

## **Working and caring: women in food retail in Scotland**

Work-life balance has emerged as a hot topic in recent years— fuelled in part by changing trends in women’s social roles. Whilst labour market participation has increased for women of all ages, women continue to shoulder the main responsibility for organising and undertaking unpaid caring work. In the context of an ageing, shrinking workforce, government and business increasingly recognise the need to address the particular challenges faced by employees who have caring responsibilities outside of work.

Although the food retail sector in Scotland is a growth industry, and one which is largely dependent upon female labour there is limited research on women’s employment experiences. Laura Airey reports on a three year study funded by the European Social Fund which explores this issue.

### **The study**

In the first stage of the research, just over 300 women workers from 9 businesses shared their experiences of combining paid work and unpaid care for family members. Data were collected through a combination of semi-structured interviews and a questionnaire survey. This was followed by interviews with key management and HR staff within a subset of 5 of the 9 businesses. The interviews explored employers’ views of work-life balance policies. A third group of interviews were carried out with representatives from a range of organisations that have an interest in work-life balance issues and/or the food retail sector. Here, we focus on women’s experiences.

Evidence was gathered from women who worked in a variety of positions ranging from shop floor and check-out assistants to supervisors and store managers. The women who took part in the study ranged in age from 21-64, and their caring responsibilities varied, from looking after children and grandchildren, to caring for elderly dependents.

Our interests centred on women’s everyday experiences of combining paid work in the food retail sector with unpaid care for family members and other dependents. As well as exploring how women routinely incorporated their work and care responsibilities into daily life, we were also interested in investigating what happened when unforeseen caring emergencies arose whilst women were at work.

### **Caring**

In common with other studies, women reported that their choice of job was often limited by their caring responsibilities. Nearly all women said that working in local food shops, which offered a range of shift patterns, made it easier for them to fit a job in alongside their caring commitments. About half of the questionnaire respondents lived less than a mile from their work. The advantage of this, as one part-time shop assistant explained, was that ‘it is near my children so if something happens I can just go back’. Employment in food retail companies was also valued because the range of shift patterns

available meant that working hours could be periodically re-negotiated, in order to fit in with changes in women's caring responsibilities over time.

#### Caring for children

Just over half of the women had children under the age of 18. Almost all of these mothers relied on family and friends to look after their children while they were at work. These women considered informal childcare provided by relatives to be crucial in enabling their participation in the labour market.

The vast majority of mothers felt strongly that family members were the most appropriate carers for their children – they were known and trusted. Informal childcare arrangements were also valued for their convenience and flexibility – important considerations when many women had to work early in the morning, late at night, or at weekends, when formal childcare is generally unavailable. Several interviewees acknowledged that the combination of low wages and high childcare costs meant that they would be unable to afford formal childcare. Very few women used nurseries or childminders – those who did tended to be single parents without family living nearby to provide childcare.

#### Looking after older people

A third of the women who took part in the study told us that they were involved in looking after older people, such as parents, in-laws, or family friends. The amount of time that women spent caring for older people varied widely – from one or two hours every week to several hours a day. Women undertook a range of activities on behalf of elderly dependents, including doing housework/laundry; conducting business phone calls; food shopping; providing meals; accompanying their relative to healthcare appointments; providing personal care such as washing and toileting. Many women were also responsible for co-ordinating health and social care services for their elderly dependent.

The unpredictability of older people's caring needs, and the likelihood of serious health problems and terminal illness meant that having a caring responsibility for an elderly person could be very stressful. A contrast was noted in the data between the uncertainties associated with care of elderly dependents, compared to the more structured routines involved in caring for children.

#### Time off

When it came to needing time off work for caring reasons, we found that in general, women were unclear both about their legal rights as employees, and also about company policies regarding entitlements to time off work. What was important to women was that they were regarded by employers and colleagues as 'reliable workers', highly committed to their jobs. Having a good reputation was felt to strengthen a woman's case for time off work on the rare occasion when an unexpected caring emergency arose. Although this was possible for most women, almost all said that this time off was unpaid.

A common strategy to avoid losing wages was to swap shifts with other workers. Both women and employers valued shift-swapping as a means of achieving informal flexibility in working hours. This flexibility allowed women to fulfil both their caring and their work obligations.

#### Work-life balance?

Women expressed a range of views about how they felt about combining caring and working. Nearly three quarters of the women who completed the questionnaire indicated that they felt satisfied with the balance between their work and care commitments. However, juggling paid work and domestic life could be stressful, particularly if women worked full-time, or had multiple caring responsibilities.

Supervisors and store managers were more likely to report dissatisfaction with their own work-life balance, compared to shop-floor workers. Many supervisors and managers reported working unsociable hours, and working extra hours to cover under-staffed shifts - often unpaid. They also mentioned taking telephone calls at home outside of work hours, and during days off. These aspects of their working lives led many supervisors and managers to feel stressed, tired, and depressed. Businesses were not always aware of the extra hours being worked by managers and supervisors and the negative effect that this was having on them.

#### What next?

Findings from the research have been presented to the businesses and women that participated in the study. A paper based on the findings was presented by Laura Airey at the British Sociological Association Medical Sociology Conference in September 2006. The findings will also be disseminated more widely, both through academic journal articles and through relevant business organisations.