

Flexible work practices for employees from a non-English speaking background

It is now increasingly accepted that an employee's family responsibilities affect their work, and vice versa. In order to enhance performance and productivity, managers need to take account of how this interface operates for all staff. This paper examines these issues from the perspective of non-English speaking background employees, and suggests ways in which family and work policies and initiatives can address their needs.

Background

In 1990, the Commonwealth Government ratified the ILO Convention 156 on the rights of workers with family responsibilities, and in NSW the Government is currently developing a Family and Work Strategy. Some public sector agencies have already prepared family and work policies, and have taken related initiatives, such as the provision of work-based childcare.

Social recognition of the inter-dependence of people's work and family lives has been given impetus by the increased labour force participation rates of married women during the 1980s, and the growth in the number of single parent families.

The following matters have emerged as the main ones of concern to all employees who have family responsibilities, and are particularly vital to women, who are usually the main carers:

- inflexibility in working hours, over the week and the year
- difficulty in obtaining the occasional leave essential to meet family responsibilities
- the unavailability of part-time work and job-sharing
- the lack of access to training and further education for part-time workers
- the provision of community services, including childcare and aged care, and
- the unequal division of housework and caring work between men and women at home.

Family and work issues for employees of non-English speaking background

In many respects, the issues for workers of non-English speaking background are the same. However, for many women of non-English speaking background, additional factors exacerbate these problems, or make solutions outside the workplace more difficult to find.

At a recent consultation between women of non-English speaking background and this Office, and the Ethnic Affairs Commission, the following problems in relation to caring for their children were stressed:

- lack of anyone to help out in emergency situations
- never having the chance to attend special occasions at their child's school, or speak with teachers

- having to leave sick children at home by themselves
- difficulty in coping with early starting times and shift work hours that don't fit with childcare or school hours
- the high cost of institutional, particularly work-based, childcare in relation to their wages
- guilt and exhaustion.

One woman commented:

'I get up at 5.00 am to do everything and be at work by 8.00 am. I'm grateful if I can only get half an hour at night with my daughter . . . and that's to help with her homework - before I have to start work again in the house.'

Women and men of non-English speaking background also spoke of the difficulties they faced caring for elderly parents or disabled or chronically sick relatives:

- feeling compelled to visit an isolated family member daily because they were the only human contact their elderly relatives had
- being the language link for relatives in nursing homes where English is the only language spoken
- pressures from their own community to have aged or sick family members living with them, or guilt and social disapproval if they don't.

The work and social context of families of non-English speaking background

Specific difficulties arise for women and men of non-English speaking background in relation to the family/work interface as a result of their location in the workforce, and from their position in society generally.

Women of non-English speaking background: a heavy 'double load'

Women of non-English speaking background have less access to part-time work than other women (see Update: Equity Issues for People from non-English Speaking Backgrounds in NSW Public Employment).

One important reason is that, concentrated in lower paying jobs, non-English speaking background women are less able to afford to work part-time. Their concentration in blue-collar areas is another reason, as flexible working hours have traditionally been associated with white-collar workers and management. In addition, employees of non-English speaking background may have less confidence than their English speaking background counterparts in negotiating part-time and job sharing options with employers.

At the same time, women of non-English speaking background who are employed are more likely to be mothers than other women. While (nationally) around three-fifths (59 per cent) of Australian born employed women have children, a much larger proportion (77 per cent) of employed immigrant women of non-English speaking background have children. In other words, women of non-English speaking background are more likely to be having difficulty balancing family and work than other women, while, paradoxically, they are working longer hours.

Less access to family and community support

It is often assumed that people of non-English speaking background have large and/or extended families to look after children, and assist them generally. In fact, studies show that non-English speaking background immigrants are less likely than other Australians to have close family members accessible to them, for the obvious reason that many live overseas.

In addition, non-English speaking background immigrants tend to have less access to, and make less use of, community services and other social resources. They may lack information about such services, and/or the services themselves may be linguistically and culturally inappropriate. For example, frail elderly non-English speaking background Australians are far less likely to be in nursing home care than other Australians. Non-English speaking background families are more likely to live in areas where resources are scarce; childcare, for example, is disproportionately concentrated in inner areas of Sydney, while most of the high migrant density Local Government Areas are in Western Sydney.

Non-English speaking background immigrants and time for study

Increasingly, non-English speaking background women and men in Australia are immigrating with a high level of educational qualifications from their own country and years of prior paid work experience.

However, it is still the case that many cannot work in their area of expertise in Australia without undertaking further education in the form of a bridging course, refresher course or even one to three years of a university degree. This may be on top of formal language courses.

The difficulties of attempting to undertake this further study in the context of bringing up a family, learning English, working and getting themselves and their families settled in a new country means that non-English speaking background women are less likely than men to get their qualifications recognised and their experience valued in Australia. Studies show that non-English speaking background women suffer more downward occupational mobility in Australia than men of non-English speaking background.

Time and travel issues

Because large numbers of non-English speaking background Australians live in outer metropolitan areas where cheaper housing is available, they are likely to have long travel times to work and to be dependent on slow and uncoordinated transport modes. Non-English speaking background women often don't have access to the family car. As well as increasing the length of their working day, this has implications for their ability to use work-based childcare facilities.

The international nature of non-English speaking background family networks can also create special problems. Inflexible leave provisions in the areas where non-English speaking background women are concentrated mean that they often use up annual leave entitlements for family purposes. However, a block of time is necessary to visit family who live overseas; thus many non-English speaking background women become cut off from contact with their families.

Strategies

For all of the above reasons, it is particularly important to create an understanding and supportive atmosphere in the workplace for the family-related pressures non-English speaking background staff may experience. For example:

- when developing family or carer friendly policies, such as flexible working time, parental and family leave and or term-time employment, ensure that they cover all areas within the agency, and not just the so-called 'white-collar' area

- ensure that workers of non-English speaking background are aware of such options, and of the possibilities of permanent part-time work and job sharing. In the medium term, the low pay received by jobs in which women of non-English speaking background are concentrated needs to be redressed as part of the EEO Management Plan if part-time work is to be a realistic option
- some agencies, such as the Water Board, provide information about family care-related issues, such as vacation and after-school care, for employees. Remember, non-English speaking background employees are likely to be most in need of such information as they may lack other access to it
- the role of a welfare officer or employee assistance scheme may be of great value to non-English speaking women workers in coping with the stress of their daily lives. Ensure that such services are accessible to all workers and are culturally sensitive
- target non-English speaking background women in your organisation for staff development and ensure that non-English speaking background women have the agency's support to pursue Skillmax and other vocational training during normal working hours. Ensure childcare is made available to part-time workers attending such courses
- consult with non-English speaking background staff about their needs for flexibility at work, and about possible family-related issues that are creating difficulties for them. Such consultation can be invaluable in identifying solutions helpful for all parties, but of course depend on the prior creation of a fair and trusting work culture.

For more information contact:

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The Immigrant Women's Speakout Association of NSW
 133 Parramatta Road
 Granville NSW 2142
 Ph (02) 9637 1555

A useful source of advice on non-English speaking background women's issues and a referral point for non-English speaking background female staff.

The Ethnic Childcare Development Unit
 Hut 13A, 142 Addison Road
 Marrickville NSW 2044
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Advice about bilingual/bicultural childcare, offers a pool of casual ethnic childcare workers.