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## WHY THE WORLD HATES WORKING WOMEN

Written by Emily Hourican

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A recent wedding I went had Prayers of the Faithful written by the bride herself, a dynamic company lawyer. One was ‘We pray for the work of women.’ Well, judging by the latest reports, those prayers are badly needed. More and more it seems, employers are reluctant to hire women in the child-bearing years, because they fear – often realistically – that they are simply looking at protracted and repeated periods of maternity leave, followed, when these women eventually do return to work, by a request for flexible hours in line with family commitments. Such carry-on is clearly disruptive, costly and potentially infuriating for co-workers; the only compensation, if indeed there is any at all, is that it’s even worse for the mothers.

“Until you become pregnant, it is impossible to believe that this is going to happen to you. You presume that you are the exception, that you’re immune, that your years of hard work will stand to you. But once you start having kids, it doesn’t matter if you’re the CEO or the receptionist, your job is suddenly incredibly vulnerable.” So says a female partner in a large accountancy firm, single mother to a school-age boy, who didn’t want to be named for obvious reasons. “I spend so much money on childcare that sometimes I wonder why I’m doing this, but what are the alternatives? I don’t feel that there is any scope for a conversation about reduced hours; it’s never been done in my department. Unless I changed my role to a more administrative one, and took a huge step down in salary, which is a bitter pill to swallow after having worked so hard to get here.”

The latest stats from the UK indicate that women with children are basically industrial XX poison, about as employable as a colour-blind pilot; 45% of women face some kind of workplace discrimination or unfavourable treatment due to pregnancy; 80% of human resources managers said they would “think twice” before hiring a newly married woman in her 20s; and perhaps most shockingly, women go from being paid 3.3% less than men in their 20s, to 22.8% less in their 40s, something described as “the motherhood penalty”. Recently, Ireland added its own evidence to the sorry tail. An ERSI report into pregnancy at work published in June, the first of its kind, found that one third of mothers in work during their pregnancy say they experienced “unfair treatment”. Of the 2,300 randomly-chosen women, ten percent reported loss of salary or bonus or denial of promotion, twelve percent

had unsuitable workloads, eight percent had received negative comments from superiors or co-workers, and, at the most extreme edge, five percent reported dismissal.

Deborah Fagan, CEO of iRadio, has perspective both as an employer and an employee. Before striking out on her own to set up iRadio, she was CFO at Denis O'Brien's Communicorp, a job that required frequent travel, up to a week of every month. After her first baby, she came back to work full-time but when she got pregnant again and had twins, she realised something had to give. "I had the chat with my company, but it wasn't possible to do the job on a four-day week. And anyway, it was time for me to start something of my own." So she left, setting up iRadio, which has so far won six Radio Advertising awards, and eleven PPI awards. Its hardly part-time, but it does allow Deborah to work within the constraints of having children. However, she is now dealing with the matter from the opposite perspective. "We have a very young workforce, nearly all in their 20s, but we've had a few weddings recently, so maternity leave will undoubtedly be next..."

And how will she handle that? "In terms of work hours, once the job is done, I would try and work with the person. A lot of this is based on trust and loyalty; if an employer is fair and the person is fair back, it'll work. You have to be realistic, women want to, and have to, come back into the workforce. And think of the investment, the time, effort and training costs that have gone into person? I'd do as much as I could to ensure they come back. As an employer, you have to protect your business, but you also have look at it long term – I'd rather know that person was available to me rather than going to a competitor because I wasn't flexible." She points out that women themselves are usually keen to stay involved even while on leave, available for emergency calls or even to pop in where need be; "a woman on maternity leave isn't actually missing in action. Mostly, they don't want to be totally out of the loop for nine months."

Although the ERSI report details a minority of working women – two-thirds obviously felt they were fairly treated, while almost half of employers, 48 percent, paid some form of top-up salary contributions during maternity leave – the evidence is that the bad behaviour is increasing, that we're actually rowing back on many of the improvements of the last 15-odd years. "We've gone so far backwards," says Rob Hartnett, press officer for Unite trade union. "Society had grown up and recognised that you can't do these things. Any form of discrimination is wrong, and we had moved very far away from it. But the recession has scratched the surface and found the underlying thought-process hasn't changed as much as we thought. Pregnant women are now being seen as a very obvious way in which costs can be

avoided; the manners which had grown up around the way we like to do business have been chipped away by bottom line.”

During the good times, it was relatively easy for companies to behave decently, to congratulate a woman sincerely on her good news, and rearrange work conditions so as to facilitate her absence. There was money to hire a replacement, and where this was deemed unnecessary, other employees, feeling that they were well-paid, probably with a yearly bonus to look forward, and secure in their jobs, were accommodating, taking on the extra responsibility without griping.

These days though, in a time of economic hardship, where very few companies are as financially healthy as they were, with staff already over-worked and possibly having taken some form of pay cut or freeze already, people are once again looking sideways at pregnant women. They are counting the disruption cost, the time off work cost, the break in continuity where the woman has particular clients or relationships. It all adds up to something of a headache for employers, especially where you are talking about a mid-sized company where there may be more than one woman off at any one time, and for longer now than ever before.

“The volume of women going on leave hasn’t dropped off despite the recession, and a lot of them would be out for nine months,” says Bernie Keogh, resourcing director of Alternatives, an agency that specialises in contract marketing, where roughly a third of interim contracts are maternity-based. “We are working with one financial services company that currently has eight people out on leave; they’re at the tipping point, trying to manage maternity leave.” These days, she says, companies are no longer simply replacing the person, instead they might be taking on someone more junior, or for three days a week, or some other money-saving compromise solution, because they just can’t afford the same kind of one-in-one-out system. It makes sense economically, but usually means an extra burden on remaining colleagues.

In a way it’s a kind of perfect storm – economic pressure due to the recession, longer maternity leave (at the moment, the statutory period is 26 weeks, with a further 16 optional unpaid), and, because women are having babies later, they are also having them closer together. It is far from uncommon for a woman to come back from maternity leave already pregnant with the next child, or to be so within a year of returning – the kind of thing that makes many women grit their teeth in rage. “It’s disloyal to the sisterhood,” says one, brand

manager for a soft drinks company. “I’m sure that sounds ridiculous, but it gives all of us a bad name when women do that.”

Anecdotal research reveals stories that are predictably terrible. An economist friend who works for one of the larger banks recalls a male colleague who said, after they interviewed potential candidates together, ‘we’re not hiring her, she’s clearly about to go off and have kids.’ “They would say it openly, even though I was right there, and had at that stage one child myself. A lot of the senior male staff would say ‘my wife gave up work; it’s incompatible with having a family.’ They seemed to have no clue that some women needed to work, didn’t have the luxury of choice.” A quick glance at Rollercoaster.ie, the Irish website devoted to pregnancy and parenting, under the heading ‘maternity leave’ or ‘getting a job while pregnant’, and you’ll find all manner of upsetting threads, started by women desperate to get advice on the rough treatment they have received.

One woman who simply cut her losses and moved to set up her own business is Genevieve MacKenzie, who started the Casting Couch studio on Fitzwilliam Square after her first child was born. “With one child you have the time and energy to devote to getting a new company up and running. Having worked in film and television and production for most of my 20s and early 30s, and having learnt how to run a business as a partner in a post-production house it occurred to me that there might be a market for this. I opened The Casting Couch in 2006 when my first child was 10 months old. XXXX”

Another is Elaine McCabe, who trained as an architect and was running her own practise for ten years, during which time she had her three children, before giving up and starting her own business, the Clever Box Club ([www.cleverboxclub.com](http://www.cleverboxclub.com)). “I wasn’t driven to it by having children, so much as inspired by them. I still work very long hours, but this way I can make time to do things with the kids in the afternoons. I took the decision so as to be more child friendly, and the company has grown way more than I expected, but at least I feel I have the flexibility.” With each of her three children, Elaine was back at work within six weeks. “I used to look at friends who worked for large companies with such envy, they had such amazing structures in place. Small to medium sized businesses just can’t sort this thing out on their own, the government needs to help them. Where women give up work, it’s usually because of a lack of flexibility, and often the company just can’t facilitate the requests, even if they want to. I used to feel terrible about not paying maternity leave, for example, but it just wasn’t an option.”

Elaine may have looked with envy at large companies, with their dedicated HR departments and clear policies, but even there, all is not rosy. Yes, they will try and accommodate requests for more flexible or shorter hours, but in the traditional areas, like law or accountancy, any concessions will usually be at the expense of your career. Hazel Gaynor, writer and creator of the Hot Cross Mum blog (<http://hotcrossmum.blogspot.com>) spelled it out. “I worked in a large company, in the legal sector, and before I went on my first maternity leave I was in a managerial position. When I came back, I asked for a four-day week. It was discussed and debated, but in the end I was demoted. Yes, I got a four-day week but I had to step down. And it’s very hard to step back up again, especially once baby number two came along. At that stage I asked to work part-time – a three-day week – and after a lot of humming and hawing, I eventually went back on a two-day week. I understand where my employer was coming from, I think they were as understanding as an employer can be, and that my case was considered fairly. But in the end, they will always put themselves first. Basically, it’s not easy to continue to building your career when you have children. As soon as you make that first request – for a four-day week or to leave at 4.30 – you’ve sidelined yourself. Especially in that sector, where people work very long hours. Once you show that you have other priorities, that your career isn’t your entire life any more, it’s only a matter of time. The option of remote-working was mooted, but there was still that pressure to be seen; ‘out of sight, out of mind,’ basically. The attitude is very much, ‘well you choose to have children...’ And maybe that’s fair enough. There are two very clear sides to this. However, one thing I’ve blogged about, and I’ve seen it come up elsewhere a lot is that, since I’ve become a mother, I am an infinitely better resource. I’m more organised, confident and hard working. You’re under so much pressure to prove that having children hasn’t affected you that you’re above standard. Employers might be quite short-sighted in letting that go.”

New-media-type companies seem to be better at the balance. Lisa Healy creator of parenting website [mama.ie](http://mama.ie), is a content specialist with an e-learning company, and her story of maternity leave and transition back to work is exemplary, largely because the company operates an enlightened policy for all workers. “The options that women can avail of such as flexi-time and parental leave are also available to men in the company. I think this helps reduce the sense that someone is benefiting unfairly at a cost to others.” That is the kind of XX generally only seen in the public sector, where being child and family-friendly is a much bigger deal. In fact, the gulf between the private sector, where flexibility is dramatically reduced in recent years and where requests for reduced hours are increasingly being met with a curt ‘no!’ and the public sector is wider than ever before. Being a mother in public sector employ is a far easier matter

So given that the basic attitude – even where companies are fairly nice about it all – is ‘God, isn’t women getting pregnant a real pain?’ is it unfixable? Working conditions were designed with men in mind, either single or with the incredible resource of a stay-at-home wife, to iron their shirts, cook them promotion-securing dinner parties, and of course mind their kids. The work force may have changed, but the attitudes of the workplace haven’t. Long hours, face time, inflexibility and salary-man-type dedication are still the norm. There is a total lack of imagination and can-do-ism around the notion of changing the way we work. The technological revolution was supposed to change all that, with remote working and so on, but it didn’t really. Most bosses still like to see their staff in situ, at their desks. Whether they’re secretly playing on-line Scrabble or buying knock-off Diane Von Furstenburg on e-bay, is another matter. At least they’re there. Whereas, no matter how many hours you put in from home, in the eyes of the office, you’re basically slacking. Job sharing, another Holy Grail of the New Working Order, has also failed to catch on significantly, largely because it requires that bit more commitment and organisation, and so employers see it as more trouble than its worth.

The result is this has developed into an ‘us’ against ‘them’ mentality, even though really, we’re all ‘us’, and we’re all equally ‘them.’ Because so far, we haven’t worked out a better way of having and rearing children – kibbutz-style communal arrangements have been tried, and failed – and so we’re just going to have to try a bit harder to make this one work. Grace under pressure is a big part of this – just because times are tough is no excuse for turning on the most vulnerable in the workforce, and pregnant women are vulnerable. It may not be ‘a fucking illness,’ as one manager so charmingly put it, in the UNITE report, but it is a time of emotional uncertainty and upheaval. Inaugurating paid ‘parental’ leave rather than ‘maternal’ leave would be a start – because the only way this is going to improve is if responsibility for children moves from being solely that mother’s to becoming the wider community’s. And maybe it would help to see them as economic units – the pension providers of the future, rather than a bunch of needy little parasites, draining the resources of valuable employees?

What’s really freaking companies out isn’t just the disruption of maternity leave – it’s the unquantifiable aspect of what she’ll be like when she’s back. Will she be coming in late, stressed-out by the morning hand-over to crèche or child-minder? Leaving on the dot of 5.30 so as to pick-up in time? Taking days off when the child is sick? Wanting parental leave during the summer holidays...? There’s no doubt having children changes a woman’s availability to work, whatever about her commitment. Long hours, late nights and weekends all become problematic, and largely undesirable. It is at this point that so many dynamic women go off and start their own businesses – there’s plenty of stress that comes with doing

that, but at least they don't have to explain to an unsympathetic boss that the kids have chicken pox and they won't be in for a couple of days.

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