Getting gender on the agenda: The tale of two organisations

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Charlesworth, S., & Baird, M. (2007). Getting gender on the agenda: The tale of two organisations. *Women in Management Review*, 22(5), 391–404. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09649420710761455>

Published Version: <https://doi.org/10.1108/09649420710761455>

Submission to *Women in Management Review*

Title:

Getting Gender on the Agenda: The Tale of Two Organisations

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Citation:

Charlesworth, S and Baird, M 2007, 'Getting gender on the agenda: The tale of two organisations', *Women in Management Review*, vol. 22, no. 5, pp. 391-404

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Getting Gender on the Agenda: The Tale of Two Organisations

Abstract

Purpose This paper explores emerging issues in the application of the ‘dual agenda’ model of gender equitable organisational change aimed at improved work life outcomes in two large Australian organisations.

Design/methodology/approach The research project used the collaborative interactive action research (CIAR) methodology that underpins the dual agenda change approach. Within both organisations a multi-method approach was used, including formal interviews, focus groups and ethnographic type observation and interaction, as well as the analysis of a wide range of organisational documentation. The paper focuses on the challenges both for the researchers and the organisations in keeping gender on the agenda, drawing on the identification of work practices and work-life policies that impede organisational effectiveness and gender equity and the subsequent work culture diagnosis for each organisation.

Findings The way in which the ‘gender problem’ within an organisation is framed is strategically important. An understanding of ‘gender’ as ‘women’ not only marginalises gender equity as a business goal and its links with organisational effectiveness, but also works to silence men’s interests in better work/life outcomes. A refocusing on the ‘ideal worker’ was found to be more inclusive not only of men and also valuable in highlighting the ways in which organisational work/life policies may be undercut by business pressures and long hours, poor job design or management discretion. However challenges remain in linking

gender equitable organisational change to organisational effectiveness, especially in organisations which are restructuring.

Originality/value Provides a frank account of the challenges in making the links between gender equity, organisational effectiveness and work life issues that is valuable for both academics and practitioners. The 'dual agenda' approach is methodologically important as it engages both 'outsider' academics and 'insider' organisational members in an action research process directed at gender equitable organisational change.

Keywords Dual Agenda, Gender Equity, Organisational Change, Action Research

Paper type Research paper

Getting Gender on the Agenda: The Tale of Two Organisations

The Dual Agenda: Applying the approach and methodology

This paper explores emerging gender issues in the application of the ‘dual agenda’ model of organisational change in two large Australian organisations, ManuCo and UtilityCo.¹ Both are confronted with male dominated, ageing workforces and have identified the need to broaden the recruitment pool of employees. At the same time, both face product market pressures that challenge their competitive position and have organisational cultures that constrain their ability to attract and retain female employees. The underlying assumption of the dual agenda, and the collaborative interactive action research (CIAR) methodology on which it draws, is that making changes in work practices to increase gender equity and work/life integration can also increase workplace performance and organisational effectiveness (Rapoport *et al.*, 2002). The dual agenda developed out of critical feminist perspectives on organisations underpinned by an understanding that ‘gender inequities in organizations are rooted in taken-for-granted assumptions, values and practices that systematically accord power and privilege to certain groups of men at the expense of women and other men’ (Meyerson & Kolb, 2000, p. 554). Initially trialled in three major corporations in the US (Rapoport *et al.*, 2002, pp.184-189), the dual agenda concept and CIAR methodology have now been used in a wide range of organisations in a variety of industries, including retail, manufacturing, telecommunications, information technology, insurance, government administration, business and accountancy services, and the not-for-profit sector - predominantly in the US and the UK (Rapoport *et al.*, 2002, pp.195-196; Bailyn & Fletcher, 2003; Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Kolb & Merrill-Sands, 1999; Lewis, 2001; Lewis & Cooper, 2005).

Our attraction to the dual agenda concept stemmed not so much from its organisational change perspective, but from our inter-related concerns about women and work in Australia and the burgeoning debate about work-family tensions (Pocock, 2003; Campbell & Charlesworth, 2004). In particular, we were concerned about the lack of gender awareness in much industrial relations research (Baird, 2003; Pocock, 2001) as well as the apparent disappearing of gender from both public and organisational discourses, including in those around work and family (Berns, 2002; Charlesworth, Hall & Probert, 2005). To us, Rapoport *et al.*'s explicit recognition of gender was very appealing, as was the observation that a departure from established work-family research had to be made, 'by reframing the issues in terms of gender, directing attention to the role played by strongly held, usually tacit assumptions about how work should be done, assumptions that are linked to the traditional separation of work and family spheres and to stereotyped views of the role of men and women in each' (2003, p. xiii). Adopting this approach leads directly to interrogating the construction of the 'ideal worker' (Kanter, 1977; Williams, 2000), assumed to be a full-time male employee, unencumbered by family or domestic responsibilities and around whom organisations base their work practices and organisation of working time. The model of the dual agenda argues that the conflation of this ideal masculinity with paid work on the one hand, and of women and femininity with family and domestic work on the other hand, not only creates equity issues for women but is problematic for the work itself. That is, work practices that are constrained by gendered images of competence and organised around 'ideal work' may undermine an organisation's ability to meet its business goals. The dual agenda concept assumes that 'it is possible to challenge conventional wisdom about ideal workers (equity) and ideal work (effectiveness) and make changes that can benefit both' (Bailyn & Fletcher, 2003, p.2).

The CIAR methodology is a qualitative approach aimed at getting beyond and below taken-for-granted assumptions about the 'ideal worker' and the organisation of work. It emphasises research 'with' people rather than 'on' people (Coleman & Rippen, 2000, p.575) and is explicit about the role of the researcher and underlying assumptions in the research process. It is based on a cohesive set of underlying principles that set it apart from other conventional case study approaches. These include: 'mutual inquiry', approaching relevant issues with a goal but not pre-determined solutions; 'fluid expertise', in which all parties, researchers and organisation members, are active learners and teachers; 'honouring resistance', reminding all participants of the recurrent, yet normal resistance to change; 'keeping the dual agenda on the table', emphasising the need to maintain the connection between organisational effectiveness and employee personal life/well-being (Bailyn & Fletcher, 2003, p.3). In these ways the CIAR approach is also more akin to feminist methodological approaches and consequently different to the traditional 'gender-blind' approach to industrial relations research.

In Australia (as elsewhere) issues about the availability, access and utilisation of family friendly policies are about gender as much as industrial relations and the 'dual agenda' approach therefore offered us an opportunity to link the two areas. Furthermore, Rapoport *et al.* also recognised the emergent state of their conceptual framework and methodology, and so this project provided an opportunity to test both the concept and the methodological approach. Lewis' and Cooper's case studies demonstrate some of the difficulties associated with maintaining organisational commitment to research of this kind, including allocating the time needed for organisational change, engaging both the top and bottom of the organisation, and keeping the dual focus on organisational effectiveness and gender equity (2005). In particular, the difficulty of keeping 'gender on the agenda' has also been flagged by Ely & Meyerson

(2000). It is this aspect of the implementation of the dual agenda concept and CIAR methodology on which this paper focuses.

In the next section we describe the organisations and briefly outline our dual agenda research to date. We then explore the emerging issues around our attempts to keep gender on the agenda; firstly we identify the different intra - and inter - organisational framings of the gender ‘problem’; secondly we consider the way both silences and noises around gender can be seen to advance gender equity goals and thirdly, we reflect on the advantages and limitations of our all female research team.

It is important, however, to first acknowledge the broader institutional and social context in which gender issues are talked about and represented in organisations such as *ManuCo* and *UtilityCo*. Over the last decade in Australia any focus on equal employment opportunity (EEO) or gender equity for women, at its height in the 1980s and early 1990s, has gradually receded from policy and political discourse. At the policy level in particular we have seen a shift away from EEO to ‘work and family’ and the construction of working women as ‘working mums’. The disappearing of any public EEO agenda, both in relation to work and family and more generally, is in sharp contrast to many European countries, including the UK, where gender equality is at least articulated as an integral objective in policy debates around women in employment. The public silence around the issues of gender in Australia has seen a growing dominance of a seemingly gender-neutral ‘managing diversity’ discourse in organisational responses to unequal employment opportunities. Broadly speaking, managing diversity is seen as more inclusive than EEO, which is often described as ‘only about women’ (Charlesworth, Hall & Probert, 2005, p.10). So while gender and organisational analysis may be a burgeoning field for academics, in many Australian organisations gender is barely on the radar.

Trialling the Dual Agenda in the case study organisations

ManuCo is a large manufacturing multi-national company with its parent company located in North America. ManuCo's Australian operation is located across two large manufacturing sites and several smaller distribution and testing worksites. A commitment to diversity is seen as delivering the innovation required for the company to maintain and grow its global market share. The organisation's immediate employment and work-life concerns are how to recruit more women, how to re-orient the company culture to be more 'work-life' and 'family-friendly' and how to successfully introduce and diffuse a new work-life strategy throughout the whole workforce. At the commencement of the research project ManuCo had a workforce of some 9500, 90 percent of whom are men. Three quarters of workforce work in blue-collar, plant-based positions with the remaining employees in salaried, managerial or professional positions. The workforce is culturally diverse and represents more than 60 nationalities. It is also aging with more than half the workforce aged over 35 years. While these features are broadly characteristic of the industry as a whole, ManuCo has comparatively fewer females than its industry competitors. Currently women make up around one in twelve managers and administrators and less than one in ten of the production line staff. Perhaps surprisingly, women comprise almost half of the company's Australian board of directors.

UtilityCo is a state owned corporation and one of the largest utilities in Australia, providing essential services to a large metropolitan area. It currently employs just under 3,500 people, a third of whom are located in the head office in a central business district of a capital city with two thirds working in geographically dispersed small to medium sized worksites across the metropolitan area. The concerns that initially attracted UtilityCo to the dual agenda project were how to maintain the health and well being of their workforce, while at the same time attracting and retaining a younger and more gender balanced workforce. The composition of UtilityCo's workforce is predominantly male, and women constitute less than

one quarter of its current employees. Employees are spread across a diverse range of professional, administrative and technical occupations. Almost 40 percent are in blue collar jobs and 60 per cent in managerial, professional and clerical occupations. Women are most heavily concentrated in the professional and clerical positions, and also have a relatively high presence at the senior executive level. The workforce is culturally diverse, with over a fifth of employees from Non-English speaking backgrounds, representing more than 60 different languages. Employees have an average length of service of more than 15 years with almost three quarters of employees are over the age of 35. Female employees are, on average, younger and have fewer years of service at the organisation compared to males.

The research journey to date

CIAR is action research specifically directed towards change in the organisation around work/life integration for the improvement of gender equity and organisational effectiveness. With this aim in mind, both ManuCo and UtilityCo had to be ready to accept such a research philosophy and style. Entry to the organisations was negotiated through 2004. As others have noted (eg Bryman, 1988), this can be a difficult phase and may be expected to be more contentious when dealing with the issue of gender, but assisting us was the fact that in both cases we had established connections through personal contacts and previous research. Importantly, both organisations also had accepting research cultures and some pride in their work-life policies, which have received external publicity and attention. Arrangements for the research were finalised in late 2004 and the project commenced in 2005. As far as we know our research project at ManuCo and UtilityCo is the first of its kind in the Australian context.

There are four main stages in the dual agenda/CIAR research process: These stages are:

- the identification of work practices and work-life policies that have implications for organisational effectiveness and gender equity;

- the provision of a work culture diagnosis for the organisation. This makes the costs and consequences of the work practices both for gender equity and organisational effectiveness visible;
- the identification of leverage points, so-called ‘interventions’, for ‘small wins’ change that would both benefit the people who are doing the work and the work itself;
- helping the organisation to implement the changes; the ‘interventions’, and evaluating the outcomes.

As the CIAR methodology is a collaborative relationship between the academic researchers and the organisation, a liaison person in the organisation is needed. From the beginning we had very willing liaison people both located in middle management HR positions who became, in effect, ‘insider’ researchers. The research assistants entered the organisations in early 2005 spending two days a week working on the first stage of the research and quite soon became embedded in the organisations as ‘insider/outsider’ researchers. We remained predominantly ‘outsider’ researchers, being involved in the overall project management, organisational liaison and presentations, undertaking some interviews and running several focus groups.

A multi-method approach to gathering data for the organisational diagnosis has been used in both organisations including formal interviews, focus groups, and ethnographic type research - observation of, and interactions and discussions with a range of managers, white collar and blue collar employees. Key questions that shaped our investigations were: ‘who is the ideal worker in this work/area?’; ‘how is performance/commitment measured, rewarded?’; ‘how and for what purposes is work organised?’; and ‘how do these norms affect men, women, those with caring responsibilities?’ (see Bailyn & Fletcher, 2003). In addition, organisational documentation has been examined, including employee and HR data, records

of internal presentations, projects and climate surveys (Baird *et al.*, 2006). After almost a year in the organisations we are over the half way point in terms of the dual agenda methodology. An organisational diagnosis has been developed and feedback sessions undertaken at ManuCo and UtilityCo that has led to a further refinement of diagnoses, the identification of possible interventions and to an increase in organisation awareness about the project. In the following analysis of emerging gender issues we draw on research outcomes from the first two stages.

Getting gender on the agenda

Gender relations are integral to the structure and practices of organisations and operate on many levels from the explicit to the more subtle, in the ways in which work is organised, defined, rewarded and represented (Edwards & Wajcman, 2005, pp. 79-80). Examining the ways gender issues are negotiated within organisations can help us understand both why and how gender inequality in both family work and market work persists. In this section we reflect on the emerging issues around gender in our dual agenda projects at ManuCo and UtilityCo. This is not so much a critique of the dual agenda methodology as a reflection on the challenges in keeping gender on the agenda in the first half of the project.

Framings of the gender 'problem'

In both ManuCo and UtilityCo, initial management interest in the dual agenda project stemmed from the issues of work-life tension and work-family balance rather than gender. Gender, it must be said, was not their primary concern. Initially too, pleased to have gained access to the organisations we were also somewhat wary of being too explicit about the gender issue. Nevertheless, and somewhat to our surprise, our projects quickly overlapped with the interests of the senior women's leadership networks in both organisations. In UtilityCo the senior women's leadership program, which is aimed at advancing women's

interests and organisational voice, is part of a broader public sector initiative to promote women. This program was being revitalised just as we were commencing our research and while both they and we saw some potential to jointly advance our interests, the exact nature of the relationship is still unresolved. At ManuCo, just as we came into the organisation a women's leadership network was introduced as part of a global wide-initiative to address the advancement of women within the company. The involvement of women in executive positions provided a real opportunity to canvas gender equity concerns at a number of levels. The stated goals of the network explicitly identified the business benefits of improved representation of women within the organisation. While we initially attended as observers at meetings of this group, it quickly became another auspice for the dual agenda project. At the same time, a decision was taken by the new CEO to introduce gender hire targets to encourage the recruitment of women in male-dominated work areas. This gender-explicit initiative was in sharp contrast to the earlier approach taken to the issue of women in ManuCo's Australian operation. While the former CEO had encouraged a greater representation of women both on the board of directors and in non-traditional occupations, such encouragement was not explicit because of concerns that such efforts would be seen as privileging women.

How gender issues are framed within the context of organisational change shape not only the objectives of such change efforts but their outcomes. Meyerson & Kolb identify four approaches to understandings of gender equity and organisational change (2000, pp. 560-566). The first approach, 'equip the woman' or liberal individualism, sees the gender problem as differences in women's employment opportunities relative to men's as the result of sex-role socialisation. The goal of this approach to gender equity is to minimise differences between women and men so that women can compete as equals. The second approach, 'create equal opportunity' or liberal structuralism, focuses on structural barriers, such as in hiring and

promotion processes and practices. It also recognises women's primary carer role as a structural barrier to their advancement. The goal of this approach is to create equal opportunity for women by eliminating these barriers through appropriate recruiting and promotion procedures and by providing work family benefits. The third approach 'value difference' or women's standpoint/advantage, sees women's disadvantage as stemming from the devaluation of the skills and attributes associated with women and femininity. This approach shifts from a focus on eliminating difference between men and women to celebrating those differences and valuing them equally - by raising awareness of how traditionally feminine activities and styles can benefit the organisation. The fourth approach, 'resisting and re-vising the dominant discourse' or 'post equity', is concerned more about the gendered process of organisation rather than women or discriminatory practices. It sees organisations as inherently gendered; that is gender is an organising principle and process that shapes social structure, identities and knowledge. The focus is then on different sets of gendering processes, including formal practices and policies; informal work practices; and symbols and images that express, legitimate and reinforce gendered divisions in the organisations. These processes are seen as potential sites for resistance and levers for gender equitable change.

Arguably the philosophy of the 'dual agenda' draws on this fourth approach to understanding the gender problem. However, the current inter- and intra-organisational framings at ManuCo and UtilityCo overlap with Meyerson and Kolb's first two approaches. Within both organisations two main understandings of the gender problem have surfaced so far. These framings can be characterised as firstly, the problem is women's individual disadvantage and individual women's lack of access to equal employment opportunities, and secondly, the problem is organisational culture and practices which prevent women from reaching their full potential and being fairly rewarded for the work they do. In both framings

gender is understood to mean ‘women’, with the emphasis on either the deficits of individual women or on the impact of organisational practices on women. Both perspectives underpin assumptions about the causes of unequal employment opportunities for women and appropriate organisational responses to (and responsibilities for) this. These different understandings of gender inequity/equity appear to co-exist within the case study organisations and also within different worksites.

While the presence of the senior women’s networks at both ManuCo and UtilityCo are visible symbols that gender is an issue, the way in which the gender problem is framed is strategically important. If it is women’s individual disadvantage, then the focus is typically on women and individual remedies to ameliorate that disadvantage, such as through assertiveness training or better networking opportunities as have been the focus of some discussions in ManuCo’s women’s leadership network. If the gender problem is framed as organisational practices and culture then the focus is typically on the effects of that culture and practices on women. For example, one of the issues identified in both organisations is the difficulties for women of working in a ‘blokey culture’. We found, however, that the responses to the identification of such a culture may still draw on different understandings of the gender problem. At UtilityCo the focus has been on creating more inclusive recruitment, selection and promotion processes, while at ManuCo emphasis has been placed on creating more acceptance of ‘working with women’, particularly in male dominated work areas. Even where the gender problem is understood more as a web of systemic practices that disadvantage women, we have picked up contradictory views about the extent to which women’s typically greater primary carer responsibilities outside work are an individual or an organisational concern. In both organisations, however, such views sit side by side with the provision of paid maternity leave, still exceptional in private sector workplaces in Australia.²

There has been a debate about strategy, particularly in ‘naming’ the gender problem in both organisations. Thus, while there may be a strong consciousness of the need to improve women’s representation in non-traditional areas and in senior management, there is often a concern about how explicitly gender-specific any action should be. At ManuCo, while there is some high level support for increasing the numbers of women in senior positions, ‘merit’ has to be constantly balanced against any appearance of ‘special treatment’. In the women’s leadership network for example, there have been some robust debates about whether it is better to avoid any backlash about perceptions of ‘more favourable’ treatment of women or whether it is better to simply meet such resistance head on and deal with it. These concerns about how explicit initiatives to increase women’s representation should be are fascinating to us as ‘outsider’ researchers given the obvious low representation of women. In ManuCo and UtilityCo, gender inequity clearly operates at a structural level (Coleman & Rippen 2000, 579) with not only the numerical dominance of men but the dominance of men in management, on high pay scales, in certain professions and in manufacturing. At the same time, some women at least do not see representation as the only indicator of a more gender equal workplace. While the relatively high representation of women on ManuCo’s executive is very visible, different views about what such representation means for other women within the organisation have also been expressed. As one professional woman in the company rhetorically put it, ‘the glass ceiling has been broken, but where is the ladder?’

These different organisational framings of the gender problem and of strategies to address it have very much shaped our attempts to keep the dual agenda project on track, and to get gender on the agenda. We have been juggling what has increasingly seemed to us to be a triple agenda of work/life integration, gender equity and organisational effectiveness. In respect to the latter aspect, focusing on ‘salient business needs’, such as workforce demographics and sustainability, provided an important initial ‘hook’ for the projects once we

started work within the organisations. At ManuCo, one such goal identified by the women's leadership network was to increase the representation of women, both for long term workforce sustainability and to improve market share by better harnessing female customer demand for the products the company produces. At UtilityCo, the work effectiveness 'hook' was the retention and attraction of women and a desire to improve organisational/employer branding. The process of the dual agenda projects has produced rich insights into the different aspects of the dual agenda. At UtilityCo, we initially identified a long list of issues that affected gender equity and organisational effectiveness including the very 'blokey culture' of certain parts of the organisation; practices of attracting, retaining and promoting female employees; and problems with the access and quality of existing part-time work arrangements. At ManuCo similar issues came to the surface, including the long hours culture, particularly for salaried employees; patchy knowledge of the work/life policies across the organisation, especially around part-time work; as well as the issue of 'blokey culture', both in the white and blue collar areas.

Gender discourses

In this part we outline the ways in which different gender discourses can be seen to advance or hinder gender equity goals. As in other similar projects, we found ourselves constantly making judgements as to how far we could go and when we could push the gender equity aspects of the dual agenda (Coleman & Ripen, 2000, p.577). At times silences around gender equity can be seen to advance gender equity goals. For example, at UtilityCo we have argued that time lost due to the women's extensive use of informal networks to support each other and to overcome the 'blokey culture' and harassment issues is a cause for concern because of the loss of productivity and performance time. At ManuCo we have found ourselves appealing more to the work effectiveness part of the dual agenda when we face resistance to

the idea that the way in which work is organised may impact unfairly on many women. For example we tried to link the issues of workforce sustainability and dealing with current and future labour market shortages to increasing the representation of women through a 'widening the talent pool' argument.

In our efforts to get and to keep gender on the agenda we find that we and others in the case study organisations use different gender discourses in different settings. Here we briefly tease out two issues that have arisen in both the silences and noises around gender equity; firstly, around the 'business case' version of organisational effectiveness and secondly, the use of a work/life discourse, including the construct of the 'ideal worker'. In both organisations we have found that organisational effectiveness is often understood as a narrowly framed business case argument. A business case for advancing gender equity can present some very real problems, not least in masking the business case for gender inequity (see Hearn, 2000, p. 615; Dickens, 1999) such as in pay inequity. This makes it easy for the link with gender equity and organisational effectiveness to become severed. For example, in mid 2005 ManuCo announced a significant downsizing of its manufacturing operation, because of global competitive pressures and the rising Australian dollar. At that point in time, facing the redundancies rather than any expansion of employment made any business rationale for increasing the representation of women immediately seem much less relevant. When people's jobs are under threat, any talk of long term workforce sustainability and the role of gender equity within this simply have little immediate meaning. On the one hand, the business rationale gives us an alternative legitimate language in which to explain our efforts when we or those we talk to feel threatened or insecure (Ely & Meyerson, 2000, p.606). On the other hand, when the business rationale for gender equity disappears it becomes very hard indeed get gender on the agenda. Faced with this dilemma we have found ourselves refocusing on the work/life aspect of the dual/triple agenda. This aspect continues to have

some salience as increasing work pressures make work/life integration more difficult to achieve for both women and men.

A work/life discourse, rather than a gender equity discourse, can be seen as offering recognition of specific issues many women may face in the workplace and also as projecting an inclusivity not only of men, but also of activity outside of family. In many ways this discourse, also framed as 'work/family', has been the most readily accepted in both organisations. We have discovered many men and a number of women find framings of the organisation as gendered deeply suspect as it appears to pit women against men. Such a framing is seen by some women to not only reflect on women's identities, but is also seen to work to undercut their achievements. In ManuCo, in particular, discussions about possible strategies to recruit more female engineers has led to some concern from one group of female engineers who do not want to be identified as 'whiners or losers' (Acker, 2000, p.631). They are more comfortable discussing the pressures of long hours and the increasing demands of their jobs and the (unfair) ways in which performance is recognised and rewarded. In these situations, we have found the construct of the 'ideal worker' used in both the collection of data and in our cultural diagnosis to be very fruitful, not least because it allows us to surface the gender consequences of this powerful norm in a less threatening way. In both organisations we have found a broad acceptance around the problem of a long hours culture, in making it difficult for those men and women who cannot or do not want to meet tacit organisational expectations of time-unbounded availability for work.

The focus on the ideal worker has also made it more straightforward to highlight the ways in which work/life policies may be undercut by business pressures and long hours, poor job design or management discretion. Interestingly the 'ideal worker' construct has resonated with many men, who are resentful of an organisational culture that 'says' working long hours/overtime is the most effective way to get the job done and thus that only workers

prepared to put in long hours are effective and therefore valuable. In particular, while the cultural diagnosis in both organisations has drawn out the implications of the ideal worker for women's opportunities in the workplace, we have also been able to point out that the power of this norm means that there is less flexibility for men also, especially those at the 'bottom', working on the production line. Indeed, we have found that surfacing gender, when gender is understood as women, can work to hide other critical divisions in the organisation, such as the strong division between blue collar and white collar employees. A work/life discourse makes the very different opportunities for work/life integration for men and women and for blue and white collar employees much more apparent. At the same time, the risk remains that a work-life discourse can also work to de-gender the issue of work/life integration.

Gendering of the research process

Finally we reflect on the gendering of the research process itself, manifested most visibly in our all female research teams and in the collaborative mode of the CIAR research methodology. While the sex composition of our teams was not deliberately planned, it is hardly surprising. The focus on our project on a 'soft' issue such as work/life integration, particularly its link with gender equity, is more likely to involve female researchers with a feminist bent. Moreover the location of the project within the both organisations under the umbrella of equity/diversity within the HR function made it highly likely that our insider researchers would also be female. While this has been a common experience in dual agenda projects for these very reasons, we continue to make attempts in both ManuCo and UtilityCo to make links with the more 'masculine' industrial relations areas and, as noted above, to make efforts to surface men's concerns in our projects

The research team in the dual agenda methodology can act as a research instrument in reflecting and interrogating our understandings of the dual agenda (Bailyn & Fletcher, 2002,

p. 15). In this vein it is important to ask whether the sex composition of both our research teams and those change agent groups we engage in the next phases of the research will make a difference to the success of our dual agenda projects (Acker, 2000, p. 627). Our all female research teams led to some immediate connection with women employees and their concerns. At UtilityCo, for example, many female employees were very excited about the project when it commenced, especially those with pregnancy and maternity experiences and also those with harassment and discrimination grievances. At the same time, our all female teams also provoked some reaction and resistance with one male focus group participant at ManuCo quizzing the research team about the 'biased' nature of the research because it focussed on women. We have also had on occasions to wear the consequences of poor communication across the organisation around the rationales for both the introduction of the gender hire target and the women's leadership network.

The CIAR methodology also presents an issue in terms of the gendering of the research process. One of the problems is that a feminine mode of collaboration is simply not the way business is done in either organisation (see Coleman & Rippen, 2000, p. 585). At UtilityCo for example, there has been a call from some managers for us to use a more quantitative, and arguably more masculine, methodology. Both organisations have very much 'command and control' bureaucratic structures and there is little emphasis on collaborative management. Further, our location/point of entry outside the IR and business units and links with the respective senior women's networks only underscores our separateness from the 'real' business of the organisation. This issue was brought into sharp relief when ManuCo announced the downsizing noted above. Despite some concerns that this downsizing may impact on the slowly increasing number of blue collar female workers, no formal steps were put into place to ensure that women were not adversely affected. The dual agenda project,

which had focused on the importance of an increased representation of women for the long-term sustainability of the company, suddenly seemed irrelevant.

Nevertheless, we have found some real interest in the research and its potential by men, particularly around work/life integration, and it would seem that our more ‘feminine’ modes of communication and our collaborative open style has given voice to many men to articulate the very real dilemmas they face in trying to manage work/life integration within an ideal worker paradigm that denies such interests or commitments. We have also managed to identify a number of male dominated worksites at ManuCo where blokey cultures do not prevail and have been able to talk with men and women in those areas in trying to better understand how they have been able to develop more inclusive cultures.

As researchers, while we have reflected on the impact of our all female teams, there has also been some discussion about our own reactions to issues such as working hours, overwork and sharing the load, so that we try to practice what we seek to preach (Baird *et al.*, 2006). However, perhaps because of an implicit assumption that as women we share some common views about the way in which gender works within organisations, we have not always discussed our own suppositions and presumptions about gender. One rather fundamental issue that has surfaced in the writing of this paper is that as research teams we have not explicitly discussed what we each understand by gender equity and where these understandings fit within the four different approaches outlined above. While all of us, including our ‘insider’ researchers, are committed to a broad goal of the advancement of women, we had not teased out the basis of that commitment nor what it means in specific organisational settings. Given the dual agenda projects builds on understandings within organisations and is directed to organisational change, we will need to clarify our thinking about the goals of gender equity in the dual agenda, as this inevitably shapes our understanding and expectation of where each organisation is and the outcomes of the project.

Concluding comments

One of the major challenges in our dual agenda project has been keeping gender on the table and not burying or avoiding reference to gender in our interactions for fear of backlash or reprisal within the organisations. As noted above, while we were initially concerned about being too explicit about the gender aspect and used a 'work/family' discourse as a cover, once gender issues began to surface as key problems in the organisation we have felt more secure about being more explicit, and we as researchers gained confidence as well. However, particularly in the face of some pockets of resistance it is not easy to maintain that confidence and we often have to remind ourselves that that is the principle of the dual agenda research to keep both gender and organisational effectiveness on the table. What we have learnt is that we need to emphasise the different aspects of the dual or triple agenda, while maintaining the links between them. We have so far mainly kept and increased our focus on gender (from nervous beginnings), even where we engage in seemingly less gender explicit discourses such as around the 'ideal worker'. And we are, we believe, making a case that 'gender' includes men. The real test will be to link that understanding to organisational effectiveness, to the 'normal' business demands and operational requirements, especially in organisations which are restructuring. In many ways getting gender on the agenda has been not so difficult. But keeping it there, much less directing it to effective gender equitable organisational change around work/life integration, will be much harder!

Finally, organisational debates around gender equity and organisational effectiveness do not occur in a vacuum. We have to recognise the broader context in which gender is understood and negotiated and in which our dual agenda projects are taking place from the global to the national. We know for example that the type of gender contract and type of

welfare state in which organisations are located will influence not only the barriers to and opportunities for work/life integration, but also any sense of entitlement to it (see Lewis & Smithson, 2001). In the Australian context, the ambivalence many Australians continue to feel about gender equality (Probert, 1999), the lack of any legislative progress on work/family, let alone gender equity, and the fast tracked deregulation of the employment relationship presents both an imperative for and a real challenge to the success of our dual agenda projects.

Notes

¹ This research project, entitled 'Work-Life Integration: Developing the Dual Agenda in Theory and Practice', is jointly funded by the Australian Research Council and the two organisations under the Linkage grant program. We thank our 'insider/outsider' research assistants, Dominique Beck and Sheree Cartwright, and the 'insider' researchers, management and employees of ManuCo and UtilityCo. The views expressed in this paper are our own.

² Australia and the United States remain the only two OECD countries without a national system of paid maternity leave. While available in many public sector organisations, the provision of paid maternity leave in the private sector is limited in the main to large 'best practice' organisations.

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