

Working with Diversity Parallel Session: Who Cares? Gender imbalance in the children's sector workforce

The statistics

- Scottish Government statistics show that in 2007, of the 32,800 people working in pre-school and childcare centres in Scotland, women made up 97% of the workforce.
- Men are a higher proportion of playworkers in after school care. In 2005, they were almost 10% of the UK workforce.
- Scottish Government statistics show that in 2007: 92% of all primary school teachers and 83% of primary head teachers were female.
- In most other European countries men are under 5% of the childcare workforce. Denmark has the highest proportion (in 2005, 8%) of male childcare workers.

Reasons for the current gender imbalance

Barriers – men

- ***Perceived low professional status of the work*** associated with: poor pay, few opportunities for promotion, low qualification levels, high staff turnover, poor terms and conditions of employment and lack of consistent training.
- ***Working with younger children widely perceived as a female job.*** Research refers to conceptual link between childcare and 'mothering', whereby childcare is seen as an extension of women's traditional role as homemaker.
- ***Male childcare workers have been found to lack support*** of family and friends and to have experienced feelings of isolation.
- ***Growing concern with child protection*** leads men to fear they will be treated with suspicion if entering an occupation involving direct contact with children.
- ***At lower end of pay, wage not high enough*** to support a family.
- ***Part-time work deters men*** who are seeking full-time employment.

Attractions – women

- Women often enter childcare workforce because they have ***childcare experience***, enjoy working with children, perceive themselves to already have the skills required.
- Suits ***domestic situation***: local employment, opportunities to combine employment with caring responsibilities.
- Studies of childcare workers show that they enjoy high levels of ***job satisfaction***.

Benefits of increasing gender balance in the children's sector workforce

Strong, empirical evidence is limited, mainly due to the lack of examples of gender-balanced workforces to study. However, analysis of existing projects and initiatives (e.g. Men in Childcare) designed to address gender imbalance, has been positive. There is anecdotal evidence, and a widespread perception that increasing the number of men working in the children's sector does bring benefits.

Benefits to children

It is widely perceived, that children benefit from contact with male as well as female perspectives and approaches. Men are held by many ***to encourage children to risk-take more and to play differently*** – enabling more physical, outdoor, 'rough and tumble' play through differences in experience, skills and physical strength.

It is widely believed that boys in particular, but also girls, benefit from contact with ***positive male role models*** who would otherwise be lacking from their lives. The male role model

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argument has been criticised, but research suggests that employers and parents view this as a benefit of employing men.

A mixed workforce is seen as enhancing childcare by demonstrating gender equality to young children.

Benefits to parents

Perception that many ***fathers feel more at ease*** with male staff and that they are better able to relate to them. Others feel that male workers demonstrate that men can be good at caring and associate this with more men taking on ***caring roles at home***.

Research has found that the majority of parents are in favour of men working in childcare.

Benefits to the workforce

The workforce itself benefits from ***gender diversity***. It is recognised that men bring different experiences to their work, reflecting their own gendered upbringing and culture.

Benefits to employers

Recruiting more men is considered to be a means of improving the ***image*** of the sector, to be generally good for business and to help solve problems of ***skills shortages***.

Benefits to society

Wider benefits to society include the ***breaking down of stereotypes*** of suitable jobs for men and women, for current and future generations. The perceived ***value of caring work*** to society is raised and the rewards (including personal fulfilment) to both men and women who engage in this type of work are highlighted. All of this feeds into and supports broader visions of shared parenting and life-work balance for men and women.

Benefits to men themselves

High job satisfaction. Studies that have asked men about their experiences of working in childcare have found that positive features include: variety within the working day, the satisfaction of helping children to learn, gaining understanding of a child's perspective and the relationships formed with children, families and other workers.

How can we achieve improvement in the gender balance of the children's sector workforce?

There is general agreement that ***raising the professional status of childcare work*** through emphasis on ***training and qualifications*** will be necessary to reduce the gender imbalance. This is supported by evidence from Denmark and Norway, where childcare work is more knowledge and education-based than in the UK.

Other strong supporting activities include:

- Targeted marketing and recruitment
- Support and mentoring
- Providing appropriate careers information for young people (emphasise knowledge, skills, training and progression opportunities)
- Improving pay and conditions.

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