



A double-edged sword: twenty-first century workplace trends and gender equality

A double-edged
sword

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to uncover the hidden gender consequences of three current trends in the workplace, the increase in knowledge work, information and communication technology (ICT) and work-life balance policies.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper synthesizes and analyses existing empirical evidence from research on knowledge work, work-life balance and boundary, women's work and careers.

Findings – Knowledge work, ICT and work-life balance policies are found to increase the temporal and geographical flexibility of work. Such enhanced flexibility should facilitate women's participation and advancement in work and therefore gender equality. However, all three trends also have hidden gender consequences that significantly prevent women from participating and advancing.

Research limitations/implications – Research needs to explicitly integrate evidence from across research areas and disciplines to appreciate the complexity and contentiousness of current workplace developments from a gender perspective.

Practical implications – A public debate is needed that better communicates and challenges the complexity of gender issues in the twenty-first century workplace, in order to raise critical awareness amongst individual workers, as well as practitioners and policy makers, and to lead to better informed decision making.

Originality/value – A gender-focused analysis and synthesis of evidence across the research areas included in this paper is currently lacking. The paper thus makes a novel contribution to the academic debate on gender equality in the workplace and provides an improved basis for better informed discussions between academics, policy makers and practitioners about how to achieve gender equality in today's world of work.

Keywords Working patterns, Working practices, Gender equality, Information technology, Knowledge work, Women's work, Work-life balance, Work-life boundary

Paper type Conceptual paper

1. Introduction

The public debate of gender and workplace equality is dominated by two truisms: that women's fortunes at work have improved significantly in the twentieth century and that they still and equally significantly fall short of those enjoyed by men. Undoubtedly a key economic development in the last 50 years has been the substantial and well-documented increase in women's labour force participation (Blyton and Dastmalchian, 2006; McCall, 2005), with female employment rates in the UK "inching closer to men's employment rates all the time" (Li *et al.*, 2008, p. 3). National and European Acts prohibit gender discrimination in recruitment and redundancy decisions and establish rights to, for instance, part-time work, flexible working or maternity leave

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(Appelbaum *et al.*, 2006; Hyman and Summers, 2007). What is equally true and well documented, though less acknowledged publicly, is that gender equality in work and employment is still the aspiration, not the reality. Across the EU, women's employment rates cluster around the 66 per cent mark, compared to 75-80 per cent for men. Significant shares of women only work part-time, up to 66, 68 and 78 per cent for Germany, the UK and The Netherlands for instance, which typically impedes career progression (all figures European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2007). In addition, women are still over-represented in the low-pay jobs which Banyard (2010) dubs "the 5 C's: cleaning, caring, clerical work, cashiering and catering" (Bradley, 2007). At the same time, women are under-represented in upper echelons of the corporate world, where a meagre 12.5 per cent of FTSE 100 board members are women and only five FTSE 100 companies are managed by a female CEO (Vinnicombe *et al.*, 2010). Behind these statistics lie countless incidents of implicit and explicit, minor and major gender discrimination at work, from low pay for classroom assistants because they are "just mothers, really" (Warhurst *et al.*, 2009) to the blatantly sexist culture of investment banking (Suzana, 2009). For women business owners gender is a disadvantage on markets for (start-up) capital as well as in the general evaluation of their entrepreneurial success (Carter *et al.*, 2007; Marlow and McAdam, 2011). So while women's fortunes in the workplace have undoubtedly improved in the twentieth century, the early twenty-first century sees women still at a disadvantage – including at the end of the month, when their pay-out is still significantly, often by a quarter or third, lower than that of their male colleagues (Banyard, 2010; EHRC, 2009).

This evidence paints a picture of persistent and entrenched gender inequalities in labour market participation and advancement. Some of these inequalities will be rooted in deeply held beliefs about gendered capabilities and skills and about women's and men's roles in society (Banyard, 2010; Bradley, 2007). However, topping the list of "barriers to women's ascendancy through the workplace" (Banyard, 2010, p. 83) are not such socio-cultural aspects but "the lack of flexible working" (Banyard, 2010). Flexibility in the length and scheduling of working hours continues to be regarded as the central facilitator for reconciling work and non-work (read: family) and therefore for women's participation and advancement in the labour market (Appelbaum *et al.*, 2006; Hill *et al.*, 2011). At first glance, the past two decades in particular have seen three major and closely-related developments that should provide such increased flexibility and thus benefit gender equality in the workplace. First, there has been a general trend towards knowledge work (Newell *et al.*, 2002). In knowledge work the crucial resource of production lies with the individual worker and actual work practices are (much) less dependent on the physical infrastructure of an organisation. Consequently, knowledge workers have a more powerful position in their relationship with employers and enjoy more autonomy and control over how, when and where they work (Darr and Warhurst, 2008). Second and relatedly, modern information and communication technology (ICT) allow taking work out of the office and, particularly, into the home (Duxbury and Smart, 2011; Felstead and Jewson, 2000). This relocation of work also enables workers to tailor working hours to their preferences. Closely linked with growing attention to work-life balance issues, such home-based telework has become widespread in the UK and internationally (Felstead *et al.*, 2005; Warhurst *et al.*, 2008). Third and again relatedly, the need for better work-life balance has taken centre stage in the work-related public and academic debates (Fleetwood, 2007; Warhurst *et al.*, 2008).

and current legal acts and corporate policies offer unprecedented support for reconciling work and career demands with family and care responsibilities.

Given these three developments and the flexibility they provide for women's work, why do the gender inequalities outlined above still exist? This paper suggests that at a second glance, the increase in knowledge and ICT-supported work and the joint effort towards improving work-life balance experiences comprise hidden obstacles for women's participation and advancement at work and therefore for gender equality. It is the aim of this paper to analyse these hidden obstacles and to synthesise them into a more comprehensive picture of the gendered aspects of work. The paper will undertake this analysis by reviewing existing evidence on knowledge work (Section 2), on the impact of ICT (Section 3) and on work-life balance policies (Section 4) through a gender lens[1]. With this analysis the paper uncovers the more hidden and ambiguous implications current workplace developments have for gender equality. The concluding Section 5 discusses the paper's findings in relation to broader workplace trends and identifies implications for research, practice and policy. *Gender in Management* has presented ample evidence of gender issues regarding certain aspects of work and employment, but most of this discussion focuses on how women's work-life balance practices enable and constrain their careers (Anderson *et al.*, 2010; Desai *et al.*, 2011; Mäkelä *et al.*, 2011). A gender-sensitive analysis and synthesis of evidence across the three research areas outlined above is currently lacking, in *Gender in Management* and elsewhere. In undertaking it, the paper therefore makes a novel contribution to the academic debate on gender equality in the workplace and to this journal's aim of addressing gender issues in management. The paper also provides a basis for better informed discussions between academics, policy makers and practitioners about how to achieve gender equality at work.

2. A gender perspective on knowledge work

The twentieth century has seen a steady increase of what sociologists of work have labelled knowledge work: economic production in which immaterial resources such as talent, knowledge, creativity, communication and presentation skills are the key resource. Employers and contractors hire employees, self-employed or freelancers because they expect them to make a particular contribution based on their capacity to produce output with their brains rather than through interaction with raw materials, tools and machines (Darr and Warhurst, 2008; Newell *et al.*, 2002). Industries that are knowledge intensive in this sense have become an important focus of economic policy as governments and think tanks worldwide expect them to accelerate socio-economic development (Cable, 2010; Clifton, 2009; European Communities, 2004).

At first glance, the fact that knowledge work focuses on individual talent and knowledge seems to offer opportunities for lessening gender inequalities in the workplace. First, physical strength, which gives men a competitive advantage in industrial and agricultural production, is irrelevant to the job performance of knowledge workers. Second, the possession of knowledge and talent is not dependent on gender (or class or ethnicity, for that matter; Florida, 2004), but is regarded as "everyone's natural asset to exploit" (Ross, 2009, p. 40). On the contrary, as they regularly outperform men in higher education (HEPI, 2009), one could argue that women might even be better placed to acquire the crucial resources for knowledge work. From this perspective, a growing proportion of knowledge work in a society's economic

activity could be expected to increase the opportunities for gender-neutral participation and advancement in the workplace.

However, the focus on individual knowledge and talent has a more ambiguous side. First, knowledge workers have to constantly maintain and develop these individual capabilities (Gill, 2010; Jones and DeFillippi, 1996). The exact requirements and strategies depend on the job and differ between, for instance, an academic, a copywriter in advertising or a business consultant. Second and perhaps even more importantly, knowledge workers have to continuously communicate and market the value of these capabilities to potential employers or contractors. As a script supervisor interviewed by Randle and Culkin (2009, p. 101) explained: “finding and negotiating work is the hardest part. Doing the work is the fun. Finding the work is the job.” Notably, this need to market one’s labour power has proved relevant for both employed and self-employed professionals (Haunschild and Eikhof, 2009; Pongratz and Voß, 2003). An employed business consultant or tenured academic has to constantly develop, demonstrate and self-market her professional achievements to in ways not dissimilar to those used by a freelance journalist: through building “brand you” (Baréz-Brown, 2011).

For this constant “selling of the self”, two aspects are important: reputation and networks. Knowledge workers need to build a reputation for delivering high quality, innovative work. More often than not, this reputation has to transcend individual organisations and stretch across the whole industry to reach potential business partners, employers and clients (Blair, 2001). Personal networks are essential for building and maintaining such reputation (Randle and Culkin, 2009; Haunschild and Eikhof, 2009), but even more so for directly marketing one’s labour power to potential buyers. Knowledge workers have to show presence in their occupational community, attend company and industry functions and maintain good relationships with key players inside and outside their organisation to advance their careers – or just to get work. In the audio-visual industries such as TV, film, radio, media and publishing, for instance, 68 per cent of workers surveyed by Skillset (2005) were recruited into their current job through informal channels, with most contacted directly by the employer or by someone they had previously worked with. Because the crucial resources of knowledge work are invisible, “literally in [workers’] heads” (Florida, 2004, p. 37), employers and contractors seek “someone they can trust” (Sutton Trust, 2006, p. 10). Such trust is established through personal contacts and affirmed by reputation.

Public perception sees women as better communicators and possessing better social skills than men (Bradley *et al.*, 2000) – if that were true, work, employment and careers that are predicated on networking should play to women’s strengths. However, empirical evidence demonstrates that the opposite is the case. Capitalising on networks means investing and profiting from social capital (Jones and DeFillippi, 1996; Broadbridge, 2004, 2010). While undeniably a powerful resource, social capital is also inherently abstract and informal, making networking-based decisions about participation and advancement intransparent. This lack of transparency considerably obscures the proverbial “old boys networks” and women, along with workers from ethnic minority and working class backgrounds, find it hard to break into these (Arthur *et al.*, 2011). These difficulties have been most extensively demonstrated in the media industry, one of the oldest and publicly most influential areas of knowledge work, where “employers essentially employ people like themselves [white, male] [...] this is not necessarily just by race, but by class and gender”

(respondent cited in Thanki and Jefferys, 2006-2007, p. 114). In addition, the informality of networking disproportionately disadvantages women. Networking mostly takes place outside the office, in informal, semi-private entertainment settings, “clubby atmospheres” (Gill, 2002) in which women are primarily perceived and assessed as females and where their professional characteristics are at best a secondary feature. And while promoting one’s own course and trying to exert influence are socially accepted practices in men, the same behaviour is viewed negatively in women (Banyard, 2010; Eagle and Carli, 2007). Against this backdrop, networking events look less like nice work in a pleasant location with good catering. “Give me a formal hierarchy any day over the fake democracy and pseudo-equality of this work!” was the verdict of one female new media worker (Gill, 2002, p. 83).

Contrary to the idea of knowledge work being gender neutral, this evidence exposes the hidden aspects of knowledge work that disadvantage women from participating and advancing. The problematic impact of these obstacles is further compounded by the link between knowledge work and the growing share of temporary and self-employment (Cappelli, 1995; Kalleberg, 2000; Rubery, 2005). Although selling one’s self and networking are essential for both employed and self-employed knowledge workers, the latter are under an additional pressure to secure contracts and thus their livelihoods. These pressures are particularly problematic for self-employed workers with dependants, be they children, spouses or elderly parents, which disproportionately disadvantages women (Dex *et al.*, 2000; Skillset, 2008, 2009). To buffer employment insecurities, many knowledge workers strive to earn income from a variety of activities, in particular teaching. Again, women tend to use this strategy more intensively than men (Gill, 2002), which then distracts from developing their core careers: “When you’re working, you can’t write, and when you’re writing you can’t earn money” (screenwriter cited in Randle *et al.*, 2007, p. 110). The growing rate of temporary work, freelance work and self-employment thus constitutes a further challenge to gender equality in knowledge work. Considering the overall evidence, Skillset’s verdict on the audio-visual industries appears to hold for knowledge work more widely: there are “still some cultural shifts and changes in attitudes towards women that [are] needed to occur before women could achieve parity with men” (Skillset, 2008, p. 21).

3. Gender and the decoupling of work from time and location

Closely linked to knowledge work, but a late twentieth century workplace trend in its own right is the use of ICTs. Laptops and smart phones, remote-access software and cloud computing increasingly feature in the modern workplace and substantially change its very nature. ICT allows for economic activity to be undertaken in relative independence from the traditional material infrastructure of production such as machines, factories or office buildings (Bergman and Gardiner, 2007; Duxbury and Smart, 2011). Economic production for which ICT hardware constitutes the only material requirement constitutes the work context for a growing number of knowledge, clerical and service (Felstead *et al.*, 2005; Newell *et al.*, 2002). Supported by ICT work can be and is undertaken across a variety of locations, from conventional corporate offices to clients’ premises, commuter trains, coffee shops and home offices. At the same time, working hours become decoupled from the twentieth century 9-to-5 office day as workers check their e-mails from home after dinner or skype an overseas clients at night (Besseyre des Horts *et al.*, 2012; Warhurst *et al.*, 2008). Workplaces “explode”

(Felstead *et al.*, 2005, p. 5) beyond the boundaries of traditional working hours and office, factory or retail locations.

Again, the increasing use of such ICT at first sight appears to enable women's careers. Most obviously, the less dependent work practices are on location and office hours the more opportunities for reconciling work and family commitments arise (Bergman and Gardiner, 2007). The unintended consequences of this work-life balance perspective will be explored in-depth in the following section. At this point, a related but slightly different aspect shall be discussed separately. Because technology now allows work to be undertaken outside office hours and premises, there is an expectation that workers will accept work practices out with the traditional workday and location. These expectations result not directly from ICT but from the specific nature of the knowledge work they support and in which communication, collaboration and interaction features prominently (Felstead *et al.*, 2005). Working "out of hours" and across a wide geography has, of course, long been the reality for workers in manufacturing or services. For the average white collar clerical and professional worker however such expectations are still relatively new (Warhurst *et al.*, 2008). Business consultants, journalists or product developers, for example, are expected to regularly work away from their home office at clients' offices, in the field or at conferences (Felstead *et al.*, 2005; Mayerhofer *et al.*, 2011), while NGO directors, PR advisers and other cultural workers need to attend functions, networking events, launches or performances on evenings and weekends. What is more, modern communication technologies have created the expectation that although workers may not be working all the time, they will still be available to be contacted at any given moment. Responding to such expectations, as a survey by AOL and Opinion Research in the USA showed, 60 per cent of respondents used their BlackBerry to send e-mails while in bed and 83 per cent checked their e-mails while on holiday (Pilkington, 2007). While Roberts (2007) argues that this availability is largely self-inflicted, it certainly reflects the intangibility of ICT facilitated knowledge work (Bergman and Gardiner, 2007; Besseyre des Horts *et al.*, 2012).

Unsurprisingly, both geographic mobility and working evenings and weekends have proved more difficult for women with families (Dex *et al.*, 2000; McKenna, 1997; Mäkelä *et al.*, 2011). Again, a powerful example are the creative industries, where women find it particularly difficult to reconcile the long and unsocial hours working hours and requirements for often working away from home with caring commitments (Gill, 2002; Skillset, 2009; Eikhof *et al.*, 2011a, b). Only a very small minority can afford comprehensive childcare in the UK. As one of Randle *et al.*'s (2007, p. 64) female camera crew stated:

[...] it's an issue, the unfriendly hours, especially if you've got kids around, because we'll routinely have to get up at 4 o'clock in the morning, go out and work a 12 hour day and then get back at 10 o'clock at night.

Many female interviewees in this study stated that to have a successful career required them to put their personal lives on hold (Eikhof *et al.*, 2011a, b; Haunschild and Eikhof, 2009). Apparently not all women are willing to make this sacrifice: Skillset's (2005) statistics for the audio-visual industries show a marked attrition of women's workforce participation in the 30-40 years age bracket.

Felstead *et al.* (2005, p. 9) rightly point out that while "popular accounts often cite ICT as a prime mover (and) ICT opens up a range of possibilities [...] it does not

determine how they are realised”. However, recent developments in ICT have undoubtedly contributed to a new reality in which in particular professional and managerial work is (expected to be) undertaken outwith traditional boundaries of time and location. From a gender perspective, this flexibilization of work is a double-edged sword. On the one hand and as discussed in detail below, ICT supported decoupling of work from time and space can facilitate the reconciliation of work and life, particularly caring responsibilities. On the other hand, the same caring responsibilities can make it more difficult for workers to provide the geographical and temporal availability required. Therefore, the increased use of ICT has, like the rise in knowledge work, ambiguous consequences for gender equality in the workplace.

4. Work-life balance strategies and the ambiguous blessings of working from home

In the past two decades, work-life balance or rather, the need for “good work-life balance”, has featured prominently in countless academic, practitioner and policy maker debates (Fleetwood, 2007; MacInnes, 2008). Fuelled by popular works such as Bunting’s (2004) *Willing Slaves* or Schor’s (1991) *The Overworked American* and by the (partly erroneous) belief in the existence of a long hours-culture (Roberts, 2007), the strife for a better work-life balance is now universally recognised as legitimate in the general public as well. Across these debates, life is typically equated with family and more specifically caring responsibilities towards children and the elderly (Ransome, 2008; Eikhof *et al.*, 2007). While employers’ interest in helping workers reconcile work and family demands stems from talent retention, governments are concerned about ageing populations and unions are interested in worker well-being (Eikhof *et al.*, 2007). However, different, these interests converge in a recognition of work-life balance as worthy of support and have led to a substantive framework of legal acts and corporate policies aimed at delivering such support. Much of this framework rests on the right to part-time employment and flexible working (Appelbaum *et al.*, 2006; contributions in Kaiser *et al.*, 2011).

Across nations and occupations, it is still mainly women who are responsible for child and elderly care, household chores and other family-related issues and who, typically regardless of hours worked in paid employment, work a “second shift” at home (Asher, 2011; Broadbridge, 2008; Burnett *et al.*, 2011; Hochschild, 2003). Consequently, support for combining family roles with paid work and a meaningful career appears to facilitate women’s participation and advancement in the world of work. However, critical observers have pointed at the dangers of the “mummy track” (McKenna, 1997): women who take up work-life balance options and, for instance, work shorter or flexible hours are seen as less committed to their career and their employers’ cause. Consequently, they are typically assigned more routine tasks and less authority and often find themselves overlooked when employers allocate prestigious prospects or important clients, all of which hampers their prospects of promotion. As a result initially attractive alternative career paths turn out to be either frustratingly slow or a dead-end altogether. The potentially detrimental consequences of joining the mummy track or working from home are well documented in academic research and memoirs. However, to the individual woman they typically remain invisible, discovered only in hindsight and when the damage to the career is done (Asher, 2011; McKenna, 1997).

Such evidence points at the potentially problematic consequences of work-life balance policies in general. Beyond these general observations, research has exposed ambiguous

gender implications for one work-life balance policy in particular: working from home or teleworking. The appeal of working from home, for part or all of one's contracted hours, is that it enables workers to attend to both work and life/family issues in the same geographical location (Peper *et al.*, 2011). Instead of splitting the day into two blocks of work and non-work time, each spent in separate locations, teleworking allows a "micro-management of the work-life boundary" (Warhurst *et al.*, 2009), slotting work tasks around household chores and school runs. The mainstream image of such micro-management is one of continuous challenges to working mothers' self- and crisis-management skills, engagingly illustrated in many a novel and on screen – remember Michele Pfeiffer in *One Fine Day* for a particularly engaging example. Nevertheless, academic research shows that teleworking arrangements can provide the autonomy and control that allow workers to adapt work and non-work activities according to their own preferences (de Man *et al.*, 2008; Hill *et al.*, 2011). Notwithstanding these potential benefits, however, again a second, gender-sensitive glance reveals a range of more ambivalent outcomes. First, combining work and life in the same space frequently leaves workers in a double bind: they feel guilty towards their family for being unavailable while physically at home and towards their employers or clients for not "getting the job done" when attending to the family (Bøgh Fangel and Aaløkke, 2008; Kylin and Karlsson, 2008). Incapable of fulfilling neither work nor family expectations, respondents in these studies felt unable to do their career potential justice. Second, regardless of its actual content, women's work within the home is often perceived as not being "real" or "serious" work (Rouse and Kitching, 2006; Kirkwood and Toothill, 2008). Regardless of its valuation outside the house, once paid work is undertaken from home its perception is coloured by century-long images of women's domestic work as low-skilled and unpaid (cooking, cleaning, caring) or simply frivolous (decorating, entertaining) (Bradley, 2007). Third, while teleworking men typically do so in a dedicated study, women tend to make do with shared domestic spaces – the proverbial kitchen or living room table (Musson *et al.*, 2006; Sullivan, 2000). Fourth and unlike teleworking men, women working from home are often expected to integrate house- and care-work with their telework (Sullivan, 2000). As Cusk (2008, p. 12) concludes, despite better intentions, "an unfair apportioning of domestic responsibility to the home worker is unavoidable". Fifth and from a societal perspective, any relocation of women's work to the home runs the risk of women collectively losing their voice and influence in public places, be they corporate boardrooms, political agendas, local communities or media debates (Bradley, 2007; Simpson and Lewis, 2007). Despite a growing acceptance of virtual communication and collaboration, influence still seems to remain predicated on presence in the public workplace (Burnett *et al.*, 2011; Simpson, 1998). Although an individually attractive option, reducing this presence by working from home has collectively problematic consequences for gender equality. With each woman exercising this option women collectively lose voice, influence and power, thereby ceding ground to what, following Sylva Walby, has been termed "public patriarchy" (Bradley, 2007, p. 44).

In sum the above evidence shows that while work-life balance policies and in particular part-time and teleworking options may help keep women in the labour market, their effect on women's advancement in the workplace is much more controversial. Particularly where teleworking is combined with part-time work, the implementation of work-life balance policies holds the significant risk of reproducing and entrenching the prevalence of exactly that 1.5-breadwinner household model which

constitutes a key obstacle to gender equality in the workplace, private and public sphere (Rouse, 2011; Bradley, 2007). The long-term impact of the recent decades' policy and corporate investments in work-life balance policies may thus well run counter to the initial aim of facilitating careers that successfully combine work and non-work.

5. Concluding discussion

Flexibility and choice over working hours and location are commonly regarded as a key facilitator for reconciling work and life/family demands, and therefore as an enabler of women's careers and a catalyst of equality in the work place. In the two past decades, flexible working has become the reality for many, in particular professional, women. Three developments in the world of work have contributed significantly to the this change: the increase of knowledge work, new ICTs that decouple work practices from time and location and governments' and employers' recognition of and support for employees' work-life balance. However, the flexibilization of work is not unambiguously positive for women's careers and gender equality in the workplace. This paper has brought together ample evidence of hidden gender aspects of the spreading of knowledge work, ICT and work-life balance policies. In knowledge work, first, participation and advancement are predicated on self-marketing and access to networks. Women typically find it harder to gain access to the relevant and male-dominated networks and are disadvantaged by the informality and intransparency of recruitment decisions. In addition, the prevalence of temporary employment and freelance work leads to income insecurities which disproportionately disadvantages (predominantly female) workers. Second, modern ICT has decoupled work from time and location across a growing number of workplaces. This decoupling can facilitate the reconciliation of work and life which potentially benefits women's work and careers. However, it can also result in demands for an extended geographical and temporal availability that workers with caring responsibilities find difficult to meet. Finally, while intended to support women's participation and advancement at work, work-life balance policies can also have detrimental effects. Women who take up these policies tend to be seen as less committed to their job and find their careers diverted to slower mummy track. Similarly, the popular work-life balance option of working from home has problematic gender implications, ultimately resulting in the invisibility and undervaluation of women's work.

Bringing together such evidence from different corners of the twenty-first century workplace becomes even more salient in the light of recent evidence on professional women's work-life choices. A more fundamental debate about how free women are in such choices emphasises that their decisions need to be understood as constrained choices, restricted by gender-biased organisational structures, policies and procedures as well as stereotypical views of gender roles (e.g. contributions in Lewis and Simpson, 2010). However, within these constraints (or rather, in the absence of certain constraints) professional women may exercise this choice in ways that are problematic for a society committed to gender equality. Studies such as those by Goulding and Reed (2010), McKenna (1997) and Stone (2007) report on women who had started professional careers with a passion for their job and without concerns about gender issues, but by late 1930s/early 1940s had become disillusioned and demotivated by the unexpected reality of gender discrimination, work intensification and the time-pressures of modern motherhood. At that career stage, they had often achieved a high enough level of financial security to consider cutting back on work that did not deliver the

opportunities and satisfaction they expected. These professionals had been extensively exposed to, and bought into, the view that women should and do have a choice over how, when and where they work. Consequently, they exercised exactly that choice – by downshifting or opting out. In the light of middle class fantasies of escaping the corporate rat-race of lives ruled by work, commute and ever-alert smart phones (Bolchover, 2005; Bunting, 2004; Warhurst *et al.*, 2009), such individual choices may appear logical, even liberating or empowering. The collective effect of such opting-out though is likely to be a loss of women’s representation in powerful professional positions and a perpetuation and entrenchment of current gender inequalities and occupational segregation (Bradley, 2007; Eikhof *et al.*, 2011a, b).

Undoubtedly, the solution to these threats to gender equality in the workplace would not be a return to non-flexible forms of working. Evidence of the positive effects flexible working can have for women’s participation and advancement at work suggests that such a U-turn would quite literally mean throwing out the baby with the bathwater. But the synthesis and analysis of evidence presented in this paper clearly suggest that continuing to worship at the altar of flexible working in the name of gender equality is an equally fraught undertaking. Instead, first, academics, practitioners and policy makers still need to increase their efforts to “think gender” across academic disciplines, research and policy areas and corporate practice. Integrating evidence from hitherto unconnected discourses allows a much needed-better appreciation of the complexity of gender issues that can then inform industry practice and policy-making. In this regard, the requirement to consider gender implications of any public policy before its implication, for instance, is a step in the right direction (Scottish Executive, 2002). Such approaches, known as equality proofing and currently predominantly applied to service delivery (Scottish Executive, 2002), could be rolled out into human resource practice, for instance to assess performance review procedures (Tamkin *et al.*, 2000). Second, a society committed to gender equality needs a public debate about the complexity of gender issues at work, a debate that informs and educates as well as challenges and changes. Whether at a dinner party or an industry-academia exchange event, speaking up for gender concerns may look and feel like raining on the pretty parade of the beautifully flexible new world of work that offers “full opportunity and unfettered social mobility for all” (Florida, 2004, p. 321). But without public appreciation of the complexity and contentiousness of current workplace developments from a gender perspective, the manifold mechanisms of discrimination will remain hidden and, therefore, unchanged. This paper has provided the basis for such an appreciation. It has synthesised compelling evidence from hitherto unconnected research on knowledge workers, work-life balance and boundary issues and women’s careers. In so doing it offers an improved basis for academics, practitioners and policy makers to address issues surrounding women’s participation and advancement at work and to work towards a society characterised by gender quality – or even, gender irrelevance.

Within the scope of this paper it was, however, not possible to address a range of related and important issues. Most prominently, the flexibilization of work will affect women differently depending on their socio-economic background and in particular their ability to buy in childcare and other domestic help. Intersections of gender and class, but also race require further research and discussion in this regard (Styhre and Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2008). In addition, with trends towards more generous paternity leave for instance in the UK and Germany (BBC, 2011; Spiess and Wrohlich, 2006) may

over time lead to changes in the gendered use of work-life balance policies. Although such changes are unlikely to deliver gender equality over night (Burnett *et al.*, 2011), these developments open further avenues for research as well as policy debate.

Note

1. I have tried to reference a broad selection of publications across sub-disciplines and research areas, but it is impossible to do justice to the wealth of academic research on some of the issues discussed here within the space provided. Hopefully I have indicated enough avenues for the reader to pursue and discover the much needed and appreciated work that exists beyond the confines of a journal article.

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