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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

Thursday 28 March 2013

Session 4

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EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE
11th Meeting 2013, Session 4

CONVENER

*Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Marco Biagi (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)
*Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con)
*John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
*Siobhan McMahon (Central Scotland) (Lab)
*Dennis Robertson (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab)
James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Ann Henderson (Scottish Trades Union Congress)
Jacqueline Kerr (CITB)
Darah Zahran (OPITO)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Douglas Thornton

LOCATION

Committee Room 4

Scottish Parliament

Equal Opportunities Committee

Thursday 28 March 2013

[The Convener *opened the meeting in private at 08:59*]

09:30

Meeting continued in public.

Women and Work

The Convener (Mary Fee): Good morning, everyone, and welcome to the Equal Opportunities Committee's 11th meeting in 2013. I remind everyone to set electronic devices to flight mode or to switch them off completely.

Agenda item 2 is an evidence session on women and work, with a focus on occupational segregation. Let me start with introductions: at the table we have our clerking and research team, together with the official reporters and, around the room, we are supported by broadcasting services and the security office. I also welcome the observer in the public gallery. I am the committee's convener. I ask committee members and witnesses to introduce themselves in turn. Perhaps each of the witnesses could give a five-minute presentation on what they are focused on and what they hope to get out of this session. We will start the introductions with Marco Biagi.

Marco Biagi (Edinburgh Central) (SNP): I am the MSP for Edinburgh Central and deputy convener of the committee.

Dennis Robertson (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP): I am the MSP for Aberdeenshire West.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): I am the MSP for Glasgow Shettleston.

Siobhan McMahon (Central Scotland) (Lab): I am an MSP for Central Scotland.

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Ind): I am an MSP for the Highlands and Islands.

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): I am an MSP for North East Scotland.

Darah Zahran (OPITO): I am the policy affairs director with OPITO, which is the oil and gas skills body. Our focus is on getting the right workforce with the right skills and qualifications for the oil and gas industry. Female workers are underrepresented in the industry, particularly in the STEM—science, technology, engineering and mathematics—roles. A key focus for us is to try to tap into that talent pool for the industry by raising the profile of the female qualifications and talents that can add to the industry.

Jacqueline Kerr (CITB): I work for CITB-ConstructionSkills, for which I look after quality and standards in Scotland. My previous role related directly to equal opportunities and my current role still touches on that. We are both a sector skills council for construction and an industrial training board.

The statistics show that women are very underrepresented in construction, especially in the craft sectors such as joinery and painting. At professional level, things are a bit better, but there is still an acknowledgement that there are issues not just with getting women into the sector but with retention, or keeping them there. The transient nature of construction might be part of the issue, but there are other reasons.

Ann Henderson (Scottish Trades Union Congress): I am assistant secretary at the Scottish Trades Union Congress, which represents more than 630,000 workers, nearly half of whom are women, and their families. Therefore, we welcome the fact that the Equal Opportunities Committee is continuing to build on our discussions with the committee a year and a half ago.

The outcome that we hope for is that something will change. Like all the work that has gone on in the past year and a half, both the written submissions for today's meeting confirm and provide evidence of inequality and discrimination. A lot of data is available and there are a lot of opportunities to make informed decisions, but something really has to change.

From the point of view of our membership, in looking at occupational segregation, we are keen to ensure that we look at the whole workforce. We need a discussion about the value that our society attaches to caring and cleaning jobs, which are important, but which are not paid and valued as such, and which continue that segregation in the workforce. In tackling occupational segregation, we need to address not just the issues to do with the STEM subjects, but the undervaluing of many jobs that are done primarily by women. We need to consider how we can change the workforce profile in those sectors.

The Convener: Thank you. Members have a number of questions for our witnesses. I will start with John Finnie, who will ask about the improvements that have taken place and what is good. I will then move to Dennis Robertson, who has specific questions for OPITO.

John Finnie: My question is not much more than what the convener said. I want to get an understanding of where improvements have been made over, say, the past 20 years. What areas

have improved and what have been the drivers for that? Where things have improved, can we learn from the experience?

Darah Zahran: In the oil and gas industry, it is fair to say that the matter is a work in progress. There is still a real issue, which is becoming more pressing because, given the current buoyant sector, there is a need for people with mid-career skills. The statistics show that there is early withdrawal from the sector. Very few females are attracted to the sector in the first place, but those who come in often withdraw around the age of 29 or 30. If the industry is to fulfil its current economic potential, it needs a lot of workers who have five to 10 years' experience. We are losing a lot of skills, qualifications and potential talent. That has really come to light in this period of buoyancy in investment.

The industry has been slow to realise the potential advantages of trying to be more proactive in attracting females. Employers have a strong feeling that they should take the best person for the job without any positive discrimination. There are a number of trigger points, but a big issue is the perception that the industry is not particularly attractive to females.

When people are making their school subject choices, we need to improve their understanding of the skills that are required. We then need to overcome the perception that all jobs in the industry are dirty, require working offshore and are an unattractive prospect for females. Once we attract more females into the sector, we will need to find ways of retaining them. There has not been a huge amount of progress over the past 20 years, but there is now more understanding and much more work is being done to ensure that school pupils understand where technical studies, physics and maths might take them.

There are also practical considerations. When females are offered jobs, there are financial considerations for employers because of bed-space issues offshore. One female will require a room to herself, whereas four men can bunk down together, so there are practical considerations about having such a low proportion of females. Keeping people is also another key area. However, work is going on in schools and there is work to try to change perceptions and culture, although that is a bit harder to do.

John Finnie: Before the other two witnesses respond, I want to ask about that accommodation issue, which is tangible. Is that taken into account in the design of future accommodation on rigs? If not, the problem will just be perpetuated.

Darah Zahran: Certainly, that is a recurring theme that has been brought up by employers again and again. In relation to education, the issue about trying to find the right training facilities to ensure that we have a future pipeline of employees has been raised with Government ministers. If there is not enough bed space for the employees who are required to work on the projects, it is difficult to find additional bed space for trainees to come and learn on the job. That is a recurring theme, but there is a strong financial consideration.

There is talk about how we support training facilities and deal with the additional practicalities for females, but there is a perpetual problem in that, if only one or two females apply, they will take up a bigger proportion of the space. More bed space can be built at considerable cost, but there is a chicken-and-egg issue: do we say, "Build it and they will come," or do we get them to come and then build it? That is a difficult issue for the sector to address.

Ann Henderson: It now causes less surprise to see women doing a range of jobs. That is what I see around me, and young people and children today are growing up also seeing that, so people no longer take a second glance when they see a female train or bus driver. I have noticed that companies are doing proactive work by using girls and women, whom we know are statistically a minority, in their photographic images of apprentices taking up training opportunities. That is to be welcomed and is positive.

In the trade union movement, although people might still have a stereotyped view of what a trade union activist looks like, the fact is that, over the past two years, a majority of the members of the STUC's general council, which represents all our affiliated unions, have been female. That is the reality of the face of the trade union movement. Those things are important, I think, so there is an incumbency on us all to challenge such presumptions when they are made. That is not to deny the statistics, which still show consistently that women are underrepresented in a range of sectors, but I just see women everywhere and that is what we should look to see. We should support women who are doing difficult jobs or who are in a situation where unnecessary barriers are being put in their way.

For instance, the Fire Brigades Union has done interesting work with the fire services to encourage and support female firefighters. To return to a point that was made earlier, some practical design work has been done in insisting on agreements that, for example, there be separate changing facilities for male and female staff in the support units that are sent out to accompany fire engines to big fires.

Basic toilet provision is also an issue. People should be able to get sanitary protection when they are on site doing their job. Those types of

things should not be seen as the responsibility of the female worker. No one should have to ask or make a special request for sanitary protection provision. When resources are being built, designed and provided, there should be a presumption that those things will be put in place. I can see that there is good practice, but I am sure that it could be shared better and learned from more.

Uniforms are another issue that repeatedly comes up in the context of safety equipment. People should be given appropriate uniforms. Individual women and girls sometimes have to ask for smaller shoe sizes, but those should have been ordered as an option when the company was commissioning or ordering the equipment.

There is some good practice and I would definitely say that I have seen progress. The progress may not be rapid, but that does not mean that it is not there.

Jacqueline Kerr: Speaking for CITB-ConstructionSkills, there has been a fair bit of progress in the past 20 years in construction. For probably just under 20 years, our education team has been running positive action events in schools to promote construction as a viable career choice for girls. That has certainly been going on for a long time.

Another example is the Considerate Constructors Scheme—I noticed its label on the construction work that is going on outside the Parliament today—which is industry led. Employers are recognising that they need to take a different approach to construction.

All our teams that go out to speak to employers have been trained in equal opportunities, and they promote apprenticeships in particular as a means whereby employers can recruit more women. Basically, they let the employers know what the benefits are of recruiting more women. We did not do that 10 years ago, but we are doing it now. Things like that make a difference.

The number of schoolgirls and women applying for construction training has gone up over the years, but only slightly, so the industry is still not seen as a viable career choice. The reason for that is probably due to influencers, such as parents. Many parents do not see construction as a viable career choice for their sons, never mind their daughters.

There are also a lot of myths about construction. We are doing what we can and we have trained our staff to dispel the myths. On practical issues such as toilets, some think that male and female toilets are needed on site, but that is not the case. There just needs to be a toilet that locks, and it should be clean, anyway, even if it is just for men. We are doing our best to dispel such myths.

As you will see from my written submission, we have taken a practical approach in some of the initiatives that we have done over the years. For instance, we are working with the Scottish resource centre for women in science, engineering and technology on a practical project that gives women work experience with employers and the opportunity to showcase themselves. We are supporting them in relation to childcare. The desire is there to change the image of the sector.

We have also had a positive image campaign. We have been speaking about seeing more young women in our literature, whereas 20 years ago our literature detailed only the typical white male recruit. So there have been changes; granted, they are small, but they are many.

09:45

The Convener: Before I bring in Dennis Robertson I want to ask Darah Zahran about the loss of women from STEM roles. The OPITO submission says:

> "73 per cent of women graduates are lost from STEM compared with 48 per cent of male graduates".

This may seem simplistic, but even 48 per cent of male graduates leaving the STEM sector is a significant number. Have any studies been done on why so many people leave? Do men and women leave for different reasons?

Darah Zahran: I do not have that information, because the statistic relates to a field wider than that of the gas and oil industry. Having worked in the energy sector for a few years, I know that one problem is finding graduate employment. That might help to explain why men are lost from STEM roles, because those are traditionally male-dominated and women still are not going into them. There is an issue about maximising people's skills and potential when they leave university. There seems to be a gap between the point at which universities feel that they have done their job and the point at which employers take on the graduate to do a job. The message from employers is often that some graduates are unemployable, even with their degree or higher national diploma, because they have the wrong attitude or are not fit for purpose. That does a lot to explain why people in general leave STEM roles and move into finance or other sectors.

The loss of females from STEM roles is not necessarily a result of employers' lack of willingness to employ females; it is to do with the culture of the sector in general. For example, there is a perceived difference between the progress that a woman can make in engineering, say, compared to medicine or finance. That is a self-perpetuating problem, certainly in the oil and gas sector. Females who might be attracted to apply

find themselves in a male-dominated environment once they arrive, with little provision for females, which is why many of the females who make it into the field then leave.

The issues that apply to STEM roles generally differ from those relating to the oil and gas industries, but the key issue for females in all those fields is where to go once they have their degree. Key questions are whether employers are picking them up quickly enough and whether they are underutilising graduate degrees, in that they look only for the firsts and 2:1s and do not recruit graduates who have real potential in the workplace but who are deemed to be less attractive academically.

The Convener: This might be another simplistic question, but could it be simply that there is a gap between leaving university and going into employment? Is there something missing that could be done to help bridge the gap and retain people?

Darah Zahran: Strong internship opportunities help very much. Some employers in the oil and gas industry are proactively trying to get female graduates on board, because females achieve good results on experiential tests and assessments. In vocation-applicable tests, females are top performers. We need closer industry and academic liaison—particularly in the STEM sector—to explore how we can marry academic achievement to vocational requirement and have people completing their academic experience with more practical skills and more realism about how to transfer those skills to the workplace.

Marco Biagi: Can you expand on one of your comments and say where the STEM graduates go? You mentioned finance, but is that the main field that they enter?

Darah Zahran: Anecdotally, we know that a lot of people with strong mathematical skills go into finance or other high-earning industries and do not necessarily stay. My understanding is more about engineering and some of the higher-level qualifications. If engineers are underutilised in the workplace, they will go to a high-earning sector that wants them. The financial services have been good at proactively recruiting such people. Recently, the financial services have been trying to overcome a fairly negative image, and they have been positive on sector attractiveness in their recruitment.

Alex Johnstone: One reason why high performers who have entered industries such as the oil and gas industry leave them is that they are recruited to do other high-performance jobs. I think that you suggested that. I am interested in your view on whether there is a difference between men and women in that respect and whether, because women enter the oil and gas industry in smaller numbers and achieve that experience, they might even be more attractive to other types of employers.

Darah Zahran: I think that there is a culture of positive promotion and recognition. There is certainly generally a strong feeling in the oil and gas industry that the best person for the job gets it. You will probably find that in any profession that is predominantly male orientated.

Alex Johnstone: Is a woman who has made the grade in the first 10 years of a career in oil and gas likely to be more attractive to an alternative employer than her male counterpart?

Darah Zahran: There is a lot of headhunting and skills transferability across the oil and gas sector. A female who has overcome the barriers in a male-dominated environment will have shown a lot of attributes, drive and ambition, which will obviously be attractive. The sector probably starts to lose them once they hit 30 because of the work-life balance, the culture and the male-dominated work patterns. Understandably, females feel that they cannot balance all the other responsibilities that come into their lives, such as domestic responsibilities. They will go to employers that will take all those attributes on board and will look at how they can work with the female achiever and say, “What do you need in your life to make this work?” That is an issue. The women who break through the barriers will have attractive attributes for employers in all sectors.

Marco Biagi: Are there high attrition rates in the industry among men in their 30s for the same reasons, or do they tend to continue?

Darah Zahran: There is a lot of movement within the industry because of its culture. There are contractors and headhunting, and the industry is affluent. People are attracted to the day rates and contractual arrangements, so there is a lot of movement within and across organisations, but there are also high attrition rates. Only 10 per cent of those in the industry work offshore, so we need to address the perception in that respect. However, on movement and transferability, the attrition rates in the sector are good, but not for females, who find that the work patterns sometimes do not suit them.

The Convener: Dennis Robertson has more questions about oil and gas, after which John Mason will ask about schools and education.

Dennis Robertson: I give my apologies to the other witnesses. Perhaps I will be able to bring them in in a few minutes, but I would like to ask Darah Zahran about OPITO.

You have touched on many areas already, but I want to explore some perceptions. The job opportunities in the energy sector are vast and varied. Is enough being done to ensure that we talk not only about hard hats and overalls, but about aviation and helicopter pilots, project management, geophysicists, supply ships and a whole range of things? The opportunities are vast.

I am familiar with the your future in energy modules that are being taught in schools. However, there seems to be a bit of competition with some of the bigger companies, such as BP, that take only postgraduates and that do not seem to widen the net a wee bit. Why is that? Does that not restrict the opportunities for some young women?

Darah Zahran: The attrition rates for the OPITO modern apprenticeship scheme are among the highest in Scotland. There are recruitment channels at every tier of the industry. OPITO has a website, www.myoilandgascareer.com, to encourage people to think about the breadth of opportunities and skills that are required in the industry—it is not just about offshore and hard hat opportunities and skills. It is no longer a dirty industry. A lot of the marketing, using female role models where possible, is starting to filter its way through schools. We work with Education Scotland and Skills Development Scotland to try to show the breadth of skills and opportunities onshore and offshore, and the tide is turning there.

I cannot comment specifically on BP, but a few employers are deliberately looking at the range of talent that is out there and trying to attract that range of talent to give themselves and the industry—and indeed the school leavers—the widest possible choice while retaining people and attracting them to the industry. It is about geophysicists, divers, project managers, technicians and engineers. We are working hard to say, "It is not just about going in a helicopter offshore and, by the way, would you like to fly a helicopter?"

Dennis Robertson: We need chefs as well.

Darah Zahran: Yes. There are a lot of attempts to say that the whole breadth of the industry should appeal to nearly everybody coming through school or college at some point. That is an important point to make. The organisations are very health and safety aware and risk averse. They are getting more conscious of the need to attract everybody.

As I said, it is work in progress, but those who are involved in the industry are now keen to come together, to accept that just looking out for themselves has been self-defeating and to consider how to work with schools, education authorities, colleges and universities—but especially schools—to say, "This is a great industry that has 40 years left at the very least, so come and work with us."

Dennis Robertson: Is enough being done in job fairs throughout Scotland, rather than just in Aberdeen, Aberdeenshire and the north-east? Is OPITO doing enough to take that message about the opportunities to the rest of Scotland?

Darah Zahran: It is fair to say that we are taking the message to the rest of Scotland, and the rest of the United Kingdom. The hub around oil and gas has traditionally been in the north-east, but we are working much more closely with other local authorities. We are piloting a mechanics in practice programme in Aberdeen, which is about getting secondary 1 and 2 pupils to understand what mechanics and technical studies involve and how to apply physics in the workplace, in an attempt to open their minds to subject choice. We want to roll out that kit to all the local authorities and all schools and tap into the central belt talent pool.

OPITO staff who work in the east of England and in the south-east around Norwich and London say to people that Scotland and the north east are not that far away, that there are opportunities outside the local catchment area and that it is a mobile sector with transferable skills.

We need schools to work with us and we need local authorities to welcome our ambassadors into their schools. We need local authorities to adopt the kits that are being developed to reflect and complement the curriculum for excellence. A lot of work is being done, but it is fair to say that there is a lot of work to do and that we need to do it in collaboration with those key influencers.

Dennis Robertson: You mentioned in your written submission and in your opening remarks that the sector is still looking for a skilled workforce—people who are ready to go, with five to 10 years' experience. Those skills primarily are just not there in the skilled workforce in the UK, so we have to go beyond the shores of the UK to bring people in. Is that a huge disadvantage for the up-and-coming graduates?

Darah Zahran: Undoubtedly, when an industry has to go outside the UK to find the skills that it needs, something has gone wrong. It is a reflection of a lack of investment and training five or 10 years ago, and there is a reaction to that at the moment. The situation does not disadvantage graduates, because the organisations say that attracting the right graduates is not a problem. However, to get projects fulfilled, they have to go where the skills and experience are, which exacerbates the headhunting and just-in-time skills purchasing that goes on in the sector.

10:00

The work on sector attractiveness and the future talent pipeline does not have an impact on the immediacy of the requirement for skills and experience. We work closely with the Scottish Government, and through the UK Government, in trying to establish where we can use the relevant skills from declining industries. We have a strong programme of transitional training with the armed forces, given the redundancies there. We know that 70 to 80 per cent of the skills are relevant, so we are considering how we can fast-track people from there.

Dennis Robertson: How many women come from the armed forces?

Darah Zahran: I do not know. It is an open recruitment process. We find that women from the armed forces are not put off by the oil and gas working environment. I am not sure that that has become an issue.

Dennis Robertson: I will put this point to the other witnesses. Sticking with the perception aspect, which includes the construction industry, Ann Henderson mentioned female bus drivers. My understanding is that only about 11 per cent of Stagecoach's bus drivers, for instance, are female. Is it the perception that is wrong? Are we just not working hard enough to turn round that cultural, inherent and entrenched view that women simply do not do certain jobs?

Ann Henderson: I feel that it is changing. I was thinking about it and wondering where the responsibility lies. Quite often in this discussion, the responsibility comes back to women to explain what they want and how they want to change things. The evidence repeatedly shows that the culture in the workplace is a problem and makes things difficult in industries where women are in a minority.

We have to ask where the responsibility for that lies. We need to consider our own male colleagues—our brothers, fathers, uncles and the other men in our lives—and ask what contribution they can make to ensuring that the workplace feels safe and that the endless jokes that stop being funny do not make it difficult for women to continue on a daily basis.

A couple of weeks ago, down at the TUC women's conference, there was a powerful speech from a young female painter and decorator, who said that she was not going to stop doing the job, which she absolutely loved. Every single day, however, the people she worked beside—the men in particular—teased her, and it was becoming really wearing. She said that the clients and the people at her workplaces, particularly women, quite like having a female painter and decorator around the premises. From the point of view of that industry and our society in general, it is a win-win. We need to consider, for instance, the comments from a manager who laughs off a request. There is a wider discussion about where responsibility lies, and I strongly feel that we need to get in and around that.

Having listened to the conversation so far, and being aware that the committee will be considering what it can do and recommend, I think that we need to be a bit more assertive collectively about targets. If we know that 1 per cent of a particular type of construction job is filled by female workers, why not have a campaign to say that we should double that over the next two years? I am not talking about setting unrealistic, difficult-to-achieve targets, but we could work together on some sort of campaign with a headline about doubling the number concerned where there is an imbalance. That could also be applied in the childcare sector. It would be a matter of working with men in childcare, youth work and other groups where good work is being done. We would ask what the percentage is now in areas where we know that there will be an expansion in the workforce and that new jobs will come on stream. The oil and gas industry is interesting in that regard.

That is a political vision, and we can all work together to try to achieve it and change the situation. We would set a target and then consider how we can work with industry, the unions and schools to deliver it. Something is required that sends the message that we all have responsibility to change the situation.

Dennis Robertson: Is it the perception of the construction industry that is wrong? Does that perception involve hard hats and shovels or whatever? Is the wrong message being sent out?

Jacqueline Kerr: That is probably part of it. Going back to what Ann Henderson said about the painter and decorator, there is a lot of banter on site. To tackle that, when we recruit apprentices, that is discussed with them in their first week after coming into construction. There is no point in talking about it just with women; it must be discussed with the men in the sector, including new-entrant apprentices, who are the future employers and bosses. Our strategy is to deal with the issue at the level of new entrants. Their induction covers that issue and equal opportunities, inclusion, fairness and respect at work and on building sites, regardless of the size of the site and whether it is a domestic property or a huge building site. Those messages are reinforced throughout the four years of a modern apprenticeship through the review process. Apprentices are reviewed four times a year by our team, and equal opportunities issues are discussed and recorded at those points. They are

all small measures, but they will underpin the behaviour in the sector.

We set targets, but it is difficult to meet them for a number of reasons. It is not just about getting females to apply to the sector; it is about getting them to remain in the sector. We should concentrate on retention, as we are losing females for some of the reasons that Darah Zahran mentioned. Construction is transient in nature, so there can be a lot of travelling, and females of a certain age might have domestic responsibilities. We all know that, generally, women are the primary carers regardless of whether they are single parents or married. I am sure that most of the men in the room will agree with that. Maybe not all women are in that position, but they generally are. Who is going to look after the children and take them wherever they need to go when their mum is at work? That role generally falls to the female, and the construction industry—probably the oil and gas industry as well—generally does not lend itself to facilitating that.

There is not just one thing that we need to do. We must take on board a number of strategies.

The Convener: John Mason is going to ask about schools.

John Mason: We have heard a lot of interesting stuff so far. I am interested in the term "influencers", especially in so far as parents were mentioned in that regard. To change attitudes is quite a long-term aim. I would also see schools as influencers; we perhaps have a bit more influence over schools.

I think very highly of our schools, which do a phenomenal amount of work. However, I sometimes wonder how well they understand employment generally. I have heard some interesting things during my time as an MSP. I was at a meeting at which a head teacher said that they did not realise that there was going to be such a need to fill jobs in the oil and gas sector, in Scottish Power and in that area generally. That concerned me because it showed that schools are perhaps not aware of such things.

We are approached all the time by people with politics degrees who are looking for jobs. I asked one guy—it happened to be a guy—whether his school had really guided him in deciding what degree to take in order to get a job, and I got the impression that it had not. Should the schools be doing more, or am I wrong in thinking that the schools are a big player?

Jacqueline Kerr: Schools have an influence but, as John Mason said, they do not know too much about the world of work. We need to tackle that. I used to go into schools with our education team and people from the construction industry whom we train as construction ambassadors and use as role models, and they include women. It is surprising how surprised teachers and guidance teachers are about construction: it is viewed as the last option. It is not understood that a construction apprenticeship involves going to college and lasts for four years and that a lot of learning has to go on. Teachers think that construction is for kids who are not academic, but that is not always the case. Most of the young people who were involved in construction under the skills for work programme—I do not think that it is called that any more—were boys; very few girls were involved. It is schools that put young people forward for initiatives such as skills for work.

Ann Henderson: In relation to role models, another issue is the undervaluing of some of the professions and jobs that I talked about, particularly in the care sector. Often, those jobs are not understood in the education system and are not seen as valuable jobs on which we place a high premium later in life. When somebody in one's family depends on receiving care, we want to be sure that it is very good care. A recent interesting piece in a newspaper argued that the school curriculum should teach young people about what is involved in care. That raises interesting questions, because we get into the discussion about where value is attached and what people think about sectors. There are parallels with what Jacqueline Kerr said about people's inadequate knowledge of the construction sector. I do not know how we could change the situation.

One thing that has been going through my mind is mentoring. Within jobs, mentoring and networks of women who support one another have been repeatedly demonstrated to be helpful. When I worked in the rail industry, I worked with schools and went into schools to talk about jobs in the railways, but dropping in for a visit and a talk happens just once. Is there another approach, such as mentoring, that involves much more learning about jobs? There is obviously work to do, because people do not understand entirely what is involved. Teachers will say that people do not really understand their jobs either, so a bit more two-way stuff must go on.

Darah Zahran: I agree that schools are critical. They have come a long way in embracing vocational options for pupils, but it is hard for guidance teachers and careers advisers to know everything about every sector. We could address subject choices more appropriately so that where subjects can take people is contextualised—so that they know that STEM subjects do not just take them into medicine, that arts subjects do not just take them into law and that maths does not just take them into accountancy. That would really help.

Subject choices are made early. Statistics from the Scottish Qualifications Authority show that, in technical design and studies, which are critical for a lot of our important industries, there is huge underachievement among females and that, in comparison with physics, not many boys do technical design. Something is therefore going wrong in subject choices.

In some schools, for timetabling reasons, choices must be made at the end of first year. After my daughter had done 12 weeks of general science, she was asked to choose between biology, chemistry and physics. She did not know what any of them was. She showed an aptitude for STEM subjects, but the timetabling affected her career choice. That is perhaps the tail wagging the dog.

Schools have a hard job. The curriculum for excellence is certainly helping, but timetabling is not. Contextualisation of subjects is needed as pupils go through school and not just when they make their choices. People need to know where physics can take them, what engineering would do for them and what the career prospects are. That must happen before S4 and S5—it must happen in primary 7 and S1.

The Convener: Marco Biagi has a supplementary on that point.

Marco Biagi: I had intended to ask whether you think that choices were made too early, so I will home in on that. Would it be better to have more awareness in P7 and S1 or to have a system in which choices do not have to be made in P7 and S1?

Darah Zahran: I can hear teachers screaming in my head at the thought that I would say that choices should not have to be made.

Marco Biagi: Should choices be more informed when they are made at the moment or, ideally, should the system require choices later?

Darah Zahran: I think that there can be a system that just gathers pace as the child matures and as their aptitudes and talents become better known. Parents are absolutely critical in this, but sometimes the information that is given to parents is superficial and a bit fragmented about where sciences will take you.

10:15

Marco Biagi: Where is the information from?

Darah Zahran: I mean information from the schools at parents' evenings or careers evenings. The sectors have not found a mechanism whereby they can en masse feed information to schools. There should be core collaboration between Government agencies, academia and industry to agree on materials that every child and school should get so that, for example, it is not just Aberdeen schools that learn about oil and gas, or just Dumfries and Borders schools that learn about textiles. Every child should be given an equal choice according to the industries that are available to them, rather than just those that are on their doorsteps.

There is no easy answer to the problem. People have been trying for years to do what I have described, but timetabling is a practical issue for schools. Some children never make a choice, if that is allowed. There must be a structured mechanism. However, collaboration at the core is crucial in order to get the materials right and to ensure that choices are informed.

John Mason: We have talked about teachers' understanding of the world of work and industry. Is the answer somehow to get teachers out more on secondments in order that they get more experience? Would that put too much focus on one person? Would it be better if we brought into schools people like you who work in the industries?

Darah Zahran: I think that the ambassador network works well, but it does not work consistently across all areas. Influential role models coming into class and telling the class what they did with physics or with technical design will make an impact on children and high school pupils that a familiar guidance teacher might not make.

Jacqueline Kerr: We need a bit of both. The CITB has an education team that holds seminars on the sector for teachers. Again, however, there are limits to that due to the number of staff we have, timetabling in schools and teachers' ability to attend. We must have that kind of approach as well as the education team and people from industry going into schools. I do not think that there is enough of that. It is available, but it is not reaching every school, so there must be a specific resource to promote sectors such as ours.

John Mason: Okay.

Yesterday I came here on the train with somebody who works in the health sector. I was amazed to hear from that person that there are only two male midwives in the whole of Scotland; I just could not believe that. I think that you have hinted at this, but is it your feeling that we should just mix up all the occupations and that for ones that have traditionally been seen as female—albeit that they might be quite well-paying female occupations, such as in the case of midwives—part of the answer to the problem is to get more men into them?

Ann Henderson: I can hear midwives saying "We are not that well paid," and that their pay is not commensurate with their skills.

As I said at the beginning, we must have a wider discussion about what kind of society we want to live in, about where we are going to put the resources to provide skilled jobs, and about what we value. Those jobs should be open more widely and there should be a flexible approach. I do not disagree with what John Mason said. There are male nurses, male carers and male childcare workers; there are lots of very good models in that regard. It is important to overlap that with the discussion around options for young people, what they see around them and what they understand and value in what their parents do. There is definitely a need for a more flexible approach in supporting people—men and women—in training for a wide range of jobs.

Alex Johnstone: I want to follow up a comment by Darah Zahran. Some of what you have said and your experience with your daughter chimed very much with a lot that I get in my mailbag. If you will forgive me for asking a slightly personal question, where did you have that experience?

Darah Zahran: My daughter has not finished her schooling yet, so I just hope that the teachers are not watching this. It was in East Renfrewshire, which has a very high academic record, so they are getting something right.

Alex Johnstone: Indeed. My mailbag is currently being filled by parents from Aberdeenshire who are having difficulties that they associate with the local authority's interpretation and application of curriculum for excellence. Is there a particular problem with the way in which local authorities are interpreting their role? We heard suggestions earlier that the problem is perhaps at teacher level or at school level. My question is whether the problem might actually be embedded at education authority level.

Darah Zahran: The problem is clearly difficult to address, as it has been on the table for many years. However, collaboration, negotiation and greater use of parental influence and experience will probably help local authorities to understand the key issues.

I would not say that the issue is reluctance or inability of any one institution or agency to address the problem. However, there is too much fragmentation within and across local authorities and schools. Local authorities need to talk to one another and to consider how they can ensure that an equal opportunity is put in front of every child in every school. The quality of careers information that children get and the quality or number of ambassadors that they see should not depend on where they go to school.

Local authorities need to pool their expertise and intelligence and to look at best practice. There are fantastic schools and authorities all over the place that excel in different areas, but not much dialogue goes on between local authorities on how approaches can be adapted, amplified and used to best effect in other contexts. That is a personal view, but it comes from many years working in Skills Development Scotland and in the skills sector.

Alex Johnstone: My experience of a number of local authorities and how they are applying the new processes of curriculum for excellence is that decisions about narrowing the number of courses that pupils take are being made at different stages in different areas. In some places, fewer courses are available than in others. Might that be forcing girls and young women to make irreversible career choices too early?

Darah Zahran: I think that all pupils are being asked to make irreversible career choices, and sometimes at times that do not suit them. I would hope that nothing is irreversible, but once people get on a particular track and route, it is difficult to swap, at every stage of schooling.

I do not think that there is discrimination against females in relation to particular subjects; I think that the imbalances happen by default. Not enough proactive work is done to understand where the gender imbalances are. The issue is not that resources are deliberately not being put into that—it almost happens blindly. Therefore, a lot of proactive work has to be done. If we can have lots of male gynaecologists, why cannot we have male midwives?

We need to help people to break down the barriers so that, rather than just go with the masses, they go where their skills and abilities can take them naturally. That is the issue, but it takes resource.

Jacqueline Kerr: I will relay my personal experience, as my son is in second year at school, too. When we had a meeting with his careers adviser, the advice that he got was very different from the advice that Darah Zahran's daughter received; he was advised to take a spread of subjects from across the curriculum and not to concentrate on one area. I am now confused about what was the right advice. Should he direct himself to a particular career choice or should he go for a spread? Maybe there is a lack of consistency among local authorities. My local authority is South Lanarkshire Council, which is not too far away from East Renfrewshire, but the approach is totally different.

Dennis Robertson: I have a quick supplementary question. We talk about the experience that children have at school, but does

the experience at home influence the direction that our children take? For example, I remember that, when my girls were six, they wanted racing cars rather than prams and dolls. They were much more interested in that sort of image. Do parents reinforce some of the stereotypes and entrenched cultural attitudes that we talked about earlier? Is it our fault?

Jacqueline Kerr: I think that parents do that up to a point, but it depends on the parent and how much knowledge they have in an area. I would never discourage my children from getting involved in anything or picking a particular activity or career route, but that is because I know better, and not every parent does. Parents have a huge influence, but it is inadvertent rather than deliberate.

Ann Henderson: The STUC women's committee has been doing quite a lot of work with people who are campaigning on issues around marketing and advertising by emphasising the sort of world in which we live and the fact that parents are not bringing their children up in a bubble. That includes a debate about which toys and types of clothing—such as t-shirts—that are on sale to parents are suitable for children. There is a big discussion going on about the way in which companies see opportunities to sell their goods and how that cuts across the work that many of us are trying to do.

The context covers even the jobs that you are doing as members of the Scottish Parliament. In the 1980s and 1990s there was in society a wider movement—of which the STUC was very much part—to promote the belief that politicians should not be only men. The work that was done to change the way in which the membership of Parliament is constructed was very important.

As you know, some of those equal opportunities principles still feed through into Parliament's work, where there is some excellent practice relating to conditions for staff and monitoring to ensure diversity in its workforce. That did not come from nowhere—it came from a wider movement.

There is now a generation of young people whom I really believe are growing up seeing men and women as cabinet ministers and politicians, and seeing a Parliament that is more diverse than Westminster and than it would itself have been 50 years ago. That has to be put in context, and we should not underestimate how we all contribute to that situation as parents and in our jobs.

Marco Biagi: In addition to the parental input rowing against decisions at school level, what about the mass media? Are they helpful or damaging?

Jacqueline Kerr: The media can be damaging. For example, if there is anything about the construction sector in the tabloids in particular, you will see the usual image of a page-3-type girl wearing a hard hat and a pair of shorts, or whatever.

On the flip side, I remember having a conversation with someone who worked in equal opportunities about the Barbie range bringing out an engineer version or something like that. Personally, I did not think that there was much wrong with that—it is fine, because a person can be intelligent and still look at Barbie. Even people who work within equal opportunities do not always get things right, and we do not always agree, but the media play a huge part.

Darah Zahran: The media were more damaging in the past, but can be used much more constructively now to portray more positive role models for both genders. Children's television can play a huge part in that, as can greater coverage of females in jobs in the Scottish Parliament, for example. You are having to work with some of the historical negative images, but the media are everywhere now, and children are much more media savvy, so the media can be put to greater use.

We are using female role models and case studies in our marketing campaigns, and we have many more options for putting those positive role models out there. However, we have to ensure that we do not overdo it. If there is a sole female on an apprenticeship scheme, she tends to be put on every poster and website, which can cause friction in the workplace if it comes across as, "We're saying that everyone is equal, but we're going to use her for every marketing campaign." There must always be a balance, but the media are there and we should try to use them much more positively and constructively.

The Convener: Siobhan McMahon wants to ask about modern apprenticeships. I will then ask a couple of questions about childcare and flexibility.

10:30

Siobhan McMahon: At the start of the meeting, I was in a positive mood when I heard that you look for women who have done physics. I thought, "Great—I did physics, so maybe I can have another career." [*Laughter.*] I am always thinking to the future and am still under 30, so I think I tick the boxes.

However, as we progressed you said that you do not think that we could retrain because there are subject choices at school and then we go to university and various other things. Are there programmes for women to retrain in oil and gas, construction or elsewhere? Many women out there—I am not talking about myself—do one thing, for example when they have their children to

fit in with their lifestyle, but then want to go back and retrain.

Jacqueline Kerr: There are opportunities in construction because a person can do a construction apprenticeship at any age. However, there is not the same funding available for people who have taken a career break and have come back to retrain in construction. There are fewer funding opportunities from organisations such as Skills Development Scotland to support older apprentices than there are for youth apprentices. That is the Government strategy just now, which is understandable because there is a lot of youth unemployment. There are groups out there such as women returners who wish to train in new careers and there are opportunities, but they are not as plentiful as they are for youth apprenticeships.

Ann Henderson: We were concerned when the funding shifts took some resources away from older people. I do not have statistics, but our feeling was that that would particularly disadvantage women wishing to re-enter the labour market. It would be interesting to look at that and to consider positive measures to address the imbalance. It is a concern that older women and women at other stages in their lives might need, for example, support with a childcare package built in to a job, so that they can go into construction or one of the STEM occupations later in life.

There are many examples of good practice that works well but is not shared, such as familiarisation and keeping-in-touch days when someone is off work. We get pockets of good practice but it is not shared; it is not the norm and yet it does not cost very much. I understand the focus being shifted to young people, but many of the things that we are talking about do not cost much. We might find that there is a group of women who would be more likely to complete their apprenticeship and stay.

Darah Zahran: It is hard, rather than impossible, to retrain and the barriers do not—certainly in oil and gas—come from industry. The barriers are domestic and financial pressures, funding availability and finding the right model that allows people to train and make a career transition while they have other responsibilities.

We have been talking to the women in Scottish resource centre for women in science, engineering and technology because women returners are a huge pool of talent, skills and qualifications. That is where the issue of culture comes in. If a person comes back to work having been off for childcare reasons, for example, they are more likely to go into something that offers them term-time or part-time working. If they are trying to study and go into a worthwhile complete career change, they really need their employers to work with them on that. It is not impossible, but a person has to be very driven to take on all the challenges that will come their way.

Siobhan McMahon: That is helpful, thank you. I have got that all down. [*Laughter*.]

I want to ask a more direct question. I am keen to hear your impression of the Scottish Government's modern apprenticeships programme, including positive and negative opinions and how you see it working in the future. It would be helpful to have further discussions in the inquiry to note the people who work day in and day out with those in the programme.

Jacqueline Kerr: The modern apprenticeship in construction programme is excellent and is well structured. Construction apprenticeships in other countries are very different from those in Scotland. Basically, more than one agency is involved; in Scotland, we have SDS, the funding and the four-year modern apprenticeship, but apprentices are also registered with the Scottish Building Apprenticeship and Training Council. The apprenticeship is still like an old-fashioned apprenticeship; it is a type of indenture. That is very supportive of what we do, but a bit more could be done to support adult apprentices. Overall, we are pretty impressed.

Siobhan McMahon: You are talking solely about the construction industry. The figures that we have show that females are not reaching levels 3 to 5 of apprenticeships; they are at levels 1 and 2. Do you see progress developing all the way through the levels for both males and females?

Jacqueline Kerr: Females enter construction at the same level as males; the main trades are at level 3 for a construction apprenticeship, so females would come in at level 3, unless they were doing a specialist craft.

Males and females have the same opportunities to progress. Whether they go further once their four years are up is entirely up to them, because they are employees. The system works because those involved are employees—that is where a modern apprenticeship in construction works a bit better than a university degree in construction. In our research, I was surprised to discover that students who do construction-related degrees might never set foot on a building site. The beauty of the modern apprenticeship is that it provides a mix of college and work-based learning—that is where its strength lies.

In higher education, degree courses need to be structured a bit more towards work experience. That would mean that women who have completed a degree will not be so surprised by what they find on a building site and we will probably have a better chance of retaining them.

Marco Biagi: The statistics on gender segregation in the apprenticeship schemes are stark. Am I right to infer from what you said that there is not as much gender segregation in construction-related degrees, for example?

Jacqueline Kerr: There is a wee bit less segregation; in construction-related degrees, 14 per cent of participants are women. Given that half the population are women, that is still pretty low, but it is better than the figure at the craft level. That is down to the image and perception of the sector.

Siobhan McMahon: Does anyone else have comments on the modern apprenticeship scheme?

Darah Zahran: In comparison with the rest of the UK, the scheme in Scotland is good, because an apprenticeship comes with employed status—it is linked to a job—and the employers that buy into the scheme tend to be pretty committed to it. For a funding mechanism that is essentially one size fits all, the employed status is important.

The scheme is not quite as effective in its applicability to smaller organisations. For the supply chain in oil and gas, it is difficult for employers to take on to their books somebody who will be in college for a significant time before they are productive. The age constraints for the higher contribution rate do not apply to a lot of oil and gas companies because, for insurance purposes, they will not have people on site until they are 18 or older.

I am not sure whether the scheme flexes according to industry needs. It flexes in two places according to age, but it does not reflect the pace or requirements of industries or the sizes of employers that might otherwise buy into the scheme, which is restricting .

The contribution rates are minimal in comparison with the cost of taking an apprentice on to the books and training them until they are fully productive. Most energy companies would say that, although they might get a contribution rate of £9,000 for training, it realistically costs £80,000 to £85,000 to take somebody from the first day of being an apprentice to being a fully functioning member of the workforce.

The scheme is good, but it has its limitations and it does not cater to all industries and all organisations of all sizes.

Jacqueline Kerr: The difference in construction is that the employers pay a levy and can claim money back through our construction skills grant scheme when an apprentice attends college. So, in construction, a bit of funding goes directly to the employers.

Ann Henderson: I do not have the figures, so at a future point it might be of interest to the committee to speak to the people who are working on the future workforce requirements for the care sector and how those overlap with the modern apprenticeships scheme. A lot of the research is raising concerns—which are frequently reported—that because of the disproportion in numbers between males and females going into particular jobs, and the segregation in the labour market, unless positive steps are taken to address the imbalance at the recruitment point in the wider labour market, the modern apprenticeships scheme will continue to reinforce the divisions in the labour market and the pattern of wages that boys and girls go on to earn.

We need further examination of questions such as how much the modern apprenticeships scheme accommodates black and ethnic minority young people and young people with disabilities. We tend to focus on the disaggregated statistics for males and females but not on other important aspects.

One final point, which the STUC has raised before in committees, is that people often become parents before the age of 25, so more thought should be given to how to provide support, for example with childcare, for young parents in apprenticeship schemes. Consideration should also be given to how maternity leave is funded and managed during a modern apprenticeship. Those and other such issues have not been given great attention.

Siobhan McMahon: That is helpful. Thank you.

Ann Henderson mentioned disabilities. We have the construction and oil and gas industries represented here, and OPITO's submission states:

"Our operating model is unique".

Are there opportunities for disabled women to get involved in those sectors? As a disabled woman looking at those sectors, I think that I could not get involved in them. Do you agree, or is that just a perception in society that we can break down?

Jacqueline Kerr: I think that it is just a perception. Many people with disabilities have been supported through apprenticeships. Put aside the disability—the situation depends on the person's ability and what they can manage. Support is available for people with disabilities who are in apprenticeships—usually, it is multi-agency support. For example, someone who has a hearing impairment might need an interpreter. People with disabilities are usually supported by us, Skills Development Scotland, the colleges and other agencies such as Remploy. There is awareness of disabilities in apprenticeship schemes and of how we tackle or manage that.

Darah Zahran: I agree. As I mentioned, only 10 per cent of our workforce of nearly half a million people work offshore. There are plenty of

opportunities across all levels and tiers of the industry for everybody to apply. I do not have statistics, but I think that the perception is maybe misleading when compared with the reality.

Siobhan McMahon: Jacqueline Kerr has mentioned equal opportunities training a few times. What does that involve in practice?

Jacqueline Kerr: We take a multifaceted approach to equal opportunities and to training in it. We have delivered training—which is more on fairness, inclusion and respect—to our staff who are out there promoting the sector and apprenticeships in it to people, regardless of their background. We have also gone into colleges and universities to provide training workshops on equal opportunities to apprentices and to students who are on construction-related degree courses. The training is very practical and hands on—it is about dispelling the myths about toilets and things like that. It is more about inclusion, fairness and respect and about what apprentices, students and our staff should expect in their workplace, how they should behave in it, and what is expected of them.

10:45

The Convener: I will pick up the subject of childcare and flexibility, which are key issues that have been raised in the committee's round-table evidence sessions, at the women's employment summit and at the recent international women's day conference that was held in the Parliament. It seems that lack of childcare and lack of flexibility have huge impacts on where women are segregated and clustered in the jobs market. Although there is a recognition that we need to get more women into male-dominated employment, we also need to get more men into female-dominated employment. Underpinning all that is the lack of childcare and lack of flexibility in workplaces.

I know that the STUC has been very vocal about childcare and flexibility, but I am also interested in knowing from Jacqueline Kerr and Darah Zahran what is being done in the construction and oil and gas industries to tackle those issues. What do you do to encourage flexibility and to support women? Perhaps Ann Henderson can start by giving a bit of background on what the STUC has been doing and what more it would like to be done.

Ann Henderson: It is true that every discussion on the labour market brings up the question of childcare. The STUC's view is that we require a fundamentally different approach that moves us away from the current demand-led provision to accepting that childcare should just be provided: it should be a statutory function that is delivered by public bodies.

The difficulties with the present arrangements, which are so dependent on the private sector, are that childcare is obviously very expensive and that we cannot effectively pick up on some of the issues that we have been talking about. For instance, when thinking about returning to work, the conversation in families begins with people saying, "How can we afford a childcare place at £200 a week?" Instead, people should be thinking, "My child is happy and settled in the nursery round the corner, so I can now go and look at the options that are available. I could start studying again and look at how to get myself back into work."

As you will be aware, the labour force survey's most recent labour market report shows that women seem to be disappearing from the statistics. We know that women are not disappearing to be idle but will be busy doing other things—family things or becoming self-employed or whatever—but they are disappearing from the statistics. Partly, that is because the people who collect the data use the International Labour Organization definition of the those who are signed on or registered as unemployed, which is:

"people without a job who have been actively seeking work within the last four weeks and are available to start work within the next two weeks".

I cannot think of a situation in which a woman who is a parent could give that commitment. If people have been out of the labour market for any reason, or if they have had a series of short-term contracts or zero-hour contracts that have meant their dipping in and out of the labour market—the labour market is becoming more fragmented—how can they plan or commit to saying that they can start work in a fortnight when there is no childcare?

There needs to be a shift, so we certainly welcome the First Minister's statements at the weekend about beginning to talk about childcare as infrastructure. There needs to be a fundamental shift in how we approach the discussion. Linked to that is that we need to stop seeing school as a form of childcare; school is a place of education. Wraparound care, which should exist during school holidays and before and after school, needs to be built in to allow people to commit to work.

Jacqueline Kerr: I agree with what Ann Henderson has said. For many mothers who want to go back to work, there is a financial issue about being able to pay for childcare from when the child is young. Local authority-provided nursery care does not always tie in with the working hours that employers want people to work. Therefore, there is more than one requirement in relation to childcare.

Ann Henderson mentioned summer holidays. I have two children—a 13-year-old, whom I still

probably would not leave on his own, and a daughter aged nine—and I have to work out my summer in order to juggle childcare. I am fortunate because I have family who can help out, but not every parent has that. In construction, a lot of employers that take on apprentices are small companies that cannot afford to subsidise childcare for employees; they do not have that facility. It requires financial support—perhaps directly to employers to encourage them to consider a diverse workforce. That could be one angle.

The Convener: Marco Biagi has a supplementary question on that issue before I bring in Darah Zahran.

Marco Biagi: This may be one of those moments where Siobhan McMahon gets depressed again. [*Laughter*.] Why do childcare responsibilities still fall almost exclusively to the woman in a nuclear family?

Jacqueline Kerr: We have just not yet fully got over traditional roles. I have a husband who is a great help, but as a woman—speaking from personal experience—I am so used to doing things myself that I became the primary carer. That is a bit to do with me as a woman and also to do with traditional roles and seeing what my mother did. My mother always worked, but was also the primary carer who did all the domestic stuff in the house.

Darah Zahran: I will answer that as a mother, as well. The point that is sometimes missed is that you have to be not just the primary carer. I love my job, but I love my children, so I do not want to farm them out all the time to somebody else who can do that for me. I want the balance between my work life and my home life and I want to be the one who can negotiate with my employer to go to a sports day or to attend a school concert.

That is a working parent issue; it is not just a working mother issue. If a person loves their job, wants to do their job as well as they can and wants to be as good a parent as they can be, the other parent needs exactly the same flexibility from their employer; sometimes male parents do not get that. The male parent might come across more barriers in his workplace, although the employer might think that they are very forward thinking. I must say that my point does not relate to my husband because he works for a local authority and they tend to be very good about parental rights.

A person who is trying to get some flexibility in their workplace relies on the other parents getting flexibility in their workplace, too. That is where gender imbalance comes in. It can be much harder for a male to ask whether he can go to a sports day than it is for a female because the employer has it in their head that they need to let mothers go to sports days.

The minute a person becomes a working parent their life becomes a juggling act and it is not just about cost. Cost is hugely significant, but if a person can meet the cost they then have to work with perceptions, cultures, employer flexibility, rights, reasons and policies. Both parents have to juggle with their employers and then with the school or the nursery. Childcare through a nursery is very different from childcare through a school because there are different demands coming from both institutions. Underpinning all that, parents need their employers to understand.

The Convener: What support is available in the oil and gas and construction industries to allow that flexibility and to provide that balance for parents?

Darah Zahran: Support varies; we are talking about huge multinational and global organisations that have strong human resource and employee policies. That can sometimes conflict with the working pattern of the industry. If there is a culture of having 7 am meetings—that seems to be endemic across the industry, and not just in particular organisations—a person might have a childcare place for nursery but not for school, or they might have a childcare place in the workplace but then still have to get that five-year-old to school for 9 am.

Sometimes a lot of effort is made, particularly in the big companies, but there is a tension. Meetings that have to take place over breakfast conflict with the reality of getting a child to nursery or to school, or of having a child who is sick and out of school. The culture and the intentions of the industry can be in conflict.

Jacqueline Kerr: Support will depend on the size of the organisation whether it has the facility to let parents go away for specific things. That probably mirrors Darah Zahran's point. I am not sure that problems with getting away from the workplace to attend events at school are specific to the construction or oil and gas sectors. They probably apply across all businesses and sectors, although that is just my view—I have not seen data on that.

Darah Zahran is spot on in relation to nursery and school provision and before-school and after-school care. There are good examples of that. At my daughter's primary school, there is a breakfast club and an after-school club. That is a private venture with a cost attached, but the service is there for parents if they need to use it. We need to put in a bit of effort to provide more of that in schools, and the service should perhaps be subsidised, particularly for parents who are lower

paid and who need it but who cannot afford to pay for it.

Ann Henderson: Our view is that childcare should be free at the point of delivery, because that would cut out many of the problems that have been referred to. The current system does not address the requirements of shift workers at all, although many industries, such as transport and retail, depend on people working shifts. There is no reason why childcare should not be available in an after-school club that runs over supper time, for instance, or why a breakfast club cannot start at 7 rather than 8. There just is not enough flexibility.

In our view, that flexibility is not being delivered now and it will not be delivered unless we make changes. If there was a big private sector market, the flexibility would be being delivered now. We have to examine why it is not working. If the services do not exist at local level, potential workers will not be freed up to go into the workforces and sectors that we have talked about today.

If childcare was available right up to the age of 16 and delivered by a skilled and highly qualified workforce, that would free up the large amount of time that is spent trying to deal with flexible working requests in businesses. I do not know what the correct words are for this, but there is no proper cross-transfer on a finance page. All that happens when people discuss childcare is that they say, “Oh, that’s expensive.” We should try to put a cost on the number of person hours that are spent by managers, union representatives and individuals getting completely stressed out trying to work out how to juggle starting times. Perhaps a local bus is no longer running, so someone has to leave an hour earlier to do the school run or whatever. If childcare was available, many of those issues would be resolved and company time would not be spent on them, so we just would not have those conversations. Some other countries deliver that system and support, and that is the way they see it.

The provision has to start from a younger age. The limited state provision in Scotland starts at the age of three, but people will have lost their job by then, and then they are in that conversation about how to get back into the labour market.

It is well worth looking back at the women’s employment summit, as a number of other issues were raised at it. We are pleased that the Government is continuing with work on that. Issues have arisen from the feedback from rural areas in Scotland about the disappearance of after-school clubs. They are not sustainable because, if somebody loses a bit of their income, the first thing they do is to take their child out of the after-school club. Big issues are developing around that in rural Scotland. We are not nearly clever enough at using other resources that could be more flexible, such as community childminding.

We need a shift. We need to start talking to companies and encouraging them to think of the money that they could save if staff were not spending hours trying to deal with all the flexible working requests. Although people have the right to request flexible working, which will be important in certain situations, we need an analysis of where many of those requests come from.

The Convener: As members have no further questions for our panel, I thank you all very much for coming along and giving us your evidence, which will certainly help us as we proceed with our inquiry into women and work.

That concludes our meeting. Our next meeting will take place on Thursday 18 April, and will include oral evidence on our women and work inquiry.

Meeting closed at 10:59.

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