



Women. Men. Different. Equal.
Equal Opportunities Commission

Delivering quality services, meeting different needs

Promoting sex equality in the public sector



Women and men have different needs from public services

Most women still have very different life experiences from most men.

For example:

- Although women now make up nearly half of the workforce and men's role in caring for children is growing, women still take on the majority of care for children.
- Women and men have different working patterns. 44% of working women work part-time, compared to only 10% of men. Women often take breaks from paid work to care for others. For many, this results in limited career progress, lower pay and reduced pensions. Women pensioners' incomes are just 57% of men's.
- Even when both partners work, women still do the majority of the domestic work.
- Even if caring and domestic roles were shared more evenly, women and men would still have distinctive needs, for example in their health and in their personal safety.

Because women's lives are different from men's, they need different things from public services. Meeting their needs often means changing the content of services and how they are delivered.

There are issues for men and boys too. Men are sometimes reluctant to use public services that they see as irrelevant to their needs. They are much less likely to visit their doctors or be involved in their children's education. When they do want to be involved as fathers, services that have been designed for women can make men feel unwelcome. To get them involved, service providers need to address these barriers.

Yet many public services are designed on a 'one-size-fits all' model which does not look at women's and men's different needs. Even when planners consult users in the design and management of services, it is rare for them to look at the gender differences. The importance of doing this becomes even more obvious once other differences like ethnicity and disability are taken into account.

To find and retain the right workforce to deliver quality services, public sector employers also need to look at the needs of women and men as employees:

- Women are the backbone of the public sector, comprising over 70% of the workforce, but are systematically under-represented at senior levels.
- Men and women want to be able to balance work and caring responsibilities, yet British men work the longest hours in Europe.
- Four in ten mothers and one in ten fathers have left or turned down a job because of childcare responsibilities.

Why these differences matter: transport, crime, childcare, education, health

Women have less access to private cars than men and are the main users of public transport. They use transport at different times, in different ways and for different reasons from men, both to get to work, and to access services, childcare and food shopping. Yet transport services and town planning rarely recognise this, or allow for women's greater fear of travelling at night, or provide easy access to transport for those carrying children and pushchairs.



Image courtesy of Firstgroup.com

One quarter of all violent crime in Britain is domestic violence, and two women are killed every week by their partners and ex-partners. Yet policing, criminal justice, health and housing services do not always prioritise violence against women, and its consequences, when they are allocating their time and resources.

In England this year, there were 4.5 children under the age of eight for every formal childcare place. Lack of childcare often prevents women, and some men, from accessing both employment and services, yet public service providers and employers do not always recognize how big a barrier this is, or do anything to address it.

Overall, girls are outperforming boys in school, but their success is not translating into better pay and jobs. When girls or women choose traditionally female jobs, they get lower pay, and employers do not get access to the full pool of talent they need to meet skills shortages. Some schools have introduced schemes to tackle the cause of boys' underperformance, but this is patchy. Education and careers services need to address these issues for boys and for girls.

There are big differences in women's and men's health needs and behaviour. Biological and social factors influence the health risks they are exposed to, their health behaviour and their experience of health care. For example, while women are more susceptible to lung cancer, more men die of the disease, because they seek medical help late. On the other hand, policy to shorten hospital stays can affect women differently from men, as women will often not have support in place at home and quickly resume household responsibilities.

Understanding and meeting the different needs of women and men is an important part of delivering quality services.

Introducing a new legal duty to promote sex equality in the public sector

The Sex Discrimination Act (1976) outlaws sex discrimination in the workplace and in the provision of goods and services. But it does not prevent discrimination from taking place, just addresses it after it happens. If a man or woman experiences sex discrimination they can challenge it through the legal system. But we know that most people will not choose to go through the legal process because of the cost or the fear of losing their job. It is stressful for the individual and their families and can take years to resolve a case. As a result discrimination is often left unchallenged and unchecked.

The Government proposes to introduce a duty on public bodies to promote sex equality, which will be similar to the existing duty to promote race equality, and the forthcoming one on disability. These duties will place clear responsibility for taking action on equality with public bodies themselves, rather than relying on individuals to take action.

The sex equality duty will require public bodies to ensure that their policies on services and employment address the different needs of women and men. This will not mean introducing quotas for women or positive discrimination in employment. This will, however, require public bodies to set their own gender equality goals in the design and delivery of their services, and the way they employ staff.

The sex equality duty will lead to:

- more focus on the needs of service users
- better quality services
- more effective targeting of resources
- better results
- more efficient use of talent in the workforce.

What will public service providers have to do?

The sex equality duty will mean that public bodies will have to identify the big issues for sex equality in their services, employment and policy making. They will have to analyse what they do and who uses their services, and ask:

- what are the priority issues for women and men in the services we provide?
- do they have significantly different needs within some services?
- will women or men be put off using a service because of lack of childcare or an unsafe or unwelcoming environment?
- are there some services which are more effectively delivered as women-only or men-only?

Public bodies will have to listen to what women and men say about their needs, choose priority goals for change, and take action.

The Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) has found that some public bodies are doing this already, but they are still in the minority. This leaflet includes some examples of the kind of good practice that we want to see spreading across the whole public sector. With a duty to promote sex equality, good practice can become common practice. Understanding different needs can lead to new ways of delivering services and improved employment practice, producing a better deal for women and men.

Healthier options

Men are 50% less likely than women to visit their GP, which means they often seek treatment late in an illness. This is bad for their health and wellbeing, and costs the NHS more in the long run. The **Barbershop Health Clinic in Wolverhampton** is an example of a service that addresses men's health needs. It has taken services to a place that men ordinarily use and where they feel relaxed. Health checks are provided within a barbershop and men can ask questions about health concerns, or discuss sensitive issues like depression in a comfortable environment.

The benefits of this approach include increased take-up of health services by men and diagnosis of undiscovered health risks (46% of clients in the first six months had at least one health problem). The clinic has been a useful way of tackling obesity (28% were obese or overweight), high blood pressure and men's fears of talking about health issues. The clinic is a cost-effective service, with surgeries costing no more than if they were provided at the local health centre.

“Many of my customers tell me about their health worries but are reluctant to go to their GP because the waiting times are too long and they don't feel they are ill enough to go... the problem is a lot of them fail to spot the tell-tale signs of illness until they end up in hospital or worse.”

Greg Mason, owner of GI's Barbershop



Image courtesy of the Barbershop Health Clinic, Wolverhampton.



Image courtesy of Lovell Partnerships Limited.

Tackling job segregation, improving housing services

Only 1% of construction workers and 2% of plumbers are women. Leicester City Council has made a concerted effort to encourage women and people from ethnic minorities to take up careers in building trades that are traditionally dominated by white men. In particular the Council offers apprenticeships targeted at women, including help with childcare costs, and it now employs 35 women in its housing maintenance team.

Benefits of this policy include a repairs service that is quicker to respond, and a service that better meets the needs of tenants. For example, female tenants can request that repairs are undertaken by women-only teams, and this has been of particular value to elderly women living alone, some ethnic minority women, and women who have been victims of domestic violence. The Audit Commission praised this initiative when awarding Leicester's housing department top marks in an inspection in 2002.

Improving education, involving fathers

One of the reasons boys can under-perform at school is that they see reading as somehow 'uncool' and 'girly'. The Fathers and Reading Project is one example of a service that tries to create positive male role models for school children. It is run jointly in a number of areas by local education authorities and the voluntary sector. The project provides opportunities for fathers to get involved in their children's education, and specifically to help them with their reading. Games and activities are used as a way of recruiting fathers and their children and developing physical contact. The project provides reading packs, which they work on together at home. Resources include activity books, a reading diary and a favourite books record. The project also gives dads an opportunity to improve their own reading and writing skills.

"It was the push I needed to spend more time with my daughter. I hardly see her because I work in the catering business. I set off for work at 4pm and don't get home 'til the early hours. I am usually asleep when she leaves for school in the morning. But I do have two days off and I want to help her reading. What I didn't know was there was more to it than listening to her. I have usually left that sort of thing to her mother. Reading together is a good way of enjoying ourselves."

Father, Bradford



Image courtesy of
www.continyou.org.uk



Image courtesy of the Borough of Telford & Wrekin

Increasing productivity through flexibility

The Borough of Telford & Wrekin recognises the difficulties that many parents and carers face and they have designed policies to support staff with caring responsibilities. Their innovations have reduced staff turnover (3% compared to an average of 10% for councils across England), created a loyal workforce and reduced recruitment costs. By retaining experienced and well-trained staff, they have ensured continuity and quality in service delivery. Because of this, the Council has been able to increase its full service opening hours by three days each year. The new working culture has increased productivity as employees have begun to measure the results they have delivered, instead of the hours they have worked. Promoting gender equality has improved services and benefitted everyone.

"Since introducing the new flexible measures, the council's unauthorised-absence levels have reduced, the numbers applying for jobs have increased, the level of training undertaken has risen and part-time employees now outnumber traditional full-timers, meaning that it is easier to respond to short-term work fluctuations."

Michael Frater, Chief Executive, Telford & Wrekin Borough Council.

What will it mean for the workforce?

Public sector organisations will also have to set goals to promote gender equality for their employees. This could include:

- taking steps to improve the under-representation of women or men in parts of their workforce
- taking steps to address the under-representation of women at senior levels
- conducting reviews to ensure their pay systems are fair and addressing any discrimination they identify
- improving the support they offer to their employees in balancing work and family life
- introducing effective sexual harassment policies
- requiring their private or voluntary sector contractors to meet fair employment standards.

It doesn't have to be bureaucratic

Promoting equality for service users and the workforce should be part of the core work of the public sector, not something extra. It is part of providing a quality service.

It can be done as part of an organisation's annual planning, and in reviews that are already taking place. It can form an integral part of setting standards for services and identifying the improvements that service providers want to see. Good practice service providers know who their users are and what they want. Good practice employers realise that that time spent on supporting their workforce results in a better use of resources and better staff performance.

It doesn't have to be costly

Designing services to meet user needs can result in better value for money, because resources are being targeted where they are most needed. Investing in the workforce can significantly reduce staff turnover and recruitment costs, as well as improving service delivery. It's all about getting the right information to make decisions, on how and where to prioritise resources.

Couldn't this be done without a change in the law?

Our evidence shows that where equality is optional, it doesn't happen. Best practice organisations will take action anyway, but the majority will not without legislation. The Audit Commission recently found that the Race Relations Amendment Act 'is the most influential driver of activity to address race equality across the public sector.' (Journey to Race Equality, 2004)

We know that there is still a long way to go towards achieving race equality, but progress would not have been made without changing the law. We think the gender duty will provide a similar incentive to action.

It's not just about sex equality

The EOC supports the introduction of the duty on public bodies to promote equality for disabled people. In fact, we think public bodies should have a duty to promote equality across the board. They would then have to respond to the different needs of older women and men, and of younger people, of those with different religious beliefs and those with none, of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transsexual people, as well as people from different ethnic groups and those with a disability. In reality, an individual's identity is complex. Modern public services must be able to see, understand and respond to the many aspects of an individual's needs. We need services that are based on evidence, not assumptions of who people are and what they need.

No choice without equality

Equality of opportunity is fundamental to an extension of choice in the public sector. Without it, only those who can exercise choice already will benefit. Choice is meaningless unless you have equality at the heart of policy. The EOC wants to see:

- responsive, quality public services that meet the needs of women and men
- a public sector workforce that is motivated and well-supported to deliver those services.

A duty on public bodies to promote sex equality is fundamental to these aims.



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Get involved

We are collecting examples of good practice in promoting sex equality in public services to publish on our website. To supply information or to be kept in touch with the progress of our public services project, please email publicservices@eoc.org.uk.

You can find out more about the project on our website at www.eoc.org.uk/publicservices.