

**Creating Opportunities . . .  
... Making Choices**

**Women and Work**



National Women's  
Council of Ireland  
Comhairle Náisiúnta  
na mBan in Éirinn

## **REPORT FROM THE NWCI MILLENNIUM PROJECT**

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## **1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

In January 1999, the National Women's Council of Ireland initiated *Women Mapping the New Millennium*, a national research, analysis and action study. The research focused on six key areas of enquiry: women and work, health, poverty, education, violence against women and local development. The aim of the study was three-fold. First, to provide women across the country with the necessary skills and opportunity to have their voices heard. Second, to obtain women's views on each area in order to inform the NWCI's lobbying and policy strategies in the future. Finally, to explore and evaluate a model of participatory research and analysis which might form a basis for future ongoing research of this nature. This research could prove capable of assisting policy-makers and advisors, agencies, advocates, women and their communities with timely and appropriate information for policy formulation at local, regional and national levels.

This report presents the outcomes of the second of the above aims, that is, the views of the participants about women and work in Ireland.

### **1.1 WORK BRIEF**

It is recognised that there has been a dramatic increase in the number of women participating in the labour market. However, certain factors still affect women's access to work. This report aims to describe what the participants in the 'Women and Work' component of the Millennium Project perceived as an 'ideal' working environment for women and how the workplace needs to change in order to respond sensitively and effectively to the needs of women in work.

### **1.2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The study was conducted using a Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) approach, which seeks to build bridges between locals at 'grassroots' level and policy makers at local, regional and national levels. Researchers who use PLA emphasise the fact that engaging in participatory research is a two-way learning process for all involved; that movement towards action is a central aim of the process; that a participatory approach can work equally well in urban and rural contexts, and that the techniques can be adapted and applied to a wide range of issues.

In the work component of the study, 25 facilitators engaged in research with 104 women across 7 counties, covering both urban and rural areas.

### **1.3 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **1.3.1 *Conclusions***

- A dominant theme that emerged was the importance of the development and implementation of policies by the State and employers to enable women to reconcile caring responsibilities with paid employment.
- The issue of childcare was seen as a fundamental factor in determining the extent of women's access to the labour market. It was felt that a key role should be played by government, in partnership with employers and parents, to provide a comprehensive and regulated childcare service. All participants felt that some support should be given for childcare – this might take the form of subsidisation of supply or the introduction of a childcare allowance which would benefit both mothers in paid employment and mothers engaged in full-time caring work in the home.

- An issue which was raised repeatedly within research groups was the need for the more general application of flexibility in working conditions and the introduction of a more comprehensive system of family-friendly policies.
- There was general support for the introduction of paid parental leave as a right to enable women and men to make freer choices about their careers and home lives. This confirms the view of the Commission of the Family that benefits currently attached to maternity leave should extend to cover parental leave.
- Participants were strongly in favour of an improvement in conditions of pay, working conditions and pension and other entitlements. They called for equal pay for work of equal value and an increase in the Minimum Wage.
- Participants repeatedly expressed their desire for greater equality in the workplace – this would encompass recognition of women’s caring responsibilities, career promotion, recognition of the value of women’s work, protection against sexual harassment and greater access to education and vocational training.
- The women in this project concluded that a change in awareness was necessary with regard to societal perceptions of women’s roles. Traditional stereotypes regarding the type of education, training and work appropriate to women need to be challenged and education and training opportunities made available to women for all areas of work. In the workplace, new models of decision-making and communication could enable the organisation to become more flexible and sensitive not only to women’s needs, but also to the needs of all workers.
- Women identified the co-operation of the three principal actors – the Government, employers and employees as critical to the development of a “women-friendly” working environment by 2020.

### **1.3.2                      *Recommendations***

**Based on the findings from the ‘Women and Work’ component of the Millennium Project, it is recommended that:**

- Targeted indicators to measure equal opportunities in employment should be accurately defined and implemented in order to produce reliable data on a long-term basis.
- The recommendations of the Commission on the Family (1998) to extend the PRSI Maternity Benefit Scheme to ‘...cover parental leave and provide a weekly payment on the lines of maternity benefit to workers availing of parental leave under the EU directive’ should be implemented. In recognition of both parents’ caring responsibilities, paid parental leave should be offered to both parents on a non-transferable basis. The Government should also introduce 5 days’ paid paternity leave in recognition of a father’s caring role.
- The Government should give priority to the issue of childcare. It should provide supports for all parents through the payment of a universal childcare payment and through subsidisation of childcare provision. Support from the State should be offered in a flexible manner to enable parents to exercise choice in relation to the type of childcare selected for their children. Supports should, therefore, be provided for home-based and community-based care and for childcare provided by crèches, after-school facilities and by childminders.
- Support services within and outside the workplace for new mothers should be improved.



- Provision needs to be made to enable workers to take paid leave to engage in eldercare and in care of dependants with disabilities.
- The Government should consider the introduction of family leave to be availed of by workers in the event of family emergencies such as the sudden illness of family members – the current provisions offering 5 days' *force majeure* leave over a 3-year period or the newly-instituted carer's leave, aimed more at situations of chronic illness, while welcome, do not provide adequate flexibility for workers acting as primary carers of children or elderly relatives.
- New models of flexible and part-time work practices should be introduced. These should be designed in consultation with policy-makers, employers and women in the workforce, together with a comprehensive framework for monitoring the numbers of people in part-time work and evaluating and improving the pay and conditions available for that work.
- A national support programme should be put in place to assist women returners. As indicated in the NESF *Alleviating Labour Shortages* (2000) report, this should include the establishment of women returners as a priority group within FÁS Employment Services and Training provision. The programme should include tracking and monitoring mechanisms, career path planning and the identification of progression routes.
- More flexible models of training targeted at women interested in returning to work should be piloted. The timing and location of training courses should be developed in such a way as to meet the needs of women, including outreach, part-time and modular courses. As indicated also in the NESF *Alleviating Labour Shortages* report, supports should also be offered to facilitate participation by women with caring responsibilities. The *Report of the P2000 Working Group on Women's Access to Labour Market Opportunities* should be implemented as a matter of urgency.
- Further strategies should be developed to enforce the principal of equal pay for work of equal value. While the Advisory Committee on Male-Female Wage Differentials should urgently devise recommendations to address the issue of wage differentials, there is a need for the Government and social partners to engage in cooperation to consider the broader issue of sectoral segregation and the concentration of women in areas of low pay and poorer working conditions.
- The Minimum Wage should be increased by 100% in recognition of the inadequacy of the current rate, given the recent increases in the average industrial wage through the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness. The Minimum Wage should then be indexed to increases in average industrial wages.
- The Government should devise an action plan to combat sexual harassment and bullying in the workplace – a more proactive Government role is necessary to encourage more proactive action by employers in protecting employees against sexual harassment.
- Government should work in partnership with employers and workers to improve the quality of the working environment both in terms of the development of a collaborative, supportive working culture and of the provision of workplace facilities.
- The Government needs to recognise the issue of diversity within the existing and potential workforce – it should urgently devise policies to ensure greater access to secure, well-paid employment for groups such as older women, minority ethnic women and women with disabilities. It should also take urgent action to protect the rights of such groups within the workplace.



## 2. INTRODUCTION

The National Women's Council of Ireland is a non-governmental organisation (NGO) currently operating as an agent of change<sup>1</sup> with and on behalf of women in Ireland facing a complex and rapidly changing society and culture. Over the past years, the work of the Council, coupled with that of other agencies and organisations, has achieved significant and life-enhancing change in ordinary women's lives. In 1998, approaching the third Millennium and cognisant of significant shifts in the political, economic and social landscape in Ireland, the Council recognised that new models of partnership were rapidly emerging. This indicated the need, in turn, for new models of communication and information flow between people at local 'grassroots' level, policy makers, and the NWCI as a social partner. In seeking to develop and explore such a model, the Council proposed its Millennium Project: *Women Mapping the New Millennium*.

### 2.1 WOMEN MAPPING THE NEW MILLENNIUM

*Women Mapping the New Millennium* is a national research, analysis, and action project that seeks to foster a process of empowerment that "has the potential to radically redesign the current paradigm that continues to produce social exclusion." (Zappone, in Kirby and Jacobson, 1998) It is a capacity-building programme that goes beyond the traditional notion of 'consultation' towards an active participatory experience of research, analysis and action.

The key objectives of the project are to:

- Design and explore an innovative model for forming national and local policy through direct participation by local actors;
- Provide women across the country with the training and capacity to conduct sustained social research and analysis;
- Encourage women to analyse the social and economic implications of their activities;
- Produce ongoing, up-to-date research on key experiences of women's lives – poverty, healthcare, work, etc.;
- Build towards sustainable development of initiatives at local level.

At time of publication, we have a partial picture as to the extent to which the last of these objectives was reached. It is the NWCI's task to take the results of the research into the national policy arenas to which it has access. This work is ongoing. An evaluation is planned for the future in which policy-makers will be asked as to the Millennium Project's effect on Irish social policy.

We have evidence that some, but not all, of the women involved in the project have fed the results of their research into their local policy-making arenas and/ or have initiated an action at local level as an outcome of their research and the skills gained through participating in the project. While this 'action' phase was built into the project, it was optional for facilitators and for a number of reasons, for instance, lack of time or lack of resources, not every group could progress action at local level. Also, groups may have started these initiatives long after the end of the project. A mail-out at close of the project asked facilitators to outline what ways they had used the skills gained through involvement with the project. These descriptions are available in the full reference report of the project available in the NWCI.

In many ways, the Millennium Project was a first step towards sustainable local action by the women involved. It represents the beginning of a developmental process. It illustrates the need for women to

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<sup>1</sup> Agents of change or 'change-agents' is a term commonly used in majority-world development planning to denote organisations (governmental and non-governmental), institutions (public and private), community activists and communities themselves, policy-makers and advisors, individuals and professionals (e.g., researchers, technical experts, etc.) who seek to foster positive change in people's lives at community, national and/or international level.

receive information, financial and training supports to pursue further projects which would enable them to investigate and challenge their environments.<sup>2</sup>

## **2.2 RESEARCH AREAS**

Six broad areas of research enquiry were identified via consultation with Council affiliates and advisory personnel:

- Women and Poverty
- Women and Health
- Women and Work
- Violence against Women
- Women and Education
- Women and Local Development (rural and urban)

## **2.3 WOMEN AND WORK**

Women have historically been excluded from participating in paid employment in Ireland. Their exclusion was reinforced by the marriage bar which prevented married women from working in the civil service and local authorities until 1973 and by Article 41.2 of the Constitution which ensured that women would not be obliged by economic necessity to work outside the home. Furthermore, because of the separation of public and private spheres and because of the persistence of structures of discrimination against women, women's caring work has tended to be unpaid and undervalued. The change in the Government's policy in the 1990s to one encouraging women to enter the workforce has not served to address the historical problem of discrimination against women's work as it has prioritised the needs of the economy over those of women. Thus, while one of the marks of the 'Celtic Tiger' economy is the dramatic increase in the number of women participating in paid employment, and indeed many would agree (see the National Childcare Strategy, January 1999) that women's engagement in the labour force has been central to Ireland's present economic success, women continue to be concentrated in low-paid, part-time work. Inadequate or inflexible provision of education and training and the absence of quality childcare supports have exacerbated the high proportion of women in low-paid, insecure and part-time employment. Furthermore, while women's share of the job market has risen from 36% in 1991 to over 45% in 1999, occupational segregation and the preponderance of women in part-time work have ensured the persistence of male-female wage differentials. Similarly, women continue to experience barriers in accessing education and training because of the Live Register requirement.

The research brief for women and work is intended to explore women's attitudes to work, their views on a suitable work environment and to identify the supports which they need to exercise choices with regard to participation in the paid workforce and engagement in caring responsibilities.

## **2.4 PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH APPROACH**

Given this brief, what shape might our research take? How research is designed, and from whose perspective, radically informs the content and results of any research project, which, in turn, informs the policies developed in response to those results. The Millennium Project utilised an emic<sup>3</sup> approach and participatory methodology, which is described in detail in the methodology section of this report.

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<sup>2</sup> This issue is explored in more depth in, O'Reilly-de Brún et al. (2001). The Millennium Project: Women Mapping the New Millennium Executive Summary. Dublin: National Women's Council of Ireland.

<sup>3</sup> To distinguish between the terms 'emic' and 'etic': etic research is conducted from the outsider's perspective, while emic research takes the insider's perspective on board as the framework from which to explore and understand the issue in question. The terms are drawn from anthropology (Goodenough: 1956) and were borrowed from linguistics. Emic research is also known as ethnoscience, the New Ethnography, ethnomethodology and componential analysis.

## **2.5 THE POLICY-INFLUENCING POTENTIAL OF THE MILLENNIUM PROJECT**

The Millennium Project has the potential to address several ‘audiences’ and therefore to influence policy at various levels. Intended audiences for the results and recommendations of this study include: the National Women’s Council of Ireland and its affiliate membership, policy-makers and advisors in key Government departments, NGOs, agencies, community groups and activists working on issues related to women and work.

The National Women’s Council of Ireland has been acting in partnership with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment since the Department assigned the contract of the National Support Structure for NOW (the European Social Fund programme: New Opportunities for Women) to the NWCI in 1991 (European Social Fund 1997). We hope that our discussion of Irish women’s articulated needs and ideas for an improved working environment will help to inform the ongoing employment policy work of the Council, its affiliates, and strategic partners involved in the arena. Through the Millennium Project, the Council has built increased capacity within its affiliate membership (as outlined in the project objectives mentioned above). This enhanced capacity should assist in enabling affiliates to address these issues at local, regional and national level and to operate as agents of positive change.

Policy makers and advisors cannot develop viable policy in a vacuum. They require constant assistance from those who are the intended beneficiaries of the policies. At the same time, women cannot hope to improve their situation if their voices and expertise remain unsolicited and unheard; they need constant assistance from those who have the power and vision to seek that expertise and build it into healthy policy. A feature of the Millennium Project is the model it employs in order to bring women’s experiences, their needs, suggestions for change and potential solutions, into the heart of action and planning at local, regional and national level.

### 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 3.1 EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES IN EMPLOYMENT FOR WOMEN IN IRELAND

Women have traditionally had a low rate of participation in the paid workforce, principally because they were expected to assume the role of unpaid carers of children and elderly relatives and denied opportunities, as a consequence, to remain in many jobs upon marriage. Their unpaid caring role was explicitly reinforced by the constitutional provision stating that women would not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home (Second Commission on the Status of Women, 1993). While a series of EU directives have sought to address the situation of women in the paid workforce, the narrow interpretation of equality in Ireland, ignoring historical discrimination of vulnerable groups (O'Connor, 1995), has resulted in the perpetuation of inequalities in relation to women and work. The contribution made by women in terms of unpaid caring work remains unmeasured and unaddressed. Furthermore, the culture of paid work has not yet changed sufficiently to permit the full reconciliation of work and family life. Consequently, women engaged in caring duties tend to be perceived by employers as 'problematic employees' in the labour force (European Women's Lobby, 1998).

While limited in scope to issues related to economic equality, EU treaties and directives have facilitated certain progress on equality in the workplace by guaranteeing rights, such as that to equal pay. Article 119 of the Treaty of Rome [1957] (Nelson, Pollard and Wheeler, 1993) states that:

*'Each member State shall, during the first stage, ensure and subsequently maintain the application of the principle that men and women should receive equal pay for work.'*

Subsequent directives have prompted Irish legislation providing entitlements in respect of equal treatment, statutory social security, occupational social security, maternity leave and parental leave (Fourth Joint Committee on Women's Rights, 1996). However, directives towards equality of opportunity do not necessarily lead to equality of outcome. Mr Georges Kintzele, Head of the European Social Fund Unit, commented two years ago on the failure of the Department of Finance in Ireland to make reference to equal opportunities in its evaluation for the subsequent round of structural funds. Commenting on this failure, a report from the European Social Fund Programme Evaluation Unit stated:

*'This is just one example which provides a hint of how the mainstreaming of equal opportunities may actually require a radical policy shift; lip-service observance will no longer be sufficient' (ESF Programme Evaluation Unit, 1999).*

The inadequacy of the policy response to the issue of equal opportunities for women in paid employment is also reflected in the inadequacy of data relating to women and the labour-market. The *Report of the P2000 Working Group on Women's Access to Labour Market Opportunities* (2000) concluded that current measures of women's unemployment are inadequate and that a better understanding "...of the reasons behind female participation decisions [in the labour market]," is needed (Ibid.). However, as yet, indicators to measure equal opportunities even when in place are 'poorly defined and quantified and show little evidence of a serious strategy to achieve equal opportunities in the employment arena' (Ibid.).

The persistent inequalities experienced by women in paid employment are highlighted by the following findings:

In the areas where young women are likely to be employed – managerial, professional and service occupations – they receive less pay than young men (Ronayne, 1987).

Although women currently comprise 40% of the total workforce in Ireland, it is estimated that less than 3% of top executives are women (Quarterly National Household Survey, March-May, 1998).

### **3.2 WOMEN, CHILDCARE AND ACCESS TO THE LABOUR MARKET**

One of the clear findings has been that women's access to the labour market in Ireland is severely hampered by the lack of childcare provision (Isis Research Group, 1999). To date, Ireland shows the worst performance in Europe with regard to the participation by women with children in employment. This should not seem surprising as the costs of "...childcare (as a proportion of average earnings) are amongst the highest in the European Union. Average full day-care costs in Ireland are 20% of average earnings" (P2000 Expert Working Group on Childcare, 1999) while the mean for other European countries is 8% (Goodbody Economic Consultants, 1998).

Following Partnership 2000, an Expert Working Group on Childcare was established in July 1997 and operated under the aegis of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform. The subsequent publication, the National Childcare Strategy (Ibid.), states that "...there is a virtual crisis in childcare supply". Furthermore it adds that "the availability and cost of childcare and the difficulties around reconciling employment and family lives are the most significant barriers to women accessing and participating in the labour force" (Ibid.). For women in low income households, the crisis in affordable, accessible childcare services is particularly acute (WERRC, April 2001). The escalating dimension of the crisis has been highlighted in the Goodbody report which estimates a projected rise of between 25 and 50% in demand for childcare services by the year 2011 (Goodbody Economic Consultants, 1998).

Government spending on childcare in the early 1990s made limited provision for services for children in disadvantaged areas and children whose parents were engaged in national training schemes. For those parents who were working outside the home, childcare was left to a laissez-faire economy dictated by the rise and fall of the market. Thus, as more women entered or returned to the workforce as the economy grew, the cost of childcare grew accordingly. Public debate often revolves around the importance of 'quality childcare', for today's working parents. However, within this debate, the following observation is important:

*'In countries where families are supported with generous leave entitlements and publicly funded childcare, there is no question as to whether children will receive quality care (NWCI, unpublished).'*

The question remains as to whether or not a market economy can deliver adequate childcare (ibid.) and to what extent the market framework creates conflict about who should deliver those services.

Again, an organisational culture which views women with caring responsibilities as difficult workers and a State that does not ensure that men take on caring roles hinders women's capacity to be involved in the labour market. It is clearly proven that motherhood exacerbates the difficulties that women experience in the workforce (Isis Research Group 1999). For example, women who are breast-feeding encounter difficulties as a consequence of the lack of proper facilities and because maternity leave is inadequate (Ibid.). Indeed, several of the women indicated that the pressures of the dual burdens of work and new motherhood were too difficult to sustain on a full-time basis and so "they were therefore withdrawing reluctantly from the work place" (Ibid.). Data from the Quarterly National Household Survey indicates that a large number of women, over 70,000 of whom had previously held regular jobs, had given them up for domestic or family reasons (Central Statistics Office QNHS, 1998 Q2.)

### **3.3 WOMEN'S ACCESS TO THE LABOUR MARKET**

Many of those women who withdrew from the workforce either voluntarily or forcibly to care for their families may wish to return to paid employment at a later stage. In 1972 the Commission on the Status of Women stated that if women were to choose to work outside the home "...they should be reasonably free to do so, and...the barriers in the way of such a choice, should as far as possible, be removed. A woman has a right equally with a man to enter employment." To date, we have the worst European record with only 60% of women between 24-54 in full employment.

Partnership 2000 undertook to "review participation by women in mainstream vocational education, training and employment programmes and better job opportunities". As a result of this commitment, the Women's Access to the Labour Market Working Group was set up. This Working Group found:

- women are under-represented on training and employment programmes;
- for women who are job seeking, there is a greater focus on part-time employment;
- 37.3% of mothers are in the workforce currently;
- there needs to be greater consideration of alternative access routes for women to access training, education and employment apart from the live register;
- there is a general information deficit as to the availability of labour market opportunities for women;
- there is a substantial link between women's participation in the workforce and education;
- the design of courses for FÁS and other training providers is problematic for women, given the difficulty in accessing childcare and that courses generally run from 9 to 5.

(Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, 1999)

The difficulties experienced by many women returners in accessing education and training were recognised in the recent National Economic and Social Forum report on *Alleviating Labour Shortages* which recommended the establishment of a national support programme for women returners to assist their entry into education and training and their return to paid employment (National Economic and Social Forum, 2000). The need for flexible provision of education and training and for the incorporation of childcare and eldercare supports was also highlighted in *Out of Sight: the Hidden Poverty of Women* (NWCI, 2000). The importance of eldercare supports is confirmed by Ursula Barry in a recent report in which she states that "for many women, elder care responsibilities become particularly critical just as their responsibilities for young children decrease (WERRC, May 2001).

### **3.4 FAMILY-FRIENDLY EMPLOYMENT POLICIES**

The need for the State, employers and training providers to recognise the importance of facilitating the reconciliation of women's caring responsibilities with their current or potential participation in the workforce is all the more acute in the light of the current inadequacy of family-friendly employment policies. Family-friendly policies are policies within workplaces and at State level that assist parents who are in paid work outside the home to attend to their caring responsibilities. These policies encompass maternity, paternity and parental leave as well as the right to leave in order to take care of a sick dependant. Employers may also introduce policies to allow flexible ways of working that are family-friendly, for instance, job-sharing, flexi-time, reduced hours, career breaks, teleworking and limited work from home. In Ireland, family-friendly companies are in the minority. Notable exceptions are Aer Rianta, Allied Irish Banks, An Post, Bank of Ireland and the Electricity Supply Board (O'Reilly, 1997). Due to the small size of most Irish businesses, family friendly practices have been set up on an informal basis (Ibid.), thus slowing the design and implementation of more formal and widespread systems within Irish workplaces in general.

The current provisions of the Parental Leave Act (1998) are not sufficiently generous to permit the effective reconciliation of paid employment and family life. The current leave of 14 weeks is available on an unpaid basis and is often available to employees only in a single block of leave. Consequently, many employees,



particularly women in low-paid employment, are unable to avail of this entitlement as they cannot afford to take 14 weeks' leave without pay. In order to change this situation, the Commission on the Family recommended that "...the PSRI maternity benefit scheme should be extended to cover parental leave and to provide a weekly payment on the lines of maternity benefit to workers availing of parental leave under the EU Directive" (Commission on the Family, 1998). The Commission is very clear that unless the period of parental leave is paid "it will not fully realise key family objectives which include providing real opportunities to mothers and fathers in balancing their work and family responsibilities" (Ibid.). Parental leave is not transferable between parents. The Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform is currently chairing a review of the operation of the Parental Leave Act.

Budget 2001 recently formalised changes to maternity leave (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 2001). Paid maternity leave is now set at 18 weeks, with an additional 8 weeks' unpaid leave. Employers are also obliged to provide mothers at work with lactation breaks for breast-feeding. However, fathers were not given the right to paternity leave, except for civil servants who may have three days paid leave. Parents may take *force majeure* paid leave in the event of the sudden illness of a family member. However, it is most often women who take both parental and *force majeure* leave (NOW, 1999a).

In general, family-friendly policies are perceived as women's issues (NOW, 1999a) given the continued association of women with caring responsibilities and with home duties. The fear that availing of family-friendly options could impact negatively on women's promotional prospects is reflected in comments of Millennium Project participants which will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

The lack of proper provision for leave entitlement for family and care purposes places a particularly severe burden on Irish women workers (WERRC, April 2001). It contributes to the decision of many working mothers to withdraw reluctantly from the workforce. (Employment Equality Agency, 1999). It may also be a significant factor in prompting women to engage in part-time work.

### **3.5 PART-TIME WORK AND FLEXIBILITY**

In the 25 years from 1971 to 1996 the number of women at work grew by 212,000, as compared to a growth of just 23,000 in male employment in the same period (Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, 1999). A substantial proportion of this increase relates to part-time employment and is concentrated in the services industry. While 1 in 6 of those in the labour-force are in part-time employment, over 70% of these are women. Given that women have a lower labour-force participation rate than men, their representation among part-time workers is significantly high (WERRC, April 2001). 18-46% of part-time workers who work under 30 hours a week are low paid and 24-67% of those working under 10 hours a week are low paid (NWCI, 1999).

A new EU Directive establishing a framework agreement on part-time work was agreed in 1997, and was to be implemented in January 2000. This framework agreement has two objectives which should be met in an Irish context:

- To remove discrimination against part-time workers and improve the quality of part-time work.
- To facilitate the development of part-time work on a basis that is acceptable to both employers and employees.

The inferior nature of much part-time, non-standard employment has been identified as a major factor contributing to increasing poverty and social polarisation in Britain (Rowntree Foundation, 1995). It is well-known that in a competitive labour market, the weakest, least trained workers get the worst jobs (Crompton and Harris, 1996). Recognising the lack of protection afforded to part-time workers, the

European Commission has recommended the need “to extend social protection, acquired and transferable rights, to non-standard forms of work” (1997).

### **3.6 LOW PAY**

Different wage scales for men and women have been abolished since the early 1970s. However, a significant male-female wage differential continues to persist in Ireland. The disproportionate concentration of women workers in the lower paid sub-sectors of the services sector and in part-time and temporary employment plays a crucial role in determining women’s low paid position (WERRC, April 2001). It is interesting to note that data available on earnings in Ireland is provided in detail for the industrial sector but in the service sector where women are heavily represented there is no data available (Ruane and Sutherland, 1999). When analysing the distribution earnings in industry in 1997, the average hourly female earnings comprised 73% of the average hourly male earnings. However, in manufacturing and all industries generally during 1997, males worked on average five hours per week more than females and so, in manufacturing, for example, female earnings represented only 66.3% of average weekly male earnings. A recent study of the impact of the newly introduced Minimum Wage estimated that over half of those falling below the £4.40 minimum (the rate set in April 2000) were women (Economic and Social Research Institute, 1999).

Vertical and horizontal segregation is a strong feature of the Irish labour market and both contribute to the wide gap between women’s and men’s earnings. While 64% of civil servants are women, for instance, less than 10% of the top positions are occupied by women (Humphreys et al 1999). Similarly, while discrimination against women in the workplace is reflected in the preponderance of women in low-paid employment, it is also evident at the highest ranks of employment such as that of managing director. At this level, women tend to earn, on average, 75% of the salaries earned by their male counterparts (Incubon Ireland Limited, Salary Survey, 1998).

### 3.7 TRAINING AND PROMOTION

Lack of training opportunities for women both inside and outside the workplace has been identified as a problem for women in Ireland. Obstacles to women returning to education and training have been clearly recognised over the past decade. Lack of financial assistance, of transport provision and, in particular, of flexible delivery of programmes have been cited as key barriers. Indeed, “inflexible training programmes and the inflexibility of work were identified by 38% of policy and delivery organisations as obstacles to women’s participation in education, training and work” (ESF Programme Evaluation Unit, 1999).

At European and national level, the need to train women in the workplace for promotion has been identified as a priority (EWL, 1998; NOW, 1999). Women in the workplace need to be able to see clear career paths that they can pursue (O’Connor, 1995). Offering training in the workplace for women employees is a demonstration of the “organisation’s perception of the worth of the employee” (Ibid.). However:

*‘Women traditionally receive less training from their employers and because they are also paid less they find it more difficult to invest in their own training. Women are regarded as unreliable ‘human capital’ because they have children’* (Kinnock 1995).

It is important to have training for gender awareness in the workplace to combat negative attitudes about women. O’Connor (1995) notes the pivotal role that an equal opportunities manager at senior level can play in ensuring that women are provided with opportunities in the workplace and that all employees are trained in an awareness of equality issues.

### 3.8 ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

To what extent might the experiences of women in the workplace be structured by the organisational culture of companies or institutions? Current understandings reflect organisational culture as the norms and values that members of an organisation perceive to underlie the practices of that organisation (Rentsch, 1987). Companies and institutions can include both dominant and sub cultures. Hofstede (1998) suggests that those who are at the top of hierarchies in organisations can be unaware of other sub-cultures but can retain the power to block or encourage organisational change:

*‘Minds of top managers are less complex than their organisations, and their decisions reflect the subculture of their own...group. They may not even be aware of the cultural map of their organisation - or if they perceive cultural variety, they may not like it and try to repress it’* (Ibid.).

It follows that organisations do not operate in vacuums and that the cultural expectations of members as learned from the external cultural map also shape the way things happen inside the organisation. Discrimination against women inside the workplace mirrors their oppression in Irish society. O’Connor (1995) points out that, “general organisational culture...portrays management as ‘male’, and...is reflected in organisational procedures which differentially affect the opportunities of men and women.” Also reflected in organisational cultures are assumptions about what jobs are appropriate for women to do. Thus, in Ireland, women are concentrated in clerical and service work, as well as part-time work that can allow them to balance family and work life (EEA, 1999). Female participation in apprenticeships for trades has fallen to 0.7% in recent years (EEA, 1999). O’Connor (1995) reports that in Ireland there is a pervasive belief that women cannot perform management roles. An AIB Task Force Group report (2000) found that female employees believed that they had consistently to outperform men in order to achieve the same goals.

### 3.9 STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE

Policy lessons have been identified through a series of initiatives that would assist in addressing the problems identified throughout this literature review. From 1991 until 2000, the New Opportunities for

Women Programme (NOW) piloted training and employment initiatives for women that sought to improve access to, and the experience of, the workplace for women in Ireland. The Aer Lingus Wider Opportunities for Women (WOW) project, for example, involved a partnership with Dublin City University to “research and address the issue of representation of women in management in Aer Lingus through a corporate change in policy and a management development programme.” (NOW 1999b) The project established an in-house women’s network in order to support women to move into management positions.

NOW projects were successful because they attached importance to women-friendly training, support for women in the workplace, partnership approaches and flexible work practices. Partnership models and the variety of perspectives that they bring to the workplace can be effective in combating discrimination against women in the workplace, especially if women themselves are real partners in the process. Moreover, they are democratic structures that can encourage and effect organisational change.

The Equality Authority has been given the power to part-fund and assist Irish companies to conduct gender Equality Reviews. These reviews are to include audits of the workplace and action plans for change within the workplace so that gender equality can be ensured. It is hoped that they will provide a useful mechanism for improving the situation of women in paid employment in Ireland.

## **4. METHODOLOGY**

### **4.1 INTRODUCTION: THE DEVELOPING**

#### **RELATONSHIP BETWEEN RESEARCH METHODS AND SOCIAL POLICY**

Research approaches and methods radically influence research content and, consequently, the policies designed in response to that content. Traditionally, research funding in Ireland has privileged large-scale survey-style research, and it has been a struggle to find support for smaller-scale qualitative research. The NGO sector has made strategic decisions regarding what type of research is necessary to support particular policy outcomes, but the salient question that remains is this: Is it the intention of social policy research to describe the current situation, to change it, or both? (Cantillon, 1998). What might small-scale predominantly qualitative research projects like the Millennium Project contribute to each of these objectives?

Many authors have demonstrated the inability of researchers using exclusively quantitative methods to attend to the “persistent requirement in social policy to understand complex behaviours, needs, systems and cultures.” (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994, 173; Cantillon, 1998; Hallett, 1996; Ruspini, 1999). As Irwin (1987) says, “Human behaviour and social existence is a subjective and wilful construction and requires drawing close to subjects in their natural contexts and understanding the fundamental human process.” This ‘drawing close’ can best be achieved by using qualitative approaches because they provide “an opportunity, albeit briefly, to see the world from another person’s point of view” (Schein, 1995).

This is a lesson strongly reflected by what policy-makers in ‘developing’ countries in the majority world have learned: all the components of social policy – not just the technical and economic, but also the social and cultural – have to be taken into account (Kane and O’Reilly-de Brún, 2001). All the parties involved in research and policy-making – governments, sponsors, local people, and external experts – have a unique perspective to contribute (Cernea, 1991). This holistic approach to research and effective policy-formation demands that we make the best possible use of available methods and techniques, and involve local people – in our case, women participants discussing issues related to women and work and in describing the ideal working environment in 2020 – directly in the process of research, analysis and action-planning.

### **4.2 FROM THE OUTSIDE IN, OR THE INSIDE OUT?**

#### **CONTRASTING APPROACHES TO RESEARCH**

Research is designed and approached in two main ways, which contrast strongly in terms of perspective, method and therefore outcome. The more traditional approach, and the one with which most people are familiar, might be described as doing research ‘from the outside in’. This is called the ‘etic’ (see footnote #2) approach, and is reflected in the question: “What do I see these women doing/ how will I describe their experiences?” Such research is conducted from the perspective of professional ‘outsiders’, perhaps a team of researchers, or an organisation commissioning a piece of research. The framework for the research is decided in advance, and the ‘research group’ is usually perceived as a passive participant in the process.

In contrast, taking an emic approach means doing research ‘from the inside out’, and is reflected in the question: “What do these women see themselves doing/ how do they describe their experiences?” This approach sees the research group as expert in its own right, and takes that perspective on board, often placing it in positive articulation with other expert opinion. In emic research, the language and categories of analysis used by the group become the framework or lens through which the data is viewed and analysed, and the research group is involved in an active and participatory way throughout the research process.

Feminist research methodology is similarly focused on active participation of women and others in the research process ‘stemming from a concern that existing methodologies support sexist, racist and elitist

attitudes and therefore negatively affect people's lives (Holland et al., 1995). The feminist research project proposes not a prescriptive, distinctly feminist set of methods, but a variety of methods employed with the objective of bringing women's experiences from the margins to the centre. The objective, in terms of research outcomes, is the development of recommendations which position women's interests centrally in policy debates and maximize their potential for implementation into policy and practice. As such, the objectives of Participatory Learning and Action as a research strategy for this project serve as an appropriate vehicle to place women and their concerns at the centre of the research process. The research strategy is outlined below.

#### **4.3 RESEARCH STRATEGY: PARTICIPATORY LEARNING AND ACTION (PLA)**

The NWCI Millennium Project was designed to respond to the challenges and concerns we have noted, and a PLA (**Participatory Learning and Action**) research strategy was adopted. PLA techniques are capable of accessing both qualitative and quantitative data,<sup>4</sup> and can be described as “a growing family of approaches and methods to enable local people to share, enhance and analyse their knowledge of life and conditions, to plan and to act” (Chambers, 1994c). PLA techniques also possess the necessary flexibility to explore issues of a sensitive nature, where ‘drawing close’ to women's actual ‘lived experience’ of women in the workplace is essential to making visible the complex realities of their lives. This research strategy provided the women involved in the project with tools to develop analytical frameworks that make sense of their experience, and articulate their vision for a more positive future.

Key features of PLA include:

- giving credence to the insights and abilities of local people to share and enhance their knowledge of the issue in question;
- using emic research to elucidate the ‘insider view’ and uncover local categories of meaning and analysis;
- avoiding the kind of biases that have characterised much research done from the outsider's point of view (Kane, 1995: 197), and
- ‘handing over the stick’, meaning to actively encourage local participation and development of positive action planning.

This research strategy is now in use world-wide in organisations as diverse as UNICEF, Save the Children, WorldVision, Ipsas, and The World Bank.

#### **4.4 RESEARCH SCHEDULE**

**4.4.1 Training Programme:** Training for the Millennium Project took place in two distinct phases: Phase One training spanned March to October 1999, and provided practical training in basic PLA principles and techniques. Phase Two training spanned March to May 2000 and covered more fundamental issues in PLA.

An enormous amount of material was covered in each of the training sessions in groups where women had differing levels of knowledge about research and group facilitation. Since an aim of the project was capacity-building, participants did not have to have prior experience of any of the above. Facilitation skills

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<sup>4</sup> As a research approach, PLA remains open to the integration of conventional research methods and approaches. This allows PLA to inform other research strategies, for example, a tightly-focused qualitative PLA research project is capable of usefully informing larger-scale quantitative studies.

are extremely important in PLA research. Also important to the research is note-taking during research techniques. Both facilitation and note-taking were covered briefly in the training.

Feedback from the PLA facilitators<sup>5</sup> indicates that a number felt that they would like more training in facilitation and note-taking: '[I would suggest] more in-depth training on bettering facilitation techniques – this is vital in both encouraging and energising a group to reach to their full potential' (PLA facilitator).

**4.4.2 Research Schedule:** At the close of each of the 13 training programmes nation-wide, facilitation teams were invited to negotiate and choose one of the six topics as their 'national' issue (meaning it was being researched by other teams across the country). They were also invited to devise a 'local' topic of their choice ('local' meaning it could be a topic unique to the locality). In many cases, teams preferred to select another of the six issues for their local topic because it matched their concerns and those of their research groups. The information generated for the study on work, therefore, includes 11 'national' and 1 'local' issue.

Research was conducted over the period May 1999 – May 2000. Teams were provided with back-up support from one of four Millennium Project staff.

## 4.5 RESEARCH METHODS

The work component of the Millennium Project involved several processes:

- methods:
  - sampling
  - research outlines and selection of data-collection techniques
  - data analysis
- putting appropriate monitoring and evaluation procedures in place
- ethical issues

### 4.5.1 Sampling

**PLA Facilitators:** The initial project design aimed to draw members from NWCI affiliate organisations to train 120 facilitators in teams of 2, giving the Project 60 teams nation-wide. In early 1999, the NWCI had 142 affiliates. All received information packs about the proposed Project, and invitations to nation-wide Information Sessions. Project information was also made available via NWCI Panel Meetings and affiliates were invited to consider nominating women for inclusion in training. 41 affiliates responded, and from this number, 4 teams from rural and 8 teams from urban-based affiliates carried out research on 'Women and Work'. Counties Cork, Monaghan, Roscommon, Galway, Tipperary and Louth were included, as was Dublin City and County. In all, 12 teams conducted research on the work component, with a total of 104 participants nation-wide.

**Research Participants:** Intensive qualitative study of a small number of cases can lead to valuable understandings about women's experiences of work. The sample of 104 participants involved in this study, therefore, is a non-probability purposeful sample<sup>6</sup>. The principle of selection is the researcher's judgement as to applicability (Robson 1993). The value of non-probability sampling lies in the depth and quality of

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<sup>5</sup> As the women involved were called after completion of the first phase of training.

<sup>6</sup> Types of purposeful sampling include: extreme or deviant case sampling, typical case sampling, critical case sampling and confirming and disconfirming cases (Kane, 1995).

information generated in the research encounter.<sup>7</sup> Facilitation teams gathered their research participants from within affiliate groups, mainly via network sampling.<sup>8</sup>

#### **4.5.2                    *Research outlines and selection of data-collection techniques***

The NWCI Millennium Project Team engaged in a consultative process with affiliates, policy analysts, advisors and research consultants in the process of designing the research topics. Analysis of the data generated by this process, coupled with further input from the NWCI Policy Team, resulted in the identification of key foci for the work research component.

As one of the aims of Phase 1 was to provide data on a national scale, it was necessary to introduce some level of standardisation to the process. Therefore, a research outline comprising a range of PLA techniques and a sequence for their use was designed. Teams were asked to follow the outline closely in order to make scaling up and a level of standardisation possible. The specific questions addressed by each technique can be found in the results section of this report.

It is important to stress that PLA techniques function as a focus for discussion as well as an illustration of the discussion and analysis in which the group engages.

##### **4.5.2.1                    *‘Women and Work’ – range of techniques and sequence:***

- **Card Sort 1** was designed to enable participants to study a series of pre-prepared cards and decide whether all of these cards are relevant or whether some should be discarded.
- In order to access women’s own ideas of what is necessary for an ideal workplace for women into the year 2020, participants were asked to add any extra cards they thought should be included via a **Brainstorming Exercise**. They were asked to consider these extra cards under the research question: ‘What other key things do you think would make for an ideal workplace environment into the year 2020?’. Participants could add up to 10 extra cards.
- The next technique, **Direct Ranking**, was designed to encourage the group to make consensus decisions about the relative importance of the ‘ideal elements for a workplace environment for women’. Participants were asked to rank the ideals cards from Card Sort #1 and those created in the Brainstorming Session in order of greatest to least importance.
- The fourth technique was a **Double Matrix**. It was designed to correlate ideal elements for a workplace environment and potential actions that could be taken to obtain these elements. These solutions were divided into 2 categories, those that can be activated by participants themselves, and those that require outside assistance (for example, State funding)
- The final technique to be completed was **Card Sort 2**. This exercise was designed to access how the groups themselves categorised the ideals cards from the first two techniques. Participants were asked to sort all the ‘ideals’ cards into a series of smaller bundles, and name the category headings used to sort them.

#### **4.5.3                    *Data Analysis***

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<sup>7</sup> As our study sample is not a probability one, we are not making claims for statistical representativeness or significance of our findings.

<sup>8</sup> Network sampling is, again, a type of non-probability sampling.



PLA was developed for use primarily at the micro or local level, the level most often ignored in policy formation. Since the Millennium Project was national in focus it required a scaling up of the research approach. While scaling up has been achieved in many countries, the literature attests to its problems, mainly, meeting the challenge to maintain the integrity of the PLA process in terms of its context-specific value, while attempting to make key connections across groups at the macro level.

PLA analysis is usually undertaken on-site, is of an organic formative nature and is a collaborative effort by facilitators and participants alike (Chambers, 1994b and c). Due to the limited resources at the disposal of the research team and the breadth of the project itself, this approach was not feasible for this project.

Analysis of the returned research data was, therefore, conducted in-house. It is important to stress that this does not mean participants were completely removed from the analytical process; because many of the techniques are, in and of themselves, analytical tools, participants were involved in preliminary analysis at the local level. For example, by completing matrices and direct ranking, by conducting card sorts and creating seasonal calendars, the women in this study were analysing primary data as they generated it. They made analytical decisions about proportionality; they prioritised and categorised; they showed correlation and identified bases for action planning and policy development.

The main task, therefore, facing the Project Team was to design an analytical framework appropriate for dealing with 'scaled-up' PLA, where the analysis was to take place in-house. This framework would have to meet a number of challenges – it would have to:

- be able to cope with a considerable bulk of data;
- be able to represent as accurately as possible the voices of the women who carried out the research;
- be capable of presenting themes and categories that emerged across a number of research reports, while, at the same time, preserving the depth and individuality of distinct groups' research material.

Data arising from PLA research is often a mix of textual and numerical data, each of which are interdependent on the other. Brewer and Hunter (1989) have pointed out that qualitative research in general is inherently multi-method in focus, and this use of what is known as 'methodological triangulation' (Janesick 1998) is central to the strategies employed by PLA. Five techniques (pie charts, card sorts, direct ranking, seasonal calendars and matrices) were utilised for the 'Women and Poverty' component.

Multiple analytic tools were used to deal with the different forms of data:

RESEARCH TECHNIQUE	ANALYTIC TOOL EMPLOYED
Background questionnaires	SPSS
Facilitator evaluation forms	SPSS
Card Sort #1	Microsoft Access
Brainstorming	Microsoft Access
Direct Ranking	Microsoft Access
Double Matrix	Microsoft Word
Card Sort 2	Microsoft Word
Accompanying observation notes	QSR NUD*IST

Because extended co-analysis was not feasible for the project, the team became aware of questions arising from the research that could not always be answered, for instance, when observation notes from facilitators did not expand on the emic concepts being used by groups or did not clarify decisions that were made during the techniques. Research is always somewhat unpredictable and questions will arise in the research that are as important as the rich descriptions of phenomena that are present in the data. In other words, the

team did not expect to present the definitive voice on each of the six issues, but to employ a way of investigating the issues that could be improved and built upon in the future. The team understood that, “no picture is ever complete...what is needed is many perspectives, many voices, before we can have deep understandings of social phenomena” (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). Thus, where appropriate, we have identified where information was not available and have made suggestions for future research.

#### **4.6 DESIGNING APPROPRIATE MONITORING AND EVALUATION PROCEDURES**

An essential aspect of any research project is an evaluation component. This is especially true where the research aims to encourage people to become ‘stakeholders’ in the study and to facilitate participants in making their voices heard. To this end, a framework for on-going monitoring and evaluation was designed to give facilitators the opportunity to tell us what worked well and what could be improved. Multiple data sources were employed, including:

- Observation notes accompanying the returned research.
- Evaluations of training programmes.
- Facilitators’ comments at the ‘Gathering Day’ (this was an event organised by the team in February 2000 to gather facilitators together so that we could hear about their experiences of doing research).
- Facilitators’ evaluation questionnaire (this was a questionnaire designed in order to obtain facilitators’ satisfaction with the research project as a whole).

#### **4.7 ETHICAL ISSUES**

For the work component of the research, facilitators were encouraged to remain aware that women providing information on any aspect of their lives are vulnerable in a number of ways. Facilitators were aware that researching these issues requires complete confidentiality. During training, several safeguards were put in place. Confidentiality guidelines were provided in the training manuals and discussed with facilitators, as was the need to respect boundaries and assure participants of their rights during the research process. Names of participants and names of affiliate groups were not mentioned in released material without consent. If data from one affiliate group was used during training or to be released, explicit consent for this was sought from the facilitators involved.

## **5. RESULTS**

### **5.1 RESPONSE RATE**

12 groups completed research on 'Women and Work', 11 as their national topic and 1 as their local topic. The geographical distribution of groups who engaged in research in this topic were as follows (for those included in the cross-analysis):

Dublin city and county: 6 groups

County Monaghan: 1 group

County Roscommon: 1 group

County Galway: 1 group

County Cork: 1 group

County Tipperary: 1 group

County Louth: 1 group

### **5.2 SAMPLE PROFILE**

- The average age of the women who completed background questionnaires (respondents) was 44 years.
- 54.2% of respondents described their economic situation as 'comfortable', and 22.9% described their economic situation as 'not so comfortable'. 10.8% said their economic situation was 'barely comfortable'. Participants were asked to describe their current economic status by circling one value on a 6-point scale which consisted of: 1) extremely comfortable; 2) very comfortable; 3) comfortable; 4) not so comfortable; 5) barely comfortable, and 6) not comfortable at all.
- 74% of respondents said they worked inside the home.
- 75.3% of the women said they worked outside the home, and 80% of these said that their work was paid. 16.4% said their work was voluntary.
- 11.1% of the respondents said they left education after the Leaving Certificate, 23.5% after a certificate from a post-secondary institution, 12.3% after a bachelor's degree from a post-secondary institution, and 9.9% after a diploma from a post-secondary institution.
- 67.1% of the respondents said that they had daughters. The average number of daughters per respondent was 1.5.

### **5.3 RESULTS FROM TECHNIQUES:**

Technique #1: Card Sort 1:

As outlined in Section 4, a list of pre-prepared cards was provided within the special issue pack. Participants were requested to decide how many, if any, of these cards should be discarded and to give any reasons they may have had for their decision.

These cards dealt with the following issues:

- Flexible working hours
- Equal pay for equal work
- State subsidised childcare
- Good technology
- Warm space
- Affirmation and encouragement sessions.

- Opportunity for ongoing training
- Paid paternity leave
- Great communication flow
- Free health screening

Of the 12 groups who were included in this exercise, only three retained all of the pre-prepared cards. Below is a table showing which cards were retained by most groups:

CARD RETAINED	NUMBER OF GROUPS
State-subsidised childcare	7
Free health screening	7
Warm space	8
Affirmation and encouragement sessions	8
Opportunities for ongoing training	10
Good technology	10
Great communication flow	11
Flexible working hours	11
Equal pay for equal work	11
Paid paternity leave	11

#### **STATE-SUBSIDISED CHILDCARE:**

Seven groups decided to retain 'State-subsidised childcare'. There was general agreement among the groups who decided to retain this card of the need for the State to assume responsibility for assisting parents with childcare. Groups wanted subsidisation of a range of childcare facilities – crèches, after-school facilities, community-based services, highlighting the importance of State assistance in such a manner as to guarantee flexibility and choice. A number of groups wanted recognition for women caring for their children in the home and, while agreeing with the need for State subsidised childcare, asked that this also include a payment to the primary carer.

Of the groups discarding the card, Group W9 wanted to go further and be more specific so it replaced this card with one of its own, entitled: 'Free Childcare'. Some groups, such as Group W4, for instance, felt that while the Government should have a certain role, particularly in terms of regulating the sector:

*'Government should have some control of crèches...they should be regulated, not in the "black economy.'*

it appeared cautious about full State subsidisation.

*'One particular member of the group felt very strongly that the State should not subsidise childcare, but others felt that government should have an interest in childcare but not take it over, as they want women to stay in the workforce.'*

In light of the complex issues raised on this topic, it was decided to discard the card and replace it with a more suitable card, entitled 'improved childcare facilities' in the brainstorming exercise.

For Group W5, the issue of State-subsidised childcare became absorbed into a more general discussion of the issue of reconciling a career with family responsibilities.

#### **FLEXIBLE WORKING HOURS:**

Eleven groups retained the card 'flexible working hours', considering it of vital importance to women and work – it was linked by some groups to the possibility of having a wider choice in accessing paid

employment (Group W12). The group, Group W9, which discarded this card, created more specific cards in the brainstorming session, namely:

- 1) reduced working hours
- 2) leave

It is possible to conclude, therefore, that this issue was of importance to all groups.

#### **PAID PATERNITY LEAVE:**

Eleven groups retained the card 'paid paternity leave'. The group, Group W9, which discarded the card, felt that it was more important to have equal parental leave conditions for both men and women:

*'Paid paternity leave – as for women. If needed 14 weeks. Both parents at the same time for the same [length of] time'*

It therefore added 'paternity/maternity leave as a right' in its brainstorming session. For group W5, what was more important was parental leave rather than paternity leave on its own – as its members indicated: '...one parent should have 2 to 3 years' leave of absence from work (if they choose)'. For them, the issue was one of parental leave rather than maternity or paternity leave per se.

#### **EQUAL PAY FOR EQUAL WORK:**

As can be expected, this card was retained and considered important by eleven of the twelve groups. One group, Group W9, rejected this card; however, no reasons for its decision were provided in the accompanying observation notes.

#### **OPPORTUNITY FOR ONGOING TRAINING:**

Ten groups retained this card and considered it to be of importance for women and work. Of the two groups that discarded the card, Groups W3 and W9, the latter group considered that on-going training was very important because women were 'likely to change roles 2/3 times in a lifetime'. However, the results of its brainstorming exercise indicate that its members felt that this pre-prepared card was not specific enough and so replaced it with two cards of their own; 'Opportunity for ongoing training with training expenses and without loss of pay', and 'Good technological training and access to computer email' (which also overlapped with the pre-prepared card 'good technology'.

#### **FREE HEALTH SCREENING:**

Seven groups retained the 'free health screening' card from the pre-prepared list. Of the five groups who discarded the card, three groups did not state detailed reasons for this. Although 'free health screening' was felt to be important by Group W6, everyone agreed that it was not 'broad enough' to cover all the health needs of women in work. For this reason, it was discarded and replaced with two cards in the brainstorming exercise; 'accessible quality screening and health and access to welfare officers', and 'generous paid sick leave'.

The participants in Group W10 replaced the card with 'free and equal health care to be provided for everyone' in their brainstorming session.

#### **WARM SPACE:**

Four groups did not retain this card, two of which, Groups W2 and W3, did not provide observation notes to explain their decision. Group W6 did not feel that a 'warm space' was as important as a non-competitive environment. Its members felt that this was covered by the pre-prepared card entitled 'Great communication flow'.

Group W9 expanded the concept of ‘warm space’ to include safety, good facilities, leave and bullying. These were covered by cards added in the brainstorming exercise.

#### **AFFIRMATION AND ENCOURAGEMENT SESSIONS:**

Four groups also discarded this card - Groups W3, W6, W9 and W10. As stated before, Group W3 did not provide observation notes for this exercise. Group W6 felt that the language of this card was ‘too artificial’ and ‘heavy management driven’. Group W9 did not give any reason for discarding the card. Group W10 decided that the idea was too idealistic and ‘American’ and rejected the card.

Even among those groups that retained ‘affirmation and encouragement sessions’, many were uncomfortable with the concept. Group W4 reported: ‘Affirmation and encouragement sessions [were] felt to be very important but must be managed very carefully as it would be most un-useful if it was the only form of reward, a sort of back-slapping exercise. If these sessions were in the absence of...[promotion]...in fact it would then be seen as patronising.’

#### **GREAT COMMUNICATION FLOW:**

One group, Group W7, decided to reject this card for two main reasons:

- 1) It was felt by the group that this issue would be covered by ‘affirmation and encouragement sessions’.
- 2) The card was later bundled and categorised as an aspect of ‘quality working environment’ in the Card Sort #2 exercise.

#### **GOOD TECHNOLOGY:**

Two groups discarded this card, Groups W6 and W9. Group W6 did not give any reasons for this decision. Group W9 did not discuss in detail the reasons behind its decision in its observation notes. However, as discussed above, its members did create extra cards in the brainstorming session, indicating that the group may have felt that the pre-prepared cards were not specific enough and needed to be refined.

#### **Technique #2 - Brainstorming – extra cards added.**

	REFERENCES	GROUPS
Family Friendly Employment	15	8
Equality and Discrimination Policies	13	10
Child Care	13	7
Health	13	7
Time flexibility and relaxation	11	8
Pay and Conditions	10	6
Training and Education Facilities	10	5
Bullying and/or harassment	8	6
Benefits	6	5
Flexibility	5	5
Transport	6	4
References	4	4

#### ***Rank order of cards added in brainstorming session coded and categorised.***

The table above shows the list of additional ‘needs’ cards added by participants, by group and reference. Additional cards have been grouped together under 10 main headings for ease of analysis. As some groups created several different cards dealing with a common issue, these have been counted and the ranking of the headings is based on both the number of references and the number of groups making those references.

It can be seen from the above table that issues dealing with family-friendly employment policies and equality and/or discrimination were the two most commonly occurring category of ideals cards created by groups.

NOTE: Groups W9 and W3 did not provide observation notes for this exercise.

#### **FAMILY-FRIENDLY EMPLOYMENT POLICIES:**

15 references were made to cards falling into this category by eight different groups. Family-friendly employment policies were closely linked to parental leave by the three groups that elaborated on their decision-making process in their observation notes. Group W1, for example, felt that the annual leave offered by employers should take account of family needs, such as children's summer holidays: *'Option to take leave (paid/unpaid) during children's summer holidays.'* This group also suggested that 'maternity leave [be extended] up to 2 years' and that there should be the option of shorter working hours for both women and men. Group W6 suggested that maternity leave be increased to one year on full pay.

Similarly, Group W7 saw parental leave as being central to family-friendly employment policy, as it can give mothers more choice about when they would like to return to work. For this group, it was important that both parents would have an equal entitlement to parental leave. Group W6 pointed out that family-friendly policies can militate against women in terms of career promotions if they are the only ones availing of these options.

#### **EQUALITY AND/OR DISCRIMINATION:**

13 references were made to cards falling into this category by 10 groups, meaning that it arose as often as did family-friendly employment policies. The issue gave rise to lively discussion within the groups who provided observation notes. For example, Group W1 regarded the caring role assigned to women as an important factor in their unequal status in the workplace:

*'it was pointed out that women can be assumed to have to leave employment at some stage for either family or low pay reasons, and so are not given responsibility for projects in case others would be left to pick up the pieces when they leave.'*

Group W12 emphasised the importance of treating all women equally and granting them equality of status – this should *'not [be] based on need to recognise as in lone parent, unemployment status.'* This group appeared to support the principle of individualisation and the importance of women receiving payments in their own right, arguing that: *'women in marriages were not necessarily supported by their spouse[s]'*.

Group W7 felt very strongly about the issue of gender equality in terms of the tendency for women to do part-time work:

*'Women want the same status in part time...need equality in the workplace for part-time and flexible workers...Contract workers must also be made permanent.'*

Group W10 turned its attention to current policy on sexual discrimination, wanting to see this expanded to a 'policy on discrimination in general'. They argued that '...all sexual discrimination [should be] banned in the workplace.' For them, a workplace promoting equality between women and men and between older and younger workers was highly important:

*'[Participant 1] wants a workplace where men/women are equal.... ' [Participant 2] wants a gender balance in the workplace. ... [Participant 3]...feels the need for an anti-discrimination ban on ageism; after all, age brings experience and life-long learning into the workplace.'*

## **CHILDCARE:**

13 references were made to cards falling under this category by seven groups. Three main themes emerged in the accompanying observation notes. These were:

- 1) childcare in the workplace
- 2) childcare and the State (including funding)
- 3) childcare and the option to work from home

### **Childcare in the Workplace**

Most groups raising this issue saw childcare in the workplace as not just a positive, but as a necessary step towards making employment more accessible to women. Group W1 stated that: 'Crèches should be provided in [the] workplace, which facilitate breast-feeding.' Interestingly, this group broadened the discussion to the issue of support for caring work more generally.

It recommended:

*'State subsidised care to include elder, child and disabled; State crèche grant should be paid to a minder of the parents' choice; crèche in workplace ...; crèche subsidy to be given to stay-at-home mothers also.'*

Group W10 did not feel that employers should bear the sole burden of responsibility for childcare provision. They suggested that costs could be split on a 50/50 basis between the State and employers.

### **Childcare and the State (including funding)**

Three groups discussed the issue of childcare and the role of the State in service provision. Group W7 had ambivalent feelings about this issue; although its members asserted that 'women who can't afford childcare are excluded from the work place', the group felt that if all childcare was State-subsidised, women would feel 'obliged to work outside the home'. Therefore, State childcare should be optional and partially subsidised rather than fully-funded. Group W5 suggested the payment of an increased childcare allowance directly to the mother in order to value the decision of women who choose to work in the home.

Group W12 said that the important issues in childcare were not just that it should be affordable, but also that it should be reliable and provide a happy environment for children:

*'Affordable childcare including the well-being of the child. Being assured is a major concern for this group. Being able to check on child's health, happiness and contentment were all concerns for mothers of this group'.'*

Interestingly, Group W2 broadened its support for State-subsidised childcare to extend also to subsidisation of care for the elderly.

### **Childcare and the Option to Work from Home:**

The final theme that arose in one group was that of 'childcare and the option to work from home'. Group W5 saw the 'option to base workplace at home' as helpful for those trying to combine full-time work and caring for children.

## **HEALTH:**



As with childcare, 13 cards were created under the category of 'health' by seven groups. However, only four groups referred to this issue in their notes.

Two groups discussed the need for health-related support. For instance, Group W4 referred to the need for a support-structure to help those who have been ill for a long time to re-integrate back into the workplace:

***'Support for individuals to re-integrate back into the workplace especially after an illness, because of lack of confidence due to the length of time missing from work.'***

Group W5 also felt support to be very important, but this was seen mainly in terms of counselling women to help them cope with stress.

#### **TIME FLEXIBILITY AND RELAXATION:**

11 cards were created that were bundled under this category by 8 groups. A major concern for two groups was that of the pressure to work extra hours and cut annual leave allocations. They both linked this to the issue of gender, feeling that men did this more often than women. Group W4 held very strong views about this problem, believing that it was particularly a problem in its members' own workplace, where:

***'working at weekends seems to be an escalating male trait at the moment. Staying back late at night is also very common. Leaving at 4pm is frowned upon or coming in at 10am, even though flexi-time is available to a large majority of the staff. Full allocation of annual leave is not taken and it is carried over.'***

The group felt that there were two possible explanations for this problem.

- 1) That the people (mostly men) who do this do not want to contribute to the work needing to be done in the home.
- 2) That to be seen to work late would be 'looked at favourably for promotion, (seen as loyalty or commitment)'.

Group W6 also felt that men were the main culprits for working late hours in order to avoid their responsibilities at home.

#### **PAY AND CONDITIONS:**

11 cards were created under this category by seven groups. For instance, Group W10 saw the issue of tax as very important in improving conditions for working women. They put forward two possible solutions to the problem of high taxation:

- 1) more rungs on the tax ladder. One participant felt that 'with only two tax bands...there should be something in between'.
- 2) Reduction of tax.

Group W12 wanted to see the current Minimum Wage level reviewed and increased so that women would be ***'not just working to make ends meet but to provide a higher standard of living.'*** Group W9 recommended that the Minimum Wage be doubled.

#### **TRAINING AND EDUCATION:**

Five groups created 10 cards under this category. Group W4 discussed training and education in terms of the need to improve managers' interpersonal skills in the work place. Its members argued that 'most managers/supervisors do not know how to...speak to staff.' This, they felt, was partly caused by the power

that people attain when they are in supervisory or management positions. This issue was also raised briefly by Group W5. Group W3 stressed the difficulties experienced by women returners in accessing education and training because of the live register requirement. As they said:

*‘there are still difficulties for women in the home and not on the live register. This is a major issue for our group.’*

#### **FACILITIES:**

This category includes cards referring to staff facilities such as canteens, food entitlements, social and health facilities. Six groups created eight cards between them that were coded under this category.

Group W8 wanted to see access to *‘...better facilities, for example a canteen’* as did Group W12, the latter also calling for recreational facilities.

#### **BULLYING/HARASSMENT:**

Six ideals cards were created by five groups in this category. Two groups referred to this issue in their observation notes. Group W8 argued for the need for a serious attitude towards sexual harassment and bullying on the part of the employer. They felt that workers would not report either sexual harassment or bullying if they did not feel that their complaint would be taken seriously by their employer:

*‘If they feel the employer doesn’t take it seriously they won’t report. Employer must take it seriously.’*

#### **BENEFITS:**

Five groups created five cards that were categorised under ‘benefits’. Most of the groups involved discussed benefits in terms of pensions. This is illustrated in the notes of Group W8 stressing that employees be made aware of what pension schemes are available. The participants also felt that pensions, private if necessary, should be available for all jobs. Group W12 ascribed particular importance to pension security for women’s old age – older women should not have to live out their lives below the poverty line.

#### **FLEXIBILITY:**

Four groups created six cards between them that were coded under this category. All four groups discussed the issue in their observation notes. Three of the groups saw flexibility and childcare as closely linked. Group W5 regarded the ability to work from home as an important motivator for women to return to the workplace. They felt that *‘one ideal workplace is the home if it’s paid’*.

Group W10 also advocated the idea of paid employment in the home for those ‘who wish to remain in the home to rear their children’. Group W11 were anxious that those working in the home have access to ‘equal benefits’. They also argued for the *‘recognition of women’s work in the home’*.

Group W2 said that job-sharing was not a widespread enough practice: ‘Job-sharing, some places have it but not enough’. Group W12 echoed this: ‘In job-sharing... the group discussed having a wider choice of opportunity in seeking and accessing paid employment.’

#### **TRANSPORT:**

Four groups created four cards dealing with transport issues. Group W1 wanted to see general *‘...improvements in transport with a reduction in transition times and an improved school bus service.’* For Group W2, *‘...safe transport to and from work’* became an issue, but they did not go into further detail on the matter. Finally, Group W10 wanted to see a travel allowance provided to those who use public transport rather than their own car: *‘Travel relief, if you travel by public transport rather than using your own car.’*

### Technique 3 – Direct Ranking

The direct ranking exercise was primarily designed as a group-specific exercise to enable groups to prioritise their needs in preparation for moving on to the action phase of the project. For this reason, the exercise is not particularly amenable to a detailed cross-analysis. However, the top three ranking positions have been examined to discover whether there were any points of commonality within the first, second or third ranks in order of importance.

#### Ideals Cards Ranked First

There was a wide variety of issues in first position; however, two issues did arise more than once. These were:

- 1) **Equal pay for equal work:** This pre-prepared card was ranked first by three groups. Two of these decided immediately that this card should be ranked at number 1, with very little discussion.

Group W8, however, ranked both equal pay for equal work and flexible working hours in joint first place.

- 2) **Pay and Conditions:** Three groups ranked ‘pay and conditions’ first in the direct ranking exercise. Group W6 said a minimum wage (along with equal pay) was ‘basic’. Group W8 tagged its card ‘basic living wage’ onto ‘equal pay for equal work’ which it had already ranked at number 1. Group W9 ranked its cards ‘minimum wage laws’ at number 1 because it felt that the minimum wage was ‘not in line with the cost of living’, and ‘needs to be enforced’.

#### Ideals Cards Ranked Second

Three issues arose more than once that were ranked in second place. These were:

- 1) **Childcare** (this contains issues other than those included in the pre-prepared card ‘State-subsidised childcare’). This was placed second by 2 groups, W9 and W12.
- 2) **Equality and Discrimination** two groups ranked cards dealing with issue of equality and/or discrimination second. One of these (W11) ranked two of its cards relating to this category at number two. Group W7 combined the pre-prepared cards ‘equal pay for equal work’ with its brainstorming card ‘equal opportunity’ to make a new category – ‘equality’. It pointed out that it was impossible to treat any of its cards in isolation from the rest, as:

*‘...you couldn’t have real equality if your contract could be terminated or not renewed at any time...’*

Group W11, as discussed earlier, ranked both ‘gender awareness’, and ‘elimination of ageism’ in second place. It attached importance to the need to ‘de-gender’ work so that women would receive remuneration for work of equal value – an issue which it felt went beyond equal pay:

*‘Need to redefine work and remuneration for work done – de-genders work – goes beyond equal pay...huge areas seen as women’s work e.g. secretarial.’*

- 3) **Pay and Conditions:** Two groups ranked brainstorming cards coded under ‘pay and conditions’ second. Group W4’s ‘new and fair grading structure’, was placed second instead. Group W10’s brainstorming card ‘more rungs on the tax ladder’ was ranked at number 2 with one woman describing

the situation with regard to her own home business: 'She gets no tax breaks. She wants the card to stay at number 2.'

### Ideals Cards Ranked Third

Two issues were ranked in third place more than once. These were:

**2) Childcare:** This was ranked by four groups in third position. Group W5 tagged adult dependants onto the pre-prepared card 'State-subsidised childcare'. Its members also said that they wanted 'State-run crèches (as in Australia) by the year 2020', and stressed the importance of quality childcare. However, one participant expressed some doubt as to the value of creches and felt that '*...ideally, women should be able to stay home for 1 year rather than use crèches.*' Group W8 also added one of their own cards to 'State-subsidised childcare', this being 'crèche facilities in the workplace'. Group W1 expanded the 'State-subsidised childcare' and ranked it at number 3. However, it did not provide reasons for this decision.

**3) Flexible working hours** was ranked third by three groups. Unfortunately, Groups W4 and W7 did not provide observation notes with their direct ranking exercises. Group W10 had a heated debate about the ranking of this card, which is explained in more detail in the description of Technique #1.

### Technique #4 - Double Matrix

The double matrix was designed to help participants identify actions that could be taken to achieve the goals set out in both the pre-prepared cards and the cards created by the groups themselves for an ideal workplace in the year 2020. The actions created were to be divided into two categories:

- 1) Actions that could be taken without outside assistance
- 2) Actions that would require outside assistance.

**TABLE 1:**  
**Actions that can be taken without outside assistance**

	REFERENCES	GROUPS
Assertiveness and empowerment	20	8
Lobbying/campaigning/media	13	7
Communication/Staff relations	10	6
Co-operation and support	9	5
Education and training	6	5
Health and Lifestyle	3	2
Change social attitudes	3	2
Improve working environment	2	2

The actions created in this section have been grouped together under 8 main headings. As some groups came up with more than one action falling under the same heading, these have been counted and the ranking of headings is based both on the number of references made by groups and the number of groups making them. Full correlation between actions and ideals cards was not possible as different groups used different scoring procedures which could not be reconciled. However, some links have been made between specific goals and actions.

- 1) Assertiveness and Empowerment:** Actions arose most often under this heading, with eight groups creating 20 actions in this category. These actions were seen as useful across a wide variety of the ideals cards, including women in the home/childcare, empowerment and self-care, pay and conditions and training. A particularly strong illustration of the potential of assertiveness and empowerment to effect change came from one participant in Group W5:

*'I'm at home looking after my child, what can women themselves do – take power and say what I do matters and what I deserve? And I actually work myself as much as anyone who does a day's work, not to take it lying down, believe it, vocalise it, get momentum going.'*

- 2) **Lobbying/Campaigning/Using the media:** This came after 'assertiveness and empowerment' in terms of frequency (seven groups created 13 actions which were coded under this category).

The groups showed great resourcefulness and energy when it came to devising strategies for change, from taking strike action to fight for better working conditions (Group W8), to using the media to advance the cause of childcare (W9), and designing a poster campaign for 'flexible working hours' to run in parallel with industrial action (Group W10). Group W11 provided a good example of the different ideas and energy linked to these types of actions:

*'Crèche – lobby local councils, planning authority. Need to raise awareness and take action.'*

- 3) **Communication/Staff Relations:** Five groups created 10 actions which were coded under this heading. Again, this emerged as an action with widespread potential to address a number of issues including:
- Family-friendly employment policy
  - Flexible working hours
  - Gender balance/equality
  - Warm space

One group, W8, argued for increased co-operation between employees to achieve flexible working hours.

- 4) **Co-Operation and Support:** Five groups created nine actions that were coded under this heading. The main theme running through the notes of the groups creating actions under this heading was the need for women to co-operate and work in partnership in order to deal with a variety of issues, either with bullying and/or harassment in the workplace or with supporting those with caring responsibilities: *'Support structures for carers...and acknowledge the needs of carers'* (Group W10).

**5) Education and Training:** Five groups created six actions referring to aspects of education and/or training. However, only Group W5 discussed the issue of education and training in its observation notes. Its members advocated community-based courses for parenting, assertiveness and communication training.

- 6) **Change Social Attitudes:** Two groups created three actions that were coded under this heading. Group W1 created one action, 'changing attitudes', but did not provide accompanying observation notes with its matrix. Group W5 created an action aimed at promoting *a 'fundamental change of attitude by society towards work of mother'*. This group felt that in order to achieve childcare allowances which could be paid directly to the mother, it was essential to work towards *'...a fundamental change in thinking regarding working and not working. The fact is that women at home are working.'*

## 7) Health And Lifestyle / Improve Working Environment

Two groups created two actions dealing with health and lifestyle issues. These included actions entitled 'awareness of preventative medicine' (Group W11) and 'healthy diet' (Group W10) and suggestions to make the work environment more pleasant.

**TABLE 2: Actions that require outside assistance**

	REFERENCES	GROUPS
Govt. action/lobbying and awareness-raising	16	7
Finance and taxation	13	6
Education and training	10	5
Childcare and parental leave	6	5
Flexibility at work	5	4
Health care and lifestyle	5	4
Transport	4	4
Communication and staff relations	4	4
Improve technology	4	4
Improving working environment	3	3

The actions in this section of the matrix have been grouped together under 10 main headings. The same analytic procedures used in the first part of the Double Matrix have been used here.

**1) Government Action/Lobbying and Awareness-Raising:** Seven groups created 16 actions that were placed in this category. These headings have been grouped together to create one overall heading as government action was closely linked with strategies to enforce government action. Group W6 pointed to the need for the Government *‘to enshrine rights in law and to ensure their enforcement ... [with] sanctions for non compliance’*. Group W2 linked the Government role with lobbying work which women themselves could undertake to improve working conditions:

*‘lobbying the Government for legislation on minimum standards of pay and conditions and implementation of this.’*

Group W5 created two actions; ‘Enforce equal pay legislation’ and ‘Government funding’. However, on the other hand, this group also felt that it was essential for women, and women’s organisations, to take action themselves since:

*‘Women less willing to rock the boat... women don’t demand wages.’*

Another area discussed by groups was that of campaigning/media awareness. Group W10 felt that media coverage was essential in campaigning and lobbying to achieve change in a number of areas such as ‘Free Quality Care for all Dependants’ and ‘Equal pay for equal work’.

**2) Finance and Taxation:** Six groups created 13 actions grouped under this heading.

- (a) *Taxation:* Six groups created actions related to taxation. The relationship between taxation and the care of adult and child dependants emerged clearly in the data, as four groups either created actions specifically related to this issue (such as Group W5’s ‘tax relief for children’), or gave such actions a high score for ideals cards dealing with care: for example, Group W10 scored their action ‘Making the tax system less complicated’ for their cards ‘Free quality care for all dependants’ and ‘State-subsidised childcare’ at 15 and 21 respectively.
- (b) *Finance:* A wider range of ideals were addressed through actions related to finance, including funding for adult and child dependant care, health and training. However, four groups linked financial concerns to the need to improve the working environment. Flexibility also emerged as an ideals card which could be greatly facilitated by funding.

- 3) **Education and Training:** Six groups created 10 cards categorised under this heading. Education was seen to cover a wide variety of the ideals cards created by the groups in previous exercises. Some of these were specific to one particular group (such as the scores given to ‘excellent management skills’ and ‘work to be seen as service to humanity’ under the action ‘education and training’ by Group W1). However, certain themes did emerge as being common across groups.

(a) *Opportunity for Ongoing Training:* Four groups linked educational and training actions with the pre-prepared card ‘Opportunity for ongoing training’. Group W8, for instance, felt that employers and government should work in partnership with employees to increase ongoing training opportunities in work:

***‘Opportunities for ongoing training in work ... They subsidise (government). Employers pay for the course.’***

(b) *Good Technology:* Three groups saw education and training as important in the successful introduction or operation of good technology. Group W10 felt that along with ‘email and computers and chat rooms’, and ‘user-friendly language’, ‘Training to meet employers’ needs’ was essential to obtain a working environment with high technological standards.

(c) *Gender/Equality:* Three groups also linked ‘education and training’ with issues of gender and equality within the workplace. Group W11, for instance, created an action entitled ‘Look at how business is taught in school re: gender’ which was given a high score for ideals such as ‘family-friendly policy on all levels’, ‘great communication flow’, and, to a lesser extent, ‘gender awareness’.

- 4) **Childcare and Parental Leave:** Five groups created seven actions which can be grouped under this heading.

(a) *Parental Leave:* Only one group created an action dealing with parental leave, specifically paternity leave. They called this action ‘maximum/minimum amounts of paternity leave’. The women in the group argued that men as well as women should be entitled to parental leave:

***‘If a woman can, why not a man?...Flexible hours. Same pay as women...everything equal and he gets it – 6 weeks.’***

(b) *Childcare:* All five groups created actions related to childcare. While three of these actions were simply entitled ‘Childcare’, 2 were more specific in terms of which area of childcare the actions were designed to target. Group W8 came up with an action which was called ‘Childcare centres legal requirements for [shopping] centres, State-subsidised’. This arose out of the group’s argument that all shopping centres should be legally required to provide crèches, and that these should be partly subsidised by the State.

- 5) **Flexibility At Work:** Four groups created five actions which were coded under this heading. One group, W1, created 3 of these actions: ‘Business should be family-friendly’, ‘Locate work closer to home’ and ‘Flexible working hours’. The other two groups, W7 and W11, both dealt directly with flexibility within the workplace and time spent at work. Group W7’s highest score given under this action was for ‘flexible working hours’. Group W11’s action was entitled ‘Job-sharing and options for leave of absence’, and scoring was split evenly between ‘Flexible working hours and flexible location’ and ‘Family friendly policy on all levels’.



- 6) **Health Care and Lifestyle:** Four groups created five actions dealing with this topic. Three of the actions created dealt with the issue of health screening for employees. Group W8 were quite specific about how health screening should be implemented. The title of their action was 'Free medical screening once a year, Government subsidised.' Group W9 created a card entitled 'Free access to leisure facilities for all employees' but did not discuss this in its observation notes.
- 7) **Transport:** Four groups created four actions which were coded under this heading. All the actions deal with the need to improve existing standards of public transport. Only one group, W10, provided more detail in its observation notes. It outlined a number of steps that could be taken to achieve this aim:
- Analysis on transport
  - Better rural transport system
  - Yearly travel card to be given to all employees at a nominal price
- 8) **Communication and Staff Relations:** Four groups created four actions which dealt with this issue. Three of these groups came up with actions that were in the area of consultation and/or oral communication, such as 'Learning art of consultation' (Group W1), 'Conducive, responsive, facilitative management' (Group W7), and 'Meeting with all staff members' (Group W9). However, Group W8 looked at communication in the form of written information, their action was entitled '*Compulsory staff notice board re: entitlements, policies, helpline numbers, taxation information, etc.*'. Its members saw this action as being most effective in facilitating communication flow and dealing with bullying and/or harassment in the workplace.
- 9) **Improve Technology:** Four groups created four actions which were categorised under this heading. Three of the four groups' actions referred to the need for employers to improve standards of technology and/or equipment. Group W1's action was entitled 'Profits ploughed back into technology'. Group W8 argued that the employer should '...buy good technology and equipment'. Group W9 simply entitled their action 'Provision of computers and equipment'. However, Group W10 specified that machinery and technology should be adapted to the particular needs of women (older women, women with disabilities etc.).
- 10) **Improving Working Environment:** Three groups created three actions under this heading. Group W7 created an action entitled 'Employer input (environment/finance)' which was coded under both 'Finance and Taxation' and 'Improve working environment'. Group W10's action was entitled 'Good employment practice, home from home' which consisted of a number of steps towards implementation:
- Good employment practice
  - Statutory rights/good employment policy
  - Convince employers that flexi-hours would not result in low productivity
  - Health and Safety policy implemented/warm space.
- Group W11 called their action 'Ensure health and safety in the workplace'. They felt that there was a link between health and safety and 'Warm space'.

## **6. DISCUSSION**

### **6.1 OVERVIEW**

While the methodology used in this study allowed for a very rich variety of views and opinions to be expressed, some very clear priorities and themes did emerge from the research. The primary issue for most participants was that of their caring role and this defined their attitude to paid employment. Their strong interest in childcare provision, family-friendly policies and the need for the recognition of women's unpaid caring work stemmed from the fact that most of them were performing caring roles and would be required to reconcile existing caring responsibilities with participation in the paid workforce. However, many supported the recommendation that men should also be facilitated to undertake caring duties.

Participants were acutely aware of the persistence of discrimination against women in the workforce and ascribed importance to the need for equal pay for work of equal value, greater protection of the rights of workers, particularly part-time workers, and for an immediate increase in the level of the Minimum Wage. They called for more proactive measures by employers to combat sexual harassment in the workplace and for a general change in attitude by employers so that women would not continue to experience the glass ceiling and discrimination in the workplace, raising, in particular, the issue of ageism. They also expressed particular concern about the patriarchal structure underpinning current pension provisions, which creates an increased risk for older women of living their final years in poverty.

What clearly emerges from this research is the desire of participants for a society which would recognise women's caring roles, facilitate the reconciliation of work and family life and provide adequate protection of worker's rights and of their entitlement to good working conditions. They called for a culture of equality in which women would be guaranteed the access to education, training and employment that is their due and, once in paid employment, would not continue to encounter obstacles to promotion. Their ideal working environment was revealed as an affirming enabling one in which employers would fully acquit their responsibilities to create better working conditions for workers and enable them to achieve their full potential.

### **6.2 WOMEN, CARING AND WORK**

Participants ascribed priority to the key issue of caring. The majority of groups supported the idea that the State should play a significant role in subsidising childcare in the form most suitable to the needs of parents and children. They also believed that fathers should be enabled to take a more active role in caring for their children – while most groups supported the introduction of paid parental and paternity leave, one group suggested that paternity leave be made equal to that of maternity leave. The general support for a greater role by fathers in assuming parenting responsibilities points to the importance of parental leave continuing to be offered on a non-transferable basis so that fathers may be facilitated to take this leave entitlement.

The Government is challenged in the research to develop policies which will guide Irish employers and workers (including parents) to bring about a radical shift in approach to equality, caring and work. The National Childcare Strategy (1999) has already identified deficits such as that in childcare provision which makes it impossible for women to reconcile paid employment with family life. Participants also identified family-friendly policies and flexible work conditions as critical in this regard.

Participants also identified the importance for them of assistance in acquitting their eldercare responsibilities. They called for subsidies for eldercare and for the provision of eldercare facilities which would enable them to access education and training. Groups made, for instance, a recommendation that daycare centres for the elderly (“granny crèches”) be provided by the State. The discussion among participants of support for childcare and eldercare highlights the need for the State to recognise more fully

its responsibilities in this regard and the equal importance of proper recognition of the contribution made to society by these women in terms of their unpaid caring work.

### **6.3 EQUALITY AND THE WORKPLACE**

A vicious cycle was described by participants where women were perceived as problematic employees both by employers and colleagues, by virtue of their real or potential caring responsibilities. As a result, women were effectively the subject of double-discrimination. They were subject to work practices which were really designed for traditional male employees, and then, because of the inflexibility of such structures, it was the women's contribution to work which was seen as suspect, rather than locating responsibility where it truly belonged, i.e. in the failure of the workplace to respond to the reality of women's lives.

If current working environments fail women, how can they be changed? The participants have identified a number of areas where improvements could be made, calling for collaboration between employees, for instance, to force more proactive policies by the Government and employers to combat sexual harassment and/or bullying. The hierarchical model of organisational culture fosters an environment in which energy and resources are wasted in competition between workers for personal gain or advantage. This unproductive behaviour can be greatly reduced when the focus is on a collaborative approach.

In order to achieve improvements to working environments, a more consultative approach in which workers have a greater level of ownership of company policy is required. The establishment of more flexible, family-friendly policies, in full consultation with employees, might prevent women having to make the choice to withdraw reluctantly from the workforce.

In essence, the women who carried out this research call for a form of equality in the workplace which acknowledges differences. Not only must women be given rights equal to those already enjoyed by male employees in terms of pay and conditions and access to training and promotion, the structure of work more generally needs to be changed to allow all employees to reconcile their work and family responsibilities.

### **6.4 CHANGING WORK PRACTICES**

Gender awareness needs to be developed and reinforced within all levels of society; in education (some women identified a continued need for schools to promote women at work), in the workplace and among policy-makers/government, particularly to encourage women to take up jobs traditionally seen to be the preserve of men. Policy-makers also need to develop greater awareness of women's needs when developing indicators to measure equal opportunities and strategies to achieve equal opportunities in employment. Certain recent initiatives, while welcome, need to be expanded if they are to offer mechanisms for positive change. The Equality Authority's facilitation of gender equality reviews in Irish workplaces could contribute, for instance, to the promotion of greater gender awareness. However, as the reviews are optional, a more systematic change is needed. Furthermore, the introduction of parental leave, while welcome, will not offer possibilities for change if it remains unpaid. The current provisions offering parental leave on an unpaid basis have been condemned by the EU for failing to provide real opportunities for parents to meet their work and family responsibilities.

This research demonstrates the potential offered by women workers to work collaboratively with the Government and employers to devise proactive strategies to achieve change. Participants recognised that women's experience of paid employment is determined not simply by the actions of employers and female employees but is shaped by wider societal factors. Accordingly, the elimination of discrimination against women in paid employment and the promotion of equal opportunities for women require wider societal changes. Participants identified the need for lobbying and awareness raising and for a more active role by the Government in working to achieve positive change for women. One group, for instance, recognised the need for the Government to ensure the enforcement of existing rights and to exercise sanctions against

employers in the event of non-compliance. However, it was also recognised that employers have a specific responsibility to develop a supportive working environment for all employees, to devise family-friendly working practices, to provide good working conditions for employees and, above all, to promote equal opportunities in the workplace. If made compulsory, the Equality Authority's gender equality audits could offer a useful means of monitoring the progress of employers in promoting equality and protecting the rights of all workers. One group suggested that employers might play a role in promoting models of good practice (Group W2).

The research participants point to the sort of strategies which women themselves could use to effect change, such as working collaboratively to devise lobbying campaigns. Women themselves have clear ideas of their needs in this area and of possible strategies for change. If policies are to be effective, women need to be given the opportunity to work in cooperation with the Government and employers to develop strategies for change. Furthermore, policies which are devised to address the needs of women in the workplace must recognise the diversity of women and the particular needs of women Travellers, older women, lesbian women, women with disabilities and minority ethnic women. These groups should be consulted so that policies can be devised which target the particular needs of women who have experienced multiple disadvantage with regard to their opportunities in terms of paid employment.

## **6.5 MODELS OF CHANGE IN ORGANISATIONS**

One example of how organisational change has been undertaken specifically to create a 'woman-friendly' working environment is that of the work carried out by Catherine Itzin (1995) in the late 1980s in Britain. Itzin utilised a 'bottom-up' model of organisational change rather than one which imposed change from the top-down, in order to create a working environment which was more sensitive to the needs of the women working within the organisation. She emphasised the need for informal consultation and discussion throughout the change process via these steps:

- 1) Work hard at establishing the need for change.
- 2) Think through the change – what will it mean for all parties involved?
- 3) Initiate change through informal discussion to get feedback and participation.
- 4) Positively encourage those concerned to give their objections.
- 5) Be prepared to change yourself.
- 6) Monitor the change and reinforce it. (Pugh, 1978)

Through using this model for organisational change, Itzin not only identified where problems lay (for instance, the existence of 'glass ceilings' at middle and senior management levels and a male-oriented work culture) but also key actions that could be undertaken by the organisation to tackle these difficulties such as to design indicators for gender monitoring within the workplace and to establish a mentoring scheme for women in middle management positions.

This is just one example of how a model of organisational change based fundamentally on consultation and feedback from staff at all levels can succeed, at least in part, in effecting sustainable improvement within the organisation. Change models such as these could be utilised by employers, in partnership with staff members in order to work towards creating an environment which would attract more women into the workforce and provide real choices for those already in paid employment. In addition, policy-makers could use such examples as strategic frameworks on which to build future policy and implement existing policy.

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