

PRESS CUTTING

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Opinion: What women want - feedback from a 'real woman'

By Clare Murray, managing partner, CM Murray LLP

I felt quite queasy earlier this year when I read the report of the right-leaning Centre for Policy Studies think tank, What Women Want and How They Can Get It. Although it rightly calls for more family-friendly policies, at the same time it effectively sought to abandon women's rights in the workplace.

The author, Christina Odone, refers to "real women" who reject "the work-centred culture" and want to lead a "full life". She considers that instead of finding satisfaction in full-time work, most women realise themselves in their other roles as carers, partners, community members, and above all mothers. She considers that notions of women's progress over the past decade have been measured by the "wrong" things...minor, pointless things such as more women in top jobs, a shrinking earnings gap and better state-funded childcare.

Following the report's lead, I immediately checked with my husband, and was relieved to be reassured by him that, although I am a lawyer working full time in a job I love, I am still apparently a real woman. I also discovered this report had made me quite an annoyed woman too.

The report was based on so many shocking misconceptions or extremes that it completely undermined the author's otherwise laudable aim of seeking to secure more family-friendly policies.

The report implied that women only regard themselves as committed to a career if they are working full time. But this is absolutely not the case. We find that part-time working mothers tend to be incredibly committed to their work, to doing well and being recognised and rewarded for doing so, and to making sure that their flexible and part-time arrangements are to the benefit of both employee and employer. Part-time female managers are often some of the most efficient, productive and loyal members of staff.

There is also the suggestion in the report that enjoying and being committed to a career – whether on a part-time or a full-time basis – excludes your ability to be a good mother, a community member, a partner. This report plays on all the prejudices and sense of guilt that working women have had to try to overcome over the decades.

The report is also premised on the notion that being a mother means you want to work part-time forever. Many, however, increase their hours when their children start school with a view to returning to work full time, or close to it.

The authors seem to ignore the fact that what women want – and what equal opportunities legislation aims to provide – is the option to work full time or part time as their family and economic needs dictate, and be valued at work, be in line for promotion, for pay rises, for equal pay to their male counterparts, for bonuses, and for training.

One of the themes that really made my blood boil was the notion that full-time working females resent other women who do not work or who work part-time; that we and society regard such women as "little more than parasites", and that we won't tolerate any exception to the norm of full-time working. This is simply offensive. As the female founder and managing partner of a law firm, where I work full time, five of our 11 female members of staff work part time or flexibly (including remotely), some for childcare reasons, some not. They are all exceptionally committed and highly valued. It's about understanding the benefits, and supporting differences in arrangements within the parameters of the business, and not having the stereotypical preconceptions as put forward by this report.

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The report also suggests that the feelings of women referred to in the report regarding childcare and part-time and flexible working are the sole domain of women, whereas in fact, more and more men are also interested in looking after the family, working flexibly or part time, and participating in the community. Again, more preconceptions underlying this report: that family care is all down to the women.

This report potentially sets us back decades. It gives fuel to the views of those old-school employers, who still haven't got with the programme on equal opportunities and the benefits they bring to the workplace. Rather than trying to educate them on the business benefits of recruiting and retaining working mothers, and to support them to become good equal opportunities employers, it effectively lets them off the hook with the notion that women don't really want to work anyway.

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