

NEWS IN BRIEF

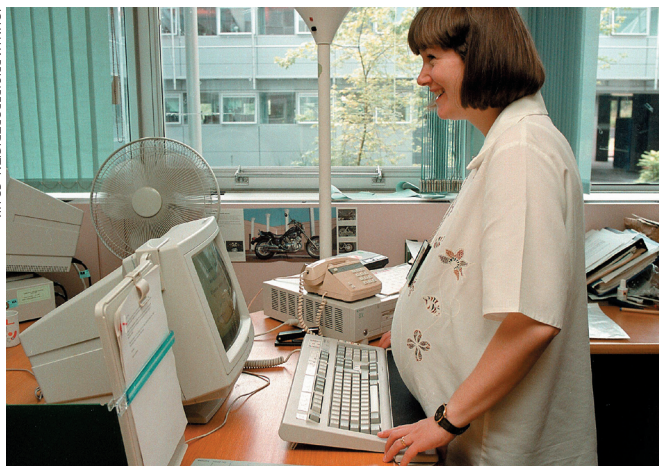
PREGNANCY
DISCRIMINATION

In an average year more than a thousand women take legal action claiming they were sacked because of their pregnancy, and this figure is only the tip of the iceberg, according to Julie Mellor, Chair of the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC). Yet employers who do support women when they are pregnant and on their return to work see real benefits to their bottom line.

Ms Mellor was speaking on 26 February, the day of the launch of *Pregnancy discrimination at work: a review*, which was carried out by the EOC as part of *Pregnant and Productive*, the first ever investigation into the problems encountered by new and expectant mothers and their employers in managing pregnancy at work. She said the report revealed many employers still see pregnancy as a problem and discrimination still goes on. Knowing more about the challenges employers face in dealing with pregnant staff will help us develop recommendations that work for both employers and individuals.

Ms Mellor went on to say: "Our research indicates that employers' concerns about the impact of their staff's childcare problems can mean that some see the announcement of an employee's pregnancy as forewarning of difficulties in the future. The childcare challenge for parents is made worse by Britain's long hours and a lack of flexibility. The economic realities of modern

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Pregnant women who are treated fairly by their employers are more likely to go back to work after having children

life mean that most parents have to work.

"However, pregnant women who are treated fairly by their employers are more likely to go back to work after having children. With the average cost of replacing one member of staff amounting to £4,000, the British economy and individual employers themselves simply cannot afford to lose valuable, skilled staff – just because they are pregnant. Many firms do manage pregnancy successfully and we are keen to learn the lessons of those that do as part of our forthcoming in-depth research into the problems employers, large and small, face.

"When women are pushed out they don't just pay a financial cost, the evidence also suggests that they are more likely to suffer from depression."

The investigation's first report, a review of existing research, reveals that:

- Between 1996 and 2002, on average more than 1000 pregnancy related unfair dismissal claims per year were

registered at tribunals in England and Wales;

- The average compensation award for women who have been dismissed because of their pregnancy for injury to feelings is £2,000 lower than the average awards given for non-pregnancy related dismissals;

- The amount of maternity pay women in Britain receive is amongst the lowest in the European Union although maternity leave entitlement is higher in Britain than in most other countries;

- Small studies of tribunal cases reveal that the majority of women are dismissed prior to going on maternity leave, sometimes within hours or days of informing their employers that they are pregnant;

- The current legal time limit for making a claim of pregnancy discrimination is three months. This means that many women must lodge their claim with the employment tribunal during the latter stages of pregnancy or when they have recently given birth. More research is needed to look at whether the

current tribunal system is fully accessible to pregnant women;

- The fact that pregnancy discrimination still persists may reflect a traditional image of motherhood as incompatible with paid employment. As someone who e-mailed the EOC remarked, "I work for an organisation that seems to believe that having a day off for a hangover is pretty macho, but having a day off for morning sickness is a pain in the neck. I call the place Jurassic Park."

Pregnancy discrimination at work: a review by Dr Grace James from Reading University is available to download free of charge from www.eoc.org.uk/pregnantandproductive or through the EOC helpline 0845 601 5901 (calls charged at local rates).

INSTITUTIONAL
SEXISM

Women are being excluded from senior jobs in the criminal justice system because of entrenched discrimination and prejudice, according to a comprehensive investigation into the issue.

The year-long commission by the Fawcett Society, which campaigns on equality for women, examined the experiences of women working in the prisons, judiciary, legal profession, Crown Prosecution Service and the probation service.

It found that, of 12 judges in the House of Lords, just one was a woman, there were five women out of 43 police chief constables and 18 women out of 42 chief officers of probation. It also found seven women in 42 chief crown

prosecutors and 31 women of 138 prison governing officers.

'Women's near-exclusion from every single one of Britain's decision-making bodies matters to us all,' said Katherine Rake, director of the society. 'The faith and trust invested by the public in the criminal justice system is vital to its continuing existence. But that faith can only be retained if it keeps its legitimacy in the public's eye, which it is in risk of losing.'

Worst was the prison service and the judiciary. The Crown Prosecution Service emerged as the most fair employer, with women representing 50 per cent of senior grade officers and 18 of the 42 Chief Officers of Probation.

Even so, one anonymous female probation officer told the commission: 'Women have the same opportunities when first joining, but then the male dominance of the criminal justice kicks in and we don't stand a chance.'

The criminal justice system has historically been a male-dominated area, but the commission found that, despite increasing numbers of women entering the system, there is no evidence of them 'trickling up' to the top jobs. Barriers to women's promotion include openly discriminatory cultures and practices, sexual harassment, inadequate maternity leave and inflexible working arrangements, it found. This has resulted in lower pay and the 'ghettoisation' of women into certain jobs.

'It is unacceptable that the system that delivers justice - to both women and men

- remains male-dominated,' said Labour MP and criminal QC Vera Baird, who chaired the commission.

The Government has already agreed to propose changes to the way in which judges are appointed and has announced that the prison and probation services will be merged into a single National Offender Management Service. Prison staff and Probation Services staff are against this merger - this is not the answer.

PART-TIMERS FACE HOSTILITY

More than 100,000 Britons opted to downshift and work part-time last year, hoping to avoid long hours and nightmare journeys to work.

It seems like the perfect answer in an imperfect world, but new research has revealed that, for some, life with less work can be a nightmare. A comprehensive survey has found that part-time workers are often accused by co-workers of being lazy and face pay cuts much more severe than their reduced hours warrant.

A year after the introduction of flexible working rights, the negative perceptions of flexible and part-time workers runs across all industries, according to research by the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS).

One in four of those questioned doubted whether flexible and part-time workers were as committed as their full-time colleagues and resented their flexible hours.

Penny de Valk, director

of the work-life balance consultancy Ceridian Centrefile, believes the gender gap has led to a two-tier job market, with part-time work being considered as the 'mummy track'.

The number of part-time workers in Britain is growing: more than 102,000 have been recruited over the past year, compared with a fall of 29,000 in the number of full-timers, bringing the total of part-time workers to 7.22 million, the highest since records began in 1984.

But the disproportionate slump in pay and promotion opportunities among part-time workers is, PCS believes, a result of the fact that such work is largely taken by women: with more than 40 per cent of women working part-time, Britain has 10 per cent more part-time working women than any other EU country.

Fewer than half of those questioned in the PCS's independent ICM survey said they had been given the option to adopt flexible working hours, but most who took the option reported that their promotion and pay prospects had been disproportionately affected.

Over two in three part-time workers in the Civil Service are on the lowest grades, earning an average of £3,000 a year less pro rata than their full-time colleagues.

WOMEN'S PENSIONS

A new report released by Fawcett and Age Concern reveals that the Government risks losing key women voters

at the next General Election unless it reforms the state pension system. The report states that one in four single women pensioners now live in poverty, and women in a pensioner couple receive just 32p for every £1 of income received by a man. Three quarters of women aged 55 to 64 are unhappy with the Government's performance on pensions. Read the report and more on pensions

Women today are facing a considerable pensions gap: for every pound of income received by men in a pensioner couple, women receive less than 32 pence. Female single pensioners are one of the poorest groups of the older population, and currently nearly a quarter live in poverty. More than twice as many older women as men are reliant on the means-tested Minimum Income Guarantee. The issue of pension provision is of major concern for both women and men, but too often pensions have been designed without taking into account the differences between women's and men's lives. The Fawcett Society and Age Concern have joined forces to run a campaign on women and pensions. We share the view that the levels of hardship currently experienced by older women in the UK are intolerable. And, unless the Government acts now, many younger women will face an old age in poverty just as their mothers and grandmothers did.

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