

Childcare is a central issue in women's participation and advancement in business

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/businessreview/2015/11/10/childcare-is-a-central-issue-in-womens-participation-and-advancement-in-business/

11/10/2015

The LSE Gender Institute has recently launched the report [Confronting gender inequality — findings from the LSE Commission on Gender, Inequality and Power](#). Drawing on LSE research and external experts, the commission was designed to inform public and policy debates in the UK concerned with inequality and power imbalances between women and men. The work focused on the four main areas of Economy, Law, Politics, and Media and Culture. Here, the commission's co-director [Nicola Lacey](#) talks about the report's most business-relevant findings.

The main business message

"I think the main message is that businesses are losing out — despite the progress that women have made in terms of their achievement in education where they now outstrip men in degree level. They are doing very well in the labour market in their thirties. But after the thirties all the evidence shows both participation rates fall off and wage differentials start and massively increase and there's every reason to believe this has to do with patterns of care. Basically women still have the burden of child care and therefore their childcare responsibilities and other caring responsibilities have an impact on their labour market participation and achievement. We argue in the report this is a loss of skills to businesses. To look at it in a longer-term way, businesses would be doing well by themselves in terms of efficiency to try to keep women more fully and up to their skills-level involved in the labour market."

Norway's example

"We would like to see this country building on some of the initiatives we have seen in some continental European countries recently, with tough targets for participation and representation of women in leadership roles on company boards and so on. We think that those are places for targets and even for quotas in some areas. But probably the most concrete thing that we think could be done in the shorter term is to do something like Norway has done, which is to restructure access to parental leave. At the moment, essentially, the bulk of parental leave is taken by women as maternity leave. That was also true in Norway when it was possible for men and women, mothers and fathers, to agree to split a chunk of the available leave. In fact, in sort of 99 percent of cases women took the vast majority of the leave. Norway a few years ago introduced a system where if a father doesn't take his entitlement to leave, then he loses it. The couple lose it. And this has made an absolutely dramatic difference to the number of men — whereas now over 90 percent of men actually take up that parental leave entitlement."

The political feasibility of quotas

"Quotas at the moment are very, very difficult but they're not impossible, of course. We know through the example of the Labour party's all-women's shortlists policy, which in the end required special legislation. But probably more realistic is to take the idea of targets, because I think everybody could see that a target can be a motivating force. It focuses minds and can have real impact relatively quickly. So I think it will be much easier to garner the political will and social support by applying targets than around formal quotas except in certain areas. We feel that in the ideal world there would be a place, given the way things are, for legislatively mandated quotas. Now this is a very complex thing, both in terms of political support and in terms of the equality legislation in this country and at European level. Nonetheless there are examples where this has been achieved, as with the labour party's all-women shortlists. And we feel this is a policy area that should not be abandoned prematurely and should perhaps be revised for the government to look at."

Job performance evaluations

“This is a subtle thing. Obviously one of the ways in which people progress in their careers and feel motivated to continue to achieve is when their work is valued. And I think there’s quite a lot of evidence that some of the things that are really precious are things that typically disproportionately women bring to the workplace. Various kinds of communications skills, social skills and perhaps caring skills aren’t always fully recognised in the ways in which jobs are graded and promotion decisions and hiring decisions are made, and so we make counterproposals about how that might be more adequately handled. The idea would be to try to build a proper evaluation of the social skills alongside the objective skills to incorporate them within that – not to think of them as subjective or in a different category, but as part of what makes somebody good at a job.”

♣♣♣

Notes:

- *The post gives the views of the interviewee, and not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.*
- *Featured image credit: [jencu CC-BY-2.0](#)*

Nicola Lacey is School Professor of Law, Gender and Social Policy, attached to the Departments of Law and Social Policy and to the Gender Institute. From 1998 to 2010 she held a Chair in Criminal Law and Legal Theory at LSE; she returned to LSE in 2013 after spending three years as Senior Research Fellow at All Souls College, and Professor of Criminal Law and Legal Theory at the University of Oxford. She has held a number of visiting appointments, most recently at Harvard Law School. She is an Honorary Fellow of New College Oxford and of University College Oxford; a Fellow of the British Academy; and a member of the Board of Trustees of the British Museum. In 2011 she was awarded the Hans Sigrist Prize by the University of Bern for outstanding scholarship on the function of the rule of law in late modern societies.



- Copyright © 2015 London School of Economics