

WOMEN AT WORK

DESIGNING A COMPANY
FIT FOR THE FUTURE



FOREWORD



Deborah Hargreaves

Friends Provident
Foundation journalist
fellow

The sight of Carolyn Fairbairn and Frances O’Grady touring the TV studios with a joint message for the prime minister on the “national emergency” of a no-deal Brexit, was heartening – even if Theresa May was not listening. ‘These women are doing things differently,’ I thought, unprecedented as it is for the leader of the employer’s organisation, the CBI, to join forces with the head of the Trades Union Congress.

I would like to think that women could collaborate and co-operate more like Mses Fairbairn and O’Grady if they were able to work in ways that came more naturally to them. This might give us a more sustainable, caring form of capitalism than the current winner-takes-all approach to the economy that has been fostered by men in charge.

There are already many women out there who are attempting to do things differently. In the wake of the #MeToo movement lots of women have been re-assessing their approach to work. They are being helped along by a proliferation of writing about women and jobs, leadership and the economy. From retail consultant and broadcaster, Mary Portas [Work Like A Woman](#) where she writes about rebuilding her business on values such as collaboration, empathy and trust, to feminist campaigner, Caroline Criado Perez [Invisible Women](#) about a world largely built for and by men.

We seem to be waking up to the fact that the female approach, women’s views and characteristics such as inclusion and empathy are just as important as those of men and it is high time they were recognised.

This report is my attempt to ask women what a feminine corporation would look like; what they would change about work if they could and in doing so, make the economy work more fairly for everyone.

I would like to thank freelance reporter, Jill Treanor, for helping with the interviews. Between us, we have spoken to about 150 women in the UK either individually, in groups or in online conversations. We have tried to cover a broad swathe of the economy, both private and public sector as well as academia and the arts. Our youngest interviewees were in their early 20’s and the oldest in her late 70’s. While everyone’s experience is different, there are some strong themes that emerged.

My thanks also to Friends Provident Foundation for funding the project through their Journalist Fellowship and for providing valuable support.

Lastly, a big thank-you to all of the inspiring women who have helped with this report.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There are 71% of women aged 16–64 at work in Britain.

Gender stereotypes: Women encounter prejudice about the roles they adopt: men are seen as leaders and women as assistants. Current career structures can encourage women to adopt male behaviour to get on at work.

The lack of representation of women in the tech industry is a particular concern as it means the male outlook becomes embedded in the algorithms that increasingly run our lives.

Pay gap: The difference between men's and women's earnings remains 9.6% across the economy, often because of job segregation – women are most represented at the lower levels. This means women are most exposed to the insecure employment conditions endemic for low-paid roles. Childcare costs in England are the highest in the OECD at 40% of a couple's after-tax income.

Caring and flexibility: Women are the main carers for children, elderly parents or spouses which makes them more likely to work part-time, in job shares or flexibly. Flexible working is foisted on some women in low-paid roles while those in better-paid jobs can struggle to squeeze full-time work into part-time hours. Job-sharing is one answer, but this is not for everyone.

The right to request flexible working has been enshrined in law since 2014, although take-up has tailed off – women fear their careers will suffer. But some question whether jobs have to be this big or whether responsibilities could be divided differently.

Different values: Younger women and men are demanding more from the workplace; their motivations vary from those of their parents. They are questioning the company culture that puts profits and shareholder returns as the main outcome of business.

Progression: Women often do not get noticed for promotion to the top of companies and organisations because their male bosses are not looking their way. Some organisations are introducing mentors and a chance to try a top role.

Women running their own businesses are already taking a different approach. But many are told a prerequisite for raising finance is to install a male chief executive.

Biology: Menstruation and menopause are two of the great taboos in the workplace. The failure of managers to recognise their impact can lead to women feeling

vulnerable at work.

Conclusions: The feminine corporation would put caring at its heart and work would fit around it, rather than the other way around. My manifesto for change would see a more human face put on the workplace.

1. The organisation would put caring for children, relatives and parents at its heart.
2. It would offer a carer's passport for all staff – including agency workers.
3. The workplace would help provide affordable childcare – either with an in-house creche or vouchers towards outside provision.
4. There would be a focus on agile working with a 4-day week, flexible rotas, home working and job-sharing encouraged and facilitated at all levels.
5. The workplace would be inclusive and open to people from all heritages, disabilities and identities.
6. There would be no gender pay gap and mentoring would be available for all.
7. Equal numbers of men and women (with diverse backgrounds) would be promoted to all layers of management and senior roles.
8. Similarly, the same number of men and women would be on the board of directors.
9. The organisation would encourage a more ethical and sustainable way of working rather than a focus purely on profits and growth.
10. Rewards would be based on the broad values of the company rather than just individual performance.

INTRODUCTION

“Put simply, we women have had to fit ourselves ergonomically, physically, mentally and emotionally into a man’s world of work. It wasn’t designed for us much less for the next generation we are bringing up. I would argue it is increasingly unsuitable for many men too.”

says Yve Newbold, one of the UK’s first female company directors, now retired.

The workplace has been set up by men to fit a male career pattern and while women have won major concessions, there has been little fundamental structural change in the western world for over 100 years.

Even though women enter the workforce in equal numbers to men, they are not in the driving seat of most organisations. Even the National Health Service – the UK’s biggest employer of women, is mostly run by men. Britain has set the unambitious target of women holding a third of boardroom seats at big companies by 2020. But even this is proving a stretch for some organisations. At the same time, parliament has record numbers of female MPs, but is some way from reaching parity.

This is important because unless we have a balanced group of people running the country, our businesses and our workplaces, we will continue to see entrenched power structures, predominantly male values and macho ways of working and doing business.

In his book *Descent of Man*, the artist Grayson Perry, calls white, middle-class, middle-aged men the Default Man who holds all the power. “Default man’s world view is woven into government, the media and business practices, giving the fabric of society a bias in favour of his race, sex and class.” Mr Perry’s point is that the default male view of the world has become the norm; we take it as the sensible, rational approach to the world – the status quo.

Default man has forged society in his own image, his identity masquerades as normal. “He prioritises rational goals like profit, efficiency, self-determination and ambition over emotional rewards like social cohesion, quality of life, culture and happiness.”

These emotional rewards are more associated with women and if we value them, we need to correct the imbalance of default men at the top of society and the economy.

As it is, women have been forced to squeeze themselves into a male-driven culture. Society has certain assumptions of what it expects of women – both in behaviour and aspirations. This is not just about women bearing children, but about entrenched views of what women should be doing at work and how they should behave.

More women are starting to question the current set-up and a new generation with different values is putting more emphasis on a sustainable approach to the world of work.

I started this project to ask women to talk about their experiences at work, what they wanted from work and how they might do things differently if they could. I wanted to know how this might lead to a new type of feminine corporation run along more inclusive lines with new values. Of course, there are many different answers and not everyone wants the same things. But there were consistent views on issues such as gender roles, caring, flexibility and values.

As Tracey McDermott group head of corporate affairs, marketing and compliance at Standard Chartered Bank says, work needs to change for a variety of reasons for both women and men:

“If we’re all going to be living longer, working differently and retiring later, we need to think about how do we enable people to have careers that come in and out of the workplace. The only people who go out of the workplace [at the moment] are women having children.”

That may need to evolve; a young person starting out now may have different ideas about how they work, they might want to have a study break or caring leave: “The world of work currently would be completely unsympathetic to that because the way in which you progress is very linear and to my mind, that is going to have to change.”

WHERE DO WOMEN WORK?

More women than ever are in employment: 71% of women aged 16-64 are in work in the UK. Women make up 9m of the 24m full-time employees in Britain and 6.3m of the 8.6m part-time workers, according to the [Office for National Statistics](#). The number of working women with children has risen sharply in the past 20 years, but at 66% for mothers of pre-school children, it remains below the EU average of 71%.

The retail industry is Britain's biggest private sector employer of both men and women with 3.2m jobs – three in five of them held by women.

But women are predominantly represented in the lower rungs of the employment ladder and consequently earn less than men.

Brenda Hale, Britain's most senior judge, recently called for gender equality across the judiciary. After 100 years of women in the legal profession, just 29% of court judges are female. There are only 12 female chief executives of Britain's 350 biggest public companies – this has declined over the past year – and only 22 women chairing corporations. Women make up 208 out of 650 MPs, or 32% in the current parliament.

In the NHS three-quarters of its 1.5m staff are women and are grouped very much in the lower pay bands – 74% of people in pay band 1 (an annual salary of £17,460) are women, according to NHS Digital. The numbers of senior women in charge of NHS trusts and clinical commissioning groups is growing and is currently at 44% – much higher than in the private sector – but men still predominate and only 37% of non-executive directors are women.

This is the case right across the workforce with more women at the bottom of most industries and men still in charge. There is also a strong gender split between the roles taken by men and women.

Industries that employ a lot of women

82% caring and leisure 

77% secretarial and admin 

63% sales and customer service 

Equally split professions

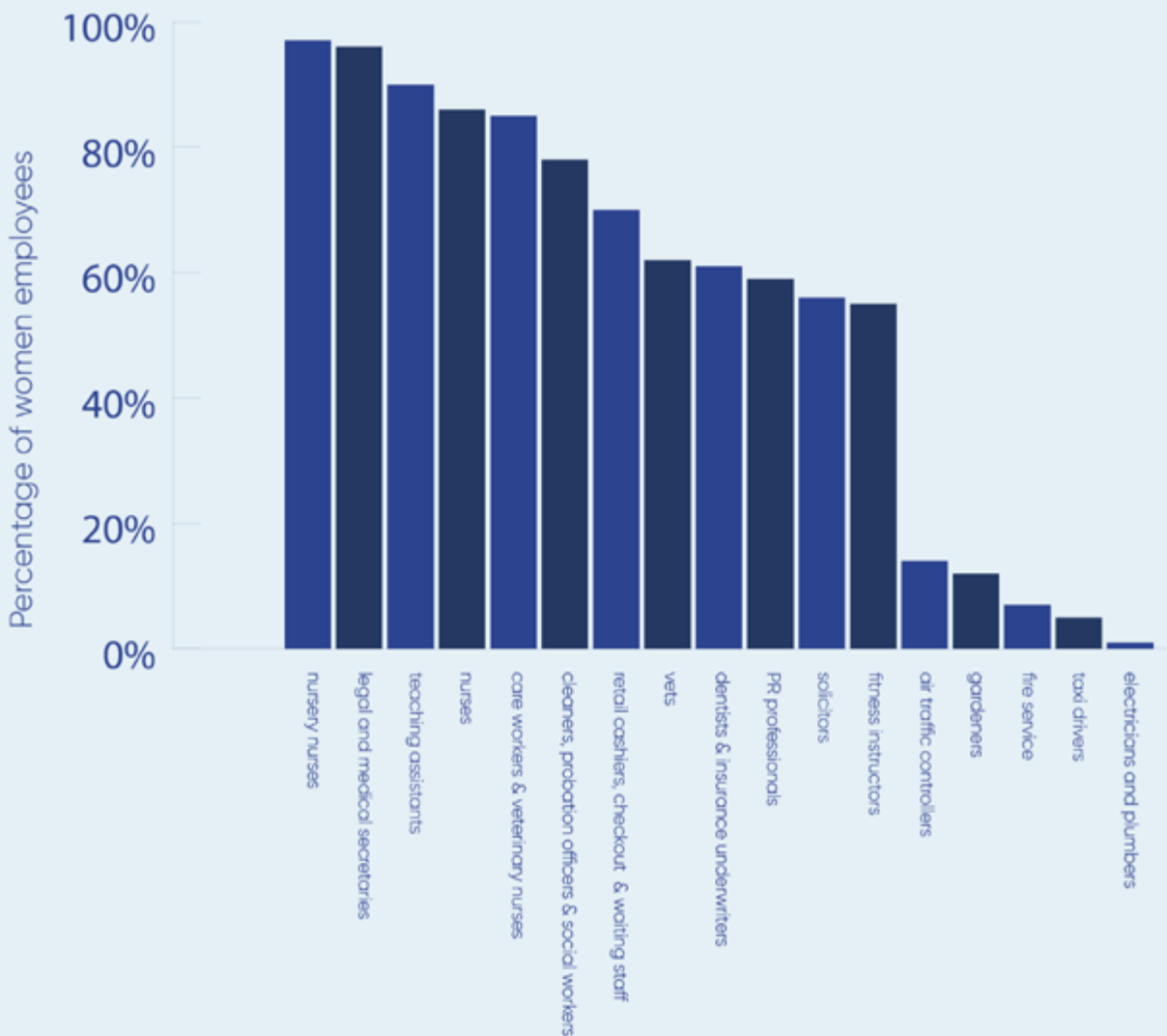
50% law, accountancy and journalism 

Fewer women

33% managerial positions 

Percentages of women employees according to the Labour force survey by the ONS.

Occupations



In a 2017 data search by the Financial Times, it found that women in financial services outnumbered men in junior roles, but made up only 25% of senior roles in the City.

WHAT DO WOMEN DO?

I have lost count of the number of women who have told me that they are expected to take notes in meetings and pour the coffee even though they might be in charge. Men are seen as leaders and women are viewed as assistants. There is an assumption that women will be in the junior role.

This extends right through the workforce. At the supermarket where one of my interviewees works, there is an established view of girls' and boys' jobs. "A lot of women get quite upset about this. Boys do frozen foods and fruit and veg. Girls do date coding, reductions and go on the tills. Nowhere is this written down, but the managers who are mostly male just decide who does what." This makes sense she says, as the men are stronger for hauling the heavy food about, but women are strong too and they object to being stuck on the tills.

It is important to show that you can be versatile as that is how you get rewarded and promoted or given a pay rise.

In the supermarket, when men are put on the tills, they ensure the managers see what they are doing; expanding their skillset which could feed into a pay rise. But the women just get on with it and no-one notices that they have been working in other sections so they are often not rewarded.

This echoes behaviour that is replicated across the workforce. Women tend to assume their good work will be noticed and do not speak up about it. Whereas men are keen that everyone sees them, they speak up in meetings and negotiate themselves bigger pay rises.

When women behave like this, they can be judged harshly.

"I was asked to do a job above my level of grading," says a woman who works in a betting shop. "I did this for a while, but I wanted it reflected in my pay. When I pressed for this, I felt I was being viewed as a troublemaker. I also asked for more flexibility and I was told I wouldn't get any progression unless I committed to five days a week."

A female construction worker told me that she spent a lot of time in meetings with men shouting at each other.

"But one time I lost my temper and raised my voice, one of the men rang my boss and told him he had to 'call his Rottweiler off'".

Among a group of women from different careers who I spoke to in Cardiff, 72% had been told they were "aggressive" or very bold. This is seen as a drawback for women even though it is expected of men.

This is even more of an issue for black women. "If you think people have entrenched views about women, you should try being a black woman," says another interviewee. She is an actress but is generally mistaken for a cleaner or toilet attendant. "I went to a conference and someone came up to me in the toilet and told me there was no paper in one of the cubicles. I said; 'why are you telling me?'"

Black and Asian women have few role models since they are seldom represented in top jobs. Only 0.7% of BAME women (Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic) were present in a list of the most powerful men and women running Britain's leading organisations drawn up by the Guardian and Operation Black Vote. BAME women make up 14% of the workforce.

When Victoria Akintomide-Akinwamide was thinking about studying law, she hadn't met any black lawyers and didn't know what options were available to her.

"When I started university, I joined many diversity and inclusion programmes. Whilst visiting law firms they would present that one trainee who happened to be a black person. In the last 2-3 years, black women across the City have come together in networks to help each other and go into Schools and universities and talk to the students. Inspiring and explaining that they rightfully have a place in the legal profession. These are a group of black women that want to change the status quo, but they are not as big as they could be and need support. These projects would have been immensely beneficial, whilst I was in school."

OBSTACLES AT WORK

Women face barriers and prejudice in the workplace, and this is exacerbated if you are a woman with a disability.

Esi Hardy uses a wheelchair and has set up her own company Celebrating Disability to help disabled people overcome the obstacles they face at work. "There are still lots of barriers for disabled people in the workplace and I work with businesses to help them have the confidence to hire and support them."

Ms Hardy says that peoples' attitudes are a major block to employing disabled people in the first place and then to promoting them.

"There is no getting around the fact that if a disabled employee cannot access the workplace, they cannot do the job. However, when people have the right attitude, no problem is too big to solve."

Disabled people themselves are very good at coming up with solutions to these obstacles – they have had to do it their whole lives.

"As disabled people, we are used to encountering obstacles, it starts when we open our eyes," says Ms Hardy. "Problem solving and thinking outside the box are just two of the reasons why disabled people make great

employees."

"We also need to be mindful of people with hidden disabilities; mental health, Life limiting illnesses, neuro diversity, etc. The same physical barriers may not apply here, however the barriers caused by negative attitudes are substantial."

Ms Hardy is mixed race which also marks another challenge to society's attitudes. "I think that people do see beyond the disability to my ethnicity and gender. However, my disability is always the most overwhelming characteristic of the three. I think my accent (or lack thereof) goes a long way to ensuring that I can "fit in" and my self-confidence and ability to talk to the majority of people allows me to break down some of those barriers. But I do think that being a mixed race, disabled woman occasionally leads to people's assumptions that they can walk all over me."

As a person who identifies as non-binary, Laura Noble encountered a wall of silence from the predominantly male executive committee when they came out at work. There was no procedure in place for accommodating their requirements. Now Mx Noble is working on a new workplace inclusion proposal to help LGBT+ people. An ally at the company is helping to push this through. "There needs to be training for staff on how to respect LGBT+ needs; I personally believe most people in the UK are unaware of the needs of LGBT+ rather than deliberately transphobic or homophobic."

"For non-binary people, having our pronouns and titles respected at work is key to our wellbeing."



WORKING WOMEN

Many women talk about inclusivity and wanting everyone to work together in harmony. This seems to happen more when gender at work is balanced.

“I’m in a balanced sales team now and it is competitive, but we do bring people with us. When its male-heavy, the women get really nasty with each other – it’s like they have to outdo the men,”

says Clare Brewster, head of new business at Marketforce, a conference company.

Not all female bosses are inclusive: the rules of the game are set by men and some women at the top tend to adopt a more assertive persona to get on.

But the sort of behaviour that is expected from men, can be heavily criticised when displayed by women. “What women have to realise,” a female academic told me; “is that men hunt in packs, they can be ruthless and we can’t beat them at their game, we have to be different.”

“By and large, organisations that have some kind of feminine intent in their leadership or in their outlook are more holistic and sustainable,”

says Carrie Coombs an executive coach.

“Women’s characteristics had tended to be seen as something of a disadvantage in the workplace because clearly stuff needs to get done,” says Dame Helena Morrissey, head of personal investing at Legal and General, who is also the author of *A good time to be a girl*. “Women’s

tendency to go about things – and I don’t want to over-generalise – but I do think we tend to build consensus a bit more and try to work round the problem. I think that’s tended to be seen as a bit waffly and ineffective and we have this thing about women being too emotional.” But she thinks we should really be seeing a premium on those perceived characteristics.

“[When I worked on the trading floor], they had mentoring programmes for us and the net result of the mentoring programme was ‘be more like a man,’” says Tracy Blackwell, chief executive of the Pensions Insurance Corporation. “I don’t think this is wrong...[but I also think] men need to be more like women when it comes to empathy and understanding and what customers want. The problem is there has been an imbalance and the two need to come together.”

The hierarchy of an organisation can feed into very male obsessions with status and competition. “It’s almost like how the army would operate, there’s a boss and the people who work for him – it’s usually a him – end up feeling like there’s a narrow pathway to success,” says Dame Helena. In 2010 she set up the 30% club in the UK to achieve a better gender balance in organisations. The campaign has since spread to 12 countries overseas.

Another young saleswoman said: “You have to be hard and bullish to get to the top and act like a man. I started off like that, but I soon realised it wasn’t me and I changed – now I’m kinder.” She realised she had made enemies with her approach and needed more fans to progress.

But women complain that men do not listen to them and will not take a proposal seriously until it has been articulated by a man. Even Christine Lagarde, head of the International Monetary Fund, points out in an interview with the Guardian that when she is chairing a meeting: “Whenever a woman takes the floor there is a general reduction in the attention of men around the table, and sometimes chatting and gossiping amongst themselves.”



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TECHNOLOGY IMBALANCE

Male predominance in some industries can have much broader effects beyond the workplace.

Margaret Heffernan who has been chief executive of five different companies and currently lectures on management at Bath university points to a worrying lack of representation of women and consequently female values, among the Silicon Valley companies which increasingly dominate our lives. "Women are under-represented and sexism is quite vicious," she says.

"It is a certain type of machismo that is articulated. When that gets articulated through an algorithm, it is very worrying. There is no-one there asking 'how does this play out for women, for older people, for black people?' This means the algorithms are not representative of the society they serve."

Women have to keep struggling for recognition in the tech industry, she says. In November 2018, staff at Google offices worldwide walked out in protest at the treatment of women at the company.

We also have to challenge our own attitudes towards female behaviour. At an interview, a woman was quizzed by a man and a woman from the same company. "I realised I was very irritated by the woman's questioning because I thought she was patronising. But then I realised the man was behaving in the same way and I expected it from him," says my interviewee.

Gender stereotyping goes back to our very early years in the home and at school. We all need to be conscious of how we bring up our offspring and what prejudices they absorb in their formative years as these will affect their whole lives.



GENDER PAY GAP

Men tend to measure themselves by what they earn, whereas women often use different standards. This is one reason why the gender pay gap remains entrenched – at 9.6% across the workforce – it has improved by only 0.1 percentage point since companies began reporting in 2018. (The median gender pay gap is the difference in hourly pay between the employee in the middle of the range of male wages and the middle employee in the range of female wages.) Out of the companies reporting their pay gaps in 2019, 8,113 paid men more than women while 1,422 paid women more.

Gender pay reporting that came into force in 2018 for all employers with more than 250 staff, has led to many significant discussions around remuneration, job segregation and progression.

Companies have highlighted the fact that men are clustered among the top ranks and women hold posts lower down as a major reason for the gap. The figures show that women held 38% of upper-quartile income roles (earning £70,000 or more) in 2018 compared to 37% in 2017. Some companies have addressed this by appointing one senior female to help close the gap without addressing pay at other levels.

One of the reasons for women to be in the ranks of the

lower-paid across the economy is their need for flexibility and part-time work to accommodate their caring responsibilities. But that also means they are vulnerable to insecure work. Job losses in the retail sector, for example, are much higher for women – 3.4% in 2018 compared with 0.2% for men.

Pay is an extremely emotive subject and men can be very competitive about their packages. In a discussion with women in the finance sector, they said they had never complained about a bonus, but were very grateful to be offered one. Men, however, school each other to be dissatisfied at the first offer in the expectation of getting a higher one.

“We tend to undervalue ourselves. I recently spoke to a friend of mine who is going for a new job and I said ‘if you are tempted to lower your price – call me.’ Because you are worth what you tell them you’re worth.”

says Carol Coletta president and chief executive of the Memphis River Parks Partnership in the US. She believes that



employers will naturally try and hire you for less, but you should push for your price as that is what a man would do.

Some firms are offering women lessons in negotiating skills – teaching them to demand a better deal. But some women react to this by asking why they should have to change when the system is at fault.

A potential solution to this is total transparency over pay with all roles clearly marked and bonus strategy set out. Some companies will try and get around this by putting people onto freelance contracts or by outsourcing certain jobs, but if all tax returns were printed online as in Sweden, incomes would be much clearer.

Pay is complicated further by the fact that women are much more likely to adopt caring roles and ask for flexibility at work, a different job structure or part-time work.



PROFILE: JOB SHARE

Claire Walker and Hannah Essex co-executive director of policy and campaigns at the British Chambers of commerce.

Hannah and Claire have known each other for eight years since they did a joint project together. Hannah then asked Claire to cover her maternity leave at Teach First where she was working and they ended up establishing a job-share once Hannah returned as director of communications. After some initial scepticism, their 30-member team championed the arrangement. "We realised that in the digital age, these very senior communications jobs are full-on and when you are trying to make judgements when you're tired, it's very hard and sometimes you can miss the bigger picture."

After four years at Teach First, they decided to apply for other roles as a job-share partnership. They wrote a joint CV and applied for a number of board positions – some recruiters thought it was a great idea, but others couldn't get their heads round it. The BCC was not looking specifically for a job-share but has embraced their arrangement, recognising it has many benefits especially in the current challenging climate.

They both do a 3-day week and cover every other weekend as well as covering for each other's holidays. They have one overlapping day in the office – one of them does a hand-over on Tuesday night and the other on Friday night and they have a call on Sundays.

On Wednesdays, they have a 2-hour session with each other. "Then we play our favourite game where we're in two places at once," says Ms Walker. "So we might have an AGM and I go there and Hannah is meeting international trade commissioners."

They communicate via WhatsApp, setting up groups with key individuals who text the group and one of them responds. While they like to be interchangeable, they are quite different people and stress that it is important to get the right partner.

Another benefit of their arrangement is keeping your feet on the ground. "How many politicians or chief executives can say I drop my kids off at school and listen to what is being said in the playground. How can you hear what people are saying about Brexit if you drive round in a car? You need face-time with the real world."

WORKING NINE TO FIVE

The structure of work has evolved over the years to accommodate the predominance of office and computer-based jobs. Structures have become more flexible to encompass working at home and varied hours, but many professional jobs still demand a presence at work on a 9-5pm (or longer) basis. While flexible working has generally been seen as a good thing for well-paid professional women, it has often been foisted on women at the lower end of the income scale with the growth of zero hours contracts and insecure employment.

In general, we are working longer hours than ever, the Trades Union Congress has found that 1.4m people are working 7 days a week in the UK and 3.3m – or nearly 13% – work more than 48 hours a week, out of a total full-time workforce of 24m.

In recent years, the rise of zero hours contracts, varied shift patterns in the retail and care sectors – predominantly jobs that are populated by women – have meant that many women are working flexibly whether they like it or not. So, for example, retailers can be organised around complicated shifts with 180 different contracts in the average supermarket. Work status has also changed with more people becoming self-employed or working for agencies.

“This causes insecurity at work and atomisation of the workplace where women are working alone or in depopulated workplaces and they are isolated through truly complex shift patterns,” says Frances O’Grady, director-general of the TUC. While some relish the additional flexibility this brings, others would like to work more hours with more regular shifts.

Women in irregular shift work are particularly pressed to find appropriate childcare.

“Shift workers like nurses and police are struggling to find nurseries that will accept changing shift patterns – so again it is women who are forced to mark themselves out as different (read: difficult) by asking for set shifts,” says a single mother who works shifts, in an online chat.

For single parents, shift work is challenging. Poverty campaigner, Jack Monroe, had to give up a well-paid job as a call handler with Essex fire brigade because she could no longer [juggle the shifts with motherhood](#).

“There are some jobs that are almost impossible for working parents,” says a former policewoman. “For example, if you are on a police surveillance team, you will have to follow wherever the people you are watching go. This can mean travelling across the country at short notice and working beyond your hours. You can’t just leave and pick your kids up.” This is an issue for both men and women, but it is usually the women who are responsible for the bulk of childcare.

Even parents who do not work shifts can find it difficult to balance childcare and commuting in the Southeast. Britain’s dysfunctional housing market – particularly in the Southeast – has played into the long-hours culture. People cannot afford to live close to work meaning that workers are often travelling quite long distances to their place of employment. This eats into leisure and caring time.

“Commuting is a societal problem, but the issues of commuting fall heavily on “unsecure” workers. We are all expected to commute in our own time, but the time of those with set nursery or school hours is already restricted – there’s no extra hours to borrow. Those in precarious job roles, often women, are at risk,” says a single mum.

A different take on commuting is the particularly controversial practice of not paying care workers for travel between people’s homes. They are not paid for the time it takes to journey between homes and only for the 15-minute slots when they arrive when they have to register they have arrived and call again to say they are leaving. This means they can end up working long hours but be paid for a lot fewer. Some local authorities have started to address this, but it remains the norm and most of the care workers are women.

TIME OFF FOR NEW PARENTS

New mothers receive statutory maternity pay for up to 39 weeks, although many employers offer better deals. Fathers get 1-2 weeks of paid paternity leave and couples are also able to split the maternity leave between them, but beyond 39 weeks, this is unpaid.

Most employers are supportive of women having children although one of my interviewees was made redundant while on maternity leave and had to cart a 3-week old baby to the workplace for consultation on the job cuts. Shocking stories of women discriminated against when having babies has emerged from a new organisation called Pregnant then screwed.

With a new generation of professional men and women more prepared to shop around for employers offering attractive deals to parents, employers are becoming more imaginative about what they offer. While several companies now hold rosters of emergency care workers who can step in at the last minute for employees with a childcare or elderly care crisis, Goldman Sachs, recently offered to fly womens' breast milk across the world to help women who are travelling for work and have left their babies at home. This is a rather extreme reaction – especially with the onset of video calling and Skype.

The government also covers 15 nursery hours a week (for 38 weeks) for 3-4 year olds. But many women struggle to return to work when their children are small. And if they do, they face another big disruption when the children go to school, this is another point where women are vulnerable to dropping out of the workplace.

In the UK, more women than men are working up to the age of 25, but this begins to reverse when people have children. According to Eurostat, the EU statistics agency, there are 73% of women between the ages of 35 and 44 working in London compared with 92% of men – the biggest gender employment gap in the EU. Women dropping out of the workforce in the Southeast cite the high cost of childcare and the lack of family support nearby.

Employment rates for mothers are higher in other parts of the UK, suggesting that the cost of childcare and long commuting times are major factors in women dropping out of work.



CARING FOR CHILDREN

"It is an eternal battle to get home in time to put my son to bed even though I have a really good childminder who is flexible and is already working longer hours than normal," says a single mother who works in London. "I would like to finish work at 4pm every day so that I just have a little bit of extra time to help with his homework."

The structure of work is particularly problematic for single parents and those without an infrastructure of friends and parents to help. "I absolutely dread the school holidays," says another single mum. "It's the most awful time of year because I don't have enough leave days to cover the childcare." She relies on friends, holiday clubs and some time off.

Nursery places are eagerly sought after, but can be very expensive, especially in London and the Southeast. The [OECD has calculated](#) that childcare costs in England are the highest among the advanced economies at 40% of a couple's disposable income, on average.

Some women would like to have facilities at their workplace where children could be put into a creche, but others fear commuting with a pram and baby paraphernalia. Nurseries in the workplace have not really taken off and younger women without children do not often favour their introduction over say, a gym.

Interestingly, a new book [Why Women Have Better Sex Under Socialism](#) by US academic Kristen Ghodsee points to post-war Eastern Europe where countries were keen to encourage a female workforce. Many provided kindergartens, creches and holiday care for free. Women were also financially independent of their male partners long before they won similar status in the West.



SWEDISH LESSONS

"I feel very strongly that everybody needs flexibility," says Katja Hall, corporate affairs director of outsourcing company, Capita. "Women aren't the only parents, there are dads as well as mums. I'm partly influenced by my native Sweden where the workplace is more adapted to a dual working culture."

Scandinavia has among the most generous parental packages in the world, although taxes are high, benefits are extensive, particularly for parents. In Sweden parents are entitled to 480 days of leave (68 weeks nearly double the amount available in the UK) – 390 of them are paid at 80% of normal pay and the rest at a flat rate. Parents can share the leave between them and even take some at the same time as each other. Even those not in work can claim paid parental leave. Fathers in Sweden have been encouraged to take several months off when their children are born and it is not unusual for dads to be doing the childcare. The parental leave can be taken until the child is 8 and is available also for each extra child. Even when parents return to work, they are helped along with up to 120 days paid leave per year (at 80% of pay) for looking after sick children or elderly parents. They also have the legal right to reduce their working hours by 25% until the child is 8.



BREAKING THE LONG-HOURS CULTURE

Half of the women working in the UK are in part-time jobs mostly to help balance work and childcare. These can often suit the people involved, but many women speak of trying to squeeze a full-time job into fewer days with less pay.

“I found my boss was surprised that I could do everything in the time allocated and I realised that long hours were built into the culture and you were expected to work more than your allotted number of hours,”

says a museum worker who shifted from five days to four and found herself working long days.

Other organisations have taken steps to break the long hours culture by making it technically difficult to send emails, for example, outside of office hours. “The core hours are 10-4pm when people will expect to find you in the office, the rest is output-driven.” If you write an email after 9pm, it will not be delivered until the next morning, says a woman working for an online company.

Some people will add a caveat to emails stating their working hours and pointing out that the recipient should not feel obliged to reply to the message out of office hours. As part of an effort to lead by example, Jan Gooding, chair of charity Stonewall, has an email sign-off that says: “I am one of those people who likes to work flexibly. I’m sending this email now because it suits how I balance my working hours. I don’t expect that you will read, respond to or action this email outside of the hours that work for you.”

But that is not an option for everyone.

“At most big companies the demands on the executives remain incredibly intense. If anything, they are more all-consuming because of the technology. That’s both a good thing and a bad thing, not replying to an email in a matter of hours is seen as a big deal,”

says Kate Grussing, managing director of Sapphire Partners, head-hunters recently appointed to recruit the next governor of the Bank of England. “It does worry me that men and women – especially women – don’t have time to switch off.”

This is echoed by Ms McDermott at Standard Chartered Bank. “In the world before emails, you wouldn’t work on a weekend and be constantly contactable when on holiday. You had very linear-bounded work expectations with quite distinct boundaries between work and home.” However, technology – which she also sees as a huge opportunity – has changed that: “Now you might have to work until you are 75 and you are contactable all of the time, you work across time zones. When you’re not there, people don’t necessarily take up the slack.”

Some people – particularly millennials – are starting to challenge the long-hours culture of work in the UK, but women who have pushed themselves into top jobs have often had to compete on male terms. This means fitting in with the macho culture of long days and all-encompassing jobs. It would be encouraging to see senior women breaking this mould, but I am sceptical that this will happen without a more significant mind-shift in society as a whole.

However, some men are not prepared to sacrifice their whole lives to work even though they are currently in a minority.

PROFILE: JOB SHARE

Will McDonald and Sam White directors of sustainability and public policy at insurance group, Aviva.

The two men work three days a week, overlapping on Wednesdays. They are a rare example of an all-male job share and also one that is senior, just one level below the executive committee of the FTSE 100 company.

They aim to look seamless from the outside. "You tell one of us, you tell both of us," says Mr White. That includes informal conversations in lifts as well as detailed discussions in formal meetings.

The job share works because of "brilliant handovers," says Mr White, who works Monday to Wednesday, looking after two pre-school age children on the other days.

Mr McDonald, who works Wednesday to Friday, says it is as important to take charge when in the office as it is to leave your job share partner in charge when you are not there. "It's actively annoying to the other person if you start interfering when you're not meant to be working," he says.

However, they have three areas where they have agreed to consult: hiring and firing, expenditure above a certain limit and on areas of strategy.

"Never undo a decision made by the other person without talking to them the first," Mr McDonald adds.

They have been asked by colleagues whether the job share is their way of dialling down their careers for a period. Mr White says: "We are no less ambitious than we were. We were asked the explicit question: Is this you leaning out? No it's not us leaning out. For me, it's a period in my life where I'm trading off some income and time in the office for some time with my young kids."

He took six-months parental leave with his second daughter before starting the job share (Mr McDonald was already in the role) and since then, Aviva has introduced shared equal parental leave. Data it published in November 2018 showed that a year after its introduction, more than 700 employees made use of the scheme internationally, including around 300 men.

Such schemes are a way to make a period of absence not just something women do and also to narrow the gender pay gap, Mr White says. "It's partly solved by men changing their behaviours without saying it's about women changing their behaviour."

"It will change a generation of men in this organisation," Mr White says. They too will have to ask themselves, as women do, if they are away for six months, will they miss opportunities for promotion.

Now that the youngest of his three children has started nursery, Mr McDonald volunteers for the National Trust during school hours. Both men say how much their relationship with their children has benefitted from them being around more.

Both of their wives work part-time, one of them as a charity chief executive.

Mr White says it gave him "a different understanding of what it takes to look after children."

It is also helpful in identifying with people coming back from paternity and maternity leave: "At a basic level it means you are much more in tune with people coming back from maternity... you slightly know what it feels like," says Mr McDonald.

CARING FOR THE ELDERLY

With an ageing population, care for the elderly is increasingly becoming an important focus for many of us. Carers UK, the charity that advises carers, has calculated that more than 600 people a day leave their jobs to care for the older generation. In a recent report it found that 2.6m people had quit their job in the past five years to care for an older person, or someone seriously ill or disabled. A further 5m people were juggling work with care responsibilities for this group of people.

An interviewee who runs her own company near Cardiff in Wales, explains how she was suddenly pitched into a pressing care crisis. "Aged 51, as a menopausal mother of two girls, both under 10 and with all their parenting needs, my husband and I found ourselves in the 'caring for all sandwich.'

We are both freelance arts practitioners who run our own businesses. Our three remaining octogenarian parents were all in crisis. My husbands' parents, living an hour away and determined to stay in their own home, had 10 hospital visits between them in the space of 12 weeks. This involved respite care for my father-in-law in a home whose website looked like a hotel stay and was, in reality, an episode of Fawlty Towers and the Walking Dead. My advice to the staff was: 'Keep him in his room. Going downstairs to the day lounge will kill him.' My mother, 45 minutes away, was then hospitalised for two months and emerged frail and vulnerable. Everything had to stop to deal with this very real 'care crisis sandwich.'"

She kept her work going as well, learning a lot in the process. "In the last two years I have researched and deepened my understanding of women's lack of confidence/ self-belief, the challenges of work life balance and caring roles."

"The caring continues and is somehow handled with more insight, personal care and boundaries. Support systems are emerging. It has been at huge financial cost to our family unit, but we, and I believe society, should not be bound or measured by our financial constraints but by our ability to respond and CARE."

Women can sometimes find that they have only just finished their childcare years to be pitched straight into the need to care for their parents.

"I was a charity chief exec, but I went self-employed to look after my elderly parents," says one of my interviewees. "As a woman in my 50's, once I'd done that for a couple of years, no-one would take me on again, I had given up all my seniority."

Baroness Ros Altmann, a Tory peer, says that while we have done a fair amount in the workplace for women with young children, we haven't done much to facilitate or support women caring for elderly relatives. "They feel they have to leave work, but once out, they don't come back. They themselves feel they can't and men don't take them seriously."

Helen Walker, chief executive of Carers UK, calls for better support for caring responsibilities in the workplace. "With 15% of the population now working and caring, there is a real social and economic imperative for UK businesses to adopt carer-friendly workplaces." The organisation is calling for 5-10 days statutory care leave which would only cover emergencies and not regular care.

There is also an argument for extending the same rights to people caring for the elderly as for maternity leave and childcare. Some women feel very strongly that they are not able to take paid leave to care for dying relatives when they have taken no maternity leave. It is currently down to an organisation's discretion as to how much paid and unpaid time is available to those caring for the elderly.

Carer's UK has found that employees had less support and flexibility over caring in the private sector than in the public sector. Carers UK has signed up a network of 115 employers who are committed to helping people juggle caring and work.

For example, Centrica, the parent company of British Gas said: "We are working hard to retain a diverse and skilled workforce through our carers' policies which includes paid carers leave and flexible working from day one of being a carer."



FLEXIBILITY AT WORK

“Flexible working has the potential to make the UK more productive and to create happier, more committed staff and a diverse workforce that is more in tune with its customers,”

says Claire Walker, co-executive director of policy and campaigns at the British Chambers of Commerce.

However, campaigning groups Working Families and Bright Horizons, found that working parents are penalised for asking for flexibility and part-time work. [The Working Families Index](#) reveals that parents working part-time – most of whom are women – have a 21% chance of being promoted in the next three years compared with those working full-time with a 45% chance. The report also found that poor job design and the culture of presenteeism saw 78% of parents working beyond their contracted hours.

This is an issue that came up time and again with my interviewees – expectations that committed employees will work long hours even though they have caring responsibilities (for children or the elderly).

Many women would like to work flexibly, but don't want to be held back in their careers because of a perception that they are on the “Mummy track” or their ambitions are muted since having children. Women in lower-paid jobs would like the flexibility but can't afford to take a pay cut. And often when women do reduce their hours and work part-time, many of them will struggle to fit an almost full-time job into fewer hours in order to have some time with the children.

“I wanted to work 4 days in the office and one day at home, but my boss couldn't entertain that,” says a woman in the legal profession. “I moved firms and now they trust me and it's about getting the job done. I'm saving two hours a day by not going in to the office and I don't mind working a bit extra.”

There is, however, a fine line to be drawn between being happy at working long hours when at work – in return for flexibility – and being exploited by getting paid less to do virtually the same job in shorter hours.

This tends to boil down to respect and trust. If you trust your employer not to exploit you, you are often happy to put in the occasional long day and have another day off at home. But if you feel you are always being asked to do more, you can come to resent doing a full-time job and getting part-time wages.

“You need a boss who trusts you and you need good people who work for you,” says Sarah Breeden, who has a senior job at the Bank of England and worked irregular hours when her children were young. But a lot of women do not have the support available to more senior women.

“I count my hours,” says an interviewee. “It's a part-time job and some days I leave at 3pm and another day at 4pm. But I worry about leaving when others are still in the office.”

This is the crux for some mothers. They do not want to be regarded as having a special need for flexibility when it does not apply to their male colleagues or other women without children. “I wish we did not celebrate the long-hours culture. Even for people without children – they have a life. If everyone asked for more flexible hours, you wouldn't feel you stood out so much,” says one.

“Flexible working should really be flexible rather than just badged as flexible,” says a mother working in the media. “Which means being able to stop for an hour or so at 3 to collect my daughter from nursery or start early one day and finish early or start and finish late.” This also means that managers should understand what is required by flexibility and part-time working, rather than expecting mothers to change their day off, for example, with little notice.

Many women echoed this concern, they wanted flexibility to be understood and to apply to everyone so that they would not be treated as different due to their childcare responsibilities. The idea of flexibility also varies a lot depending on who you talk to.

"Sometimes flexible working ISN'T flexible working. There are companies that declare they support flexible working, but actually they mean, you can start at 8 and leave at 4, instead of 9 to 5. Now most of the time that isn't flexible enough for a family or a carer, who are mostly those who need the flexibility," says an online personal assistant.

At Aviva, job-share Mr McDonald feels that it is also time to talk about "inflexible working".

"Perhaps nine to five, five days a week should be called inflexible working,"

he says. This is particularly true when thinking of millennials. "Some people will be happier if they go mountain biking once a week or have a side business one day a week and we know that millennials, especially, are more interested in that sort of career."

The John Lewis Partnership is an employer that gets flexibility right for a major part of its workforce, since it is so often quoted as showing best practice. It consistently comes top of staff reviews and Glassdoor, the employee review site, ranks it the top retail workplace. Workers (or partners as they are called) benefit from an array of advantages such as subsidised holiday accommodation and sabbaticals for long-service.

As a partnership, it has democracy representatives at every level of the business from shop floor to boardroom. This means that issues can be channelled quickly upwards into the 82-member partnership council which elects half the board members (also from the workforce) and can sack the chairman.

Profits are shared with each worker (or partner) entitled to the same percentage annual bonus. Charlie Mayfield, chairman, has said that if Britain could improve the quality of its management – and managing people is key – it could make a real difference to poor productivity levels.

FLEXIBLE RIGHTS

Since 2014 every employee – not just a parent – has the right to request flexible working if they have worked for the same employer for a minimum of 26 weeks. However, the employer does not have to agree.

One woman I spoke to asked for flexibility at work as she believed her job could be done well with three days in the office and one at home. After she had spoken to her boss, he said he would go away and think about it. She overheard him go into the next room and shout: "She can just fuck off if she wants to do that!"

Research from the University of Manchester found a year after the new rules on flexibility came into force there had been a minimal increase in the number of people working flexibly – up from 44.1% of the workforce to 44.3%. Women were most likely to be in part-time flexible jobs, while those working flexi-time in full-time jobs were predominantly working for big companies, the public sector and were educated to degree level.

In March 2018, the government set up the Flexible Working Taskforce to look more broadly into the issue of flexibility at work. It found that requests for flexible working had tailed off as employees perceived that their career might be at risk, or they had met with unsupportive attitudes from managers.

For Peter Cheese, Chartered Institute for Personnel Development chief executive and co-chair of the task force, employers need to dismantle barriers preventing them from adopting flexible work more widely, "be it entrenched organisational cultures or making sure line managers are trained to support and manage flexible workers," he says. Ms Grussing, a headhunter, says most senior hires are reluctant to set flexibility as a demand. "We've had many a woman who didn't want to move jobs because she was so grateful for her flexible working arrangement." Many of my interviewees have bemoaned the lack of flexible hours in senior and professional jobs. Mr Cheese wants more jobs to be advertised as flexible. "By encouraging many more jobs to be advertised as flexible as the default option, the task force is challenging outdated attitudes to flexible working that still prevail in some organisations and laying down a marker for other employers to follow," he said. The taskforce is due to make recommendations in 2019.

JOB RETHINK

Sam Smethers who runs the Fawcett Society that campaigns for women, believes we may be taking the wrong route by calling for flexibility for everyone. She says that we are often replicating existing patterns of work with slight changes in the structure that add more flexibility such as part-time work and job shares.

“If we really want to challenge the male model of work, we have to say: here is a collection of responsibilities and tasks; why do we want to collect it into a big fat job? Could we break down those responsibilities differently, what are we asking people to do?”

There has been little creative thinking about job design. “I’d like to see a work design surgery where we carve up a real role and see how it could be done differently. Are we doing what’s easiest by just adapting what we’ve got?” asks Ms Smethers.

Of course, a job share is one answer to this question. The Fawcett society has produced a pamphlet on how MPs could share jobs saying it would be a way of getting more parents with children, carers and disabled MPs into parliament. “There is an established motherhood gap in the Commons and there are only 6 disabled MPs,” the society says. But it would require a change in the law as you cannot currently put two names jointly on the ballot paper in a general election.

Ms Smethers, says: “A number of MPs do at least two jobs, so why not make the role of MP shareable too? Arguing that ‘it couldn’t work here’ risks making MPs sound out of touch. The truth is it could work if we wanted it to.”

One of the issues with job-shares is finding a successful

partner, some industries are now developing online portals to act like dating agencies for prospective job-shares. This helps pair people up to share a role.

However, many of the women I spoke to as part of this project, suggested that they were wary of being treated as having special needs for flexibility and did not want to be singled out as “different.” The typical attitude is summed up by a woman in the media: “In order to be seen to be worthy of an ordinary job, you have to be seen to be in the office. If you are working flexible hours, you are seen as not being ambitious, or keen to get on further.”

Ms Hall at Capita believes technology can help: “If you want to create true equality, you need a place where men and women can both have careers. The answer is technology, we should be able to have a fundamentally more flexible approach to work. Some companies are saying they are location-neutral, but I think there’s a lot more to be done.”

Women are also very inclusive; they believe that if they win a concession, it should also apply to their male colleagues. This would give them some cover for not being singled out for wanting flexibility. “If only the men in my office might ask to leave early once a week to go to football practice, it might make me feel better about wanting to leave to pick up my children,” said one.

“I have experience of leaders who judge performance by what time they get into the office and what time they leave. I have always been quite clear that I would leave at 5pm because of family commitments, but some of the men in the office do stay quite late,”

says Samantha Herelle director of operations at Mount Green housing association.

LONGER WEEKENDS

In 2018, the TUC launched a campaign to ask the government to use the benefits of new technology to introduce a four-day working week for everyone. [Full-time workers in the UK](#) put in some of the longest hours in the EU, behind only Austria and Greece, according to the organisation. And they rack up £32bn worth of unpaid overtime. Ms O'Grady, director-general, said: "When the TUC's first Congress took place 150 years ago, people worked ten hours a day with only Sunday off. But in the last century we won a two-day weekend and limits on long hours. This century, we must raise our sights to reduce working time again. "If productivity gains from new technology are even half as good as promised, then the country can afford to make working lives better."

In 2019 the Wellcome Trust, the scientific research organisation, dealt a blow to campaigns for a 4-day week when it abandoned a 3-month trial, saying it had been too difficult for some of the 800 staff at its head office to fit their workload into the shortened week.

The Wellcome Trust had initially been inspired by the move by a smaller group in New Zealand to introduce a shorter working week. [Perpetual Guardian](#) a company that manages wills and financial planning, conducted a trial of a 4-day week and found that productivity did not suffer as employees developed innovative ways to improve performance. Motivation at work also leapt as the number of staff saying they could successfully manage their work and home commitments increased from 54% to 78%.

The experiment has obviously struck a chord as the company said it had been contacted by 350 organisations from 28 countries around the world – principally the UK, Germany, the US and Australia.

However, there has so far been little concrete follow-up and presenteeism is still dominant in many parts of the workplace, encouraging people to hang around at work, whether they are being productive or not. In fact, technology companies such as [Google, Apple and Facebook are now offering](#) restaurants and leisure activities on their work campuses, making it even more difficult for staff to leave.

It is important to come up with new ways of measuring how effective people are at their jobs without calculating hours worked. Some employers have already embraced this and are happy to trust their staff. Sometimes, smaller organisations such as charities and public sector workplaces can lead the way with ideas that could be replicated across the workforce.

PROFILE:

Kathy Evans, chief executive, Children England

"I employ the whole person," says Ms Evans who runs the small childrens' charity that currently has an entirely female staff. While running a small charity is obviously a different proposition from leading a much bigger for-profit organisation, there are innovative approaches that can apply more widely.

Ms Evans is keen to assure employees that health and family comes first and when personal life is challenging, there is no point in getting stressed out about work as well. She is keen to see that the people she employs are effective rather than watching the hours they work. No meetings are organised before 10am or after 4pm to facilitate parents taking children to school and picking them up.

"I say to people, I don't need to know everything about your personal life, I won't interrogate you, but you don't have to hide your personal life issues and struggle into work regardless. There's no point in you being here if you're upset and preoccupied and feeling unable to show it. If you're having a hard time and need time off just text me and we can work around it."

"I don't have children, so it's not been about creating a working environment that I particularly needed for myself, it's just what I've learned over many years about enabling people to bring the very best of themselves to their work. I have applied the same management attitude to men and women alike, and a couple of the men working with me had real personal crisis points at times where this approach helped them through too."

"It can be common to find leaders who feel they have to show their commitment by overworking, so there can be a bit of a stereotype of the over-stressed, over-committed chief exec who sends work emails at all kinds of anti-social times, proving how busy they are. But I think that can create a working culture that expects overworking and constant availability from everyone, and that's not healthy for anyone. I've never been someone who over-works, I need balance, and I don't want to run any team or organisation on the false economy of relying on staff giving us more of their life than we are we're paying them for." She makes sure that the workloads are divided up realistically, and if workloads and deadlines pile up she'll agree how to tame them.

"It might sound soft, but I've never felt like it's a soft-touch regime. In general people appreciate it and they work really hard and stick with the team over the long term because they like the approach, so it's actually very productive." However, it is important to recruit the right people for this approach to work. "I've had to hone my recruitment skills as I have made some errors in the past, and if you apply this approach to managing anyone who's not really interested in the job in the first place, it won't work!"

NEW WAYS OF WORKING

Some women believe we should stop talking about flexibility and move towards agile working instead.

“Flexible is applied to women going part-time. When men are pursuing a PhD or men are on a board working four days a week, we don’t hear about those elements,”

says Ms Coombs, the executive coach.

“Right now, flexible means children and caring, but agile means entrepreneurial and all those good things, so I think if we apply agile to everything that requires human flexibility, I think we are getting there.”

If we want the concept of a feminine company to work for everyone, it is important to be careful about the language we use.

It can also be referred to as fluid or smart working. Ms Gooding, the Stonewall chair, says it is not just about gender: “What I’m talking about is truly fluid It’s more acceptable from everybody and all age groups to not have to go to a place of work in a very rigid way. Technology has driven that.”

If we stop judging people by the hours worked, creative solutions to measuring input have to be found. For example, Hargreaves Lansdown, a financial firm based in Bristol, is moving to a new pay system where it uses different criteria to reward its staff. Another company I spoke to is moving away from annual appraisals, for example, as its employees found them too confrontational and judgemental. The firm is moving towards a process of feedback over shorter periods and more informal ways of assessing effectiveness. This can make for a more empathetic way of working which fits more closely with the way women work. As one comments: “Men want to get it out on the table and measure it, if you can’t measure it, it’s not worth anything.”

Women’s outlook on life differs from that of men and that is increasingly coming into their judgement of a good workplace.

NEW WAYS OF LIVING

When interviewed many people express frustration at the atomisation of the modern workplace with its long-hours and long commutes. In some ways, they hark back to a pre-industrial way of life where the community was based on living, working and caring in a small area and people from all generations lived with each other. It is probably utopian to imagine a wholesale return to this sort of set-up, but ways of accommodating these trends could begin to be incorporated into the fabric of the environment in cities across the world.

This will take some time and requires a huge amount of political will. But already some forward-looking administrations have introduced changes that help women and in the long run, benefit everyone. In Quebec in Canada, for instance, the provincial government began subsidising universal childcare costs so that users pay only £10 a day. It has found that this quickly paid for itself with working women paying more in tax than the government spends on childcare.

Similarly, the city of Washington DC in the US, made pre-schools for 3-4 year-olds free in 2008. This led to a [big increase](#) in working mothers – from 65% to 76% over 10 years compared to 2 percentage points nationally. This raised the tax take and proved a powerful incentive for families to remain living downtown rather than moving to the suburbs when they had children.

These experiments show that improving facilities for families can pay for themselves and if carers for elderly people are properly supported, they can save the state large sums of money.



DIFFERENT VALUES

Many women have strongly-held values that they want to see reflected in the organisation where they work. This is particularly true of the younger generation of millennials. These women – and increasingly – men want for feel that their organisation is a force for good or is following some important principles.

“The generation that is coming up now; expectations are very different, organisations that don’t embrace that, or cling to an old culture, will look really out of step,”

says Alison Rose deputy chief executive of NatWest Holdings.

“There are several women of my age and we are all passionate about sustainability,” says a 33-year-old middle manager in the food industry. “We know the business needs to make a profit, but how much profit? Could we not invest a bit more back into the supply chain to help them meet their environmental commitments?”

“When I go to board meetings to present ideas, I feel a disconnect because they are older and very profit-orientated. But in the next 10 years, my peers and I will be entering the boardrooms as directors, so hopefully we can make a difference,” she says.

My interviewee says it is very important for a business to share her values. “I wouldn’t work for someone I couldn’t feel happy with. I would seriously consider leaving if they failed to uphold some very important values.”

This is echoed among many younger interviewees, reflecting an interesting change of focus to one where workers look beyond sales and profits towards more meaningful corporate goals.

PROFILE:

Dame Jayne-Anne Gadhia, company director

She says an ideal working environment is one where people have a shared purpose. That's what she says she tried to create at Virgin Money, a business she had been associated with since its creation in 1994, eventually becoming chief executive until it was sold to Clydesdale and Yorkshire in 2018.

She recalls holding a meeting in 2003 as she returned to work after six weeks' maternity leave. She was the main breadwinner so needed to go back to work even though she was suffering from postnatal depression. She told her assembled team that if she was going to leave her daughter at home, she intended to make sure that what she was doing would make an impact.

"I'm not just going to be here to earn money...it's only worth it if we can make a difference," she remembers saying.

This was illustrated at Virgin Money by the slogan: "Everyone better off." She gives an example of it in action: after a failed attempt to buy Northern Rock in 2009, some 50 IT developers who were going to work on the enlarged bank, were put to work instead on creating what has become the charity website Virgin Money Giving.

"An ideal workplace needs to be clear on its purpose," she says. And a lack of purpose is one of the reasons businesses are distrusted. "Business people often tend to be seen to be after their own betterment and not for the betterment of society and I think that business has a role in society."

The financial crisis heralded a "massive revolution, really to break the traditional way of doing things which had been too male, too hierarchical, too authoritarian, too alpha male."

Her fear now, though, is that any economic downturn could put back reforms. "I still fear that at the moment when there is a business crisis all of that [change] goes out the window and everybody reverts to type."

There is a case, she says, for putting diversity issues at the centre of corporate governance.

"In selling Virgin Money, very clearly the primary corporate governance responsibility for my board, me included, was maximising value for shareholders and, of course, that's critical. But I think that making these softer issues - they are critical issues - giving them as much weight in corporate governance as the financial return to shareholders is critical and where I'm feeling optimistic is that investor bodies agree."

PURPOSE IN LIFE

"I firmly believe that women need more of a purpose in what they do, that is the problem with financial services and why they drop out," says Ms Blackwell, who leads the Pensions Insurance Corporation. "That's why I left Goldman Sachs. Women need to understand that they are doing something better for society, they want to work for companies where they understand what they are doing."

Britain's [new corporate governance code](#) that sets the guidelines for the way companies should behave, is trying to foster a greater focus on stakeholders rather than just shareholders. The new code that came into effect at the beginning of 2019 encourages companies to establish a culture that is aligned with the company purpose, business strategy, promotes integrity and values diversity.

The idea of work being just one part of your life and not all of it, is something that young people feel strongly about. "This generation doesn't say: 'I'm going to be a complete workaholic,' their idols are people with multi-faceted lives," says a senior manager in the public sector.

This is just as important for men as women but has yet to translate into a huge take-up of parental leave by fathers.

Dame Helena at Legal and General believes that young people are quite demanding about the way they want to work and the companies they want to work for, whose values are aligned with their own. A man in his late 20's came to see her and wanted to get involved in diversity having looked at the 50-year-old men around him and deciding he didn't want to work like that. "Young men have become more embracing of feminine characteristics," she says.

But not all men are ready to adapt to a new working culture. "I think we are seeing a polarisation among the young – you get the super-progressive young men who are very much changed from the generation above, but also seeing a backlash – a swathe of young men who feel excluded and discriminated against," says Avivah Wittenberg-Cox who runs 20-First a gender consultancy. "They are voting right-ward and we ignore them at our peril."

This has been evident in the backlash against the #MeToo movement and the drive to tackle toxic masculinity. In introducing new ideas into the workplace, it is important to ensure that everyone feels included. Ms Wittenberg-Cox feels we should be talking about a human corporation rather than a feminine one.



PROFILE:

Alison Rose, deputy chief executive, NatWest Holdings.

There is a long-established tradition in the banking world to entertain clients on the golf course. But Alison Rose hated it. Just starting out in her career as a banker, she decided not to participate. Instead, she went only to the lunch or the dinner in the evening. Sometimes she organised meetings with clients separately.

Eschewing the golf course was part of Ms Rose's plan to be herself in the workplace and after more than 20 years at Royal Bank of Scotland, she was appointed deputy chief executive of the whole group (NatWest Holdings) in November 2018. She is reluctant to hand out advice about juggling work and home (she has two children and her husband also works in a senior role) because "it's different for everyone".

"The trade-offs I make in terms of what's really important to me may be completely different to someone else," and "it's not static". She has changed roles every three years and refers to her "super supportive husband, super supportive mother and lots of help... and surrounding myself with the right team."

One of her roles involved international travel in Asia - she insisted on being home every weekend and often spent week nights on planes.

She has also had to adapt her own working practices: when she started her current role, she had expected to hold the Monday morning meeting at 7.30am as had been the norm when she had worked in other parts of the bank. However, this time, the men in the team asked for it to be later as they had commutes, school-runs or other responsibilities and it shifted to 8.45am. This is an encouraging reversal of roles since it is usually women who ask for more flexibility for these type of responsibilities.

In order to encourage more diversity, Ms Rose requires job short-lists to include women and diverse candidates and diversity is among the factors against which heads of department are measured, alongside their financial targets.

WOMEN IN THE BOARDROOM

The barriers to women progressing up the ranks are entrenched, but not always visible. Sheryl Sandberg, chief operating officer of Facebook, notes in her book *Lean In*: "One stumbling block is that many people believe that the workplace is largely a meritocracy, which means we look at individuals, not groups, and determine that differences in outcomes must be based on merit, not gender. Men at the top are often unaware of the benefits they enjoy simply because they're men, and this can make them blind to the disadvantages associated with being a woman."

The British government's review of women on boards which was set up in 2016 and is led by Sir Philip Hampton, chair of pharmaceuticals group GSK, has set a target for getting a third of women as company directors by 2020. The Financial Times has estimated that in order to meet that target, FTSE 350 companies would have to appoint women to 40% of their board positions. These positions are mostly non-executive posts which means that women are monitoring the leadership, but not running the company. Even here boards have made some odd excuses for not appointing more women – one of my favourites is: "All the good ones have already gone." Often a single woman is appointed – bringing the number of all-male boards in the FTSE 350 down to just 10, but few go on to appoint more than one woman. The new chair of the Institute of Directors, Charlotte Valeur, has [accused companies of lying](#) when they say they cannot find enough women or ethnic minority directors to appoint. She said she would call for new laws if big companies did not make more progress in achieving diversity targets in 2019.

BOARD QUOTAS

Other countries have introduced quotas to get more women to the top. Norway brought in a rule in 2008 that company boards should have 40% of female directors or face dissolution. Other countries such as Belgium, France and Italy followed suit. Germany, the Netherlands and Spain introduced quotas but without sanctions for non-compliance. Some companies went to great lengths to avoid the regulations – even leaving the stock exchange rather than comply, others complained about “golden skirts” – the supposed paucity of female talent leading to a small number of women being appointed to several boards. An [analysis](#) by the Economist found that since the introduction of the quotas in these countries, the calamitous fears expressed by the corporate world had not come to pass. But it claims that the results of adding more women to boards have been mixed and crucially, more women as non-executive directors had not necessarily led to more women actually running companies.

Women are wary of being included on a board as the “token” woman, which is why companies should be striving for a balanced board with equal numbers of men and women. There are four boards in the FTSE 100 where this is the case: Next, the retailer, Rightmove, the property site, Taylor Wimpey, the housebuilder and retail broker, Hargreaves Lansdown.



MORE BALANCE

At Hargreaves Lansdown, the financial firm based in Bristol, even though half of the boardroom seats are filled by women, 2018 was the first time in at least five years that all of the women who went on maternity leave returned to work. Heather Cooper, chief people officer, says: "It's about creating a role that is right for the person." The company decided to offer more flexible, part-time roles. "I'd be keen to see more men doing this, more men getting involved in sharing the responsibility [for child care]."

Hargreaves Lansdown has also made interesting changes to the way staff are paid. In the past, individual performance was the only measure of success, but in 2019 when bonuses are paid, the way in which financial performance targets have been achieved will also count. There is a new matrix with five objective areas against which the individual's behaviour is measured. Staff are told they cannot reach the top performance grade "without excelling in both the hows and the whats." Someone who has failed to meet their personal objectives but excelled in demonstrating the company's values will get a higher ranking than someone who has failed to meet objectives and also failed to meet the company's values. Equally,

an individual who has exceeded all their performance objectives will not receive a top ranking if they have not been able to demonstrate they have followed the company's values.

"You have to create an environment where everyone can participate," Ms Cooper says. "Incorporating our values into the appraisal system hardwires behaviours into performance reviews. It's our first full year of doing this and we are still getting used to applying the process in practise, but the feedback so far is very positive."

The new pay scheme, she thinks, will create a more collaborative workplace. While she is the only woman on the ten-strong executive committee, Ms Cooper says she has received support from the board which is chaired by a woman; Deanna Oppenheimer – for the diversity agenda. Half of the men on the executive committee are now mentoring women.



WHAT'S STOPPING WOMEN FROM GETTING TO THE TOP

Ms Rose at NatWest who is being touted as a potential chief executive of the bank after its current boss said he would stand down, says that there are two major reasons why women don't get to the top – either they choose not to or they face unconscious bias. She says this is why the culture of an organisation can be so important and such things as having good role models – both male and female – along with a visible process for promotion.

“Women want to be treated fairly and promoted if they are good. What they don't want is to be held back because of their gender. The difference between men and women is men think we 'have it' and women don't,”

says Ms Wittenberg-Cox at the gender consultancy. “A lot of women are being told, and still feel it's their responsibility, to do something, become something, to succeed. I think that's insane. If organisations don't adapt to what is now 60% of the talent pool they will never use that resource.” There is the “unconscious bias that exists through the organisation that becomes glue and stops talent coming through,” says Ms Rose. This is highlighted by some of my interviewees who talk about male bosses, not necessarily discriminating against women by not promoting them, but just not seeing them among the male candidates.



PROFILE:

Moni Mannings, company director

As a chair, senior independent director and nominations committee member across several public company boards from manufacturing to banking, Moni Mannings has encouraged chief executives to look beyond the usual candidates in their succession planning. "I've asked: what about the women? I'm urging a broader field of vision; it's not that they are discriminating, it's just that unless actively presented they don't even see the women in those terms." As a woman of Pakistani heritage, Ms Mannings has stood out for her ethnicity and her gender. She has used that to her advantage, but early in her career, tried hard to fit in. After a law degree, she became a barrister, but decided the bar was not for her and moved to the City to work as a solicitor.

She had two children while working for Clifford Chance, a top City law firm in the 1980s, but that made it much more difficult for her to achieve partnership. After arguing for a fax machine, having done a full day at the office she worked at home once the children were in bed.

That meant missing out on the socialising after work where a lot of the soft skills were passed on. "There was a lot of soft mentoring that the men didn't even realise they were getting – like the shared war stories and how to build a client base and develop business."

After spending the first part of her law career trying to fit in, she decided to embrace her difference rather than play it down. "I was standing out anyway for being unusual as a brown-skinned, female lawyer in a City law firm, so decided to own it and use it. I started wearing bright pink and mauve suits. I had already established my credentials as an outstanding finance lawyer. Now I was overtly memorable for reasons people could mention! In the process I became bolder, projected confidence, began to court publicity for my work and started to build a reputation."

She was headhunted to become a partner at Olswang and was promoted to the board within a year of joining. At the first board meeting, the decision was taken to reduce the headcount by 15% because of the dotcom bust. Ms Mannings had to make part of her staff redundant.

"It was a decision the Board took unanimously. I was collaborating with the wider endeavour which was right for the whole firm but my team expected me to fight its impact on them. They thought I was weak and selling out. Probably because I was open about saying I thought it was the right thing to do, unlike some of my fellow board members." She thinks men have more of a tendency to overtly fight their own particular corner. "It looks like strength."

Ms Mannings believes most women are brought up from an early age to mute their anger and to achieve goals through collaboration, empathy and persuasion. "We need both men and women to work together if we want a balanced, effective organisation drawing on the widest range of skills and attributes."

She is a director at Polypipe; a Doncaster-based building products manufacturing company. "I have absolutely no sense of being treated as a woman in any negative way. I feel respected for my experience and contribution. However, I do often find myself as the first person raising certain topics like diversity, talent management, wellbeing, employee voice and I sense they have been regarded as female issues. Things are however changing with the new corporate governance code."

"We're currently looking for a woman with a construction industry background to join the Polypipe board. But the men have said, 'why does it have to be a woman?' My response is because the lived experience of a woman is different to that of a man and someone with that perspective on our industry will provide unique insights and a better balance on our board."

WOMEN IN FINANCE

In a [blog](#) to mark the 10th anniversary of the financial crisis, Christine Lagarde, head of the International Monetary Fund, said if there had been more Lehman sisters, there wouldn't have been such a massive banking collapse. She noted that there had not been much change in culture in the financial sector since the crisis. "The financial sector still puts profit now over long-range prudence, short-termism over sustainability. Just think of the many financial scandals since Lehman. Ethics is not only important for its own sake, but because ethical lapses have clear economic consequences. Good regulation and supervision can do a lot, but they cannot do everything. They must be complemented by reform within financial institutions."

She continues:

"In this context, a key ingredient of reform would be more female leadership in finance. I say this for two reasons. First, greater diversity always sharpens thinking, reducing the potential for groupthink. Second, this diversity also leads to more prudence, with less of the reckless decision-making that provoked the crisis."

"Our own research (at the IMF) bears this out—a higher share of women on the boards of banks and financial supervision agencies is associated with greater stability. As I have said many times, if it had been Lehman Sisters rather than Lehman Brothers, the world might well look a lot different today."

In order to progress, women need help, they need champions within the organisation and mentors. It is not always easy to know what is available to you or to put yourself forward without a prompt. In this way, it is encouraging to see women helping each other forward.

PROFILE:

Hattie Llewelyn-Davies, chair Buckinghamshire Healthcare Trust

She has been running her own one-woman training scheme for board members over the past 10 years. Samantha Herelle was her first trainee.

From her early days in the boardroom at a Housing Association, Ms Llewelyn-Davies spotted that women and diverse candidates were not putting themselves forward to join the board. She started a programme to train directors and to find people who would not have thought of joining a board.

Samantha Herelle who was a manager at Circle Housing Group was one of them, she had not considered a boardroom post until approached by Ms Llewelyn-Davies who said she would receive a small fee as a trainee. Ms Herelle who is a single mum and black, went to an interview with an executive panel; "One of them said: 'we need to spice things up around here,' and I wondered then what I had let myself in for!"

At first, Ms Herelle found it challenging to get to grips with the board papers, particularly on the finance side. Ms Llewelyn-Davies and other non-exec directors would talk them through with her and another director explained about the workings of private finance initiatives. After a two-year internship where she was supported and given

training, Ms Herelle went through a competitive interview process and joined as a full board member.

"What I eventually realised was that I don't need to know everything about the treasury matters, I had to remind myself, I'm there for the experience I bring on the operational housing side of things," she says.

Ms Llewelyn-Davies has now been through a similar process with 11 trainees – not all women, but also men from diverse backgrounds. "Initially, other board members thought I was mad, but after a while, they recognised that the differences bring more strength."

Ms Llewelyn-Davies would like to see more women coming up through the executive ranks. In the NHS trust, women dominate until you get to the top two tiers. "Diversity is key for an NHS trust, but very few of the chairs are women, even though they are very good at developing their staff."

"Women do things differently – we're more open to new ideas and change."

But Ms Herelle says it doesn't come naturally. "As women, we don't see ourselves as leaders and we don't set out our careers that way. I would never have thought about leading an organisation. I tell everyone now – get yourself on a board, the experience and the strategic insight gained is invaluable."

GIVING WOMEN A LEG UP

Organisations like [Women on Boards](#) have been set up to show women what is available and help them to progress to a board post. The organisation now has 24,000 members and has helped 1,500 women into the boardroom. "Men who socialise in the golf club and blur the work-life boundaries, are more likely to hear about these jobs because they are in the 'gang'." But women often do not expect to run organisations and headhunters generally do not look beyond the usual suspects when looking for new directors," said one female director. "Women won't put themselves forward, I had to be convinced by people to do that," says Ms Blackwell who runs the Pensions Insurance Corporation.

"The gender approach has up to now been very focused on women "leaning in" and all of the development training that I did over my career was very much about women adapting to what has been a fairly masculine workplace. I think that is only part of the answer. Companies need to become more feminine as well – recognising that being emotionally intelligent, supporting employees, and focusing on purpose are equally important and powerful. The most productive companies are those that balance both elements. The ying and the yang so to speak."

I am assuming that if more women get promoted into top positions, in turn they will begin to address the imbalances in the way companies are run and challenge

the way careers are structured. Women who currently lead organisations have tended to be squeezed into male structures and have not challenged the status quo once at the top. But we should also encourage male managers to challenge macho behaviour on the part of their peers and to question the current model of work.

"Women over-analyse whether they are ready for the top job, whereas men will just go for it," says a woman in the City. One idea is to encourage women to write an application for the job above them every year – they do not necessarily apply, but it can focus the mind on what is required to reach the next level. In another example, a big bank is seeking out people it believes have potential and giving them a 6-month seat on the executive committees that report in to the board. In this way, women can get a taste of leadership without having to commit to a top job, it also helps them progress to the next level.

Ms Blackwell believes that the loneliness of leading an organisation can isolate chief execs; "Then you understand why CEOs start making bad decisions because they have nobody to talk to and everybody says Yes to them." Women tend to suffer from imposter syndrome where they don't think they can progress upwards. This is fed by expectations from others and their own feelings of inadequacy. Women interviewed for this project often said they would be mistaken for an assistant even if they were in charge and in meetings, men would defer to the senior women's male assistants rather than address them.

Women are too quick to denigrate themselves and assume they have been promoted as a token. As Moni Mannings says: "No man has ever said; he only got the job because he's a man."

Not everyone wants to be a manager and strive for the top. "It is a hard, hard job, it is very lonely and that is so unfemale. In a world where it's all about collaboration and empathy. Being a leader is always lonely, that is the way it is. You are alone taking decisions, you are alone with accountability, that will never change. That is the nature of leadership and women have to want to do that," says Ms Blackwell. The corporate world, however, is not for everyone and an increasing number of women have opted out to set up their own organisation or to work independently.

PROFILE:

Jane Braithwaite runs Designated Group

"Most of the women who work at Designated Group would not otherwise be working," says Ms Braithwaite. "There's still a lot of cultural stigma attached to working mothers. Many of whom are unable to return to work due to the inflexibility of their employer." Designated was set up five years ago with the desire to help these women back into the workplace. At the time Ms Braithwaite had three young children of her own and was seeking more flexibility to help juggle the demands of motherhood. "Today Designated is made up of 65 incredibly talented and driven women and is about to recruit the first man." She believes her business model appeals to both sexes. The team is made up of specialist virtual PA's, marketers and finance managers.

Designated PA, a subsidiary of the group, expects a working pattern of 20 hours minimum per week. PAs are encouraged to manage their work commitment and diaries in agreement with the clients they work for. "Work-life balance is what we are all about," says Ms Braithwaite.

The PA meets each of her allotted clients, but most of the work is done at home in their virtual office. Ms Braithwaite allocates the clients to the best-suited PA and encourages all team members to be vocal about their experiences and help support each other.

The people who work for her cite the flexibility as a vital part of the job. "Pros for the employee are obvious, the flexibility to be both a worker and a parent/run a home or indeed whatever you need that flexibility for. People who would otherwise have to leave the workforce are granted an opportunity to stay doing what they like, earn money, stay relevant in the job market etc." says one of her employees.

The business has grown quickly and Ms Braithwaite has had to put in a financial and management structure. She is currently putting together an employee share ownership scheme to make everyone feel part of the business.

"I am very risk-averse about borrowing money to grow but my demands financially are very modest. I get a lot of motivation from what we stand for. My motivation is not necessarily to build something I can sell."

RUNNING YOUR OWN COMPANY

Women running their own show, tend to have different models of management and less-competitive goals than men. Ms Heffernan interviewed female entrepreneurs for her book *Women On Top*. She was surprised at what she found.

"Discovering just how different women's businesses are and why has made me very uncomfortable. When I describe these CEOs as nurturing, it makes me flinch," she writes.

"As relative newcomers to the business environment, we have often been judged – and have judged ourselves – by how well we accommodate ourselves to male norms. It is the wrong yardstick. The growing success of women-owned businesses demonstrates just how well we can do when we work and lead on our own terms and in our own way, driven by our own vision."

However, women struggle to get access to finance in the same way as male-run companies. Ms Heffernan says she knows many women founders in both the UK and US who are told, a condition of raising finance is that they install a male chief executive.

Ms Rose completed a [review for the government](#) in March 2019 of barriers to female entrepreneurship. She pointed to lack of access to capital as one of the key hindrances for women's businesses, as well as increased risk awareness, perceived missing skills and experience, care responsibilities and a lack of mentors. Closing the gap between women and male entrepreneurs could add £250bn to the UK economy, Ms Rose believes.

But Ms Heffernan also points to the lack of data on female-run companies. "The lack of investment in women's businesses reflects the ongoing belief that men have something business needs."

She would also like to see traditional corporations recognise the achievements of female entrepreneurs. "This is the kind of talent those corporations lose every day. Instead of shrugging off such losses with the consolation that "she couldn't cut it," these companies need to ask themselves how they've failed their female talent. What is it about their cultures, about their work habits, that renders them intolerable to precisely the kind of entrepreneurial drive and imagination they know they need?"

Ms Heffernan poses the question of whether women will change the norm, or will it change us? She poses that the new norm would be one where executives gain as much respect for nurturing as toughness. "Where quality and output are valued, rather than hours and face time. Where culture, values, and emotional intelligence are part of every corporate score card."

CHANGING THE STATUS QUO IS HARD

Women who have tried to change a traditional set-up have sometimes faced entrenched male attitudes and blocking prejudice from their co-workers. One senior woman I interviewed had tried to move the company in a more ethical and sustainable direction only to be met with incredulity from her male colleagues. They eventually parted company.

Sacha Romanovitch at accountancy firm Grant Thornton similarly tried new ways of doing business and was notable for capping her own salary at 20 times average pay. She had worked at the firm for 28 years and in 2015 became chief executive.

But an anonymous letter was leaked to the press in mid-2018 calling her a socialist and saying the firm had no focus on profitability.

Ms Romanovitch responded: "A small cadre of partners will find it hard we are making decisions that will depress profits in the short-term but will help profits in the long-term ... If profits get unhinged from purpose it might not hurt you now, but it will come back and bite you on the bum." But by the end of the year, she had left the firm in a move described by one commentator as "revenge of the chaps."

Many women speak of the need for balanced organisations – the male model has prevailed for too long and become too dominant. "Feminine corporation – if by that we mean it's about merit, hard work, culture, a more nurturing style while also delivering results, well then, yes, I think there are distinctions versus an alpha-male culture," says Dame Elizabeth Corley, non-executive director and senior advisor at Allianz Global Investors, who was speaking in a personal capacity. She pointed out that the alpha male approach was distinct from a purely masculine one.

"Organisations with the alpha male ego which dominated the late 20th century and the run up to the banking crisis...I see it just isn't sustainable...customers don't like it, governments, employees, boards don't like it."



BIOLOGY – THE LAST TABOO?

Ask some women what they want out of work and their answers are quite straightforward – a ladies' toilet would be a start. When the trade union Unite surveyed women in the construction industry, it found this was one of their major bugbears.

Ms Brewster at Marketforce, says:

“One thing I am really passionate about is period leave. Some days I just can't come in, I have crippling pains before and during my period. I can't admit I'm just off with a bad period, but I make something up.”

These things just aren't discussed. There's no understanding of women's issues. My current boss is sympathetic, but it depends on your relationship with that person. I used to have a male boss and if I was off, he would hassle me and ask, are you ill? Did you go to the doctor? Then I told him I had a really bad period and he just went red and was very embarrassed. He didn't say anything.” For some women, working practices *have deteriorated* to the point where they are being timed for taking toilet breaks, forced to stand for hours when pregnant and given little support for health conditions.

The women on construction sites are in the minority and their needs are often overlooked. “There are female toilets available but generally the ones on site where I'm actually working are unisex portaloos. These are usually disgusting,” is a typical comment.

“Toilets for females are a basic requirement but usually locked, you have to seek the key from someone so by the time you find the person – usually male – with the key and after asking several persons – also usually male – half the site know you want to use a loo and when you open the door, guess what, it is usually being used as a storage facility,” says another female construction worker.

Trade union, Unite, has launched a period dignity

campaign to bring better sanitary conditions to building and construction sites for the women who work there. But it is not just the construction industry where periods are ignored, women in other walks of life – even those working with many other women – point out that they have had to argue for sanitary bins to be provided in their workplace toilets. One woman in the film industry told me she had to point out to the male managers that these bins were required.

A charity in Sweden has encouraged workplaces to take part in an experiment to educate people about the realities of menstruation which are often totally obscure to many men.

Again, the menopause can cause issues for woman at work which are not widely recognised or talked about. Recent research from the CIPD found that three out of five working women between the ages of 45 and 55 suffered a negative impact of experiencing menopause symptoms at work. The physical symptoms of the menopause vary from one person to another and many women suffer in silence. In response to the CIPD survey of 1,409 women, many said their concentration suffered, they felt more stressed and less patient with colleagues.

Others leave the workforce prematurely because of difficulties coping or a big drop in confidence that can occur at that period of your life.

“Menopause is the last taboo in the workplace. Too many women leave the workforce prematurely because they don't have support. This can dramatically affect your later life income,”

says Baroness Ros Altmann. She believes in-work support and networks to help women managing menopause symptoms could make a significant difference.



CONCLUSIONS: A MANIFESTO FOR CHANGE

There are many small things that can be done to ease women's lives at work and make them more sustainable. However, the women I have spoken to for this project have told me we can spend years tinkering around the edges of our working patterns, easing the lives of some, but not making systemic progress. What is needed is a fundamental shift in the workplace.

Since caring – either for children or elderly parents – is at the heart of many women's lives, why don't we put that at the centre of our society and force work to fit around it rather than the other way around? Caring for the next generation is one of the most important things we will ever do and as a society we need to offer as much support for that as we can. That will not just benefit women, but men and the wider community, as well.

As Margaret Heffernan says:

"We are a society, not a machine. People need and desire to care for others, if we don't look after each other, we are not a society. Without a flourishing and stable society, there is no business success, so businesses need to recognise these caring needs."

Increasingly the ageing population will mean that caring for elderly parents becomes as big a challenge as childcare, but there is no equivalent to maternity leave. "All of us will be looking after elderly parents, whether we like it or not," says Ms Heffernan. "You can, after all, choose to have children, but you can't choose to have parents."

As a society, we are not very good at thinking about caring – it is seen as a woman's issue. But it is everyone's issue and needs to be recognised as such.

To make a shift of this nature, we need to rethink our beliefs and preconceptions about everything to do with work. Technology and the rise of Artificial Intelligence will force us to rethink much of what we are used to in any case. Why not use this opportunity to put a more human face on the workplace?

In this report, I have referred to a **feminine corporation** which I have used as short-hand for a more inclusive way of working. This should not be exclusive and maybe needs a new name such as the human corporation.

It would have the following characteristics:

1. The organisation would put caring for children, relatives and parents at its heart.
2. It would offer a carer's passport for all staff – including agency workers.

3. The workplace would help provide affordable childcare – either with an in-house creche or vouchers towards outside provision.
4. There would be a focus on agile working with a 4-day week, flexible rotas, home working and job-sharing encouraged and facilitated at all levels.
5. The workplace would be inclusive and open to people from all heritages, disabilities and identities.
6. There would be no gender pay gap and mentoring would be available for all.
7. Equal numbers of men and women (with diverse backgrounds) would be promoted to all layers of management and senior roles.
8. Similarly, the same number of men and women would be on the board of directors.
9. The organisation would encourage a more ethical and sustainable way of working rather than a focus purely on profits and growth.
10. Rewards would be based on the broad values of the company rather than just individual performance.

This is a radical manifesto for change. There needs to be a groundswell of opinion championing a new version of the workplace for this to become a reality.

A combination of policy changes would be needed for these changes to happen. Already, corporate governance codes are pushing companies in a more sustainable direction, but we need to be bolder. A new Companies Act introduced by government could provide the legislative agenda.

We need all-female shortlists not just for political posts to ensure more women are elected to parliament where they can help to implement the policy changes required. Quotas are needed to pivot more women into the boardroom and to the top of big companies. These top appointments are symbolic as they signal to everyone that this is a normal state of affairs and encourage women to identify with top roles.

These ideas are likely to spark the usual carping reaction from those defending the status quo who will say a set-up like this is unaffordable and utopian. But greater diversity in the workplace and new ways of working could produce dividends for all of us and benefits that we are not currently imagining.

As women we need to become angrier and refuse to accept the unambitious targets and empty promises we have been given. Some men may lose out along the way, but women have been losing out for much longer.

The workplace needs to recognise the stages of a woman's life and embrace the caring philosophy that women adopt as second nature. What has been a macho set-up, now needs to be feminised.

