

Leeds University Business School – Research and Innovation Podcast

International Women’s Day 2021 series

Episode 5: Matters that affect women in the workplace

Speakers: Dr Kathryn Watson and Professor Jackie Ford

Kathryn: Hello and welcome to Leeds University Business School’s Research and Innovation Podcast. I’m Kathryn Watson, a Researcher and Impact Manager at Leeds and today I’m delighted to be joined by Jackie Ford, Professor of Leadership and Organisation Studies at Durham University Business School. Hi Jackie.

Jackie: Hello. Thank you for inviting me.

Kathryn: Today’s episode is part of our series for International Women’s Day and in recognition of this we particularly wanted to discuss our research on matters that affect women in the work place; so we are going to be talking about career break returners, dual careers and work-life balance. So, Jackie, a really good place to start would be for me to ask you, what is a career break returner and why should we be interested in them?

Jackie: Well, there are many reasons why people have a career break – it might be to go travelling, to look after family members, to return to studying etc. But one of the most common reasons is to have a baby and of course this applies specifically to women – although of course partners do take parental leave and opportunities for parental leave more broadly have opened up in recent years, such that it might be either partner who takes career break leave.

Kathryn: Okay, yes, that’s interesting. So what problems do career break returners encounter in the workplace?

Jackie: Well, first of all, career blockages often occur as women move up the hierarchy. We know from the research evidence that women tend to progress to more senior levels at a slower rate compared to men. Some of this is caused by career breaks reducing their length of service, but there are other factors too – not least stereotypical assumptions about what it is assumed women might want from their work. Career break returners are frequently ambitious and they want to achieve their career potential but at times they feel thwarted by the assumptions made about them, especially those by their immediate

supervisor. So there are all sorts of potential barriers to progression experienced by women, ranging from structural to cultural and personal barriers that need to be overcome rather than leaving everything at the door of the individual to solve.

Kathryn: Okay, so, you've talked about various barriers, I wondered if you could please explain to me what you mean by cultural barriers?

Jackie: Yea, I think that's an important question. This is about the association of leadership and managerial roles as a man's domain. It is one important factor that impedes women's access to and progression within leadership roles. In fact, leadership potential is often described as requiring personal qualities like strength or decisiveness or ambition, which are much more readily ascribed to men and masculinity rather than to women.

Kathryn: Okay, yes, so I suppose then the next question is what can we do about this? In particular, what do you think employers should do to try and ensure that women's careers do not suffer as a result of taking maternity leave, and that's bearing in mind that an Ipsos Mori survey recently found that 29% of women thought that taking maternity leave had a negative impact on their career?

Jackie: Okay, well three things come to mind in terms of what we can do. First of all, we need to engage women in an active communication scheme whilst they're away from work – but make it flexible as there will be some career break employees who would prefer minimal contact and for others for whom regular contact is appreciated. Secondly, you need to ensure that there is a clear process of re-orientation back into the workplace when women are planning to return after a career break. It may well be the case, as it has been in some of our research findings, that there has been considerable change in the industry or sector to which they are returning and it could be a daunting prospect to return in a situation of rapid change. And finally, it's about avoiding making these assumptions about what women want on their return from a career break. For example, across our research, women have reported overheard conversations in which their specific cases were being discussed without any conversation with them in which they were assumed not to want to progress their career at a time when they had a young family. So rather than making the decisions for women, they need to be consulted about their progression plans and preferences. So Kathryn, that leads us on to another point, you mentioned at the start about dual careers, what does the research tell us about couples that work together?

Kathryn: Yes, okay, Jackie, so this is an interesting topic actually, many couples work together and what can happen is that at senior levels one will sacrifice their career for the other. This can be because they regard it too pressurised for them both to pursue a career. So I think, you know, if employers are more aware that this happens then one would hope that they will take action to try and make it possible for both partners to continue to build their careers. It does really mean that there is a loss of talent for the organisation and that the individual, the partner that basically puts their career on hold, does not reach their full potential if this happens. Another aspect is that it can be linked to stereotypical assumptions about work, for example, the need to be in work for very long hours, to be the last to go home etc. So some of this may be to do with organisational culture and norms that have developed in the workplace, so this would be another cultural barrier.

Jackie: Yes, that sounds really interesting. So this really brings us back to some of the broader issues around flexible working and work-life balance. With the Covid-19 pandemic, many of us have dramatically changed our ways of working but there are still many issues around these topics. So based on your research what are these issues and what can be done to make work places more family friendly?

Kathryn: Well, Jackie, what really stands out for me is that some jobs are seen as only being possible if the person is in the role 100% full time and anything less than that is viewed as not being fully committed to the role or the mission of the team. I think the problem is very often about attitudes and culture and not necessarily about the HR policies which are often supportive of flexible working, especially in large organisations. I'd like to come back to you, Jackie, and say, what do you think, have you come across these issues in your research on women in leadership?

Jackie: Yes, absolutely. I think in terms of some of the barriers for women especially, there are ongoing structural barriers that have become even more apparent during the Covid-19 pandemic which for the most part stem from lack of work-life balance, limited flexible working arrangements, especially for mothers with young families taking on dual roles of working from home and home-schooling and care, and lack of support and development networks within the workplace itself. Of course, some would say that there are advantages to working from home: comfy clothes; greater workday flexibility; less commuting

time; improved quality of working life for some people. But there are disadvantages too, not least Zoom fatigue, working harder and longer. So in a recent UK study, workers were found to increase their working week by about 25% and the survey shows that homeworkers take shorter lunch breaks, they work through their sickness and are always online, typically logging in for eleven hours a day, which is up from nine hours a day this time last year. So the loss of work life boundary has profound implications especially for women, who we know from the research evidence also bear the brunt of childcare and domestic chores.

So in terms of self imposed barriers, we as women put constraints around our time. Some of the barriers which explain the dearth of women in leadership are partly self-imposed. These internal barriers might arise from gender differences in behaviour, or limited self-promotion, lack of confidence, rather than competence. Such barriers are mainly due to gender stereotypes and gendered social roles.

So, in terms of what we can do about it, well there's a really interesting recent Harvard Business Review report last month, urging us to stop telling women that they have imposter syndrome. The researchers argue that imposter syndrome is another way of pathologising something that is no more than a feeling of discomfort and mild anxiety that seeks to place blame and responsibility on the individual, the woman, without accounting for the historical and cultural contexts that are actually fundamental to how it manifests in women. It also directs attention to fixing the women rather than fixing the places where women work. What's different for men when they are promoted to senior leadership roles is that they are validated over time. They find role models like them and their competence, leadership skills and contribution is rarely questioned. Women tend to experience the opposite. Such feelings are further exacerbated for minoritised ethnic women. Organisations including academic institutions remain mired in the cultural inertia of traditional masculine norms of behaviour and in elite practice.

Kathryn:

Thank you for explaining that, Jackie. That's really interesting. I know you've been researching issues around women and leadership for more than two decades and indeed you've published many articles on this topic. So, I wondered for International Women's Day what do you think are the key messages you would like to give to women and to employers

about how they can make the workplace more attuned to the needs of women and their careers?

Jackie:

Well this is a big question, Kathryn. The Covid-19 pandemic, through what it reveals about vulnerabilities that lie at the heart of organisational life, has prompted many of us to reflect and many academic colleagues have written quite extensively on this. Learning from our experiences during the pandemic, and thinking through the theme of this year's International Women's Day, of choosing to challenge, I think there are a number of things we do need to do. We need to communicate effectively with women, and of course with men, across the organisation and be sure to tailor needs around the specific circumstances and career aspirations of the women that we employ. We need to call out gender bias and inequality when it comes to women's careers and their much slower career progression. We need to seek out and to celebrate women's achievements, their successes, the role models that do exist. And finally I think we need to create an inclusive world and organisations within it that are much more resilient, inclusive and responsible. So it's of central importance to create organisational environments that are more inclusive, ethical, eclectic and contextually meaningful environments cultures to those who work within them. My sense is that we can achieve this through an approach to informed and responsible leadership that better adopts an ethics of care, or more widely as organisation scholar Jennifer Howard-Grenville has recently suggested, we need to adopt an approach that has at its heart, care, courage and curiosity.

Kathryn:

Thank you Jackie, those are some very practical steps for us to take us forward. I think in particular, having at heart, care, courage and curiosity, that's something for us to remember. And thank you to you for listening to today's episode. If you're interested in finding out more about this research or would like to get in touch, our contact details are available in the episode description.