure than men, as well as a bigger rise in pressure between the two periods. As for the job control measure above, the findings indicate that while men did not experience an increase in work pressure, "work pressure is higher for men in the public sector [than in the private sector] for both years". Women on the other hand did experience increasing work pressure in both private and public sector and "because pressure is also higher in the public sector than the private sector for women, by 2009 work pressure is highest for women in the public sector". The authors conclude that "once again, in terms of intrinsic job quality, we do not find that public sector employment is beneficial for women, but is associated with higher work pressure."

We can conclude from these findings that the formal availability of such practices – which is higher in the public than private sector as would be expected – does not necessarily mean that all employees can access them. Nor do we know whether different realms within the public sector, such as local government, differ in this regard, or indeed whether there are differences between local authorities. Russell et al. (2014:48) demonstrate that the widely held assumption that women's over-representation in the public sector offers them a better workplace experience does not necessarily hold: "while the public sector may have protected women from job loss, the role played by the public sector in recession did not reinforce gender equality in working conditions".

5 Next steps

It is difficult to interpret the absence of data on gender and on availing of family friendly work practices in the local government sector as indicating that, despite official policy positions, these issues are simply not being taken seriously by successive governments. It is hoped that the relevant actions set out in the recently published *National Strategy for Women and Girls* will be implemented with greater commitment than has been the case in the past.

This interim phase of the research project has focused on empirical desk research, but due to the gaping data deficit, has not been able to access relevant numerical data on the gender profile of local authority employment. As a consequence, the research project is now taking a different methodological approach.

The impetus for this research project is based on the experience of IMPACT workplace representatives and members in the local government sector, which leads them to question the degree to which these policies are in fact fully accessible to staff in local authorities; the extent to which women, who still carry the majority of care and family responsibilities, are facilitated to access these; and the impact that making use of such practices may have on career progression. They also raise the issue of disparities between local authorities in enabling staff to make use of such flexible work practices.

The next phase of this research aims to explore these critically important dynamics, involving two areas of research:

- Comparing family friendly policies and practices in local authorities with other sectors in the public service, and with relevant best practice;
- Conducting a survey questionnaire of local authority HR Directors and senior IMPACT representatives in each local authority to explore the operation of family-friendly policies.

This will go some way to generating the empirical data in the absence of official statistics, establishing this evidence base will assist IMPACT to continue its campaigning work on the issue of gender inequality. In this context, the cooperation and assistance of IMPACT branches will be important in eliciting members experience of availing of family friendly flexibility, and opportunities for career progression.

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