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Returning to another place? Boundary crossing and career transitions among women science, engineering and technology professionals re-entering employment

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Abstract for Gender Work and Organisation 2012
Stream: Career and Transition: Women Crossing Boundaries

Title: Returning to another place? Boundary crossing and career transitions among women science, engineering and technology professionals re-entering employment

Careers for science, engineering and technology (SET) professionals have been traditionally conceptualised according to a linear model, with the ideal worker being male, mobile and available for continuous full time employment. For many women in such male dominated occupations their careers have already entailed boundary crossing and transgression as they negotiate the conflicting identities of woman and SET professional resulting in an 'in/visibility' paradox (Faulkner 2009). The onset of motherhood, the demands of caring responsibilities or other external triggers such as a partner's job move, often lead to women interrupting their careers or 'opting out' of their careers altogether (Stone 2007). Indeed in the UK it has been estimated that two thirds of women qualified in SET subjects do not return to these careers after their break (People, Science & Policy 2002).

This paper examines the experiences and narratives of women who are crossing boundaries as they attempt to re-enter their professions after a sustained break. In these situations career transitions can be experienced as both temporal and spatial with the return from a career break becoming a point of major transition not only in professional terms but also in relation to the rest of their lives. A period of time away from employment provides the opportunity to re-evaluate careers and priorities (Forret et al 2010), but at the same time a lengthy absence from the workplace can mean professional identities are disrupted and uncertain. Returners are thus faced with the prospect of transitions and boundary crossings across many dimensions: from the domestic/private to workplace/public (Marks and Houston 2005); between different occupational status levels – many women professionals end up returning to lower paid, lower status jobs because there are no part time positions open at their previous professional level (Tomlinson 2006); between employment sectors, for example moving from industrial and research roles into the education sector which offers more flexible working hours. In other cases they have been literally crossing boundaries by becoming trailing spouses, following their husband's primary career and living abroad for periods of time.

This paper will draw on data from a programme to support women returning to SET careers (T160: Return to SET) run by the Open University in the UK and Ireland which had more than 1000 participants between 2005 and 2011. Using recent in depth interviews with a sample of those who have since found employment, the paper will explore narratives of transition and boundary crossing using both subjective and objective perspectives that incorporate not only the individual but the social, cultural and economic context in which these transitions have taken place.