

SUBMISSION

to the

FORUM ON THE WORKPLACE OF THE FUTURE



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and Children**

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Introduction

Treoir is the national federation of services for unmarried parents and their children. The aim is to promote the welfare of and improve the standards of care for unmarried parents and their children in Ireland. This is achieved through operating a National Information Centre, producing many publications and newsletters, undertaking relevant research, lobbying for social change and providing training to parents and professionals on issues and changes relevant to them.

The four Core Principles of Treoir are:

- TREOIR recognises the diversity of family life in Ireland
- TREOIR recognises that all families, including unmarried families, have the same rights to respect, care, support, protection and recognition
- TREOIR supports and promotes the rights of all children as outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
- TREOIR believes that all children have a right to know, be loved and cared for by both parents

Over the last number of years there has been a significant increase in the number of children born outside marriage from 4,351 (6.1%) in 1982 – 18,815 (31.1)% in 2002. Unmarried families have therefore become a significant proportion of all families in Ireland. It is essential therefore that policies and strategies, including employment policies, take into account diverse forms of families in Ireland, including unmarried families.

“Childbirth is a major determinant of female labour force behaviour, while becoming a parent hardly affects parental employment behaviour”¹

We suggest that the timely publication of “Babies and Bosses – reconciling work and family life” will inform the deliberations of the Forum and its policy recommendations should be seriously considered by the Forum. The following are among some of its recommendations :

Encourage employers and unions to make workplaces more family-friendly, e.g. through the introduction of initiatives that provide workplaces with tailored advice on family-friendly policy practices

¹ Babies and Bosses : Reconciling Work and Family Life Austria, Ireland and Japan. Vol 2. OECD 2003.

Explore options to use existing education facilities to address out of school hours care needs

Introduce an entitlement to part-time work

Public spending on childcare may best be focused on parents rather than providers, to increase their choice of work and care options, as well as providers and types of care; to improve equity in public childcare support across childcare providers; and to improve efficiency among providers.

BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT

Research clearly indicates that there are very high poverty rates among lone parents and as McCashin² states that the route out of poverty is through employment. For mothers generally there are many barriers to taking up unemployment but for lone parents reconciling work and care is even more of a challenge. Lone parent employment rates are relatively low in Ireland 45% and most Irish single parents work part-time and rely on social welfare to supplement their income.

The main barriers to lone parents taking up employment include :

- lack of family friendly employment policies,
- Lack of childcare,
- low educational attainment, and
- fear of loss of welfare benefits.

Why promote family friendly initiatives?

The Employment Equality Agency³ clearly outlined that the success of most organisations depends on factors such as quality, competitiveness, efficiency, innovation and customer service. An essential part of achieving these qualities is to create a working climate which generates loyalty and commitment in employees and encourages them to develop and use their experience and skills in the most effective way. A family-friendly organisation which enables employees to balance the often conflicting demands of their work and personal lives will help create such a work environment. The business benefits of becoming more family-friendly include the possibility of retaining effective employees, having more motivated and productive staff, reducing levels of employees' stress, reducing levels of sick leave or absenteeism, improving reputation and image.

² Employment Aspects of Young Lone Parenthood in Ireland. Anthony McCashin. National Youth Federation and Treoir. Dublin 1997

³ Introducing Family Friendly Initiatives in the Workplace. Hugh Fisher. EEA. Dublin 1996.

The family friendly initiatives which employers should facilitate and pursue include

Flexible working.

For lone parents job-sharing, flexitime, working from home, part-time working and term-time working would allow more time for caring for their children, while maintaining their labour force attachment, especially when children are very young. Some of these options are available to public servants but the evidence is that the private sector is not so open to some of the measures. Flexible working arrangements have the potential to be advantageous for both employers and employees.

Leave Arrangements

It has to be acknowledged that significant improvements have been made in relation to maternity, parental and adoption leave in recent years. However a number of issues need to be addressed. Take up of family-friendly measures is predominantly by females, as illustrated by the proportion of eligible fathers taking up parental leave 5%⁴. The most common reason by fathers cited for not taking leave is the atmosphere in the workplace. Employers need to be encouraging and supportive of men taking parental leave and they should be afforded, at least a few days, paid paternity leave.

Childcare

Raising children and having a career both rate highly as important life goals for most people. Helping parents to achieve these goals is vital for society. In order for lone parents to participate in the workplace it is essential that good quality, affordable, childcare is available. Despite an increase in investment in childcare in recent years the fact remains that there is a shortage of good quality care at affordable prices. Women are still expected to take primary responsibility for childcare and many female employees are expected to either move from fulltime to part-time work or leave the workforce altogether due to lack of adequate childcare. This inevitably results in a drop in income and its associated problems and in a disruption of career progression. When asked about their childcare preferences, the type of provision most requested by a group of lone parents⁵ 31% stated that they needed affordable or subsidized childcare, 15% want more crèche facilities and 4% want better opening hours among existing service providers.

⁴ Babies and Bosses : Reconciling Work and Family Life Austria, Ireland and Japan. Vol 2. OECD 2003.

⁵ Local Needs – Local Action. One Parent Family Research Project. Partnership Tra Li. 2001.

Low Educational Attainment

The provision of appropriate education and training for lone parents is essential if they are to gain adequately paid employment in order to lift themselves out of poverty. *If policy is specifically directed at herding large numbers of low skill, low income women into low paid employment or into 'schemes', without real training and secure child care, then it may fail*⁶ A national strategy to implement appropriate training for lone parents at local level with all the necessary supports is essential, especially for young lone parents. This would be in line with the Government's strategy to reduce child poverty through facilitating the transition from unemployment to employment, though only where it is the decision of the parent to (re)enter the workforce rather than continuing as a full-time parent.

Loss of Welfare Benefits

Due to low levels educational achievement many single parents earn low incomes and supplement incomes with welfare. The fear of losing benefits discourages many mothers from taking up employment and often they accept work in the black economy.

It is suggested in "Babies and Bosses" that a significant contributory factor to the relatively low employment rates among single parents is that the Irish social policy model provides long term benefits to single parent families, with no requirement to be available for and seeking employment.

Positive efforts have been made over the years to develop policies to remove the disincentives associated with moving from welfare dependency into employment. While assistance and incentives to enter employment are laudable and necessary it is essential that all parents, but especially unmarried parents, continue to have a choice as to whether to work outside the home or to choose fulltime parenting. We concur with the Commission on the Family's⁷ recommendation that *it should be each parent's individual decision whether to participate in paid employment outside of the home or to work within the home and that state support should be forthcoming regardless of which option parents choose.*

⁶ Employment Aspects of Young Lone Parenthood in Ireland. Anthony McCashin. National Youth Federation and Treoir. Dublin 1997

⁷ Strengthening families for life. Commission on the Family. Government Publications, Dublin 1998.

