



## Individualization and Equality: Women's careers and organizational form

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## **IIS Discussion Paper No. 85**

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organizational form**

**Submitted as working paper to  
Institute of International Integration Studies**

16 May, 2005

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# **Individualization and Equality: Women's careers and organizational form**

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**Abstract**

Some feminist writings have claimed that ‘bureaucracy’ is inherently ‘patriarchal’. This paper challenges this argument by comparing the experience of women in Ireland in a state sector organization and in a cluster of software firms. While the bureaucratic state company has been reformed to incorporate equal opportunities, in the individualised or ‘marketized’ software companies women’s progress is at the whim of individual managers and motherhood and a career are largely incompatible. If bureaucratic organizations can be reformed in this way, it cannot be claimed that there is any inherent link between bureaucracy and patriarchy. Instead organizations can be either bureaucratic or marketized, and either patriarchal or woman-friendly. These are two separate dimensions which change independently of each other. On this basis the paper suggests that the contemporary ‘remasculinization’ of management occurs because earlier reforms in bureaucratic organizations are now being eroded.

## **Introduction**

Nobody likes bureaucracy. In everyday parlance, 'bureaucratic' is a synonym for rigidity and slowness. In the contemporary business world, large firms advertise themselves as being 'dynamic', but certainly not as 'bureaucratic'. In similar vein, feminist writings have claimed 'bureaucracy' is inherently 'patriarchal'. Organizations that are not bureaucratic are therefore, presumably, more friendly to women. This article challenges such assumptions.

The paper begins by comparing bureaucratic and non-bureaucratic ('individualised' or 'marketocratic') organizations and their different relationship to women's career opportunities. After a brief outline of the research methodology and the Irish context in which the research was carried out, the paper contrasts women's experience in two very different Irish environments, both of which claim to be favourable to women: a bureaucratic public sector utility company and a cluster of software companies. While the bureaucratic company had implemented relatively effective equal opportunities policies, the non-bureaucratic software companies were in many ways much more hostile to women. On this basis the paper suggests that the form of an organization and its relationship to gender ('gender content') should be seen as two separate dimensions. This allows us to see the different ways in which bureaucratic and non-bureaucratic organizations can be changed to make them more woman-friendly.

## **Patriarchal bureaucracies and woman-friendly flexible firms?**

Central to the Weberian understanding of a bureaucracy is the distinction between the post and its occupant. In a bureaucratic organization the posts are arranged in a hierarchy. For each post the duties are clearly specified, as are the remuneration and the

entry qualifications. Bureaucratic organizations thus form an internal labour market with few entry ports. Both initial recruitment (whether at the bottom or through intermediate entry ports) and internal promotion depend strictly on merit. Such 'merit' is defined in terms of the qualifications, skills and experience *needed for the specific post*. This form of discrimination between applicants is therefore 'rational-legal' (Jewson and Mason, 1986): selection is in terms of (a) characteristics of the individual, rather than of the group to which she or he belongs, and (b) characteristics that are relevant for carrying out the task. As Jewson and Mason point out, when appointments are made in these terms, they are considered 'fair'.

The change from 'personnel management' to 'human resource management' is a move away from such principles. Thus, one contemporary slogan is that whereas personnel management attempts to recruit people for *jobs*, human resource management recruits people for *companies*. What matters is the whole person, and the extent to which they will fit into the company and contribute to it, *whatever they do*. Accordingly, pay is individualised rather than 'the rate for the job' let alone the 'point on the salary scale'. Pay is also often privatised, becoming a confidential agreement between employer and individual employee. Training is no longer the responsibility of the enterprise but of the individual, who bears the costs and reaps the rewards. This transformation of the firm involves a movement of the market into the enterprise, since the 'whole person' is judged by his or her market value while a hierarchy of command is still retained. We therefore refer to contemporary organizational forms as *marketocracies*, because the market is brought inside the organization, allowing both individualization and more complete subordination to authority. This centrality of the market distinguishes the contemporary

firm from other forms of non-bureaucratic organizations, ranging from small communities of believers through to large scale charismatic political parties.

Both the bureaucratic and the marketised forms are ideal types, and both can be criticised as over-simplifications by empirical research. Thus in the case of bureaucracy the informal world of personal relations not only contradicts the formal structures, but can be seen as necessary for the effective functioning of the organization (Gheradi, 1995: 30). Equally, while Castells (1996: 265) refers 'to the reversal of the historical trend of the salarization of work', empirical research on job tenure suggests that in Europe and even the UK it has remained fairly stable (Doogan, 2001).

Feminist critiques of bureaucracy involve two main sets of arguments. Using the distinction put forward by Davies and Thomas (2002), the first refers to *gender in* the organization – at its simplest the gender composition of the organization. The bureaucratic search for long-term employment relations requires workers who will commit to the organization for a long time. Since men are not going to be 'distracted' by marriage or childbearing, they are usually seen to have more commitment to their employment. Women may staff the lower levels of white collar hierarchies, but most will leave when they marry or have children. Not only does this leave the way clear for men to progress further up the hierarchy, it legitimates a general characterization of all women as less committed to work than men. Furthermore, men are assumed to be more ready to work long hours, and to geographically re-locate in order to 'spiral' up the bureaucratic hierarchy. Thus the bureaucratic ladder is a structure filled with 'male breadwinners'. The 'standard biography' of lifetime career with an incremental salary exhibits a 'synchronization with the family cycle' (di Luzio, 2001). These male breadwinners are



serviced by women and can only exist because of them: inside the organization the secretaries and clerical workers carry out routine tasks and also quasi-domestic chores ('the office wife'); outside the organization the domestic labour of the wives maintains home and children.

A second argument focuses more on the *gendering* of the organization in terms of ideologies or discourses. Crucial here is the division between the public and the private worlds which is central to the bureaucratic organization. From this perspective, the claim to fairness inherent in bureaucratic pay and promotion structures legitimates and simultaneously obscures the fact that, within these rules, men will out-compete women. 'Rational-technical, ostensibly gender-neutral, control systems [in organizations] are built upon and conceal a gendered substructure' (Acker, 1990: 154). Consequently, these bureaucratic structures are intransigent in the face of efforts to produce gender equality (Britton, 2000). Furthermore, the formal rationality and hierarchal control required by the bureaucracy is, so it is claimed, itself associated with 'masculinity' (Wajcman, 1998). For both these reasons, therefore, women in bureaucratic organizations are attempting to succeed in a game where the rules are not theirs.

Although using a variety of explanatory frameworks, this tradition assumes that the structures and values underlying bureaucratic work organizations negatively affect women's employment (Kanter, 1977). Conversely, the new organization values flexibility and diversity, while at the same time no longer demanding a life-long commitment. Accordingly, women can shape their working time and their careers to suit their own individual needs, including the demands of motherhood and childcare. The individualization of career paths is a 'win/win' change. It provides employers with

flexibility, while giving (female) employees a better chance to shape their own careers in their own interests .(Alvesson, 1992; Walby, 1990; Witz, 1992). Furthermore, the critique of patriarchal bureaucracy assumes that in contemporary 'flexible' organizations the more loosely defined work roles favour more direct and personal relationships and more porous gender roles. Consequently, individuals are not so tied to their expected positions and women can re-define themselves as equal to men in the world of work.

This powerful rhetoric, however, seems to be challenged by much of the small literature on the relationship between the model of work organization and gender equality. An Australian study shows that in engineering labour markets, the very act of creating regulations over recruitment and promotion has increased the number of women entering and moving up the management structure. By contrast, the predominantly collegial and more informal structure in the labour market of law works to exclude women and hinder their upward progress (Cook and Waters, 1998). These findings are supported also by Britton (2000) whose research in the United States suggests that gender segregation and wage inequality are often less marked in organizations that use formal procedures governing hiring, evaluation, and promotion. Finally, McIlwee and Robinson (1992) compared the career mobility of female engineers in two firms - a relatively bureaucratic aerospace firm dependent on government contracts and an innovative computer firm. They concluded that women's mobility is greatest where the masculine culture of engineering is minimized by bureaucratization and affirmative action.

### **Research methodology**

These limited results highlight that sometimes women seem to do better in bureaucratic organizations, or at least that bureaucratic organizations can be reformed to make them more accessible to women. We test this argument by comparing case studies of two

employment contexts where there are now significant numbers of women in professional and managerial jobs: a long-established bureaucratic organization and a cluster of new high-tech firms.

Women's labour force participation in Ireland has been rising since the 1970s, but particularly during the 'Celtic Tiger' boom of the late 1990s. Thus whereas in 1971 34% of Irish women of working age were in the labour force, this had risen to 37% in 1981 and fully 47% in 2000 (Collins and Wickham, 2004). Two components of this increase are important for this research: women in traditional 'women's jobs' such as clerical work who now stay at work rather than leaving immediately on marriage; women with educational qualifications entering areas of employment that are either new (professional jobs in the new high-tech area) and/or previously reserved for men (e.g. medicine, law). Our 'bureaucratic' case study is an example of the first situation, our 'cluster' case study an example of the second. Comparing them allows us to see in which contexts women's large-scale entry into the workforce can lead to career progression.

The bureaucratic company is a large public sector utility company; for all the usual reasons referred to here as 'UtilityCo'. The research was initiated by the company itself as part of an equality audit and involved four main elements. A self-report survey was distributed to a sample of all employees; a total of 1,103 questionnaires were distributed yielding 439 valid responses. The company's personnel records were used to generate a data file containing (anonymised) information on salary, working hours, grade etc. for all 9,000 employees. Finally we held 30 semi-structured interviews and seven focus groups, all with employees from different areas of the organization. In addition, the results were

compared with an equality audit of the same company carried out by one of the present authors ten years previously.

In contrast, the 12 ICT companies studied were all relatively young (all had been founded in the last ten years). The Irish software sector comprises a cluster of companies, some of very small size. Unlike in UtilityCo, career mobility involves movement between companies rather than simply internal promotion. After detailed overviews of key sub-sectors, 20 respondents were identified for semi-structured biographical interviews. In addition, brief case studies were carried out in four individual companies. This research was part of a European research project on women's employment in Information and Communication Technology. While this meant that access was more restricted than for the consultancy work carried out within UtilityCo, it did allow some comparisons with parallel case studies in other European countries.

The two case studies differ in methodology. Thus while we have extensive quantitative material for the single large firm, for the software cluster we rely mainly on qualitative material. The paper is therefore a meta-analysis of different studies, but we would claim the juxtaposition of the two cases nonetheless generates a meaningful comparison between a single established 'bureaucratic' firm and a cluster of 'individualized' innovative new firms. This contrast is precisely that made by those who hail the end of the bureaucratic career and therefore allows some assessment of the claim that small and flexible work organizations are more able to allow women to fulfil their potential than old-fashioned bureaucracies.

### **The bureaucratic firm and equal opportunities**

UtilityCo is now divided into a series of 'business units', but it is best understood as a technical area, employing about three-quarters of the staff, and an administrative area,

employing the remainder. Work in the administrative area of UtilityCo has long been seen as a 'good job' for Irish school-leavers – nearly as high in status indeed as clerical work in the banks or the civil service. As in these organizations, the normal entry port is at the bottom of the hierarchy into a Clerical Officer post soon after leaving school. There are several grades of Clerical Officer and then nine salary ranges of 'administrative and accounting' staff. Formally promotion is open to all and women are not segregated into separate occupations.

As a conventional bureaucratic organization, the core of UtilityCo is a series of posts, all arranged into a series of hierarchies. Promotion involves a formal competition between applicants for a vacancy that has been publicly announced, and in which those eligible to apply are clearly identified. The employment contract in UtilityCo is a standard open-ended contract for full-time employment. As in other areas of the Irish public sector, UtilityCo's workforce is unionized up to an including middle management grades. There is an extensive system of formal management–union consultation and union agreements specify the number of posts at each level.

Around this core there are areas of employment where the bureaucratic structure has been loosened. The company has a call centre which increasingly recruits externally, giving new employees a short (20 hours) contract which makes the terms and conditions less generous than for 'normal' UtilityCo staff. A small number of professionals with specialist skills are employed on short-term contracts, while at the top of the organization there are managers who are 'off scale' and who negotiate individual contracts. There are projects within the company and employees are seconded to these for a period of time before returning to their original task-based role. Secondment to projects is seen as

desirable as the work is usually more interesting and it gives a chance for employees to be noticed by management. However, projects are neither extensive nor the main route to career development.

When employment in UtilityCo was at its peak in the 1980s, the company was a classic patriarchal bureaucracy. With the exception of a few cleaning and catering staff, the technical area was an all-male world. The administrative area was a gender hierarchy similar to that described by Crompton and Jones (1984): clerical staff were overwhelmingly female, but administrative and accounting staff were overwhelmingly male. While the latter were recruited from the clerical grades, men were assumed to be career-oriented and were accordingly 'fast tracked' to promotion. Most women clerical staff worked only a few years before leaving for marriage and children.

Today the situation is very different. Total employment in UtilityCo has been falling since the 1980s and now stands at less than 80% of the 1993 figure, with the reduction stronger in the technical area. Across the organization as a whole, the few divisional heads reporting directly to the CEO are all male, but immediately below them there are now 47 women categorized as being in 'top management' (approximately 12% of the total number of top managers), compared with only two ten years ago. While men still dominate the technical area, new recruitment has introduced some women into previously all-male areas: there are now female apprentices, female technicians and female engineers, and even one station manager. Nonetheless, the technical area remains an overwhelmingly male world, and new female engineers are disproportionately likely to leave within ten years.

The dramatic change is in the administrative/accounting area. Here women are now much less likely to leave immediately on marriage, but compete directly with men for promotion out of the clerical grades and up through the administrative grades. Women's massive predominance in the clerical grades has therefore translated into dominance in the administrative grades. There has been external recruitment of graduates directly into the administrative grades, but these have included women. External recruitment has if anything improved the gender balance, even if at the same time it is seen as reducing the promotion chances for men *and women* coming from the clerical officer grades.

Table 1 compares the gender composition of the area in 1988 and 2002. Overall the proportion of women has risen slightly, from 58% to 66%; in both years over 80% of the clerical staff were female. However, whereas in 1988 only a fifth of the administrative staff were female, by 2002 this had risen to nearly half. Indeed, of the nine salary ranges within the administrative grades in 1988 the top range included precisely one woman and 50 men; by 2002 this had changed to 43 women and 120 men. There may still be a 'glass ceiling', but it now only 'protects' the executive penthouse.

**TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE**

Change for women has meant moving through a structure which can be defined independently of the people currently occupying it. It has meant challenging practices that can be defined as 'irrational' or 'unfair' and irrelevant to the 'real' structure of the enterprise. Above all it has meant rejecting the assumption that men have lifelong careers and women have short-term jobs. Especially within the large urban areas, employees can move relatively quickly up the hierarchy. One woman we spoke to had started as a typist and taken courses in law funded and facilitated by the company; now in her mid-thirties

she was a company solicitor. Such promotion within the administrative area is largely responsible for the dramatic rise in the number of women in management grades over the last ten years.

Given the predominance of women in the clerical grades, this upward movement of women is quite compatible with some continued inequality in promotion rates. Thus, analysis of the personnel records showed that women are as likely to leave the clerical officer grade as men, but once they reach the administrative grade they then still tend to do worse than men in the promotion stakes. However, there are now so many women competing for promotion that this inequality merely slows but does not stop their overall advance.

Formal equality of opportunity between women and men in access to promotion has therefore certainly not magically produced equality of outcome. A more realistic question is the *extent* to which UtilityCo does facilitate women and *which* women benefit in *what way*.

The company has for many years had extensive equality policies including an Equality Officer. This has clearly contributed to the acceptance of formal equal opportunities, and that itself is not insignificant. While women felt that they faced systematic obstacles within UtilityCo, they did not locate them within the formal system. For example, in response to a question in the survey, most women responded that they considered the company 'an equal opportunities employer'. A slightly smaller majority also considered that 'equal opportunities exist in my workplace'. About half of all women considered that 'My managers take equal opportunities seriously' (about a fifth disagreed and the rest had no views).



Indeed, managers' attitudes cannot any longer be a matter of individual whim within UtilityCo. Managers receive equality training to comply with the equality ideology of the company. To the extent that managers have absorbed the new 'correct' ideology, then women stand to benefit. There was some evidence that this was the case, since male managers were more likely than their male subordinates to consider that women faced particular obstacles in achieving promotion. In other words, male managers were more likely than their (male) subordinates to accept the need to do something about gender inequalities.

Both the survey data and the individual interviews suggested that some male managers were already making a special effort to promote 'their' female subordinates – an element long defined as important for women's career development (Kanter, 1977; McCracken, 2000). Thus the survey data showed that women were more likely than men to believe that they had been encouraged by their manager in their most recent attempt to gain promotion. The individual interviews also revealed this 'patron' role.

Such developed policies mean that explicit differentiation between women and men in terms of recruitment and promotion has become illegitimate. They demonstrate that policy in UtilityCo is far more than merely the passive acceptance of equality legislation. As we shall now see, company working time policy enables women (and potentially men) to combine a career with caring responsibilities.

At a formal level UtilityCo has many policies for flexible working and work-life balance, while the Chief Executive has several times in the internal newsletter outlined the importance of family-friendly working. Everyone in the company can apply for such working time options as job share, part-time or reduced hours working, study and

emergency leave. While virtually all men work on full time contracts, 13% of all women are on some form of short-hours contract. Of these the majority work half time; there are also some women on four-fifths contracts. While this pattern is gendered, it also suggests that women are able to define working hours that suit them. In UtilityCo flexible hours mean flexibility in terms of employees' needs.

UtilityCo does not have a long-hours culture. In our survey only five employees reported working longer than 12 hours per day on the previous day, but in nearly all such cases these long hours were unusual. On the last day worked, the average hours reported in UtilityCo overall were 8.6 hours, with over half of respondents working an eight-hour day and 90 per cent working less than 10 hours. The pattern for men and women is slightly different because women have a bi-modal pattern with two peaks at 7.25 hours and 8 hours.

These working hours enable some women to combine shorter hours with family responsibilities. Of the women, 52.7% of those in the clerical grades were mothers, as were fully 43.1% of those in administrative grades. More than non-mothers, the mothers in the workforce were likely to be working part-time and in areas where they considered the promotion chances were low.

However, this does *not* mean that all mothers were marginalized. Firstly, motherhood was not related to job insecurity. Most mothers were in full-time regular contracts (58.3%), and most of the remainder were either in regular part-time contracts (21.9%) or job-sharing (8.3%) Within this, clerical workers were more likely than higher grades to be on short-time working but part-time work was found in all categories. Secondly, motherhood did not reduce women's ambition and confidence. Unsurprisingly, mothers

were more likely than non-mothers to consider that promotion could disrupt their family. However, both mothers and non-mothers were equally like to agree with the statement that 'I honestly believe that I could reach senior management in UtilityCo' (about 20% in each case); and about two-thirds of both groups were likely to claim that 'in terms of my career, I am ambitious'.

Such ambitions are facilitated by UtilityCo's extensive training. There is specific technical training for specific jobs, involving on-the-job training or separate courses. There is also more general training in areas such as first aid training or dealing with bullying. All training occurs in company time. In addition, the company will reimburse employees the costs of courses (not necessarily work-related) which are taken in their own time, as well as giving paid time off in order to attend the necessary exams. Such training means that women who reduce their hours can still enhance their qualifications and retain their position in the promotion stakes.

Furthermore, the general lack of a long hours culture means that choosing to work shorter hours does not mark out a woman as inherently *and permanently* less committed. The analysis of the personnel data showed a minority of mothers, now in the administrative and accounting grades, who had earlier taken extended parental leave. In other words, in UtilityCo it is possible to downgrade one's commitment and then upgrade it again.

### **The individualized firm cluster**

Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) enterprises have been at the heart of the Irish boom of the 1990s. By the year 2000 the hardware sector (NACE category 30) employed over 20,000 people and was dominated by large US-owned plants (Intel employs about 3,000 at its production facility at Leixlip in the west of Dublin). The

software sector is somewhat larger: NACE category 72 (computer services) employed about 30,000 people in year 2000 (CSO, 2000). Here firms are smaller with many Irish-owned firms, mostly founded in the last ten to fifteen years, and including several that during the 1990s became global enterprises (Irish Computer, 2000). Of the twelve companies included in this research, one Irish-owned company employed about a thousand people worldwide, with 250 in Dublin; at the other extreme several were based only in Dublin and employed fewer than 50 people each.

Employment in the software industry is dominated by relatively skilled and qualified occupations. Thus over three-quarters of all employees are classified as 'managers', 'professionals' or 'assistant professional and technical staff' (Table 2). In the software companies proper, staff are broadly organized into technical (programmers and developers) and non-technical (finance, marketing etc.) areas. The same division occurs within other areas of the broader computer services sector.

#### **TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE**

At first sight the software sector appears relatively woman-friendly. Although the number has actually been falling in recent years, in Ireland during the late 1980s and 1990s women comprised up to a third of all computer science students, which is relatively high in international terms (Cunningham, 1998). Clearly, many of these students took up employment in the software industry. As Table 2 shows, women are only slightly under-represented in employment in software in comparison with the labour force as a whole (34% as against 41%). To what extent is this because of the individualized structures of these companies?

In software companies work organization is based on projects. A project usually involves the definition, development and/or delivery of a product or service. The date of its release, dictated by market expectations that are linked to sales, sets the project deadline. Projects may last from a few weeks to some years; a series of small milestones and deadlines define the progress of work during the project.

Projects in turn involve one or more teams. Each team, made up of a variable number of workers, contributes to the development of a specific aspect of the project. In turn, individuals in each team are in charge of a specific job. Typically, a lead engineer, with a co-ordination and supervision role, manages a team of engineers. The internal hierarchy is extremely limited and work relationships are characterized by functional and physical proximity.

There are few levels of management, and career advance is based on individual performance and individual pay increases, rather than movement through a series of pre-defined posts. Management and business writers have consistently emphasized the positive contribution of this organization of work to individual performance, and therefore indirectly to corporate performance. Considerably less attention has been paid to the implications of what could be defined as the ‘personalization’ of work relationships for women employees in male-dominated environments. Indeed, it is assumed to be positive that the borders between personal and professional roles become blurred. However, our women respondents suggest a different perspective.

Despite the relatively large numbers of women employed, ICT workplace culture tends to maintain ‘male’ traits and be based on male values. This is especially the case in the most technical areas where there is undoubtedly a ‘lads’ or ‘locker room’ culture. For

the women, 'the lads' are identified as relatively young and single – or at least childless – men, who tend to socialize together in or out of the workplace. They tend to work long hours, behave competitively, and in their leisure time spend time together in the pub or playing football. Formal work roles thus elide with informal male culture.

This elision explains why personalization of work roles is a particular problem for women. Progress at work requires good personal relations with one's manager, but, completely unlike the men, many of the women describe how problems with their work result not from the job itself but from a negative personal relationship with their manager. In the worse case this can lead to them leaving their job. Unlike the managers of UtilityCo, software managers experience no ethical imperative to separate the job and the person. As du Gay suggests (2000: 79), the abolition of formal rules opens up promotion to informal networks. Promotion becomes more personalized and potentially more 'unfair' – except that blurring the division between the person and the post makes it less clear what is actually unfair anyway.

This problem is particularly acute for women with children. Being able to balance work and domestic responsibilities (to the extent that they exist) depends on establishing 'friendly' relations with one's manager:

I am lucky to have my direct boss, who is very good and he looks after me, he's very sympathetic, helpful and flexible. Above him and around him, if I were with anybody else, I wouldn't get that flexibility. (LS)

Promotions are not transparent and there are suspicions of favouritism. As one woman explained:

Often people would be promoted, without anybody else knowing that there was a vacancy available. Suddenly you would hear this person got this job, but in the public sector if any vacancy comes up it is published inside, outside, that is a very clear and open process of applications and interview and selection. In the private sector suddenly somebody has got this job and you go “I would have been interested been in that job”, but you would never have known. (AC)

Since men are in the best position to capitalize on firms’ semi-formal organization of work, the absence of a formalized organization structure, especially with regard to careers and promotions, is something that they value. Similar dynamics occur with social events organized by the company (although the downturn in the industry has made them less frequent). They have a self-selective character and women managers with young children are often unable to attend them.

The vast majority of Irish ICT companies do not have formalized policies to accommodate workers who want access to non-full-time contracts. It follows that, if necessary, specific arrangements are worked out *ad personam*, through individual negotiations. These arrangements at the ‘margins’ have not produced any change in organizational culture: career and family are often perceived as dichotomous categories.

Talking about a friend in the same company, one respondent remarked:

She has three kids; she told me that two years ago, she went to the manager asking why she didn’t get the bonus [...]. He said she was a mom with three kids so “your priority is not the company”. (MD)

Or as another interviewee put it:

It's more difficult for women to reduce the working hours in the company. [...] if you want to reduce your working hours there is a kind of feeling that they could get someone else who could do the job and do more. (AC)

In addition, it is a well-established practice in these companies not to replace women who take maternity leave, something that the trade unions in UtilityCo would not tolerate. The team in which the woman works re-arranges its work and its members take charge of the functions exercised by the person who is leaving or absent. Without any formalized policies, women's (and men's) needs tend to be suffocated and their natural or even legal rights become seen as mere perks. Indeed, since workers also value equity and responsibility towards their colleagues, they find it stressful to even articulate these needs. If the company reduces one's work load for family reasons, then this is done by the company as a favour – and at the cost of one's co-workers.

Since the organization is based on projects, deadlines shape the pattern and rhythm of work. What matters for the company is not working time, but getting the task finished. Working time is formally fixed as between 09.00 and 17.30 or defined by core hours, but workers are often free to adjust their working times according to their individual preferences. For example, they may go to work very late in the morning and then work during the weekend. The company emphasizes self-management and responsibility, although daily or weekly meetings are set up to review the progress. Without heavy formal control, individuals need to be able to manage themselves. Responsibility is towards the project and towards colleagues and friends who are in the team.

The flexibility of working time allows employees to alter their work according to individual preferences and other non-work commitments. Contrary to what might be expected, Irish software companies do not in general have unusually long working hours



(O'Carroll 2004). Nonetheless, when deadlines approach, readiness to work long hours come to symbolize commitment to the organization, responsibility and productivity. For women with children, this 'shows' that they should be penalized when they do not conform:

The fact that I have to leave at 5.30 every day I think would make it difficult for me to have more responsibilities. I think I could do more. [...] It is not limiting me and my current job and I am not looking for anything else at the moment. I made a choice. (MP)

Women's inability to ensure the form of commitment required by the organization often leads them to give up any further chance of career progression. Alternatively, they become more focused at work and their working day loses any 'superfluous' sociability – including access to the vital informal networks.

The personalization and informality of training also has negative consequences for mothers. Software workers keep up to date through informal consultations with colleagues, through tracking down resources on the web, and by reading specialized books and magazines. This is done partly at work but also frequently during non-work time:

In some cases, I spent a lot of time trying to learn new things. This implies that I also spend a part of my free time doing it. (RB)

When training is organized by the company, it is now almost entirely in-house. The most experienced people are invited to give talks to the other members of the team or of the department. These talks become the main channel of knowledge transmission. Certainly

some companies occasionally pay for expensive training courses, such as MBAs, but this is essentially defined as an individual reward.

Training is therefore largely informal, continuous and individualized. This means that it becomes a critical issue for women who interrupt their career for children. MM explains the feelings and the fears involved:

I decided to take six months off and during the six months I found it hard to find childcare. I didn't want to stay at home for longer, but I took another three extra months. [...] Because you come back too cold, you forget so much in six months. [...] Yes, because a lot of things have changed and you have been familiar with what has gone.

Any extended leave also involves a more subtle problem. The very informality of training makes it impossible to monitor through 'objective' criteria what training people have received and what training is required for which job. Consequently, dropping out of the informal networks runs the risk of losing any claim on a particular job. To take time off work is to disqualify oneself.

### **Organizational form and equal opportunities**

Initial work on equality concluded that bureaucratic work form was antithetical to equality for women. Women were seen as inevitably marginalized in the world of the full-time bureaucratic career, just as allegedly neutral rules in fact ensured that the bureaucracy remained at core a man's world.

Our evidence has challenged these claims. Confronted by discrimination in the bureaucratic organization, women can insist that its rules and regulations are enforced, and appeal to the norms of fairness and objectivity. Just as US trade unions turned

Fordist forms of work organization into protection against arbitrary dismissal, so women have turned bureaucratic structures into protection against unwanted gendering. In UtilityCo, as in the German civil service (di Luzio, 2001), the male breadwinner model has been partially expanded to all employees, ‘compensating’ women for the burden of child-rearing by *temporary* access to reduced working hours. Female employees with children are therefore not necessarily shunted on to the ‘mommy track’ (Hill et al., 2004) where they must accept a permanently impaired career in return for being ‘allowed’ to be mothers.

By contrast, the choice between career and motherhood is hard-wired into the culture and practices of the software companies. For all their rhetoric of flexibility, dynamism and innovation, it is they that impose rigid life choices on their employees. Where post and person have become elided and where training is individualized, then to reduce one’s time at work is to make a permanent decision about the direction of one’s life. ‘Flexible’ or ‘marketized’ organizations, which initially appear so welcoming to ambitious women, thus turn out to be for many a trap. This helps to explain why women’s achievements in education are not reflected in much change in their situation once they reach their thirties when they come to face the implications of having children. At the same time, employer-determined flexibility with its demand for random time commitments is hardly calculated to persuade more men to become involved fathers.

The lack of conventional (or old-fashioned) career ladders in marketized firms does not mean women cannot achieve career success within them. After all, any reading of the admittedly disparate evidence (Wirth, 2001) does suggest that the USA, the home of the marketized enterprise, outpaces all Europe in the proportion of senior corporate managers

who are women. Like bureaucratic organizations, marketized organizations can also be reformed. Although not included in our case studies, many large US firms in Ireland combine marketized structures with formal commitments to equal opportunities and an active commitment to increasing women's involvement. Such firms would describe themselves now as 'managing for diversity'. For women what appears to be decisive here is the extent to which the individualized pay system is formalized by explicit performance targets and salary reviews. Thus reviews of the evidence from all eight countries in the women in information technology study are clear that women do best where companies have formal appraisal systems (Webster, 2004: 40; Valenduc et al., 2004: 82). Such organizations can thus be seen as 'reformed' marketized organizations. The cross-cutting of two dimensions (organizational form and gender policies) gives the typology of Table 3.

**TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE**

The bottom right-and cell of the table approximates to the outcome anticipated by theorists such as Kanter. However, whereas she saw this development as an almost inevitable result of a move away from bureaucratic structures, we suggest that it involves a separate and explicit commitment to reform. Discussing the range of measures which organizations can take to improve women's situation, Halford and Leonard (2001) classify them into four main groups. We now use their classification to suggest that some reforms are relatively easy in bureaucratic organizations, others easier in marketized organizations (Table 4).

**TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE**

Organizations can improve women's access to jobs by ensuring 'fairness' in recruitment and promotion and by monitoring promotion rates. As we have seen, this is very compatible with bureaucratic principles. Such forms of equal opportunities are not just 'modernist' in the general sense that they assimilate women to men (Gheradi 1995: 103), but more precisely in that they are developed for 'modernist' or 'Fordist' organizations (Walby, 1994/95). This apparently straightforward 'tidying up' (Rees, 1998) is very difficult in marketized organizations because they have deliberately minimized clear career hierarchies. By contrast, special 'catch up' training for women does not seem to pose any problems in either type of organization.

Family-friendly policies are above all maternity (and paternity) leave and career breaks. These challenge long-term full-time commitment in both types of organization. However, bureaucratic organizations can utilize their clear linkage between posts and qualifications to 'reserve' posts for women on leave. This, coupled with such organizations' extensive training (itself justified by their low turnover), means that women can reduce their time commitment for several years without being shunted into the 'mummy track' where career ambitions are permanently reduced. In other words, the reformed bureaucratic structure enables women to disprove the assumption of many writers (e.g. Wajcman, 1998: 80) that in such organizations motherhood and management are mutually exclusive.

The third set of measures involve 'challenging sexism' through organizational measures such as equal opportunities training, awareness training, and clear procedures to deal with sexual harassment. The UtilityCo study shows that these can be introduced in a bureaucratic organization, and indeed, its top-down management to some extent actually

facilitates them. Finally ‘new wages of working’ involve challenging informal male-dominated networks and creating ‘alternative work forms’. The latter presumably include fluid project structures which avoid rigid (and gendered) definitions of individuals’ ability. Obviously such work forms are difficult in bureaucratic organizations and intrinsic to marketized ones. However, the software case studies show that flexible project-based working can involve new forms of gendering.

On this basis Figure 1 maps four different organizational types. UtilityCo has moved from a traditional patriarchal bureaucracy to a reformed bureaucracy. Across Europe this change has occurred in different contexts. Halford and Leonard (2001: 197) describe how in the UK in the late 1970s local authorities introduced equal opportunities programmes, usually initiated by ‘femocrats’ (the term itself intriguingly indicates the compatibility of ‘feminism’ and ‘bureaucracy’). In Scandinavia much more extensive changes in the public sector were probably achieved by the early 1980s and were at the root of the Scandinavian solution combining extensive caring services with secure woman-friendly state employment; in countries such as Germany such reforms really began only in the 1990s (di Luzio, 2001).

**FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE**

Today, however, the marketized organizational form is gaining ground. This is partly because it predominates in new firms, such as the case study software firms. Where these have no pro-active policy commitment to equal opportunities, these firms remain male-dominated, so we have termed them ‘patriarchal marketocracies’. By contrast, some such new firms have had a commitment to equal opportunities from the beginning (‘managing for diversity’), so that here too the organizational form has existed as long as the

company. In the chart both these forms are therefore shown with dotted circles. They can however also emerge as a result of change from the previous bureaucratic forms (dotted arrows). This also applies in the public sector, where New Public Management (NPM) attempts to introduce market-type behaviour into state bureaucracies (Lane, 2000). The chart suggests that where bureaucracies are unreformed, movement towards marketized forms is a process of 'business as usual': change does not challenge patriarchal domination.

Those arguments which posit a natural linkage between marketization and equal opportunities predict movement along the 'optimistic' path from traditional bureaucracies to 'managing for diversity', but our evidence suggests a more normal experience has been the path of 'public sector feminism' from traditional patriarchal bureaucracy to reformed (woman-friendly) bureaucracy. Today these organizations are 'moving with the times', and becoming more marketized. If they are to remain 'woman-friendly', we would suggest, this will involve a greater reliance on cultural change and de-gendered forms of flexible working, since these methods are more compatible with their organizational form than are formal recruitment and promotion procedures (see Table 2). Interestingly, such changes may well mean less protection against the emergence of a 'mummy track'; they may undermine the situation of women in middle ranks of the organization, but at the same time provide more opportunities for high-profile careerists. Such a change would involve a shift down the right-hand side of the chart, from reformed bureaucracy to managing for diversity.

Greater marketization may have more negative consequences. Relying primarily on UK evidence, one major review of women's employment in contemporary Europe

suggests that flatter hierarchies and more individualized pay actually undermines equal opportunities (Rubery et al., 1999: 71; also Creegan et al., 2003). Also from the UK, Davies and Thomas (2002) locate a ‘remasculinization of management’ in the public sector. Here bureaucratic organizations have been made more woman-friendly (‘reformed bureaucracy’), but now the delegation of power to front-line management, the reduction of family-friendly hours and of woman-only training, all move the organization away from the woman-friendly column towards the patriarchal column (bold arrow). Women managers become more entrepreneurial and more competitive, undermining any co-operative and caring aspects of management, just as in the private sector women managers have to take ‘hard’ decisions in ‘hard’ managerial style (Wajcman, 1998: 72).

**Conclusion: towards singularity?**

We have described the unreformed marketized firm as ‘patriarchal’. However, this is perhaps using the language of yesterday, for these organizations discriminate not against women, but against anyone with ‘caring’ encumbrances. The bottom left-hand corner of Figure 1 is the world of singles. It is plausible that employment conditions in marketized firms make a particular contribution to childlessness. Contractual insecurity is after all hardly conducive to considering the ‘risks’ of bringing up children. Individualized work contracts link, however tenuously, to a hyper-individualized society in which the long-term commitments (and rewards) of parenthood are increasingly out of reach:

Pressures towards economic competitiveness have generated organizational restructuring ... these pressures have been passed on to individuals who, if they wish to improve their chances of a successful career, are constrained to behave in ways that can make family life difficult ... Thus a model of



employment is perpetrated in which the “best” jobs also happen to be those least compatible with employment and caring. (Crompton and Birkelund, 2000)

Today therefore, instead of Kanter’s optimistic trajectory, for many organizations the change may be *from* reformed bureaucracy ‘back’ to what we might actually call ‘singularchal’ marketocracy. The pending privatization of UtilityCo suggests that this fate may also await its women employees.

## **Notes**

1. Organizations such as the Nazi party are often portrayed as ‘bureaucratic’, but all serious historical research shows that both the Nazi party and the Nazi regime were characterized by a determined assault on bureaucratic rules and procedures in the name of healthy Aryan thinking and the untrammelled will of the leader (e.g. Burleigh, 2000).

2 The project “Widening Women’s Work in Information and Communication Technology” was funded by the European Commission (contract no. IST-2001-34520) and studied gendered patterns of work and career in the software industry. It involved teams from Ireland, Italy, the UK, Austria, Belgium, France and Portugal.

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## **Tables**

**Table 1. UtilityCo: Administrative and accounting area 1988-2002**

	1988		2002	
	Total number	% female	Total number	% female
Administrative (9 salary ranges)	728	20.6	1,095	48.3
top salary range	51	2.1	163	26.4
Clerical	1,154	81.5	1,004	85.6
Total	1,882	58.0	2,099	66.2

**Table 2. Gender and occupation: Women as percentage of each occupation**

	Hardware	Software	All ICT	All Employment
Managers	30.4	32.1	31.6	27.0
Professionals	18.8	21.3	21.1	45.6
Ass prof & tech	20.8	29.1	27.6	55.2
Clerical & sec	59.1	70.8	66.7	75.5
Craft & related	22.7	22.7	24.4	6.4
Service	0.0	100.0	100.0	58.2
Sales	58.3	50.0	54.2	60.2
Operatives	50.0	55.0	51.0	25.4
Other	33.3	33.3	33.3	35.6
Total	40.1	33.7	36.1	40.7

Source CSO: QNHS, special tabulation. 'Results are subject to sampling variation. Particular care should be taken in respect of estimates of small value'.

**Table 3. Organizational structure and gender policies**

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	Male dominated	Woman-friendly
Bureaucratic	Patriarchal bureaucracy	Reformed bureaucracy
Marketised	Patriarchal marketocracy	Reformed marketocracy

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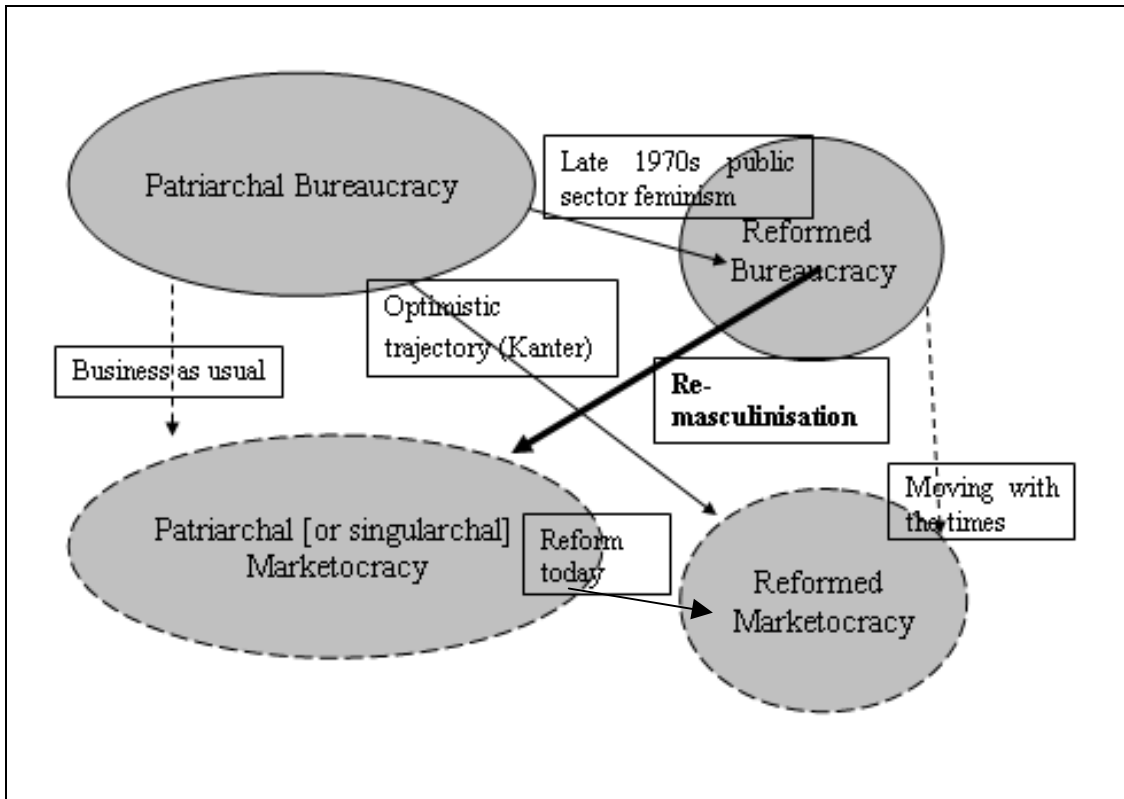
**Table 4. Reforming bureaucratic and marketised organizations**

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	Bureaucratic	Individualised
Improving women's access to jobs (promotion and recruitment, special training)	<b>Yes</b> ('tidying up') for procedures and monitoring; special training acceptable	<b>Problematic</b> for procedures and monitoring; Special training acceptable
Family-friendly policies (working hours)	Yes	Generates 'Mommy track'
Challenging sexism	Yes	Yes
New ways of working	<b>Incompatible</b> with organization	Not necessarily woman-friendly

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**Figure 1. Paths of organizational and gender policy change**





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