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“It’s not the break that’s the problem”: women SET professionals and career breaks in European companies

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Introduction

This report is focused on what companies can do to support women returning to work after a career break and to continue to progress their careers. Clearly company specific work life balance policies have a significant role to play but it is important to recognise the wide range of other factors within a broader cultural context. The decisions that women make at the time of maternity including whether or not to work part time on returning to work, can often determine what options they might have at a later stage in their careers. Yet these crucial decisions are not made in isolation but are strongly influenced by gendered cultural assumptions both inside and outside of the workplace. As well as company policies these include national legal frameworks, availability of care networks, work status, as well as personal preferences (Tomlinson 2006).

Welfare policies and legal entitlements are distinctive to each country - as such they are both informed by, as well as actively responsible for shaping, socio-cultural norms. Work status, including relationships with managers and colleagues can have a significant effect on the implementation of company policies. There is a wide variation in the availability of ‘care networks’, which may include a partner, extended family members as well as paid childcare provision or indeed facilities provided by the company itself. Beliefs about gender roles (gender scripts) and sense of entitlement also influence career motivation and ambition (see Fig 1).

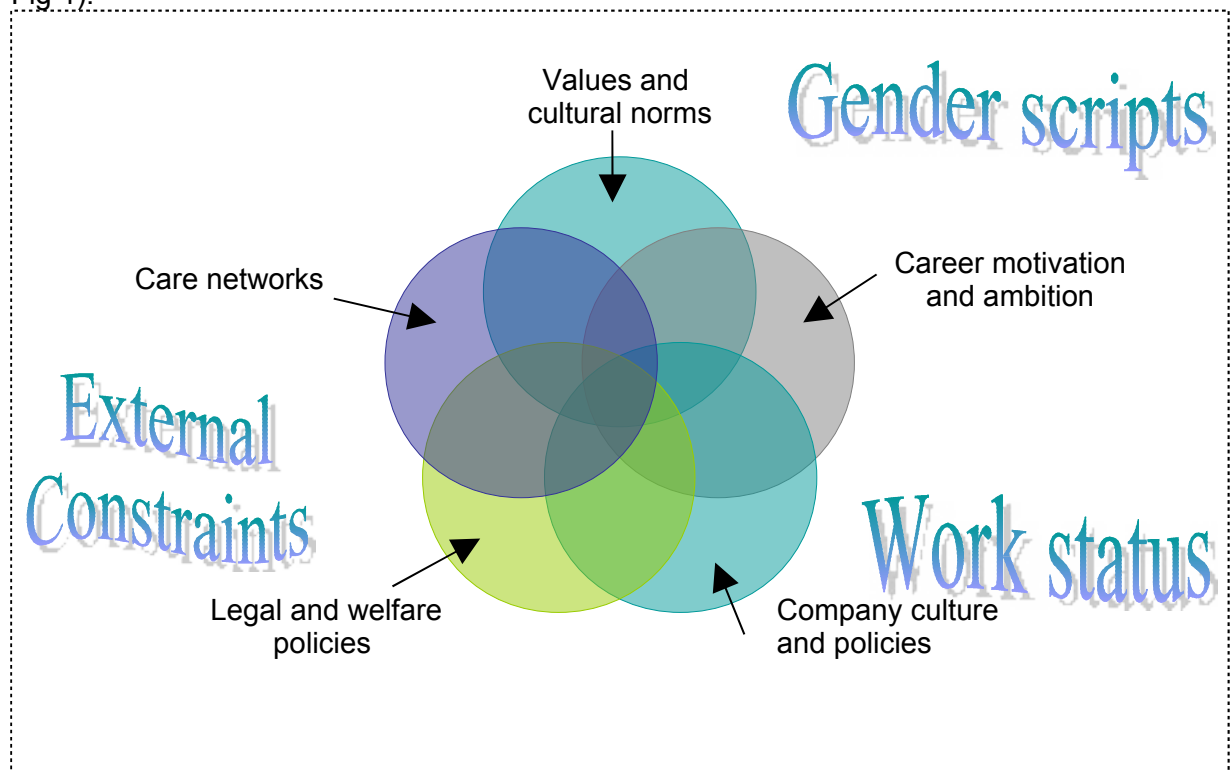


Fig 1 Model of factors that influence career decision making at time of maternity

2. Research questions

- What is the real and long term impact of career breaks for professional women in SET?
- What are the unwritten rules and assumptions inhibiting women's progression within SET companies following a career break?
- What measures can be taken to support women to achieve the work life balance they want?

3. Methodology

This research into the impact of career breaks on progression of women in SET is based on 28 qualitative interviews with women professional engineers, scientists and technologists. These participants were identified by companies participating in the project who were asked to suggest women for interview - so the sample does not include women who took leave and did not return. All but 3 of them have taken career breaks for maternity – the exceptions were one who had an extended period of sick leave, another who took time out for personal study unrelated to her work and a third who took leave to care for elderly parents. The majority returned directly to the same or similar jobs in the same companies after their (relatively short) period of leave. The sample spanned 6 EU countries (Italy, Germany, France, Netherlands, UK and Estonia) and included two individuals based outside Europe, (Russia and Canada). The average age was 39 - the youngest was 33 and the oldest 55

Using a biographical narrative approach the study has explored the impact of social and cultural factors as well as workplace cultures in formulating the career trajectories of women professionals in these fields. Interviews were conducted using semi structured interview schedule – participants were asked to talk about their careers or working lives within the context of other aspects of their personal and domestic lives forming a narrative or chronological account. Such an approach offers the potential to contextualise experiences of women whose work-life stories are interwoven with social and political meanings. Comparing the experiences of women who have lived their lives and developed their careers in a range of countries offers a lens through which to understand the complex interplay of personal and public discourses which determine the impact of career breaks on progression and development. Interview transcripts were analysed with Atlas-ti using a grounded theory approach. This means that ideas and themes emerged during analysis of the data rather than using preset categories.

4. Results:

4.1 SET industries – working in a male environment

The majority of the women were educated to post graduate level in scientific or technical subject areas – they had experienced being in a minority during Higher Education (usually there were less than 20% female students in their subject area, sometimes they were the only one). This experience of being in a minority continued into employment as they entered work in some of the most male dominated global industries including energy and IT companies. For most of the younger women this was something they just coped with and

had presented no particular problems – they loved their jobs and enjoyed the technical challenges, travel, and range of opportunities presented by their careers. Several of the older women however spoke about their early experiences of isolation and intimidation often working as the only woman in a totally male environment

*I was the first female of a technical background, at least a graduate with a technical background. ... It was quite tough, and lonely.. I think people were just struggling with how to cope and like I was supposed to work shifts for a month and there were no women's facilities and the guys were all struggling with how they should do it. They had to find a way to work. It wasn't easy, like when I had to go to management meeting and I was sitting there with forty-five guys, you feel very exposed
43 year old Process Engineering Manager*

4.2. Career breaks

Most of the previous research about career breaks focuses on women who have taken substantial number of years out of paid work and have lost ties with their previous employers. Thus the difficulties identified among women returning to employment after a career break include finding suitable and affordable childcare, and often overcoming loss of confidence and self esteem. (Shaw 1999, IOP 2004, Tomlinson 2005, Panteli, 2006). For women SET professionals there are particular issues over and above these generic problems, many of which were identified by the Maximising Returns report commissioned by the UK government (People, Science & Policy 2002). These include the loss of professional networks, location and mobility issues (usually lack of mobility options), out of date skills and knowledge and the absence of part time or flexible work in their particular sector.

Women in this study differ from previous studies of returners in two respects. Firstly they had taken short breaks. The average length of break was 6 months (the longest was just 2 years and shortest 3 months) so the issues relating to loss of skills and confidence were not as acute as those experienced by those on longer career breaks. Secondly all of them had returned to the same employer after their break, therefore they were not seeking new employment with all of the associated difficulties that this entails. However even after a short break, there were significant issues that emerged for many of the women, often associated not just with the break but also with subsequent part time working on their return.

4.2.1 Length of career break

The length of the career breaks was generally short with most taking just the statutory entitlement, or in some cases a slightly extended period that was offered by their company. Some also took additional holiday or other 'saved' leave days to extend their period of time before returning.

However there was an acknowledgement that a short break meant an increase in stress and pressure at the time of return. During early months women were often exhausted because of lack of sleep, breast feeding, and general adjustment to being a parent, so it made a big difference if their colleagues and managers were sympathetic and accommodating at this stage. Thus a maternity leave period of 4 months could in reality have a longer impact, with up to 3 or more months to adjust back in to full scale working.

Reasons cited for returning included strong career motivation, financial necessity, and wanting to do something for themselves other than being a mother. However there was also a tangible fear of missing out on work and promotion opportunities that prompted some to return earlier than they would have wished.

4.2.2 Impact on career progression

Interviewees were specifically asked if they felt their period of absence had impacted on their own career progression. Several women talked about how promotion had been missed or delayed as a result of their career break - for example

*I could have had a promotion but when you're 7 months pregnant it's very difficult - even though you have a good CV you have to say you must wait 6 months before you get a job. So I missed the opportunity when I was pregnant and I had to wait for 3 years. It's difficult to say, no-one will tell me it's because you were pregnant.
39 year old Research Manager*

However this was not universal - several of the women also mentioned positive impacts of taking breaks, specifically providing the opportunity for change that continuous employment would not have offered, for example

*The maternity leave was important and helped me to understand that I needed to change the job. It always seemed like something was going to happen - perhaps a new project or something but the period of leave helped me realise that nothing was actually going to happen!
42 year old Geophysicist*

4.2.3 Maternity cover In many of the companies work is organised on a project basis so the timing of the break was quite important. For those that were able to do so, stopping at the end of a project and then starting a new one when they came back meant that they minimised the impact of being away and did not have to delegate work to other colleagues in their absence.

*Well my first career break was, I think, in a way quite an ideal one because it was just in between jobs. So I stopped a job and I managed to arrange, before I left, the next job. So I took a break for four and a half months or so. It wasn't an extremely long period. I don't think it had a big impact as it was just between two jobs.
33 year old Chemical Engineer*

However for those who did have other staff take over their work there were also benefits, Having someone cover maternity leave was actually a way of acknowledging status and importance of their role and it also meant the work continued in their absence.

*I had someone actually replace me and so I think that's...well if you don't get replaced then in all likelihood when you get back in that difficult period you inherit a train wreck because all the stuff that should have been happening in these few months hasn't happened and there's almost no way to bring it back to success.
45 year old Senior Manager*

4.2.4 Keeping in Touch

Contact during maternity or career breaks can make an enormous difference to the process of returning.

People sort of forget about you, it's not the right way to say it but it's how it tends to happen a little bit. What we've been doing with people who go off on maternity leave for instance and take an extended leave like that, we try to find someone to stay connected with them who just talks to them every few months or whatever they want

just to make sure that we know when they're ready to come back, that there's something going on.
47 year old Senior Manager

Many of the women did keep in touch during leave and this ranged from casual social visits to the workplace to meet with colleagues and introduce them to the baby, through occasional phone calls with their line manager or boss and checking emails, to much more intense involvement in the day to day work in the case of a small number of generally more senior women.

I stayed at home five months and in those months I more or less continued to be in contact the office because it was not field work and I had to manage people so it was easy to keep contact by phone and email and after I delivered I used to drop into the office so I never really lost the progress of the things I left.. Everything continued as normal and when I went back I already knew where things were and coming back was nothing because I was always sharing decisions and people were helping me.
38 year old Project Manager

4.2.5 Returning to work

The main issues facing women coming back after extended career breaks which were identified earlier (the loss of professional networks, location and mobility issues, out of date skills and knowledge and the absence of part time or flexible work in their particular sector) are not generally a problem after short periods of leave. However there are a number of themes that regularly appeared in the interview accounts.

- Importance of support networks
- Assumptions made by colleagues/ managers that women would not be able to cope with challenging work and therefore not giving them opportunities
- Not getting your old job back
- Coping with sleepless nights and breast-feeding
- Adjusting back to a professional identity from being primarily focused on caring for a young baby.
- Conflicts and power struggles with colleagues

Most importantly the availability of support was of immense significance, and several women were adamant that they could not have returned successfully without this. One respondent described how lack of support had been be disastrous for one of her colleagues

.. it's really ... related to your environment, your own situation at home. ..It is the circumstances, your husband, it's the company, it's so many sections that would influence and make it very personal. That's why some women really struggle to make success by themselves. I know one of the very ambitious women working here worked part-time but her husband was not willing to do anything at home, cleaning or whatever. No time to pick up the kids from the kindergarten in the afternoon. She almost went mad after six or eight months. She stopped, she couldn't handle it. It was too much. And of course if you have no support from home, that counts for men as well if they're around, if you have no support it is impossible to develop a career.
42 year old Senior Manager

Supportive networks are clearly important for management of work and family responsibilities. The attitudes and behaviour of line managers and colleagues was also crucial to whether a returner was able to step back smoothly into her career.

when my baby was four months old I started working again and it was not so easy because I was a senior reservoir engineer and in that period some of my colleagues who were also senior reservoir engineers became leaders. So I lost one year of my job and career and then I tried to recover this ... but at the beginning it was not so easy because my boss at this period... said "She has a baby who is 4 months and if it gets sick she will not be able to work so we should not give her a job with responsibility."

46 year old Reservoir Engineer

While most returned to their previous posts this was not always the case

I left for a few months which was my legal entitlement, and when I came back I had nothing to do. Of course when I left somebody took my job so when I came back the project was stopped while I was off, and it took one or two months before they could get me another job....I had a few things to do but also it was very tense, you had groups between those groups there were some tensions – [...]. So I decided to change [employer]. I stayed less than a year.

39 year old Research Manager

And while the loss of confidence expressed by long term career break women in previous studies was not usually as acute, there were still difficulties in adjusting back to the work role, especially for those with management responsibility. And the transition from full time motherhood to professional employee includes physical as well as psychological adjustment

it's only natural after nine months there's going to be a period of readjustment. Obviously I had some leave cover arranged and of course after a period of nine months everybody would go to that person for advice. So it was quite difficult for me to take control again. Psychologically it was quite difficult to operate at a professional level with not a huge amount of sleep or at least a lot less sleep than I was used to doing. Yeah, it was challenging on many levels. Coming back to work full-time, trying to make myself presentable after a period of nine months not wearing very appealing clothes... trying to get myself switched on

33 year old Environmental Safety Advisor

Another issue faced by some women was 'office politics' – colleagues who had taken advantage of their absence to try and gain career advantage in a highly competitive industry sector

When I came back from this maternity leave somebody else did my job. And certainly in the beginning, and I was working three days, instead all the interesting projects and all the interesting work he kept for himself and all the interesting meeting were planned in when I was not there. So it was really obvious that this person ... wanted to develop his own career a little bit faster and, I would say, over the back of some people.

42 year old Senior Manager

The importance of a coherent institutional response was stressed by one woman – she herself had quite a positive experience but talked about other colleagues who had found returning to work a tough experience

I do speak to others who found it very, very hard when they came back and they'd lost their confidence and there should be a sort of recognition that your first few months back you're bedding back into the organisation. I don't know how you can manage that in a sensitive manner if you've given that person's work away to somebody else but there needs to be recognition that they've been in quite a big change and you actually get more from people when they come back by talking to them about what they need to work better at their job rather than just saying OK this is what we need you to deliver. There's a dialogue that needs to happen and I think that dialogue is missing.

32 year old Quality Assurance Engineer

The same woman later spoke of how important the support she got from her managers and colleagues was to which contributed to a sense of being valued by the company

I realised that they were quite pleased with me and if they had wanted to get rid of me they probably wouldn't have given me all this support... It also means that you feel valuable to the company if they want to do all these investments. It also means you feel just like an employee, you don't feel like an exotic species or whatever.

4.3 Working life after a career break

One of the strategies that a large number of women adopted in order to achieve work life balance following maternity leave was to working less hours. The impact of working part time or reduced availability after maternity leave was so closely connected to the career break itself, that the consequences are not easily distinguishable. Among those who returned to full time hours after maternity, their availability was often reduced and they were no longer able to stay late in the office or spontaneously travel abroad to meetings. Many of the women went to great lengths to ensure that they could meet their work commitments, but there were often assumptions made about their reduced availability made by well meaning managers. They became regarded in the same way as 'part-time' workers, with reduced status and diminished career potential.

4.3.1 Part time working

One interviewee felt that colleagues treated her differently as a mother and regarded her as less productive (i.e. a part timer) even though she was in fact working on a full time contract

a" lot of women with babies are not working full time so I was considered as not working full time – I WAS working full time but I was a mother so I couldn't get the job I wanted. They considered that I wasn't working full time"
39 year old Research Manager

Visibility was perceived to be compromised by part time working. Certain types of work (project leadership for example) are assumed to require a full time position and the work offered to part timers is usually less demanding and less visible.

Part time working was often regarded negatively by management - one manager advised a returner to save up her annual leave and use this to work reduced hours, so that officially she was still working full time. For others there was the recognition that double standards applied. While the company was happy to offer part time working this was considered problematic and not normalised within the organisation

“the official line is that being part time shouldn’t be a problem but in fact the cultural practice is that is a problem - the reality is not like this!”
35 year old Mechanical Engineer

Cultural differences in attitudes to part time working vary considerably between countries. In the Netherlands and Germany for example is very uncommon for mothers to work full time and there is strong social pressure to reduce hours after returning from maternity leave. In France, school closure on Wednesdays is cited by most of the women as their reason for part time working (see Lewis’s report). However this presents many of the women in this study with internal conflicts between their roles as mothers and workers. By contrast, in Eastern Europe there is very little tradition of part time working – despite the drastic reduction in public childcare provision, the legacy of communist gender policies has left a culture of full-time working for women without the ‘guilt’ that many Western European women feel about delegating their childcare to others. Similarly in Italy it is quite rare to work part time and most women return to full time jobs.

Part time working hours are regarded differently for men and women – men are more likely to work part time in some countries rather than others but even in these countries it is more likely that women work shorter part time hours than their partners. For example in the Netherlands it is acceptable and even perhaps admirable for men to work 80% or 90% - however to go down to 3 days (60%) is considered to be going against perceived gender roles i.e. it is gender incongruent behaviour.

Whether they were on full or part time contracts, there was an expectation for many of the respondents that they would work over and above their contracted hours, especially among more senior women.

Well, I admit when I was working part-time, on my day off I was working a number of hours anyway, and working in the evenings. I was always a hard worker, I still am. I work long days, I would say at least ten hours a day.
42 year old Senior Manager

However those working part time also demonstrated greater efficiency in their working hours:

And what I saw was that people admired me a lot because they couldn’t understand how I could cope with the work and the kids. And I think that it also had like a positive effect on my career progression because people were quite surprised with what I was still able to do in three days a week. And also I became more effective, more selective, not attending meetings where I presence was not really necessary. So I think it helped me to get promotions.
43 year old Process Engineering Manager

4.3.2 Flexible working

The availability of working flexible hours varied between companies and also within companies, so that even if the company had a policy for flexible work it was not automatic and could end up being at the discretion of the line manager

the company has a policy HR wise that it encourages flexible working practices but in reality most managers in the company are men who are over the age of 45 who've got wives who have been stay at home mums and for whatever reason they often struggle with flexible working, .. it all depends on who your manager is and the way you approach it - if you wait to be offered flexible working it simply won't happen
32 year old Quality Assurance Engineer

The availability of remote working from home also differed between companies and countries. Where it was available this was greatly appreciated especially as a strategy for coping when a child was ill. For example

My husband travels quite a lot as well so what I'd do is work about three hours during the day and then work from 6 till 10 at night when [my son] had gone to bed and that's how I made up my hours. Nowadays he's not ill nearly as much - he's only missed one day at nursery since Xmas this year - he's just like a normal little boy now - but if he's ill I can still work flexibly.
32 year old Quality Assurance Engineer

4. 4 Gender roles in the domestic sphere

Despite their high level qualifications and potential for career success, gender role expectations within the domestic sphere are still an important influence on career decision making for most of the women interviewed. There are indications that traditional gender roles have become more blurred in many of the partnerships in this study, although this varied considerably between countries.

Sharing some of the childcare with a partner was very common, but most women still took main responsibility for childcare, so even if both partners worked part time, the women tended to work less hours than their partners. Even where both partners worked full time, women tended to take the main responsibility for childcare with partners taking a 'supporting' role.

He helps me a lot. In the morning he practically feeds her, dresses her up and does everything. I wake up early and come to the office at 8. I leave everything ready for her - milk, yoghurt and things for the nursery. And bags for all the dresses and everything ready on the bed. He has to help her and then he usually goes working after. He works in the centre of [town] - he does the same timing as me but he needs 50 minutes to arrive at home and he arrives at half past 8 or 9 in the evening. I have to prepare the soup or the meal for [my daughter] and him. It is a long day and we usually go to bed at half past 9, dead!
38 year old Project Manager

There were one or two exceptions of couples who had reversed roles completely with the male partner taking extended leave and primary responsibility for childcare, but these women saw themselves as unusual and were considered to be exceptional role models and pioneers by their colleagues.

When our daughter was born I stayed at home the first 7 months and [my partner] took over and stayed at home for 14 months and after that he went back to 30 hours a week [...] It's still unusual - there are some men who do this but they don't make much noise about it.
35 year old Mechanical Engineer

Availability of wider care networks also had a huge impact on successful return to work. Many of the women had strong support for childcare from extended family members, especially grandparents

"I have big help from their grandparents and I take them to school in the morning but after school the grandparents will often pick them up - my mother and my partner's parents. I have a big support from the children's grandparents and my partner ... I travel much more than him but when I went abroad to Norway he got parental leave and came with me for half the year and then my mother came for the other half."
42 year old Geophysicist

4.4 Gendered cultures in the workplace

There is still an unwritten assumption within workplace culture that taking maternity leave is a deviation from the traditional (male) model of continuous full time employment and this stereotype is deeply rooted especially within SET industries in which women are still in a minority

..there are few women, 2 or 3% who are in management roles, there are so few that I know them all by name! They are all an exception to the rule.[...] I think it's a cultural thing. The whole industry is for real men and I think that it is possible to change but I don't think this company wants it to change
42 year old Geophysicist

There was a perception that companies continue to assume the model of an ideal worker as a male employee with stay at home (or part time) wife.

I think a lot of it's because the guys who are the managers here, they've generally moved around with the company and they have stay at home wives and they have the expectation that when you have children you will want to become that type of person - and they apply, what we all do we all apply our models to other people. But unfortunately the world's changed a bit and when they had their children 20 years ago women didn't return to work as much it's just a different world these days
32 year old Quality Assurance Engineer

All of the companies involved have extensive equality and diversity policies, some of them very high profile indeed, but evidence suggests that these are not always taken up or implemented to the best advantage of women who may need them

4.4.1 Promotion and career progression

In many cases line managers acted as interpreters of policies and were seen as gatekeepers to promotion and progression, either helping or hindering the process. In one company this was quite pronounced and the promotion process lacked transparency and was considered to be totally at the discretion of the manager. This was perceived by some as a potential source of gender bias

The only solution is transparency - if there is a position that is free then everyone must be informed and able to apply and then someone must be chosen because they are the best. At the moment everything is personal and private. They call you and ask you if you are interested - this is the case everywhere. If I wanted a promotion I would have to wait and ask - there is no official way. Transparency is the only real solution, this way they will choose a person not on their gender.
42 year old Geophysicist

The study found evidence of indirect discrimination against women in the promotion process. Where internal vacancies are not advertised as part time, some women were discouraged from applying as they feared they would be at a disadvantage.

Most of the women have had very conventional career paths moving straight from school to university to study some kind of engineering or scientific discipline and then straight into the company they still work for. Within SET companies there are both technical and managerial career routes and for those reaching mid or high level scientific and technical roles (male or female) there is often nowhere further to climb on the career ladder. There are opportunities to move from technical/ scientific roles to management but this entails giving up on technical identity which some women are reluctant to do, having struggled to assert their presence in a male dominated field. With such considerable investment in the technical identity there is perhaps less incentive to leave this behind, which is what is required for a move into senior management (Faulkner 2007, Simard 2008).

Moreover in some companies, the opportunity to move out of technical careers and into a managerial role is limited to a particular stage in career progression (usually in early to mid thirties) and not possible at a later age. This once again assumes a male career model as decisions about promotion into management happen at precisely the time when many women are either taking breaks or have slowed down their career in order to raise a family. This is a general phenomenon but particularly marked in SET companies that have a dual career trajectory system (technical and managerial).

4.4.2 Success criteria

Among respondents in the interviews, success was felt to be achievable but this required being available as well as visible both of which were difficult for women who were working part time or had caring responsibilities. It was no good just doing your work well, what created success was networking with the right people and getting your work known about in the company. Moreover you would need to be tough and very determined to reach higher levels of management, something many of the women were clear they were not prepared to do. Overwhelmingly women who succeed do so because they work according to the 'male model'. They work hard at being visible at work and available for 'missions' or work abroad.

One issue identified was the perception that women on maternity leave are not productive and are a drain on the productivity of the group, especially if their time must be accounted for against project budgets. So for example

*my boss phones me up and says [...] why is that, haven't you written any time against projects' 'Listen, I've been on maternity leave' 'Ye of course of course'. So even though he has been closely involved and is very understanding he also had to make the mental switch
35 year old Senior Well Engineer*

4.4.3. Mobility

The norm within many global companies, especially in the energy and IT sectors, is of being available for travel and this availability for travel is significant in career progression and promotion. Perceptions of colleagues about availability include the need to 'prove' competence and commitment. The more ambitious of the women had succeeded in showing their availability, going to great lengths to ensure that they could take up positions abroad. However for some there was a sense of resignation that their 'choice' would result in a slowing down of career progression

I mean it's a choice, it's what I've chosen to do. I've chosen to have a family and therefore I don't particularly want to travel much so I'm already constraining myself in terms of what I can do
36 year old Thermal Conversion Technologist

Most of the companies in the study have some dual career policy but this is in practice very difficult as for senior posts there are often very few available options in overseas postings. Although there were examples of 'trailing husbands' who accompanied women abroad, this was not frequently the case – especially after maternity women increasingly allowed a partners career to accelerate while their own was put on hold for a while.

4.4.4 Lack of senior women

The lack of senior women as role models was cited by many of the women as a barrier to their own progression. The message was clear, that there was a choice to be made between career and family life.

I think what I miss a bit is a lack of role models in my position. It seems like every time you go to some kind of women's event or networking event they have speakers, but I think most of the high level women in [this company] either have a husband who doesn't work and takes care of the family and follows them around or they don't have a family. Very few role models of women with a family and very few who have dual careers.
36 year old Thermal Conversion Technologist

5. Discussion points and conclusions

There is still an unwritten assumption within many company cultures that taking maternity leave or a career break is a deviation from the traditional (male) model of continuous full time employment. Although there is some variation in the norms and expectations of gender roles after maternity within different European cultures, combined with other structural factors these reinforce a particular view of mothers and their careers. Workplace cultures even in global companies are in turn shaped and reinforced by social, political and cultural factors in each country.

Following their career break or maternity leave, many women perceive that they need to sacrifice career potential and progression in order to reconcile working and family life. This is usually expressed as a personal choice rather than seen as an external or systemic problem. For some there was a worrying tendency towards self limiting beliefs – they did not have a sense of entitlement to both a career and family life and therefore expressed this in terms of personal choice and passive acceptance. Decisions made at time of maternity can be critical in determining future career progression. For example returning to work part time after maternity can be detrimental to career progression, or at least result in slowing down of progression. However there are signs this is changing among younger women and, in departments where there are a critical mass of women working part time, there are some who are ambitious to progress. There were also examples of older women who had succeeded despite periods of part time work even though they are still perceived within the company as pioneers and role models rather than 'normal'

Short breaks for maternity leave do not have the same consequences for women's employment potential that extended career breaks have been shown to do. However, the impact of working part time after taking maternity leave is so closely linked to the period of leave itself, that the consequences are not easily distinguishable. Even among those who return to full time hours after maternity, their availability is usually reduced either for travel or for extra work on top of contracted hours, or there is an expectation from colleagues that this will be the case. How this change is viewed by managers and colleagues can impact on career progression opportunities

Managing maternity leave is generally well organised – however the experience of returning often depends on the type of work being done and timing of the break. Keeping in touch during the break is one strategy used to help ease the return process, but not universal. In the UK there is a legal entitlement for so called Keeping in Touch days "Employees on maternity or adoption leave can agree to work for their employer for a maximum of ten days during their maternity or adoption leave. Work can include training, or anything else that helps the employee keep in touch with the workplace. The work must be agreed by both parties, and the employer does not have the right to demand that an employee undertakes any work"¹ The benefit of this is that they continued to see themselves primarily still as workers rather than just being 'mothers' and the transition back to work can be made more smoothly

Work life balance policies (including parental leave, flexible working and reduced working hours) can have the unintended consequence of reinforcing gender stereotyping within the workplace if it is only mothers/ female carers who make use of these and not fathers or male carers. However the availability of remote working / working from home is hugely popular and beneficial for working parents. Similarly a workplace nursery gives a symbolic message of support for parents of both genders within the company.

¹ <http://www.ecu.ac.uk/law/Gender-legislation-keeping-in-touch>

The period immediately after maternity leave is a danger time for women who may slow down or dropout of careers altogether and so companies need to ensure that they offer positive support at this time. This is not a sign of reduced commitment, but realistically it may not be possible for returners to resume the same level and pace of work and this should not be penalised. Although they are highly committed to their careers, professional women in SET usually rely on a complex set of support networks to maintain their work life balance. If these fail or if they feel too undervalued by the company, these women are at risk of leaving or halting their careers.

6. Recommendations - What can companies do or do better?

This section includes a number of practical recommendations that companies can implement to affect change. These are not necessarily new – companies have been developing and implementing policies in these areas for many years. A number of companies particularly in the financial and legal sectors have developed some excellent policies to support women to ‘Off Ramp’ and ‘On Ramp’ their careers (see for example Hewlett 2007). However within SET companies, the implementation of so-called work-life policies often lags behind other businesses. Such policies are still seen as women’s issues and professional women are still in a minority in these sectors – the challenge is to tackle and change behaviours and practices that continue to reinforce the traditional (male) model of continuous full time employment.

Policies are not enough in themselves. It is crucial to challenge myths and stereotypes throughout the organisation by offering training and awareness-raising, especially for managers. As gatekeepers and interpreters of company policy, the attitudes and actions of line managers can be critical in the successful return and progression of women after maternity breaks.

Monitor the implementation of work life policies

- Companies should make sure that there is parity in the way policies are implemented and that everyone has the same chance to benefit from WLB measures – leaving too much to the discretion of the line manager means that inequalities can emerge and resentments build up.
- Line managers should routinely undergo training and be given support in the implementation of policies. They should then be monitored as part of their own appraisals about how they have handled maternity leave (for example by 360 degree appraisals that include confidential testimonies from returners about how their leave and return has been managed).

Develop specific policy of support for returners

- Avoid making assumptions about a woman’s availability or reduced capacity following a career break. Maintain ongoing dialogue and discussion to establish what women want and are able to do. This requires an open and flexible attitude from managers.
- Implement a structured system of ‘Keeping in Touch’ during maternity leave. Ensure women on maternity leave are consulted and informed about opportunities and changes that are taking place.

Support childcare

- Provision of a workplace nursery should be considered – although not all employees would choose this form of childcare, it gives a strong symbolic message of company involvement in the overall ‘care network’. This could also include a crèche for emergencies when childcare arrangements break down, or the parent is ill
- Provide childcare support (financial and practical) for employees who are required to work abroad. Enough advance notice of travel should be given to employees to be able to make appropriate arrangements

Flexibility

- Enable parents to work from home if a child is sick

- Ensure important meetings and networking events are held during core office hours where possible

Career planning

- Encourage women to actively plan their careers – this includes planning pre and post maternity breaks, but also as a long term strategy to support and motivate women and retain their ambition
- Introduce a mentoring scheme to raise ambitions
- Companies should monitor pay rises and progression after women return from maternity for a number of years to really assess impact

Role models

- As well as senior women acting as role models, identify men who have taken career breaks or work part time so that it is no longer seen as only a women's issue

Promotion and progression

- Create transparency and fairness in promotion: Review promotion criteria to ensure that part time workers are equally eligible for promotion and posts are advertised with a part time option.
- Career breaks and periods of part time working can mean that women miss out on the traditional points when talented employees are selected for fast track or management jobs (usually in their early 30s). Remove any formal or informal age barriers to enable women whose careers have slowed down due to a career break to be considered at a later stage.
- Availability for travel is an important factor in career progression in many global SET companies. However this should not be considered to be an automatic requirement for a successful career. Alternative methods of communication (video and telephone conferencing) should be used where possible.

Normalise maternity leave/ career breaks within organisational structures

- Review internal financial procedures to ensure that they do not penalize a department in which someone has taken maternity leave or a career break
- Encourage more men to take career breaks either to do family care work or for other personal development

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