

## **‘#MeToo’ for work-life balance**

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Paula Brough’s recent keynote address to the virtual *14<sup>th</sup> European Academy of Occupational Health Psychology Conference*, discussed the ‘enigmatic concept of work-life balance’.

Brough noted that 45 years of work-life balance research has produced distinct advancements in the scholarly discussions of work-life balance (i.e., clarity of definition, measurement instruments including theoretical explanations; Brough, Timms, Chan, Hawkes, & Rasmussen, 2020) and for practice (i.e., widespread adoption of organisational work-life balance policies, organisational cost-benefit models). This research has undoubtedly contributed to the increase of employee diversity, most especially the employment and retention of women and mothers.

### **Enduring Challenges for Work-Life Balance**

However, Brough also discussed the considerable challenges remaining in this field. The ‘backlash’ targeted at workers accessing work-life balance policies (e.g., flexible working hours, parental leave) remains prevalent, and contributes to the under-utilisation of

relevant HR policies. This work-life backlash has been identified as a significant ‘burden of shame’ (Timms, Brough, & Chan, 2020) and a ‘flexibility stigma’ (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2014) and explains the low uptake of work-life balance policies by male employees especially: approximately 30% of fathers, compared to 70% of mothers, utilise organisational work-life balance policies (Timms et al., 2020). An informal disapproving organisational culture, colleague’s adverse reactions, and the perceived ‘guilt’ of adding additional load onto work colleagues, are the common sources of this backlash. Some workers perceive that accessing work-life balance leave policies will generate a permanent negative mark on their record, hindering future career advancement (Timms et al., 2015). For example, Rudman and Mescher (2013) found that hypothetical male employees who requested family leave were perceived to be less dominant and ambitious and less worthy of promotion. Interestingly, female participants were just as likely to stigmatise men who requested family leave, but they tended to express stronger views that such men were “poor workers”. Recently, Krstic and Hideg (2019) reported that requests for flexible-working arrangements were less stigmatised and attracted fewer career penalties within female-dominated industries. This observation reflects what Williams (1992; 2013) termed the ‘glass escalator’: when men receive advantages when employed in female dominated professions. This point is of interest and has implications for the discussions below of *masculinity contest cultures* (Berdahl, Cooper, Glick, Livingston, & Williams, 2018).

The increase in reports of workplace sexual harassment and discrimination, particularly pregnancy discrimination, are also an alarming challenge. O’Driscoll, Brough, and Biggs (2007) for example, reported that approximately 20% of formal workplace sexual discrimination cases in the US, UK, and Australia involved pregnancy discrimination. It is acknowledged that increased reporting may not necessarily imply an increase in the *rates* of these discrimination experiences. Instead, these figures may refer to increases in the *reports*

of these illegal work behaviours. However, the reporting of workplace sexual harassment and a range of other inappropriate, but also illegal workplace behaviours, has recently surged in response to the *MeToo movement*. The fact that so many women are still dismissed, demoted, and overlooked at work due to their pregnancy is intolerable and indicates the lip service some employers continue to apply to workplace equity legislation. Recent work by Atwater and colleagues (2019) assessed perceptions of workplace sexual harassment and the positive and negative impacts of the #MeToo movement. Specifically, Atwater and colleagues (2019) reported that while both male and female participants were equally aware of what constituted workplace sexual harassment, female participants were overall more *lenient* in their ratings of when sexual harassment occurred. Atwater et al. (2019) also found 63% of the females in their sample had experienced at least one occasion of workplace sexual harassment. Therefore, the impact of a lenient perception of sexual harassment implies these experiences are clearly being under-reported by female workers.

Finally, Brough discussed the challenge of unequal unpaid labour and how this remains a highly gendered concept. Recent work has identified that, in general, working women still perform a higher proportion of home labour and dependent caring responsibilities, compared to working men. See for example, discussions about ‘invisible load’ (Waerness, 1978), ‘emotional load’ (Hochschild, 1996), and ‘role overload’ (Matthews, Winkel, & Wayne, 2014), as well as the original work describing working women’s ‘second shift’ identified by Hochschild and Machung (1989). Recent reports from the UK Office for National Statistics indicated clear gender differences in parenting roles whilst employees worked at home due to COVID-19. Williams et al. (2020) reported that women spent more time on childcare than men, particularly ‘non-developmental’ care (e.g., washing and feeding). Whereas men were more likely to engage in developmental activities with their children (e.g., home-schooling, playing, and reading). One in three women (34%), compared

with one in five men (20%) reported that the burden of childcare had a negative impact on their wellbeing. Although men are now more involved in parenting than in the past, women continue to be pressured into being an ‘ideal mother’ and are primarily responsible for their children’s growth and development (Schoppe-Sullivan, 2017).

### **Advancing Work-Life Balance**

One of the important developments within this field, is the recognition that an appropriate organisational culture is vital for work-life balance policy access and acceptance (Brough et al., 2020). Unfortunately, the entrenchment of *masculinity contest cultures* (Berdahl, Cooper, Glick, Livingston, & Williams, 2018) within our organisations, especially our large hierarchically structured organisations, actively works *against* employees accessing work-life balance employment options. These ‘win or die’ organisational cultures have a focus on employee personal gain and advancement at the expense of other employees; adopting an informal ‘mine’s bigger than yours’ contest for workloads, work hours, and work resources (Matos, O’Neill, & Lei, 2018). These hierarchical masculinity contest cultures are most prevalent in medicine, finance, engineering, law, politics, sports, police, fire, corrections, military services, tech organisations and increasingly within our universities; see for example Rawski and Workman-Stark’s (2018) account of the consequences of a masculinity contest culture within police services. Accessing flexible working hours, parental leave, study leave, or compressed working weeks clearly goes against the grain of these cultures, regardless of their formal work-life balance policies.

### **Covid-19 and beyond**

Many of the issues outlined above are exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the mandated rise in home working. Many parents have been working full-time while also home-schooling children, as schools remained closed in many countries. There is evidence that

parents who have been working at home during the pandemic have typically adapted their working patterns around caring for their children (Payne, 2020). This has profound implications for work-life balance in terms of role overload and a distinct lack of ‘me-time’ and self-care. Analysis of data from the UK Office for National Statistics (Williams et al. 2020) provides evidence that women spent more time on childcare during lockdown than men. Unsurprisingly, a higher proportion of women (34%) than men (20%) reported that the burden of childcare had had a negative impact on their wellbeing during this time. The implications of the pandemic are also profound for career progression. In academia, the data is clear and sobering: female academics’ research outputs have dropped significantly compared to their male counterparts (e.g., Gabster, van Daalen, Dhatt, & Barry, 2020; Zimmer, 2020). In other professions, where there is no such tangible ‘output’ measure as the number of papers published, data on work outcomes which support career progression are hard to come by. But we can all agree that looking after impatient children who are under-stimulated and feeling ‘locked up’ is unlikely to be conducive to a productive work experience.

### **#WLBMeToo**

Change needs to happen, but what can be done? One of the benefits of our increased working from home practices during the COVID-19 lockdown has been a seismic forced shift in *how and where* we conduct our work. Working remotely from home, largely avoiding presenteeism and the office culture and, most of all, increasing our control over our work hours and how they intertwine with our non-work responsibilities, has undoubtedly been challenging. The permanence of these changed work situations post-COVID-19 remains to be seen. However, reports are indicating that remote work is likely to increase across most industry sectors (e.g., see UK Institute of Directors, 2020 report). The steadfast barriers erected to prevent telecommuting and work hours flexibility (for those workers who desired

this) have suddenly, magically disintegrated. We anticipate there being an increasing division between workers able/not able to work from home, based primarily on their type of work. That is, knowledge workers and office-based workers will have greater access to remote working, compared to frontline healthcare and service workers (primarily represented by low-paid female employees).

The challenges discussed above will remain. Gender equality and sustainable work-life balance in our work and home lives will continue to be an elusive construct for many. Importantly, work-life balance is not just a woman's issue, yet any mention of 'work-life balance' is often accompanied by anecdotes of the difficulties that women face in juggling their multiple responsibilities. Is it too forward to hope that the current shift to more remote working and increased flexibility will serve as a pivot for advancing a more inclusive work-life balance experience? Workplace sexual harassment recently experienced a pivotal change due to its *MeToo movement*. How can we best capitalise on this and generate a *MeToo movement* for work-life balance? What if by actively identifying our own work-life imbalance experiences and identifying employers who block access, or wider policies and mandates which increase and not decrease inequalities, we could replicate the significant results achieved by the workplace sexual harassment *#MeToo movement*? With the current disintegration of many of our remote working barriers, perhaps now this is the time to actively advance our call for the appropriate recognition of work-life balance and greater work equity? We are very interested to hear your views about advancing progress in work-life balance practices and policies, do please email your contributions to Paula Brough (p.brough@griffith.edu.au) to continue this conversation with us.

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