**Conversations in Social Justice:**



**Sharing Parental Leave?**

**Podcast transcript**

Series 2. Episode 4.

*Shared parental leave is a great policy that has the potential to bring about cultural change and drive gender equality. However, a key barrier to shared parental leave is the workplace support. Discussion in this podcast is based on shared parental leave and breastfeeding practices in UK Higher Education institution and by extension to practices in other sectors. The podcast highlights key barriers and recommendations which every employer should consider. This podcast is chaired by Professor Esther McIntosh of York St John University, in conversation with Dr Ernestine Gheyoh Ndzi and Dr Anjali Raj (both York St John), Jessica Chivers of Talent Keeper Specialist, and Emma Shepherd of Maternity Teacher Paternity Teacher Project.*

**Esther McIntosh**

Hello, I'm Esther McIntosh professor of feminist theology and ethics at York St. John University. This is a podcast for the Institute for Social Justice with Dr. Ernestine Gheyoh Ndzi, Senior Lecturer in law with your business school. Ernestine has been researching widely on the challenges of shared parental leave. Part of that research touches on the impact of shared parental leave on breastfeeding for mothers returning to work. She is currently leading on a project with Dr. Anjali Raj Westward, investigating shared parental leave and breastfeeding practices in UK higher education institutions. Dr. Anjali Raj Westwood lecturer of Healthcare Management and Entrepreneurship at York St John University is a healthcare entrepreneur, a certified antenatal breastfeeding and Hypnobirthing educator and a trained doula. Her research interests span telehealth maternity and child health, and workplace policies for breastfeeding mothers. We're also joined by Jessica Shivers, coaching psychologist, author of Mothers work, how to get a grip on guilt and make a smooth return to work and host of the comeback coach podcast. She's also the founder of the talent keeper specialists. A Business's mission is to keep everyone everywhere feeling confident, connected, and careful when they take extended leave from work. Their clients are forward thinking employees such as ITV CIPD, BlackRock and Lily's kitchen. And we also have Emma Shepherd, the founder of the Maternity Teacher Paternity Teacher Project, the UK charity for Parent Teachers. She has 12 years experience as an English teacher, lead practitioner and mentor in both the UK and Vietnam. She's a 2010 Teach First ambassador and spent the last five years teaching alongside training to become a professional coach, and researching the motherhood penalty in education. Emma now lives in South of France with a husband and two children running the MT PT project full time.

**Esther McIntosh**

Welcome, everybody. Ernestine, can we start with you? And can you tell us something about your projects, why you started it, why you engaged with it, and what helpful information you think it's going to lead to

**Ernestine Gheyoh Ndzi**

The project, I think it's been very much driven by the gender equality agenda. We’re very excited, especially when shared parental leave was introduced. However, we know that shared parental leave was a great step in the right direction, [wasn't] it had a lot of flaws in it, that didn't mean that [strength] straight up?, we will not see great takeup. So although that was the case, but it's been around the takeup has not been excellent either. But there still has been people taking up share parental leave. So the interest was really to look at shared parental. The main thing was because when you check parental leave was introduced. One of the first sort of studies that was done after that pointed out that the reason why uptake was low was or was going to be low is that mothers don't want to share. And that was something that really caught my attention. And I wanted to just question why mothers didn't want to share. So when I started doing this study, I identified quite a number of reasons why mothers potentially may not want to share their leave. But one of those themes that identified was breastfeeding, which really caught my attention, because it immediately came to me that although we talked about shared parental leave, although the government has introduced that shared parental leave, they seem to have forgotten about breastfeeding completely. Although breastfeeding is something that is natural. So we consider that as a natural law and should be taken into account when policies are being made. It really caught my attention because there is no national policy on breastfeeding in the workplace, although there is a policy which makes shared parental leave legal, but when it really comes to the workplace, there isn't anything that could be used as a reference apart from health and safety measures, which talks about they give you break the metrics assessment apart from that, nothing else. Then I started doing that study, but I thought it will be great to look at higher education, which is one of the sectors that it's kind of like the beacon in the sector does all this great research and influence policies and So therefore, I thought that would be leading the way when it comes to really equality when it comes to supporting parents to take shared parental leave when it comes to providing and supporting mothers returning to work and who are still breastfeeding so that they can continue with their breastfeeding practice if they wanted to. So that was the drive to look at shared parental leave, and breastfeeding practices in UK higher education institutions. Now, I will say rather, kind of, shockingly, from the findings, we found that it wasn't the case. In terms of that real support. Yes, we did find that there was some support in some institutions. But most of the data and even the interviews that we did, it was more kind of like really this, particularly with breastfeeding, it was completely a forgotten phenomenon in the workplace. And women were left not knowing what to do not know where to find any policies, and then feel like they can actually have a conversation about that, because if it is coming from them, they're just thinking this is something that is almost like a taboo, although we know that breastfeeding is allowed. And then when you look at things like shared parental leave, again, if we're looking at it from that perspective of gender equality, what we realise is that older workplaces have policies in place, but they were not proactive in encouraging parents to take shared parental leave. So it's a new policy. And also, it's a very complex policy that it needs someone who knows about it, or is very good at reading policies to even read and understand what it means. So it means that workplace needs to be able to support parents who want to take shared parental leave, by bringing the systems of the policy to their knowledge, and also offering to explain to them what it really means and how that will work for them in practice. But what we've seen from our study, because we looked at sixty six universities, policies on shared parental leave, we found some of the policies really lacking are really one thing because the information was not clear at all, there were jargons in there, that doesn't make sense. Some of the universities, for example, will provide hypothetical or real examples, which could help people to understand what the policies is all about. There were just very few universities that provided examples. And there were very few universities that included something in the policy saying if you want to or you're interested in this, come and talk to us. And I think the other thing is that we found that really, when parents talk or parents generally talk about, oh, I'll be going off, either for maternity or paternity leave no such conversations around breastfeeding, or taking off shared parental leave really comes into the picture. So for a woman, it's more like, Oh, you're going on maternity leave. So when are you going and the conversation ends there. And for the man is more like paternity leave. Okay, two weeks, and you're coming back, and it ends there. So we see, although we are saying that the policies are not great, we know that shared parental leave policy isn't great. But we can see people taking shared parental leave. So we expect the workplace to do their own part as far as this is concerned. So unfortunately, our study is showing that parents generally are being let down by universities, when it comes to shared parental leave. And for breastfeeding it’s even worse, because mothers that we spoke to just found that they're completely lost. They don't know where to start from in terms of having a conversation at all. So yeah, that's what we did as the study. And that's what we found. And we think that's something that really needs to be addressed by all the universities for this project. But it doesn't limit to the universities, I think every sector needs to think about this carefully.

**Esther McIntosh**

Sounds really important Ernestine. Anjali, perhaps we can bring you in there is this short experience of breastfeeding more widely as somebody who's a breastfeeding educator.

**Anjali Raj Westwood**

Yes, definitely. And as because I've been working with women for about six and a half years now. And this is across the sectors. And I think where it stems from in the workplace is that historically, it's been patriarchal. And you know, you think like a man act like a man to be in the workplace. And unfortunately, even though we are in the 21st century, in some ways, that attitude hasn't changed. So firstly, women are not comfortable to bring up the conversation when they go back to work as a Can I breastfeed? where can I breastfeed? The word breast is still a taboo and there's a situation of being uncomfortable about it. But apart from that, it's also that organisations are not making that effort to tell their employees that our culture is open. We are fine about it. You know, here are our facilities. or if there is a facility, there's no signage. So I think we need to be a lot more open about it. And that's where things will change so that women are comfortable talking about it, managers are comfortable asking about it. And conversations are not hidden, or you know, under the table kind of situation. And that's been my experience across all sectors, not just education.

**Esther McIntosh**

would you echo Anjali thoughts there? Is it the same for teachers in a school setting as Ernestine's found the university setting?

**Emma Shepherd**

Absolutely. Yeah, I think so. And what the University and the school setting, whether primary or secondary or UI Fs have have in common is that we are student facing a lot of the time so the flexibility that we might find to sort of stop working, spend an hour expressing or be even at the desk expressing whilst answering emails, that's not something that we necessarily have the flexibility to do at schools, I think it would maybe be a bit of an issue, if teacher was to express was teaching year nine, French, for example. And actually, schools are incredibly busy places. And so even finding the time and this is the reality of it, having spent 12 years there, even spending finding the time to go to the toilet, or to eat lunch in between lessons and duties and detentions. And that email that needs to be answered in that lesson. It just needs to be tweaked before the five minutes between this class comes in because it's not going to work or forgotten to do my photocopying, actually finding time in the day to then sit down for half an hour calmly in a quiet space to breastfeed to do the logistics of putting milk in the fridge. And storing and labelling and dating and all that sort of thing is not particularly realistic, it can be done, and it absolutely has been done by many members of our community. But often when we talk about continuing to breastfeed at work for teachers, it does involve the flexible working that's required because breastfeeding is a protected characteristic. I know Ernestine, you talked about there not being any legal requirements around what we need to provide apart from health and safety provision, or I think it's like a place to lie down which is great, but not particularly helpful when you need to lock a door have a fridge or have a quiet space that isn't you know the medical room where somebody is going to come in with a grazed knee. So for many of our community often means reverse feeding or it means requesting flexible working so that you have a protected longer lunch or your timetabling and clever ways so that you have a block of time that's free, and then what you would be doing in that time you're doing later in the day or earlier in the day or whatever. So planning and marking and administrative tasks. But that also requires a great deal of discipline, because teaching is incredibly reactive and incredibly high pressured. So we're faced with the option of get my planning or my marking or answering these emails or answer these inquiries right now or this hour is protected to go and sit alone quietly and and express the immediate priorities can sometimes be difficult to to align with with that need to continue breastfeeding. Whenever you talk about breastfeeding, you really do need to know the details of how it works to understand how to offer something that can work for teachers. So you know, if it's a case of you do a morning feed, and then you can save the the afternoon feed for 330- 4 o'clock, and then you do your evening feeding, then you do a midnight feed, for example. So they still get four feeds in a day, even being able to leave schools so that you can do the collection for four o'clock is tricky. Or even being able to start school, some senior leaders need to be on the gate at 720. So you know, plus all the morning routine plus a toddler that needs to get dressed and doesn't want to put their socks on, you know that it's it's about understanding the lived experiences of these teachers and exactly what that means on a day to day basis. And it can be very tricky.

**Esther McIntosh**

Very tricky to juggle all of this, Jessica, is this a particular source of guilt for working mothers that trying to juggle breastfeeding and work commitments?

**Jessica Shivers**

Well, it can be if people are feeling as though they're having to give up feeding their child the way they want to feed their child before they're ready to but I see a slightly different picture in a corporate space. And I think it can really vary according to the size of the organisation. So I was really encouraged. I mean, I'm talking very anecdotally now, but really encouraged when I had a conversation with a coachee last week who is moving to a new organisation after having her second child and she was telling me that HR was telling her ahead of her joining you know, we know that you're joining from maternity leave, and we have just not just got a breastfeeding room but we've just re decorated, we've upgraded our breastfeeding room, which was wonderful. It was wonderful on so many levels Esther that a they already had a breastfeeding room but they were improving it and this HR person was thinking to tell my coachee about this anticipating that she's actually joining the organisation a little bit earlier than she would like to so she was coming off maternity leave earlier. She's going to be in a very big job and it made sense to the organisation for her or to be joining a little bit sooner than she would like to be. But then at the other end of the spectrum, Esther, we can have much smaller employers who not only do they not perhaps have the facilities because you know, space costs square meterage. But they perhaps don't have a very big HR team. And perhaps not that sophisticated. We're not thinking about this. So then the onus is on the woman to be able to say, these are my needs, can we accommodate them? So I think there's a very different experience depending upon often the size, but not always. But that's a big factor the size of the organisation that you are working in.

**Esther McIntosh**

That's a very positive story, Jessica, someone actually has a breastfeeding room. And redecorated it, there was certainly nothing like that at work when I had my children. So it seems this in particular then is an issue for gender equality at the workplace, for mothers in the workplace. So what for each of you does gender equality for mothers at the workplace mean? Ernestine we’ll come back to you?

**Ernestine Gheyoh Ndzi**

I think gender equality means a whole lot of things. Because if we're thinking about gender equality, that equality in terms of the woman having the same opportunity, playing on the same level playing field as the men, then all institutions need to have that thinking in their minds in every single policy and every single part of the organisation. Now we're talking about shared parental leave, and we talking about breastfeeding today. But if we just to tell talk about breastfeeding, for example, this is something the simple fact that you see a woman, What do you see next is you see the breast and we are mammals, which means if a woman is to have a child, it's up to the woman, but there is that possibility that she could be breastfeeding. So if we're talking about gender equality in the workplace, and talk about the fact that women should have equal opportunity, and no barriers to stop them going up the ladder, then we need to think about breastfeeding, for example, which I look at it as a natural law, it's a natural law, that when you give birth, there is that possibility that you will breastfeed, some women don't breastfeed for so many other different reasons. But we still have a lot of women who breastfeed and really want to do that. And then when you start to build in like the WHO recommendations, which says you should breastfeed exclusively for six months, and then after that up to about two years, then you see, you can't really talk about gender equality in the workplace, when you don't make that provision for women to continue breastfeeding when they come back to work. Because like in our study, what we found was that women are put in a very difficult position where they have to make a choice. And the big question here is should women be made to choose really, they have to make a choice as to whether they want to continue breastfeeding, which means stay at home and to the detriment of their careers or return to work, where there's no support, and then have to give up on breastfeeding, which is a whole different health related issues to that because the benefit of breastfeeding has been widely recognised. So women then find themselves in a very tricky position. And some of them like I said, they are very guilty, because they have to make decisions about giving up at the time, though, didn't want to give up. So they're looking at a career and they're looking at the babies. So if we're talking about gender equality in the workplace, things like this should be the first things that the workplace should have a policy about, plastered everywhere and singing about it. Otherwise, we can't really be talking about gender equality in the workplace.

**Emma Shepherd**

Yeah, I just I find it really interesting hearing you talk there Ernestine because I remember reading part of your work that talked about this assumption that women, when they were thinking about returning to work, they would tie in their return to work for when they wanted to stop breastfeeding. So this immediate assumption that they returned to work and the end of breastfeeding was sort of happening at the same time. And that really rang true for me, I breastfed both of my children my first up until six months on my second to about eight months, and really, in my mind, and I wanted initially to be for six months, and then I wanted to return to work. And at no point did I think I would be doing both of those at the same time. And actually, for me, it was a bit of a relief first time round, because as much as I enjoyed breastfeeding, there was a part of me that just wanted, wanted myself back and wanted my body back and wanted wanted that independence, physical independence from my child. But what was interesting was the second time I returned slightly later because I had the six weeks holidays. So because the timing of my when my daughter was born, and so I did naturally carry along on longer than I said I was going to and it was a very easy thing to do and it felt more normal or more sort of more happier than than I thought it would have done had when I had my first child but again I was at assumption there that the moment I get back to work, and I wouldn't be feeding anymore. And I just thought that was, even though you've just spoken there about this idea of being forced to make the decision between either or sometimes they're not decisions, their assumptions. And I thought that was a really interesting finding from your work that that women didn't necessarily know better or different to be able to continue their breastfeeding journey when they're at work. And I don't know personally, if I would have carried on longer had that option been available to me, or whether I, my sort of excuse or my reasoning around I'd like my body back was a way of comforting myself that that was that was going to be a stopping point for me, I'm not really sure of what my psychology was there, because that's just the way it happened.

**Esther McIntosh**

So really interesting issue. And I went, when I went back to work, I was breastfeeding, trying to find time during the day to express and not be interrupted, because there was no way to do it. And you've got sites as well, it was it was all pretty exhausting. Jessica, have you got thoughts about this?

**Jessica Shivers**

Well, like Emma, that was my feeling that I came to an end with breastfeeding when I knew I wanted to return to work. But I'm thinking about coachees I've worked with recently who are very much seen breastfeeding and the return to work as things that can go hand in hand and continuing to breastfeed as almost coming back as to to you asked me about guilt earlier, almost, it's a way to assuage guilt, because there's been this continued physical connection with the child through breastfeeding when someone has returned to work. So expressing in the day or getting the milk supply so that she's feeding in the morning and the evening, it's almost been something that has transported from maternity leave into the transition back to work. And if I may, mention something that I came across a few months ago via Coachee, and it's this new, very discreet expressing device from a company called Elvie, Anjali is nodding away and sort of that fits within inside a woman's bras so she can be expressing while she's at her desk, which I just thought, Gosh, that's so liberating. And what will that do for changing perhaps the number of women who do return to work and are still breastfeeding? And then my mind sort of going on to well, what can that mean for shared parental leave, because as Ernestine has said, one of the big factors for women not wanting to sort of give up a portion of their shared maternity leave, is wanting to carry on with the breastfeeding. But I feel really, really strongly that if we're going to get equality in the workplace, then we must encourage men to take shared parental leave. And in fact, we must have a portion of shared parental leave that is set aside exclusively for the father or the non birthing parent. And that's the view that I've advocated for since shared parental leave came into law, I sort of thought from the very beginning there needs to be a use it or lose it portion. So going into sort of that gender equality piece, what does it mean to me? Well, just honing in on a subject today absolutely means men being encouraged to take shared parental leave. And if maternity leave pay is enhanced by an employer, then Let's enhance shared Parental Leave Pay as well to encourage to incentivize men to take it.

**Esther McIntosh**

Anjali, would you like to come in there about breastfeeding and breastfeeding devices?

**Anjali Raj Westwood**

Yes, so few things, in individual points. One is in terms of gender equality in the workplace. And with the current topic that we're looking at, I think I'm going to pick up a line from my TED Talk, which was motherhood should not be a deciding factor for career progression. And I think that is the problem right now. And when I mean career progression, there's a lot of things that affects her physical health, emotional health, the workplace policies, so we need to look at our employees, men or women from a more wholesome perspective, and not just as men and women, I think we ignore the responsibilities that come as a parent, as a partner, as a spouse. And that works both ways. So that's my gender equality part in terms of breastfeeding, there is also lack of support for mothers who are who are returning to work. And I'm looking at this from a health perspective. So for example, I work with a lot of moms in India, I work virtually with them, and we start planning almost two months before they actually return to work. Because we get into a schedule where they start pumping, they start storing, so they have enough in the freezer in case you know, supply drops, there is a lot of physical and emotional preparation that happens, which, unfortunately, a lot of moms don't have access to. So all of a sudden, we can't just one day, flip the switch and say, Okay, tomorrow I'm going back to work and I'm going to manage everything that causes a lot of stress for the mom and the baby, you know, by virtue of that, so we need to also look at that support. And lastly, in terms of the devices, yes, that's a brilliant device that's come out. But like a lot of other baby things, they're very expensive. So if we are looking at this on a more national or global level where we want moms to feel empowered and be part of the workplace, we can't have that price range. That's where innovation needs to come in. Companies need to start getting similar devices at lower prices, or they need to be other options for moms to use them, because I looked at it recently, and I was like, maybe I could afford it. But would I spend that much on something I'll use for a few months? I'm not sure. So if I'm thinking like that, then I can imagine you know what others would? So that's my view on the devices as well.

**Esther McIntosh**

Thank you Anjali. Ernestine.

**Ernestine Gheyoh Ndzi**

just want to pick on a point that Jessica and Anjali have they've made in terms of encouraging men to take parental leave as well. Yes, workplaces do need to encourage men to do so now. I just wanted to point that when we did this study, it's amazing how many mothers really did not… if I'm talking about mothers here, because it comes across like they're the proactive ones who want to go away and have a quick look, what is on offer, what can I use? What can I benefit from? now, the universities that were looked at not too many, but a lot of them also the enhancing shared parental leave pay almost in line with how much they're enhancing maternity leave pay. The interesting thing that came… I won't say as a shock to me was that you speaking to mothers, and then you say, but the policy is this way. So first of all, explaining the policy and they go, Oh, I didn't know that if I knew that I would have shared. And then when you say Do You Know your workplace policy? They say, Well, I don't know. And sometimes it depends where the interview is taking place. Quick Google and then you say, but your workplace is paying this much. Oh, I didn't know that. So we talking if we are thinking about models here, for example, like I said, there are very there are some men who are or other partners who are the same who quickly have a look at what is there on offer. But even if there is like some of them that we found, but the fact that the universities or the employers generally aren’t proactive to say, look, this is here and we pay this much we are supportive. If that doesn't come through the men will they won't take it or the other the partners, the birthing partners would want to take it one because they're just on our way. And secondly, because the quietness from the employers is perceived as they don't want that to happen. They perceive it as Oh, okay, it means if I take more than two weeks, that's not they will laugh at me or it will affect my career, or it will do this. So at the moment, the policy isn't great, yes, we will strongly advocate for an independent use it or lose it policy, which the government is taking its beauty time to do the review. We don't know when that will happen. But in the meantime, the policy that is there, in the meantime, employers should be seen to do their bit and then let the parents make the informed decision. So the key thing is give them the information and let them make the decisions as to whether they want to take it or not.

**Esther McIntosh**

Certainly comes across as a very complicated policy at times and very difficult for you know, the two parents involved will try and work out how to juggle and how that's actually going to work. Jessica, if you've got more thoughts on this?

**Jessica Shivers**

Well yeah, so picking up on what Ernestine was saying, you know, a few years ago, I decided we needed a bit of pragmatism around this, we need to find a way to make it very easy for employers to talk to men about share parental leave, and just like women are given what's called a mat b one form in the UK when she's 20 weeks pregnant, my feeling was let's have a dad b one form that gets given to the Father to take to his employer and say, I'm an expectant father. I created a petition to government, it didn't have the marketing campaign behind it did it on a bit of a whim. But I think if I had sort of thought about it bit more savvily could have done something with it. But I think that that's what we need is something that men just automatically take to their employers say I am an expectant parent, and then that sets a whole chain of events in motion.

**Esther McIntosh**

That sounds like a fantastic idea. Jessica, we need to reinvigorate that campaign. I think, Emma, what's your experience with maternity leave and teachers?

**Emma Shepherd**

Oh, yeah, it's interesting that wants to come back to that idea of you know, how's it working in education? There's a there's a bit of a context behind it, like like a lot of healthcare professions, but potentially not like the corporates that you're seeing Jessica, teaching is a female dominated profession. And so actually the the male voice or the father's voice in a lot of these conversations is the slightly hidden voice. And I think that's the elephant in the room in these conversations is that even though there is a great deal of disparity, and there is a motherhood penalty in education, it's what we've been researching for the last five years, for example, 76% of teachers are women. But at secondary level, only 36% of head teachers are women. So there's a huge disparity in between what we're seeing when our teacher workforce and our leadership workforce, there is the disparity at primary level as well, it's it's slightly less, but we're constantly seeing this disproportion. And we know that that's got something to do with the motherhood penalty, and women's confidence and access to flexible working in terms of leadership promotion and progression opportunities. But I think from the anecdotes that we're hearing from our community, shared parental leave is quite an interesting one for teachers because we do get 13 weeks of holiday a year and actually contractually when we're not paid for the holiday. So I really want to make that clear to anybody who's listening who's not a teacher, our pay is just spread out across the the 12 months. But it does mean that we have 13 weeks where essentially, fathers aren't are fully paid. So the motivation to take time off to reduce pay at a time when we really could do with that money. There's not a great deal of motivation. Therefore, for fathers in education, and often where we find teachers are looking to, there's a fantastic organisation called Teachers SPL, which is run by a lady called Kinsey Barrett, who's one of our advocates the MTPT project, but she also essentially does the does the legwork, and does the education and does the paperwork around accessing shared parental leave for teachers, but a lot of that paperwork, and a lot of reasons that teachers choose to take shared parental leave is so that the female teacher can get paid for the holiday period. Because whilst we do have that generous holiday allowance, unlike somebody in the corporate sector, for example, who can tag a month, for example, a fully paid holiday on to the end of their leave, if our enhanced leave comes to an end in the middle of July, we then go down to statutory at a time when all our colleagues are being paid full pay have the six week holidays, where shared parental leave allows us to return to work. And for that six weeks get paid fully for that six weeks, and then go back on shared parental leave in September. So a woman who doesn't share her leave at all, with her partner can still get paid almost two months, two and a half months more per year by accessing shared parental leave. So it's quite interesting that this policy that was sort of introduced to try to make things more equal between mothers and fathers or mothers a number thing partners is actually being used to to try and close the gender pay gap over the maternity period rather than give dads or non birthing parents more time at home with their children.

**Esther McIntosh**

That's really insightful situation, you know, understanding of the situation facing school teachers and yeah, we know that the the maternity pay gap affects higher education too, and taking time out just for maternity leave, affects your promotion chances and other publications you produce, all those sorts of things. So what do you all think then is the major roadblock to change? Ernestine?

**Ernestine Gheyoh Ndzi**

I think the major roadblock to change is still the fact that most institutions, modelled on the Father as a breadwinner, and mother, as a caregiver, a lot of the institutions are still running on that model. And until they kind of drop that model and start to look at everyone and start to recognise how much the women are bringing into the labour force, that's not going to change. And like I said, at the very beginning, this is a subject that all institutions needs to think about in every decision that they are making. So it's not just and this is something that currently I've been noticing is kind of like when you talk about shared parental leave on breastfeeding, some institutions tend to say, oh, that's EDI stuff. No, that's not EDI stuff. That is stuff for the the institution. So there needs to be an institutional change from top to bottom is not a department's responsibility. And that's why it's all going wrong. So that is the barrier institutions or employers still haven't recognised that this is something they need to deal with. So they're just like, Oh, are you the EDI lead, you solve that they can't solve that it has to come from top to bottom. So for me, that is the biggest barrier to gender equality.

**Esther McIntosh**

So what you're finding in the corporate field as well, Jessica.

**Jessica Shivers**

I think a lot of employers just don't see that there's a problem. So if you don't see it as a problem, then you're not going to do anything about it. And I'm a pragmatist Esther, and one of the things that I think employers can do is asking questions like, you know, if this was the best place to work as a pregnant woman or as a woman who's just given birth, or as a working parent, what would we do differently? So you start to get that information from people. So you can shape a workplace where people stay and can do their best work failing that if people leave, you need to be doing robust exit interviews to understand what it would have taken to make them stay and to encourage complete honesty so the business can can learn from it.

**Esther McIntosh**

Yeah, thank you. Emma, in the school sector, do you feel like there is a move to change in a kind of broader the broader sense that Ernestine was talking about? I know, you said that, obviously, that most teachers are women. So maybe breaking that idea that women are carers, is that harder to break in the school sector,

**Emma Shepherd**

I think you've got sort of two factors at play here. The first is that teaching is is an incredibly high, pressured, fast paced environment. And often school leaders are dealing with pressure from external monitoring bodies, they're in very reactive context. So you've got a parent kicking off and reception, and that has to be dealt with now, or you've got a safeguard thing issue. And that has to be dealt with now, or a person who's supposed to be delivering assembly hasn't turned up, and that needs to be dealt with now. So there was very little time often for school leaders to have weekends away to do the reflective space. I mean, whenever I've worked in the corporate world, the time dedicated to meeting and communication and strategy and planning and longer term, it's just it blows me away. And the HR practices that that are in the private sector are just often leaps and bounds away from teaching where you know, five minutes to say good morning to somebody is something to be treasured. So I think the fact that we just don't have that headspace all the time at schools to see the bigger picture and to understand, right, if we improve practices here, then this would be really beneficial in the long term for these reasons, um, or even to sit down and read the research or read the policy documents. So that's, I think, the first sort of immediate barrier. But I also think that the fact that yeah, teaching, like other healthcare professionals is considered a caring role. Until we get more men into the profession, we can't have that shared conversation, that shared experience. And where we do have those shared conversations within the MTPT project community, we're finding that the men's experiences are pretty much exactly the same as women's. And there was a CIPD report of a small like 170 men, I think, who had taken extended leave and the conversations that they were coming out with about returning to work and how they felt. Having taken that extended timeout, you know, change the names, change the pronouns, and it would read exactly the same as mothers. And I mean, even even during the school holiday periods, I have a joke with my friends, whenever we go out during the school holidays, my children, I'm like, that's a teacher, not for teacher, that's teacher, you know, when you see men with their rucksacks on with their pack lunches, and two children trailing behind them in a museum, you just know this as a teacher, and what a beautifully family friendly professional is to have that six weeks or that two weeks of time, or to be able to help them with their homework and understand the ins and outs of the conversations that are happening around your child and to know how to support them in that way. It's such a wonderful experience for mothers and fathers. And until we get more men into that space, primary and secondary, we're just going to be limited by an a bit of an us and them dichotomy, which isn't helpful at all. And I think incentivizing shared parental leave financially and making sure that there are blocks that and then have to take it to us or lose it. And that's what they have been talking about or sort of moving towards. We always hold up Scandinavia as the ideal. But moving towards those models where we're talking about parents, rather than that sort of maternity driven policy where in order to or in the name of protecting mothers rights and women's rights, we're actually compartmentalising people into different roles, which actually falls really unjustly on fathers who are going back to work, some of them when their children are seven days old and 14 days old. And that is just awful, personally, I think.

**Esther McIntosh**

Thanks, Emma. Yeah, I think there are lots of sort of institutional practices and ideas, as Ernestine said, still assume that women are in the caring role. And I know that when I went back to work, the number of times the school would ring me rather than my husband, you know, when there's a problem with the children, Ill there's still this assumption that you contact the mother first, I think that means I'm picking and yet when there are fathers who wants to be more involved and want to be more engaged, but they're almost not given that opportunity. And then the school holidays are a whole other issue, which obviously, as you're saying, if you're actually a teacher, maybe the school holidays is slightly easier to organise in terms of what happens to your children. But if you don't work in a school and school holidays become another area where again, the burden can often fall more heavily on mothers, which again, can affect, you know, career progression and so on. Anjali, how does this relate to women in India and their role as carers and is there change there?

**Anjali Raj Westwood**

It is starting but it's difficult. And I'm going to go back slightly on the whole roadblock thing, because, like Jessica was saying, you know, some companies you have 10,000, 15,000, 20,000 employees, you have some just smaller, but my experience of speaking with HR and organisations and everywhere has, there's always a question of, but I only have two or three mothers who are pregnant or breastfeeding, oh, but I only have five, we need to stop looking at that as a problem, you have five mothers who need it. It's that narrative that needs to change. Now, irrespective of whether you have 100 moms who need a breastfeeding room, or you have one mom, you owe it to them to make your workplace friendly for them. And I think that's where I feel that's a roadblock that that thought that narrative has to change, where we don't look at it as a minority majority, or it's not a numbers game. Maternity is never a numbers game, you know, we are trying to make life comfortable for parents. And again, if we want fathers to get more involved, if you want other partners, non voting parents to get more involved, they will not have a chance to do that to the mother, the birthing parent is comfortable, because there's always going to be okay, who's takes the burden. Now, if, as a mom as a birthing parent, you're constantly under stress and struggle, then it's going to be difficult for the other person to take leave or to be like, Okay, let me do this. So we can't look at this as two different compartments like we were talking about, it has to be looked at together. But change won't happen till the breastfeeding mother or the birthing parent is comfortable, is emotionally and physically okay with what's happening. So I think that is my view of, you know, the road block. And it's the same I've seen this in India, and for my conversations in the UK, I think it's the same here, we need to - issues for mother surprisingly, irrespective of which part of the world you belong to, irrespective of which socio-economic strata you belong to challenges for mothers have are the same everywhere.

**Esther McIntosh**

Absolutely. Thank you. Jessica. You mentioned earlier actually asking parents what they themselves need and how much more lethal that might be to develop a supportive workplace. So what does a supportive workplace look like to you?

**Jessica Shivers**

it's about enhanced maternity and shared Parental Leave Pay, it's about women being encouraged to do a phased return when she comes back, or when the chap comes back from share parental leave to settle back in and get comfortable. It's about asking about family and life beyond work showing interest, that's a line manager asking so that people feel they can bring their whole selves to work, it's having an output focus. So it's not about a bottom on a seat. Of course, it's different for for teachers, where it's very much, and people where it really is about being in the room doing that thing, whether it's stacking your shelf teaching a year six child, but for lots of roles, it doesn't have to be about that. And it can be more about the output focus, I think it's about asking people how and what they'd like things to be, you know, different when they return. And, and also, it's about specifically about returning to work, I think it's about people, line managers and other people seeing that person who's returning as someone who's bringing fresh perspectives, they're not just somebody who is on the backfoot out of the loop and got to catch up that actually, because you've had some distance from the context in which you work, you see the world differently. And that can be helpful in all sorts of fields. And I always remember doing a piece of work with a big FMCG, fast moving consumer goods organisation. And somebody said to me during that session when I made that point that you're so right, because I work in new product development, and spending time at baby groups, seeing how people were so I'll give the game away. Now it's to do with tea and hot drinks, beverages. She said, it gave me ideas that I'm bringing back into the workplace. And that's a really lovely illustration that people do bring a fresh perspective when they come, we're not on the backfoot we're not out the loop. And we haven't got to catch up.

**Esther McIntosh**

Fantastic. Yeah, thank you, Jessica. Emma,

**Emma Shepherd**

I wanted to really pick up on that, Jessica, because something that sort of core of the MTPT project what we were all about initially was this idea of completing professional development or personal development on leave. And that was quite a controversial idea, this idea that we would encourage women to work on leave, when we were sharing and sort of raising the profiles of teachers who were completing masters or teachers who were reading leadership texts or sort of visiting museums with their babies and really enjoying that. And we initially we came on under a great deal of criticism for that in terms of raising expectations around what maternity leave was for, but I think that you've really illustrated there how you know, what an enriching experience parental leave can be. And I think what we hear again, and again, and again, cross sector is that the way that we can support gender equity in the workplace is to listen and to communicate and to have that transparency of communication because sort of fulfilling maternity leave for one person might not be the fulfilling maternity for another person. A return to work in the needs that teacher might have more an employee might have for one mother for one father, for one parent might be completely different to another. So whilst there will be commonalities between what's helpful those personalised conversation that listening but also the understanding and the empathy to know which questions to ask, Which point are so important, and I think I know that Jess does those coaching and that coaching practice of asking the right questions at the right time is really helpful for understanding different needs. And that's that is the intent of fathers as well. So when fathers announced their expectancy, instead of just saying, congratulations, and moving on knowing that that is a moment to say, um, what are you thinking about leave? You know, and when teachers are going on leave and saying, and how would you like that to look for you in the next five years, so that we're not making assumptions about what you'll want to come back part time or you we will share that progression opportunity with you, but you probably won't want to hear about it, or we won't bother you whilst you're on leave. Because of that, that would be harassment, we're not allowed to do that. So I think the support is that listening and that communication is so important. But also then when there are patterns in what you're hearing from your employees within a specific context, formalising that into policies and procedures so that when that good listening leader leads or moves on or is not in that place anymore, those formal policies and procedures remain so that you're sort of maybe slightly clueless, but well intentioned, new middle leader, for example, who's had you know, a 29 year old young man who really wants to do well, when his when his colleague, or a second department gets pregnant and but has no clue what to do has a document to go back to and say, right, well, I'm going to be really studious and follow this to the letter so that that that practice can be continued in supportively.

**Esther McIntosh**

That's great idea Emma. So Anjali and then Ernestine, final thoughts on what a supportive workplace would look like?

**Anjali Raj Westwood**

In one line, I think where parents are not afraid to tell people that they're pregnant. Because you know, if you can confidently walk into your office and say, You know what, I'm expecting a baby, and not have to worry about what's happening next, what's happening to my career? How will I do my leave how, you know, parents go through a million thoughts when that conversation comes up. So I think a supportive a perfect example for me would be a mum or a dad walking in and saying, 'You know what, I'm expecting a baby', and be absolutely fine with it. So that's my ideal view of a supportive workplace.

**Esther McIntosh**

And Ernestine?

**Ernestine Gheyoh Ndzi**

Communication. Just communicate, let them know that you are very comfortable to talk about these things, signage in the workplace, it needs to be there, clear signage on the website, it needs to be there, key words that if people Google the website, they can pick it up in either internally or externally wherever they want. It needs to be there in the absence of all that. It's very difficult. So yeah, clear communication.

**Esther McIntosh**

Thank you. So clear signs, clear policies are listening to feedback from parents, and yet I'm making a workplace environment somewhere where you can openly be pregnant and not not be afraid. So thank you so much for listening to this podcast with the Institute for Social Justice at York St John University. Goodbye.