

Demos Conference: The Business of Care
Clifford Chance, Wednesday 21st March, 12.45pm
Check against delivery



Making the invisible visible

Thank you to Demos for the opportunity to reflect on families and care. And to Clifford Chance for lovely venue in which to do so.

I first became interested in Demos' work in this area when I was invited to speak at the launch of a report, 'Girlfriends in High places' in 2004. The report explored the role of women's professional networks in helping them to get to the top of organisations, contrasting their experiences with the kind of the support and informal advice that men have traditionally got from the 'old boys' network'.

I am glad to see that this area of work has grown, and moved from strength to strength culminating in this important conference today. What has been discussed today is a vital set of issues – and issues that I personally feel strongly about as a daughter, a wife, and a professional working mother.

What has made this conference and its discussions stand out is that it has ranged so widely from the challenges of an ageing population; to the role of fathers in family life and through to broader questions about how we define and value care in society.

But despite that breadth I think that there is an important theme that has run through a lot of the debate and discussion today. It is the hidden value of unpaid care. It is the private way in which we all find solutions to balancing paid work and caring responsibilities. Which means that as a society, we have yet to find a way to remove the glass ceiling in the home.

For although we are all familiar with the stories and reports about the challenges for working women, we still do not have adequate language for what most people view as a private rather than a political problem. "That's life" we tell each other.

History

But then, of course, domestic violence, sexual harassment and economic disadvantage were also, for many decades, also seen as private issues. But in more recent and

enlightened times, we have seen them turned into public problems that have been debated and finally tackled by laws, policies or social values.

The personal became political. And the health and strength of our society has benefited.

So we have to start this process with the issues and challenges we have been discussing today. We may not have the language yet but we do have some idea of the scale of the problem. If you are one of the 6 million carers in the UK today, the chances are that you are also a woman. You are also likely to be unemployed or working part-time. At the very least, you will be feeling the strain every day of trying to balance competing pressures.

But if we look to the future, women say that they are no more likely than men to be prepared to provide care. Our society can't count on relying as heavily on a private workforce of unpaid women in the years to come. With nearly 70% of women with children in the workforce – compared to just 20% in 1950 – there's no chance either of turning the clock back.

Public value, private responsibility

But although we are seeing ever increasing numbers of women in the workforce, they still shoulder the main burden of unpaid care work in the home.

A baby is born, a child develops a high fever. The boiler breaks down. A parent suffers a stroke. These are the everyday events that throw a working women's delicate balance between work and family into chaos.

And often, even if it is not women doing the childcare and housework, they still carry much of the emotional burden and responsibility. Although men have increased their role in household chores, women still tend to organise and manage much of family life, whether it is buying children's clothes and birthday presents, making sure the fridge is stocked or writing Christmas cards. On the whole and despite the welcome progress we have seen, mum remains the primary parent.

Recent research published by Demos showed that this is often seen as an unsatisfactory situation by men and women alike, but is also characterised as 'that's life.' Families see managing this balance as a personal issue with individual solutions – not something for us all to worry about.

And the media constantly reinforce the conventional wisdom that the care crisis is an individual problem. Books, magazines and newspapers offer women an endless stream of advice about how to maintain their balancing act. How to be better organised and efficient. How to mediate effectively. How to manage stress.

This narrative only serves to keep the value of care work private and invisible. It is designed to help, but can too easily become part of the problem. Because what all the lifestyle guides and self-help books miss is that the ability of families to find successful solutions is a public issue with public implications.

But there are signs here that the mood is changing. A recent survey tells us 65% of people say that the parties risk being unelectable if they do not provide direct support to families.

And of course it is a public concern when it goes wrong. Think of the growing number of children in care; the millions of pounds spent on the youth justice system. This is because the care work that takes place in families has a wider social value.

The Sandwich Generation

But support for modern families increasingly does not just mean childcare. Millions of people care for older relatives or friends. 1 in 4 carers have dependent children to look after as well. This group of people, mainly women, have been nicknamed the 'sandwich generation' and their numbers are set to rise.

Providing care and support to family and friends, though a normal part of life, still goes unseen and unrecognised. Many people find they become carers when social care services can't deliver what their friends or relatives want or need.

People often find it impossible to find work that they can balance with their caring role. As a consequence the very people who have sacrificed so much for others face poverty in retirement, something which particularly impacts on women. I am proud that the Government is acting to help overcome these challenges. Extending the right to request flexible working to carers and, of course, updating our pension system for the 21st century so carers do not pay such a heavy sacrifice are both important.

But our society is going, in the decades to come, to have to go further. As I've already mentioned, the pressures of an ageing population, changes in patterns of working and family life, and the attitudes of future generations, mean that the current reliance on this kind of informal care is unlikely to be sustainable.

The Personal is Global

So a changing world will demand new responses of all. It will also force us to look beyond our own borders.

My parents' generation knew that they would probably grow old in the same place that they grew up. Travelling overseas was a luxury afforded to a small minority. But now we

don't think twice about travelling half way around the world to visit a friend, relax on the beach or take up a job opportunity.

Modern travel and the greater knowledge of the opportunities elsewhere has fuelled one of the solutions many families have found to fill their care gap. They have, in fact, outsourced their caring work, often to women from developing countries.

Over the last 10 years we have become one of the largest importers of health care workers in the world. Old people in private nursing homes are almost three times as likely to be cared for by foreign trained nurses, than those native to the UK. On the whole, immigrant workers suit employers because they are more prepared to accept temporary contracts.

They also largely remain invisible as they enable the globalised knowledge and service based economy to allowing more women to work by taking over the caring role that they used to do at home. We hear a lot about the brain drain, but there is another kind of drain here at work here, as carers move across continents towards the UK. The question is whether this is really a sustainable, long term solution?

The 'quiet revolution' of men

One way, of course, to finding a long term solution to these challenges is by involving fathers more in care – something that we have heard a lot about today. We know that more and more fathers want to play an active role in their families, looking after their children, watching their children grow and develop.

Thirty years ago, fathers spent something like 15 minutes a day on childcare. That time has now grown to two hours. The EOC points to a "social revolution in fatherhood", in which fathers are increasingly involved with their children's upbringing and feel confident as carers. Yet six out of ten Dads still say they do not spend enough time with their new baby.

A recent study showed that three quarters of fathers say that spending more time with their families or having more time for their key relationships, is their biggest concern in daily life. Ahead of money. Ahead of health. Ahead of work.

But although a sizeable majority of people believe that men should be able to find ways to share childcare and look after their ageing parents, we know that in reality it is simply not that easy.

And it is not helped if the caring work that fathers do is hidden and becomes invisible itself. As we have heard today, even if they want to be heard or included, men are often not welcome or seen as legitimate voices in the debate.

This government has begun to talk about the importance of men's role as active fathers, not just as breadwinners. It has introduced supportive legislation, such as 2 weeks statutory paternity leave. But society will need to do more in the future to help them spend more time nurturing their children and being more responsible children to their own parents.

Without policies targeted specifically at helping and supporting fathers, mothers will continue to take the great bulk of parental leave, cementing rather than challenging the traditional gender divide. Due to the stubborn pay gap, inflexible working patterns and an entrenched working culture, men will end up remaining in the workplace rather than sharing caring responsibilities in the home.

Moving forward

It is clear that this debate is of central importance to the future of the social and economic well-being of Britain. It is also clear that care can no longer be categorised as a 'private matter.' We need to find ways to make the invisible visible, to uncover and celebrate the value of unpaid work.

This is not about telling families what to do. It is about putting families in control, and helping them to make the choices that they want to make.

There is not doubt that we need flexible working, and that demand is only going to grow. 62% of people believe that the world of work should change to meet the needs of families rather than the other way around. It is crucial that we find a way offer the support that families say they need. We need to find a way that is fair, and that ensures that all families have the same opportunities to be the kind of families that they want to be.

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