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Project Submission Sheet

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Name: Clare Daly

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Degree for which thesis is submitted: Msc in Management (part time)

Title of Thesis: Leave it out? Does taking family leave have a negative impact on the career progression of men and women in Ireland's approved housing body sector?

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Leave It Out?

Does taking family leave have an impact on the career progression of
men and women in Ireland's Approved Housing Body Sector?

Clare Daly

A dissertation for the degree of
MSc Management

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Abstract

This research examines the impact of family leave on the career opportunities of women and men in the Approved Housing Body (AHB) sector in Ireland. It is qualitative research undertaken using interviews. Ten participants from four AHB's in Ireland are interviewed on their experiences of family leave and what impact (if any) this had on their career progression within the sector. It discusses the organisational, individual and societal factors that influence family leave and career progression.

Declaration

This work submitted for examination is wholly my own work and all materials consulted, and ideas gathered in the process of researching the dissertation have been properly and accurately acknowledged.

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Acronyms

AHB Approved Housing Body.

CSO Central Statistics Office.

Chapter 1

Introduction

This research examines the impact of taking family leave on the career opportunities of women and men in the Approved Housing Body (AHB) sector in Ireland.

A research sample of ten people working in the AHB sector in Ireland were interviewed on their experiences of taking family leave while working for an AHB. The participants are from five AHBs in Ireland. The sample includes a mixture of women and men in the AHB sector who either:

- Have taken family leave and returned to paid employment.
- Have taken family leave and reduced their number of working hours upon return to paid employment.

The research is about parental participation in the Irish AHB workforce. It focuses on the impact of family leave and child rearing on career progression choices.

The employment rate for women in Ireland is below the EU average, (CSO, 2020). This research focuses on factors inhibiting women's employment in the Irish AHB sector and compares this to the experiences of men. It will consider if barriers to employment and progression are the same for both men and women who take family leave within the AHB sector. An objective of the EU has been to increase maternal and female employment rates, (Dotti and Scherer, 2018). It is suggested that the

birth of a child increases inequalities between men and women in both paid and unpaid work, (Zoch, 2023). This research questions if family leave is contributing to inequalities in paid work for women and men in the Irish AHB sector.

The research questions if family leave impacts the career progression and opportunities of mothers and fathers who work for AHBs. It examines the impact of pregnancy at work, the limited leave offered to fathers, and childcare availability. It questions if these factors inhibit the career progression and workplace opportunities for parents employed in AHB's in Ireland.

1.1 Definitions

Family Leave

There are four types of family leave available to parents in Ireland. They are maternity leave, paternity leave, parents leave and parental leave. For this research, all leave will be referred to as family leave except for the research and findings stage where the exact type of leave taken by an individual will be referenced.

Maternity Leave

In Ireland, mothers are entitled to take 26 weeks maternity leave. All eligible women who take maternity leave can avail of a weekly social welfare payment. Some employers pay women their full or a portion of their contracted salary while on maternity leave, however this is not an obligation. In addition to paid maternity leave, mothers are also entitled to take up to 16 weeks unpaid maternity leave, where they do not receive a social welfare payment or payment from their employer.

Paternity Leave

Fathers are entitled to take 2 weeks paternity leave from work. The payment conditions of social welfare and/or salary is the same for paternity leave as maternity leave,

(Citizens Information, 2022). Fathers do not have an entitlement to additional unpaid paternity leave. An employer may allow additional leave, but these are individual arrangements and not covered by Irish employment law, (Citizens Information, 2023).

Parent's Leave

Parents leave is statutory leave entitlement for parents in employment. It aims to let working parents spend more time with their baby in the first two years of life. At present, each parent is entitled to take 9 weeks parent's leave. This leave is unpaid by employers unless they opt to pay their employee. Parents can apply for a social welfare payment called parents benefit during this leave, (Citizens Information, 2024).

Parental Leave

Each parent is entitled to take up to 26 weeks unpaid parental leave before their child is 12 (or 16 if the child has a disability). This leave is unpaid and there is no social welfare payment available. Parental leave cannot be transferred between parents unless they work for the same employer. In this case, 14 weeks of parental leave can be transferred between parents, (Citizens Information, 2023).

Approved Housing Body

Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs) are independent, non-profit organisations. They provide affordable rented accommodation to eligible people who cannot afford to buy their own home or pay private sector rents, or for groups such as the elderly or people with disabilities, (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2022).

Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.1 Female employment

Research carried out to date suggests that female participation in the workforce is lower than male participation. Globally, 47 percent of women are in employment compared to 72 percent of men. In Ireland, the gap is narrower with 56.5 percent of women in the workforce in contrast to 68.6 percent of men, (International Labour Organisation, 2022).

In Ireland, in quarter 3 of 2022, the participation rate in employment stood at 70.80 percent for males and 58.9 percent for females (Central Statistics Office, 2022). There is a need to remove barriers for those who are willing and able to work, and this is fast becoming a policy objective for governments in developed countries. This is due to an ageing population and falling rates of fertility. The ability for governments to fund future expenditure such as pensions and healthcare relies heavily on income tax and social security receipts. There is a need to examine which policy instruments are needed to increase female participation in the labour force while not reducing fertility rates any further, (Doorley, 2018).

The literature suggests there are many benefits to female employment. Korpi et al, (2013) as cited in Dotti and Scherer (2018, 76) state that women in employment

have more resources and freedom to make decisions about their lives. And that having women and mothers in employment has benefits at the wider macroeconomic level and the narrower business level, (Dotti and Scherer, 2018). However, even though there are benefits to women being in paid employment, Dotti and Scherer (2018) found in their study that the ‘male breadwinner-female homemaker’ model is still the most prevalent and it is particularly strong when the children are young. This is despite full time mothers displaying greater life satisfaction in comparison to unemployed or part time employed mothers, (Berger, 2013). Dotti and Scherer’s (2018) research identified differences among countries such as the UK and Germany. However, in both countries, as children grow older, employment for mothers on a full-time basis becomes more common, (Dotti and Scherer, 2018).

Bettio and Plantenga (2004) suggest that the reasons behind lower maternal employment rates are possibly due to structural issues such as childcare availability, parents leave and flexible work arrangements. While Hakim (2002) suggests that lifestyle preferences of women and cultural arrangements could play a role.

In their research, Buzzanell and Liu (2007) found that women felt that their responsibilities at work and at home were incompatible. The participants in their research who felt encouraged at work during their pregnancies, believed the incompatibility of work and home could be resolved. In contrast to this, those who felt discouraged at work for being pregnant, perceived the incompatibilities to be irreconcilable. A pregnant employee who is encouraged while working before her maternity leave is more likely to feel that combining work and home duties is possible. There is no current research in Irish AHBs on how pregnant employees are treated and how (if at all) this impacts their decision to return to work after their maternity leave or apply for promotion during or after pregnancy. Buzzanell and Liu’s (2007) research participants found pregnancy and maternity leave to be a time of excessive stress, which was partially due to trying to keep up the ideal of a ‘good worker’.

Research also suggests that attitudes towards gender roles play a part in a mother’s

decision to return to work. Schobar and Scott (2012) found that there was a link between women’s labour market participation and their attitudes towards gender roles. They found that women with less traditional views on family were less likely to reduce their working hours when returning to employment. Their research also found that higher levels of education and earnings increase women’s participation in formal employment after having children. Women with low earnings were less likely to return to work, even if they held non-traditional views on gender roles. In Britain, a couple’s childcare and work plan for the family will in most cases be based on the male earnings rather than female or a sum of both, (Schobar and Scott, 2012).

Davy et al (2005) studied the motivations and preference of UK nurses returning to work after maternity leave. They found that providing flexible working hours and training opportunities were necessary to retain nurses’ commitment to work after returning from maternity leave. It has been demonstrated that women in a range of professions are at a disadvantage in terms of career progression when they return to work after a career break such as maternity leave. In addition to this, working part time is related to women’s disadvantage in career progression into management roles, (Davey et al, 2005).

2.2 Employment Gender Gap

The Work-Life Balance Initiative 2019 is the first legislative initiative of the 2017 European Pillar of Social Rights. The initiative addresses the work-life balance challenges faced by parents and caregivers. It covers the aspects of time, such as family leave and flexible working arrangements, and resources, such as adequate payment for certain leaves, (CoFace Families Europe, 2022). The initiative considers the societal changes that have occurred over the past decade to enable parents and caregivers to better balance their work and family lives and to encourage a more equal division of caring responsibilities between women and men, (European Commission, 2019).

The Work Life Balance and Miscellaneous Provisions Act 2023 was signed into law in Ireland in April 2023. It gives effect to a 2019 EU directive on work-life balance for parents and carers. This amends the 1998 Parental Leave Act to entitle certain employees to leave for medical purposes and to request flexible working arrangements for caring purposes,(Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2023).

In the EU, just over 57.4 percent of women work full time compared to 75.5 percent of men. The full-time employment rate gap is at 18 percent. Of the women who do not partake in paid employment, 31 percent state that this is due to their caring responsibilities, whereas only 4.5 percent of men who are inactive in the workforce state this as their reason, (European Commission, 2019).

Acting on this employment gap under the EU work-life balance was carried out for fairness but also for economic reasons, the economic loss due to the employment gender gap is approx. €370 billion per year in the EU, (European Commission, 2019).

2.3 Gender Pay Gap

Goldin’s 2023 research on the gender pay gap has demonstrated how the gender pay gap in the USA has remained constant for the past two decades. Goldin’s work shows that while gender differences in occupations have narrowed, the pay gap within occupations still exists. Goldin also noted that the gender pay gap is narrower for recent cohorts of employees, it then begins to widen as women age and then narrows again. The gender pay gap is at its widest when women are in their late thirties and early forties. Goldin (2023) noted that these trends rule out the idea that occupational sorting, discrimination or bargaining power as the main drivers of the gender pay gap. Goldin (2023) found that the gender pay gap varied across occupation and occurred around the same time as women’s childbearing years. This led to research into the working hours, working flexibility and family responsibilities

and their link to the gender pay gap, (Sarsons, 2024).

2.4 Theory

Human Capital Theory

The possible negative effects of parental leave are often examined by the Human Capital Theory alongside the Skill Depreciation Hypotheses. The theory is that workers' pay is positively linked to their stock of human capital. Employees are more valuable to employers as their experiences and skills increase, (Becker, 1964, Mincer 1958 and Mincer and Polachek, 1974). Gerst and Grund state that during periods of parental leave parents forgo experience, skill development and training until they return to work. It is also suggested that some stock of an employee's already acquired human capital can deplete during their time off (Mincer and Polachek, 1974). In addition to human capital depreciation, workers may experience negative expectations from their employers regarding the employee's dedication and commitment to their work, (Gerst and Grund, 2022).

Signalling Theory

Signalling theory was introduced by Spence in 1973. He argued that employers can use 'observables' as positive or negative signals when determining employment conditions e.g. wages for employees. The education level of an employee can be used as an observable positive signal. In contrast to this, career breaks and unemployment periods can be viewed by some employers as negative signals and therefore create a stigma for those who reduce working hours due to family commitments, (Gerst and Grund, 2022).

The 'Ideal Worker' Concept

The 'ideal worker' concept was put forward by Acker (1990) and Williams (2001). This concept is attributed to male workers who take on the 'male breadwinner' model

whereas women are expected to be the main caregivers within a family.

2.5 Gender Norms

Gender specific social norms are closely linked to the construct of masculinities in the workplace. A major factor in this masculinity is to show endurance. This endurance appears to be presented by males as continuous employment, (Gerst and Grund, 2022).

In their research, Gerst and Grund (2022) found that the longer parental leave that a male employee took, the lower their current earnings. They determined that signalling theory may be an explanation for their findings. Their research was based on male and female middle managers in the German chemical industry. Their findings suggest the need for further research into the impact of signalling theory with a focus on gender-specific signalling, (Gerst and Grund, 2022). This research suggests that there is a link between employee work conditions (in this case salary) and absence from work for family commitments (parental leave). This research lends the question of how (if at all) parental leave impacts the working conditions of female employees and if gender-specific signalling theory plays a part.

2.6 Childcare

The 2018 publication from the Economic and Social Research Institute in Ireland (ESRI) found that childcare costs have a negative influence on maternal labour supply. They estimate that each percentage increase in the weekly childcare costs is associated with a 0.05 hours decrease in paid work. They state that women who are employed have higher childcare costs and those with higher incomes and more earning power can afford to pay for more childcare. Thus, childcare costs, household income and employment are interdependent factors.

Family leave policies only serve their goal of increasing female labour market partici-

pation if affordable childcare is available near the time that parental leave ends. If this is not the case, parental leave only postpones women leaving the labour market instead of equalising labour market participation, (Van Belle, 2016).

Balancing a family and a career is often difficult due to traditional working hours (9am -5pm) conflicting with schooling and childcare responsibilities. In addition to this, traditionally a critical period for career advancement occurred when a person was in their 20's and 30's. This period of a person's life also coincides with women's most fertile years, (Skorinko, Rodriguez and Doyle, 2020). These conflicts beg the question of what impact parenthood has on an individual's career.

2.7 Male Family Leave

In Ireland, less than half (45 percent) of fathers entitled to take paternity benefit did not take it in 2018, (CSO, 2020). The CSO findings state that in enterprises with 50-250 employees, only 45 percent of eligible fathers took paternity leave in 2018.

The EU Work-Life Balance directive aims to increase women's employment rate, earnings and better their career progression while also giving fathers more opportunities and incentives to participate in family life, (European Commission, 2019). However, between 2019 and 2022, only 49.8 percent of fathers in paid employment in Ireland claimed paternity benefit, (CSO, 2023).

In their research into paternity leave uptake in the US, Hayes and Levine (2024) found that 5 out of 17 respondents cited financial reasons as to why they would not take paternity leave. Of the fathers willing to take leave, five indicated that their willingness/ability to take leave would depend on their ability to cover the missed time from work with paid sick leave or holiday leave.

Pizarro and Gartzia (2024) found that men's use of paternity leave was determined by legislation, and organisation's culture and practices around the use of this leave. Their research found men's use of paternity leave had an impact on career development,

family relations and health including psychological health.

An analysis undertaken by O'Brien in 2009 across 24 EU countries, discovered that fathers were more likely to avail of parental and or paternity leave if the following conditions were met:

- Near 100 percent income replacement – to make it an affordable option.
- Leave targeted at fathers rather than a family-based option. Offered on a ‘use it or lose it’ basis.
- Appropriately timed – taken at the time of baby’s birth or when the mother is returning to work.

Promoting the uptake of paternity and parental leave has a positive effect on the work life balance of families, increases female economic activity and is linked to women’s decisions to have children therefore affecting demographic outcomes, (Van Belle, 2016).

2.8 Obstacles to Male Family Leave Uptake

Offering leave to fathers does not go far enough to achieve the objectives that it is hoped paternity leave would achieve. There are several factors that affect the uptake of this leave and thus mediate the effect that paternity and parental leave has on these outcomes. These factors are set by a wider set of family policies that allows parents the opportunity to balance work and care responsibilities, (Van Belle, 2016).

Income

One of the strongest predictors of uptake of both paternity and parental leave by fathers is compensation. The countries with the highest proportion of uptake are the ones with companies that offer the highest compensation. Providing adequate compensation also reduces social inequalities. When compensation levels are low, parental and paternity leave is predominately taken by middle- and high-income

earners as taking time off work is more unaffordable and difficult for families on low incomes or where the father is the sole breadwinner. Higher levels of compensation equalise the uptake of parental leave by fathers from different socio-economic backgrounds, (O’Brien, 2009).

Eligibility

In most countries, paternity and parental leave are conditional on continuous employment for the applicant. In these instances, self-employed fathers or those with a history of unstable work patterns are excluded from taking this leave, (Van Belle, 2016).

Flexibility

Flexibility in the timing of uptake is an important factor in the decision for fathers to take paternity and parental leave. It is especially important for enabling parents to combine work and childcare. A lack of flexibility for fathers on when and how they take their leave, further burdens the mother with the responsibility of childcare as it makes it more difficult for fathers to balance their work and childcare responsibilities. The option for taking the leave on a part time basis may also help fathers to maintain a connection with their work and reduce the impact that this leave may have on career development as they are not completely absent from work, (Van Belle, 2016).

Culture

Social norms and workplace cultures play a key role in the level of uptake of family leave taken by fathers, (Moss and Deven, 2015). An organisation’s leave policies and employer’s attitudes towards father’s taking time off or reducing their hours to spend with family influence the rate of uptake of this type of leave, (Van Belle, 2016).

An employer’s support such as offering work-life balance arrangements, flexible working time accounts and two-way reversibility options (where employees can

increase or decrease their working hours depending on family needs) all affect the level of uptake of leave by fathers. Thus, company culture is an important factor that influences leave uptake by fathers. Management attitudes, sector, company size, trade union activity and the proportion of female employees can all contribute to a company's culture and the likelihood that employees are allowed working time adjustments, (Van Belle, 2016).

Wider cultural beliefs about gender roles and the division of labour also underpin father's decisions to take family leave with fathers in families with non-traditional gender roles more likely to take leave, (European Commission, 2005).

2.9 Domestic Labour

Facilitating men to take paternity leave is necessary to help create a domestic and employment landscape that is equal for both men and women. In their research, Matteazzi and Scherer (2020) explored the concept of a partner's reciprocal influence on their spouse's ability to invest time on their career progression. It is based on Becker's (1985) model of effort allocation. This is where a person's contribution to housework would reduce the amount of time their partner spends on tasks in the home and therefore allow them to spend more time in paid employment. The idea is that higher-level support with household duties may enable partners to apply for better career opportunities. They found that women's housework helped men to earn more. Whereas women did not benefit at the same rate in terms of wages from their partner's domestic work.

2.10 Literature Review Conclusion

The research to date on the topic of gender employment covers the differences in female and male participation in employment. It also demonstrates the different rates of maternal employment between countries.

There has been research conducted on the reasons why maternal employment rates are lower overall. This research has focused on wider societal factors such as cultural preferences, welfare state structure and the educational level of mothers. There is also research on micro factors such as how maternal employment impacts the family.

However, there is no evidence of research on the impact of family leave on the career progression or opportunities of parents in Ireland with a specific focus on AHBs. As there is no research to date, it is not possible to state if family leave impacts employee careers in AHBs and what (if any) are the reasons for this. There is no literature that looks at the structural or cultural influences on maternal or paternal employment in Ireland.

There is no research that compares the career progression of fathers vs mothers within the AHB sector in Ireland. Current literature suggests that mothers are at a disadvantage in terms of career progression in comparison to fathers, but this has not been researched in context of Irish AHBs. Childcare costs are cited in Irish studies as a factor influencing maternal employment rates but there is no research on whether this factor influences parents in the AHB sector.

The signalling theory suggests that the ‘stock’ of human capital depreciates while a person has taken parental leave. This has not been researched within the AHB sector to date. Some AHB’s enable parents to take maternity and paternity leave which would suggest that they don’t view this time off a depreciation of their human capital stock. There is no research that explores the employee’s feelings about themselves and their human capital value within an AHB after taking time away from work to care for their children.

There is the wider question of what role do AHB’s play in the securing of a future pension and healthcare system in Ireland. If participation in the labour force should be accessible and open to all, what role is the AHB playing in ensuring that they are providing equal opportunity to those who are faced with the responsibility of parenthood but who also want to be employed full time.

Chapter 3

Methodology

3.1 Philosophical Assumptions

The research will be conducted using an interpretivist approach. Interpretivism focuses on how humans are different from physical items because they create meanings. Interpretivists study the meanings that humans have created. Interpretivism is based on the belief that human beings and their social worlds cannot be examined in the same way as physical phenomena. Due to the fact that people can be from different cultural backgrounds with different life experiences and therefore create different social realities, interpretivism is critical of the positivist approach to create definite universal laws that apply to all people, (Saunders et al, 2023).

This research aims to gain a deep understanding of the effects (if any) of parenthood on the career progression of employees of AHBs. This will involve interviewing participants who will have different life experiences, be culturally different and will therefore have experienced different social realities. On this basis, the research has been undertaken using an interpretivist approach.

The goal of interpretivist research is to create and interpret new and deeper understandings of the social world. If research focuses on experiences that are common to everyone at all times, then much of the significant differences between individual

circumstances will be lost, (Saunders et al, 2023). To diversify the research and gain a richer understanding of the impacts of parenthood on employee's working in AHBS, this research has used participants who work in a variety of roles within a variety of AHBS. There are Housing Officers, a Policy Manager, a Housing Manager, a HR business lead. There are several variables that may make a person's experiences of their workplace differ to another person such as organisational role, gender and race. On this basis, and to develop a wider understanding of people's experiences, this research has included a variety of organisational roles from senior management to entry level, a mix of a male and female participants, a variety of AHBs and departments within, and a mix of cultural backgrounds.

Interpretation between individuals of what appears to be the same thing can be complex and varied, (Saunders et al, 2023). This research will take these complexities into account by gathering what is meaningful in the format of semi-structured interviews.

The interview questions for this research were modified based on the participant's gender. There is a question in relation to stigma for the interview of male participants.

3.2 Research Design

The research will be a mono-method qualitative study as it will use a single data collection technique. Thematic semi structured interviews will be used to conduct the research. This type of interview is used to collect data using a set of predetermined questions, (Saunders, 2023). The interviews will be semi-structured to guide the conversation and prevent the interviewee from diverging from the research topic. However, semi-structured interviews still allow the interviewer to probe a response and seek further explanation, (Saunders, 2023). The exploratory nature of this research aligns with the methodology of semi-structured interviews. The dependent variable will be parental leave with the independent variable being career impact in AHBS.

This research is a quantitative piece of work with an inductive approach because data will be collected and analysed to test the theory that parenthood has a negative impact on the career progression of AHB employees. An inductive approach to research analysis is where a research design is used to build on already existing theory (Saunders et al, 2023). Using the research onion and information from the literature review, this research will be conducted using thematic analysis.

Focus groups were considered as a method for this research as it allows a group discussion of ideas. Focus groups encourage shared discussion on ideas and perceptions, (Saunders et al, 2023). Focus groups would have provided the opportunity for participants to share experiences and perhaps give insight into other's career progression opportunities. However, semi structured interviews will be used as it gives more privacy to participants who may speak about personal and family matters.

3.3 Data Analysis

Qualitative data is derived from spoken, written, typed or printed words and from visual images, (Saunders et al, 2023). This research will use qualitative data in the form of spoken words (verbal data) that will be recorded and then transcribed into typed words (textual data).

The data has been obtained through the method of semi-structured interviews conducted via Microsoft teams or in person. As the research has been undertaken inductively, the direction of the research will follow the flow of the data collected. The data will demonstrate the variety of the participant's perspectives and experiences. Analysis of this data needed to take into the consideration the variability and complexity of the data for it to be meaningful. A conceptual framework was developed during data collection and was refined as the analysis progressed, (Saunders et al, 2023).

Meanings are derived from words and images rather than from numbers. It was necessary to clarify and explore some words stated during the interviews to ensure that

the correct meaning was correctly understood. The interactive nature of interviews as a way of data collection, allowed the identification of important themes and patterns during the data collection stage, A conceptual framework was developed during data collection and was refined as the analysis progressed, (Saunders et al, 2023).

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data collected. This form of analysis searches for themes or patterns within a data set. These themes and patterns were identified as areas for further analysis as they were linked to the research question. It is a systematic way to analyse data as it is orderly and logical. Qualitative interviews can provide a high volume of words and themes that require analysing and therefore thematic analysis was determined to be the best method to analyse the data from this research, (Saunders et al, 2023). Thematic analysis allowed for large amounts of data to be understood, key themes to be identified, a thematic description to be produced and conclusions to be drawn.

3.4 Limitations

Data Reliability

Semi- structured interviews raise concerns regarding the reliability of the data collected as they interview questions are not standardised.

Bias

There is the possibility of researcher bias where the tone, remarks and body language of the interviewer influences the response of the participants. It is also possible for the researcher to be biased in their interpretation of responses.

There is also the possibility of the interviewee giving only a ‘partial picture’ of a situation if they are sensitive to a certain theme being discussed. The semi-structured nature of the interview may lead the conversation towards a topic that the interviewee does not wish to discuss further. Participation bias may occur. This is where possible

participants do not take part in the research due to time constraints or other reasons. This may bias the sample from whom the data is collected, (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019).

Cultural differences

There may be cultural differences between the interviewer and the interviewee. Some interview questions may not be suited to participants from different cultural backgrounds who may not feel comfortable or be permitted to discuss certain topics.

Time

Interviewing is time consuming. This can have an adverse effect on the number and type of individuals who are willing to be interview participants. It is important for the researcher to establish credibility with potential interviewees.

The use of open-ended questions in semi-structured interviews mean that adequate time needs to be given to interviewees to respond with full answers. The intensive nature of the discussion and the need to fully understand the answers given, means that time must be set aside soon after the interview for transcription, (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019).

Cost and resources

If there is travel or time required off work, there are cost implications for interviews for both the interviewee and interviewer. This cost can be reduced using video calls. Cost should be considered at the feasibility stage of the project, (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019).

Logistics

Semi- structured interviews require consideration to be given to the logistics of scheduling interviews. The number of interviews to be arranged within a certain

time frame and the time required to transcribe the interviews needs to be factored in, (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019).

3.5 Ethics

Ethical consideration was given to the research project. The principles of ethical research such as integrity, respect, harm avoidance, not pressuring participants, confidentiality, anonymity, informed consent, and responsible data analyses and findings were upheld throughout the research, (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019).

An ethical concern for this paper was the researcher's employment in the AHB sector. This presented the challenge particularly for impartiality and confidentiality. These challenges were overcome by the project supervisor reviewing the research questions (impartiality) and by the researcher selecting participants that they did not know and/or have a personal relationship with (impartiality and confidentiality).

Confidentiality and anonymity remained important during the reporting stage of the research. Particular care and attention was given to ensure that readers cannot piece together information that would allow them to identify an AHB or a participant in the study. This was done by anonymising the individuals and AHB's that took part to ensure that others could not identify them. Embarrassment and harm can be caused to participants if the identity is revealed, (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). Anonymity and confidentiality was a particular concern for this research project as the topics discussed were of a personal nature and related to participant's employers. Participants divulged opinions, experiences, and grievances that they have not and may not wish to express publicly or to their employers.

It was important to collect and analyse the data accurately and without subjective selectivity. The maintenance of research objectivity was of utmost importance to ensure that data collected was not misrepresented. Lack of objectivity would distort conclusions and recommendations.

3.6 Data Protection and Management

Personal data obtained that directly identifies an individual or which can be used with other information to identify an individual was collected and stored within in line with data protection regulation. All documents and recordings were saved using password protected software.

Chapter 4

Research Question

The research question is:

Does taking family leave have an impact on the career progression of men and women in Ireland's Approved Housing Body Sector?

4.1 Aim of Research

The research aims to explore the impact that becoming a parent has on the career progression of parents working in the AHB sector in Ireland. The goal is to establish a link between childbearing/rearing and career progression for those working in AHBs. The research aims to explore whether there is equal support offered to fathers and mothers who wish to take family-based leave in the AHB sector and what implications this has on career progression.

There have been studies that have shown that male uptake of family-based leave is significantly lower than female uptake. This research wants to explore what impact this difference in leave taking has on the careers of those working in the AHB sector and why (if at all) there is a difference in the uptake of family-based leave in the AHB sector.

It aims to highlight the requirement of further research into the impact of maternity

and paternity leave on parents in Ireland. Employment law in Ireland does not offer mothers and fathers the same leave opportunities. This research aims to investigate what impacts this has on the careers of those working the AHB sector. However, as the employment law is not confined to the AHB sector, the research aims to highlight how this research question could be carried out on a broader basis to capture a national picture.

4.2 Hypothesis

This research will test that career progression within the AHB sector in Ireland is impacted by the uptake of family leave. It will explore the experiences of both men and women who take this type of leave and test that the substantially higher amount of family leave offered to mothers in comparison to fathers has a negative impact on female career progression. It will explore whether if men were offered the same amount leave, would male career progression be impacted in the same way as female career progression.

The research expects to find that mothers have put their career on hold through either reducing working hours, not applying for promotion, or taking time out of the workforce. It is important to identify this trend and the causes for this so that barriers can be removed and women's participation in the workforce in Ireland is increased in line with EU average. This is important to ensure there is a gender balance at all levels within organisations.

It also expects to find that the reasons why women sacrifice their career progression is due to the lack of uptake of paternity and parents leave by fathers. It expects to find that this is due to a lack of structural and organisational support of fathers who wish to take time away from work to take on caring responsibilities in the home. It expects to find that there is a stigma felt by fathers who wish to take parental leave.

Interview Questions

- How long have you worked in the AHB sector?
- How long have you worked for your current employer?
- How many times have you taken family leave and for how long? (explain family leave)
- Did you return to paid employment following this leave?
- Did you reduce or change your working hours?
- What barriers (if any) did you face when returning to work?
- Do you feel that taking parent's leave has impacted your career progression?
If so, why?
- Do you feel there is/was a stigma associated with taking family leave? (male only)
- Do you feel there are organisational barriers that restrict you from developing your career since becoming a parent? (i.e flexible working hours, working from home opportunities)
- Do you feel there are organisational barriers that restrict you from taking family leave available? (i.e family leave is unpaid)
- Have you ever felt that being a parent has had a negative impact on your ability to do your job? If so, why? What organisational change would reduce this impact? (i.e working from home opportunity, flexible hours)
- Have you ever felt that your paid employment has had a negative impact on your parenting? If so, why? What organisational change would reduce this impact? (i.e paid care leave, flexible hours, hybrid working)

Grade	AHB 1	AHB 2	AHB 3	AHB 4
Senior Manager	SMM1	SMM2	SMF1	
Manager	MF1		MM1	MM1
Officer	OF1	OF2	OF3	OM1

Table 4.1: Alphanumeric code for each participant

Sampling

The participants were selected using the purposive sampling method. The sample was comprised of four AHB's in varying size. Subsequently 10 employees from these AHB's were selected based on gender, grade and tenure. There was a requirement for participants to have taken family leave within the previous 5 years. In table 1 (below), participants are identified by alphanumeric code. Each AHB is numbered, and participants are graded as SM (senior manager), M(manager) and O (officer). The gender is labelled F(female) and M(male). For example, AHB1 MF1 is a female manager working in AHB number 1. 5 participants live in Dubin and 5 live outside of Dublin. All participants live in the Republic of Ireland.

4.3 Limitations

The study does not include one-parent household participants, and this must be taken into consideration when discussing the findings. It must be noted that all findings are based on responses from participants who are a parent in two parent households.

This study does not include all AHB's in Ireland and does not include the wider employment sector. All participants are in employment and therefore it does not include any person that is no longer in paid employment.

4.4 Analysis

The study used thematic analysis to analyse the qualitative interview data collected. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and each interview transcript was then

analysed. As themes emerged, categories were selected and discussions on each category were placed under the corresponding heading. The categories were examined for their relationship with one another and to identify any emerging themes.

The research found considerable similarities in the responses across the varying seniority levels with managers echoing the concerns raised by staff at officer level.

Chapter 5

Findings

The categories that emerged were:

- Financial Implications of family leave
- Access to childcare
- Flexible working hours
- Transferable skills
- Career progression

5.1 Financial Implications of Family Leave

The financial implications of taking family leave were taken into consideration by each participant when deciding on whether to and/or how long to take. One participant discussed how her employer paid her full pay for maternity leave and so she took her full entitlement of 26 weeks. However, she has not taken any parent's leave as her employer does not contribute to pay for that leave and she would be in receipt of social welfare only for this leave. The participant felt that additional leave would benefit her family but as her household expenditure remains unchanged, she is unable to take leave with a reduced income.

“I have not yet taken parent’s leave as it is only social welfare and my bills have not reduced so I can’t afford to take this leave right now. It is only available until my daughter is two years old so I don’t know if I will take it at all. It would benefit my family if I could get this time off” (AHB1OF1).

Other participants in the study felt that unpaid leave was a barrier in them taking more family leave but didn’t view this negatively as their employer offers flexible working hours and therefore if they were required to attend or do something for their family, they could do this while also working.

One female participant discusses how she and her husband had to decide who would take unpaid time off work to mind their children while they waited for a childcare place. She advised how their incomes played a key role in making a decision. “You have to weigh it up, like the salary of your partner versus your salary in terms of like who stays at home or not. And like, you know, it usually makes sense for the higher earner obviously to be working” (AHB3SMF1).

This is in line with Schobar and Scott’s 2012 research which found that women with low earnings were less likely to return to work and that a couple’s childcare and work plan for the family will in most cases be based on the male earnings rather than female or a sum of both, (Schobar and Scott, 2012).

5.2 Access to Childcare

One participant took all full paid maternity leave, unpaid maternity leave and parents leave consecutively. They advised they were able to do this financially. However, their reason for taking the leave in this way was because their local creche did not accept children until they are aged 1 or over. The participant chose to take 12 months family leave as they had no other option. The participant felt that her time out of the workforce had a negative impact on her career progression and wondered if she did not have to take so much time in one go, if missed opportunities for career progression may have been avoided. She would have preferred if childcare places

were more readily available to young babies and if family leave could be shared more equally between mothers and fathers. She takes one day per week as parents leave to be at home with her children.

“So minimum one year and share it between the two parents. Do that so that men and women of child’s bearing age are equally disadvantaged in the workplace, you know” (AHB1MF1).

One participant spoke of how she felt happier about being offered a creche place for her son than she was when she purchased her home. She found this amusing as Ireland is currently experiencing a housing shortage. She felt that the lack of childcare options and the high costs of childcare made her re-consider whether she would return to work after maternity leave. The participant did not grow up in Ireland and felt that childcare support in her country of origin was significantly better. Before the participant was offered a creche place, her mother temporarily moved to Ireland to help with childcare.

The difficulty in finding creche places and the cost of childcare featured heavily for the female participants in the study. One participant was offered a childcare place for her unborn child, however when the time came for the child to start in creche, the start date was delayed by several months. The participant advised that as a family, the decision was made that she would return to work after taking one year of family leave and her husband would take some time off work to bridge the gap until the child could start in creche. The participant did not want to take any more time off from work and it made sense for them as a family for her husband to take time off instead.

One male participant discussed how they combined creche and reduced working hours of his child’s mother as their preferred childcare option. He advised that they chose creche as an option as there are benefits to his child such as socialising. He discussed how the creche and the reduced working hours of his wife were her decision and something that he agreed with. He advised that they could afford this financially.

He did not reduce his working hours but advised that the flexible hours that his employer offers allows him to work full time and is conducive to his family seeking a part time creche place rather than full time.

A female participant in an officer position advised that she does not have formal childcare due to cost and access issues. Her husband works nights and can help with childcare during the day when she is at work. Her mother also helps with childcare when she is required to attend work meetings.

“They are not in formal childcare due to cost and access. My mother helps when I am needed for work meetings. It’s difficult to answer ad hoc work calls when at home with the children. If childcare was more affordable, I would have children in childcare” (AHB1OF1).

Overall, the findings of this research show that access and affordability to formal childcare is an issue for parents returning to work. It was seen as a barrier in returning to work as costs were so high and lack of places created uncertainty on whether their child would be enrolled in creche in time for the mother’s return to work after family leave. Where a family did not have a full time creche or childminder for their children, it was the mother who took time off work to fill the gap in all but one case. Two participants used the maternal grandmother to assist with childcare. All female participants felt that organising childcare was stressful. All but one female participant reduced or considered reducing their hours of work due to childcare constraints.

Childcare did not feature as a barrier to working full time or returning to work for the male participants in this study. However, the husband of one female participant took several months off work to care for their children while they awaited a creche place.

5.3 Flexible working hours

Flexible working featured heavily in this study as a way for parents to combine work and family responsibilities. All participants had some sort of flexible working arrangement – some were formal arrangements while others were informal. When asked if the participant ever felt that being a parent had a negative effect on their ability to their job they all advised that flexible working hours and working from home reduced this impact.

One male participant in a senior managerial position advised how his employer has created a culture where it is ok to drop and collect children from school/creche etc and he now knows his staff's routine around dropping and collecting children.

A female participant in an officer grade role advised that her employer has been flexible with her working hours and breastfeeding breaks and that this has enabled her to return to work full time since having her baby. She felt that the flexible working was particularly beneficial when her baby was sick as she could work from home at hours that suited her, and she did not need to take time off to care for her sick baby.

“I’m not from here (Ireland), so I have no support. When my baby is sick I have to be there with him. My employer always like supports me in this so I can be at home and work”, (AHB3OF1). One female participant in a managerial position felt that overall, the flexibility of working in a hybrid role was beneficial to her as a parent but felt that more could be done. There is a requirement for her to attend the office two days per week and on those days, she is unable to drop or collect her children from creche. Her employer also has a clock in system that required her to clock in at her agreed hours, but this was contrary to the flexible working policy in her job, and she was permitted to work flexible hours. She felt this was an unnecessary stress on employees to ensure they clocked in and out at a certain time while also knowing it was ok to work flexible hours.

One female participant in an officer role advised that she did not feel that being a

parent impacted her ability to do her job as her employer offered flexible working hours, “My employer offers flexible working hours so I am able to do some tasks that require intense concentration early in the day before the children are awake and I can fully concentrate. This would not be possible if my employer did not offer flexible working hours. I have made mistakes that I know were due to tiredness, but management have been really understating when this happened and it was not something that caused a long term problem” (AHB2OF2) One male participant in an officer role advised that he did not take his entitlement of parents leave as he felt he did not need to take this time off due to his flexible working arrangements. When asked if he has taken any parents leave, his response was as follows.

“I can work evenings or I can get up early in the morning and do a couple of hours and another couple hours in the evening or whatever. So, it hasn’t been a consideration. It’s that flexibility that that I have in the role there is that it’s never been a need to take parents leave” (AHB4OM3).

Overall, flexible working hours and working from home was felt to be a major factor in why participants did not feel that being a parent impacted their duties as an employee. It was also the reason why some participants could return to work full time and not need to reduce their hours. It played a key role for one participant when her child was sick. One male participant advised that the flexible approach to working that he is offered by his employer has resulted in him not taking his allocation of parent’s leave.

5.4 Transferable Skills

The concept of transferable skills emerged throughout the interviews for this research. Some participants felt that parenting lent itself well to being an employee as new skills that were established and learned could be applied to their work. The skills discussed were time management, conflict resolution and resilience. Some participants felt that they had new and stronger skills since becoming a parent and that this was beneficial

in their paid employment.

“Sure you gain in confidence just by being a parent because you’re like, wow, I can handle a lot of, like, a lot of mayhem and chaos. Negotiation and just, I suppose, not letting even just in terms of resilience and like your emotional yeah, conflict resolution, emotional regulation like, organisation, time management, everything” (AHB1MF1).

One male senior manager advised how his employer encourages staff to bring their whole selves to work.

“They want employees to bring their true selves to the workplace and this in turn allows for transferable skills to be applied both in work and at home” (AHB1SMM1).

He felt that this approach enables him to speak openly at work about parenting and that he does not have to completely separate himself from his home life to get work done. He felt that this allowed him to use his transferable skills more readily and easily as he was his full self at work.

Transferable skills were seen as a positive for participants both at home and in the workplace. They were seen as beneficial in terms of confidence in returning to work after family leave but also in assisting with career progression. Some participants felt that the new skills they learnt as a parent lent themselves well to promotional roles where skills such as conflict resolution were deemed essential.

5.5 Commuting

A male participant in a senior managerial role felt that working from home allowed him to cover a national remit in his role while also giving him the opportunity to be in the home environment and do the creche drop-off and collections.

A second male participant in a senior manager position advised that he moved to his current employer as he wanted to work for an organisation that offered working from home. He did this, as the commute to his previous employment took over an hour

each way and he felt that this was not conducive to having a family. He confirmed that he delayed having his first child until he was in a role where he could work from home as he wanted to ensure that he would be home as much as possible with his family.

A female participant at an officer level advised that she is office based but that her office is within walking distance of her home and the creche that her child attends. She advised this is important to her as she does not want to spend time commuting as this is time that could be spent with her child. She advised the short commute was a pull factor for her returning to work after maternity leave.

“My office isn’t really far so I can walk and collect (my child) at half 4. The short distance was really encouraging for my return to work, you know. I did not have to spend time away from my child for travelling so this is better for me for working full time” (AHB3OF3).

All participants in this study either worked from home fully, worked a hybrid model or lived close to their office. The participants all felt that this was a contributing factor in maintaining a work life balance. With one participant ensuring that he had no commute before he would start his family and another confirming that the short commute was a pull factor for her to return to full time employment after becoming a parent.

5.6 Career Progression

The study consisted of 5 females and 5 males. Of this, 3 females felt that taking family leave had a negative impact on their career progression, 1 female felt that family leave had a positive impact on her career progression, 1 female felt that there was no impact on her career. Of the males, 4 felt that family leave had no impact on their career progression and 1 felt that it had a negative impact on his career progression within an AHB.

Some of the female participants felt that there were informal penalties for taking family. These penalties were perceived by the participants as detrimental to their career progression. One participant described how when she returned from maternity leave, the employee that was hired to cover her had two months remaining on his contract and so she had to job share the duties of her role with him until he left. She described this as difficult because the duties were difficult to share out fairly and there was a clash of opinions at times.

Another female participant describes how there was an office change, new IT software and new employees hired while she was on maternity leave. She advised that these changes were expected, and she did not have any ill feeling about the changes while she was on maternity leave. However, when she returned to work following family leave, she described feeling ‘out of the loop’ and like a brand-new employee. She felt that this was a penalty as it took her several months to re-train on the systems and establish new working relationships. She felt that there should be some form of re-induction to work when returning from family leave. She advised that these changes impacted her experience of taking family leave and that it will be factored into her decision on whether to take more leave in the future.

One female participant described how she was promoted while pregnant and felt that her pregnancy had a positive impact on her career progression. She advised that she works for a small AHB and as such, they used her experience of pregnancy and family leave to inform their ‘family’ and ‘work life balance’ policies. She feels that her input into this has had a positive impact on her career.

In contrast to this, a female participant in a different AHB describes how she was not chosen for a project while she was pregnant. She advised that she cannot prove it but feels that her exclusion from this project was due to her impending maternity leave. She feels that she would have more opportunity for promotion if she was included on the project as all of her colleagues who were on the project group gained additional skills and experience with some obtaining promotion since.

Only 1 male in the study felt that taking family leave had a negative impact on his career progression. He advised that his preference to remain working from home to spend as much time as possible with his family, has greatly limited the type of role he can apply for. He advised that many promotional roles that he is interested in, have a travel or office-based aspect to them. He has decided to put career progression on hold until his children are older, and he has increased capacity to travel and work longer hours.

Chapter 6

Discussion

The findings show that females are more likely to take additional family leave in the form of parent's leave than males. All males in the study took 2 weeks paternity leave with no males taking any parents leave. Three of the five females in the study took parent's leave in addition to their maternity leave. All females took their full maternity leave entitlement.

Females were more likely to feel that family leave had a negative impact on their career progression with four out five feeling this way in comparison to one out of five males. In addition to this, the male's reason for feeling that his career progression was impacted was based on choice (he did not wish to work in an office or travel) and was not a result of the family leave he has taken. In contrast to this, the females who felt that their career was negatively impacted, felt that this was due to reasons directly related to their pregnancy and/or family leave such as sharing their role upon return to work and feeling left out of company-wide changes. They felt that these factors were regressive and detrimental to their career development.

The findings support the idea that female career progression is more negatively impacted than male career progression following family leave. However, one participant felt encouraged by her employer while pregnant and received a promotion during this time. As a result of this, she felt that pregnancy and family leave had a positive

Table 6.1: Leave taken by participants

impact on her career. This is in line with Buzzanell and Liu’s 2007 research which found that females who are encouraged at work while they are pregnant feel more confident about promotion.

The findings support the view that family leave should be allocated to parents as a unit and how this leave is divided and distributed between the parents should be decided by them. The findings suggest that the autonomy to decide how much leave the mother or father takes and at what time would lend itself to more equality in time spent at home between parents but also their individual career advancements. As previously mentioned, Hayes and Levine (2024) found that 5 out of 17 respondents cited financial reasons as to why they would not take paternity leave. Of the fathers willing to take leave, five indicated that their willingness/ability to take leave would depend on their ability to cover the missed time from work with paid sick leave or holiday leave. This inequality in the division of leave and the low uptake of males taking leave could be addressed by introducing a system where leave is allocated to parents as one divisible group.

The study also gives insight into how access to childcare plays a role in the decision-making process of mother’s returning to work. The lack of formal childcare places and the high cost of childcare has resulted in it being a barrier for some participants in this study when they were planning their return to the workplace.

The findings support the research to date that suggest that the financial implications of taking family leave is considered when a parent is deciding how much (if any) family leave to take.

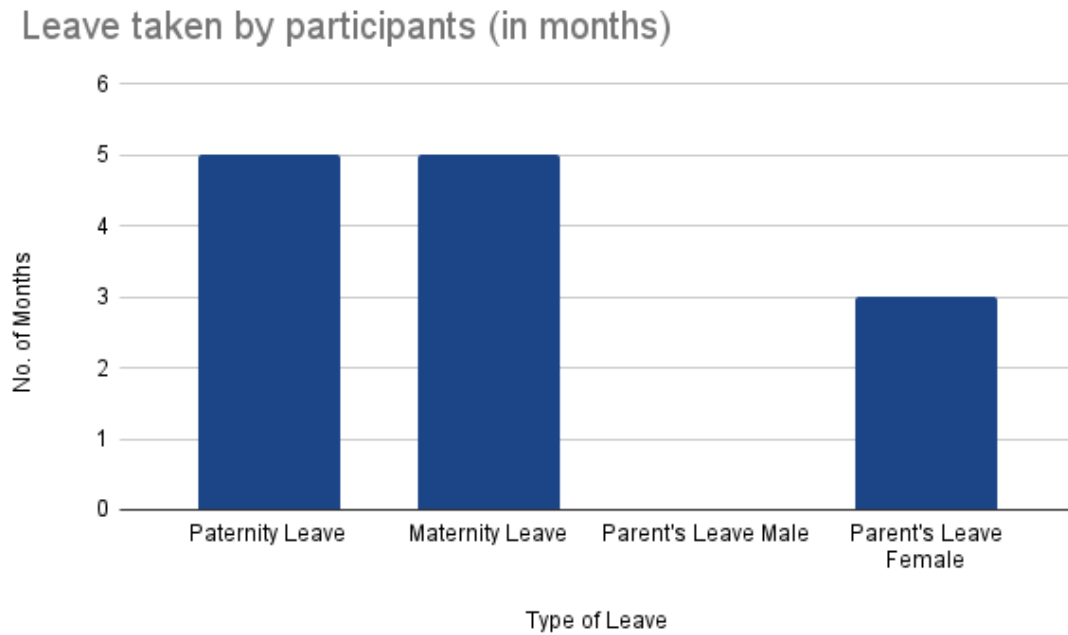


Figure 6.1: Leave taken by participants

6.1 Further Research

Between 2019 and 2022, only 49.8 percent of fathers in paid employment in Ireland claimed paternity benefit, (CSO, 2023). This statistic brings into question the effectiveness of the EU Work -Life Balance initiative to give fathers incentives and opportunities to participate in family life. There is a question of whether, if this payment was ‘topped up’ by their employer, would uptake in paternity leave be higher?

There is the question of how and if increased uptake in paternity leave would lead to a more equal division of domestic labour. If domestic labour was divided equally, would there be an increase in women participating in formal employment or an increase in women moving from part time hours to full time hours?

This research found that men were less likely to take parent’s leave due to flexible working hours. Perhaps flexible working hours would explain the low take up of family leave by men in Ireland.

There is the wider question of what role do AHB’s play in the securing of a future

pension and healthcare system in Ireland. If participation in the labour force should be accessible and open to all, what role is the AHB playing in ensuring that they are providing equal opportunity to those who are faced with the responsibility of parenthood but who also want to be employed full time. The reasons for wanting full time employment can vary from individual to individual but overall, there is no doubt that future fiscal policies such as pension provisions will be based on the tax and social security income of employees.

Further research can question what impact the current family related policies within AHB's may have on the future economic landscape of Ireland. Do AHB's support full time employment for all parents wishing to avail of it? If not, how may this be impacting on the future of Ireland? Do non-supportive family policies have an impact on an individual's decision to have more children, and what impact is this having on population rates in Ireland? A young population is required to fund future social security policies.

The above questions require further investigation that is beyond the remit of this research.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research has discovered that females are more likely than males to feel that taking family leave has negatively impacted their career in the AHB sector in Ireland. It has found that access to childcare is a significant factor for families when women are considering their return to work after maternity leave. Flexible working hours and short or no commuting time were viewed as a pull factor for males and females returning to work after taking family leave.

The findings of the research are in line with findings in the literature review in that financial considerations play a significant role in how much family leave is taken by employees in the AHB sector.

The findings do not support the research in relation to the stigma that some father's feel when applying to take family leave. The participants in this study took family leave in the form of paternity leave. They did not feel any stigma in taking this leave, however no male participant took any longer than two weeks leave at any given time.

Four other male participants of this research felt that taking family leave had no impact on their career progression. This is in contrast to Pizarro and Gartzia's 2024 study which found that men's use of paternity leave had an impact on career development, family relations and health including psychological health.

There was no evidence to suggest that females took more leave due to males reluctance to take family leave. The research discovered the male respondents did not take their full entitlement of family leave due to a perceived lack of need because they could work family friendly hours. In contrast to this, females who did not take their full entitlement of parents leave, did so due to financial implications as it is unpaid rather than because they have flexible working hours.

To conclude, this research has found that taking family leave does have a negative impact on the career progression of those working in AHBs in Ireland with the biggest impact felt by females. Further in-depth research is required to gain a clearer understanding as to why this is and what can be done to mitigate it.

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