

Sex equality and the modern family:

the new political battleground

March 2006

There has been a dramatic change in the way we live our lives and sex equality is now a critical issue as a result. Achieving a better balance between work and family life, support for parents and carers and the question of pension reform are moving up the political agenda. They are no longer simply private struggles, things that families battle with alone. Instead they are becoming central to public policy.

But what do people really think about these issues and which political party do they think is the most credible when it comes to addressing them? How do voters respond to a party that puts support for the modern family and pensions reform for women at the heart of its agenda? Could more women representatives help to enhance political parties' engagement with the electorate? And how do the parties themselves stand to gain?

To explore this, the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) commissioned ICM to conduct a survey of over 2000 people and Ipsos-MORI to carry out 6 focus groups with undecided voters in marginal constituencies.¹

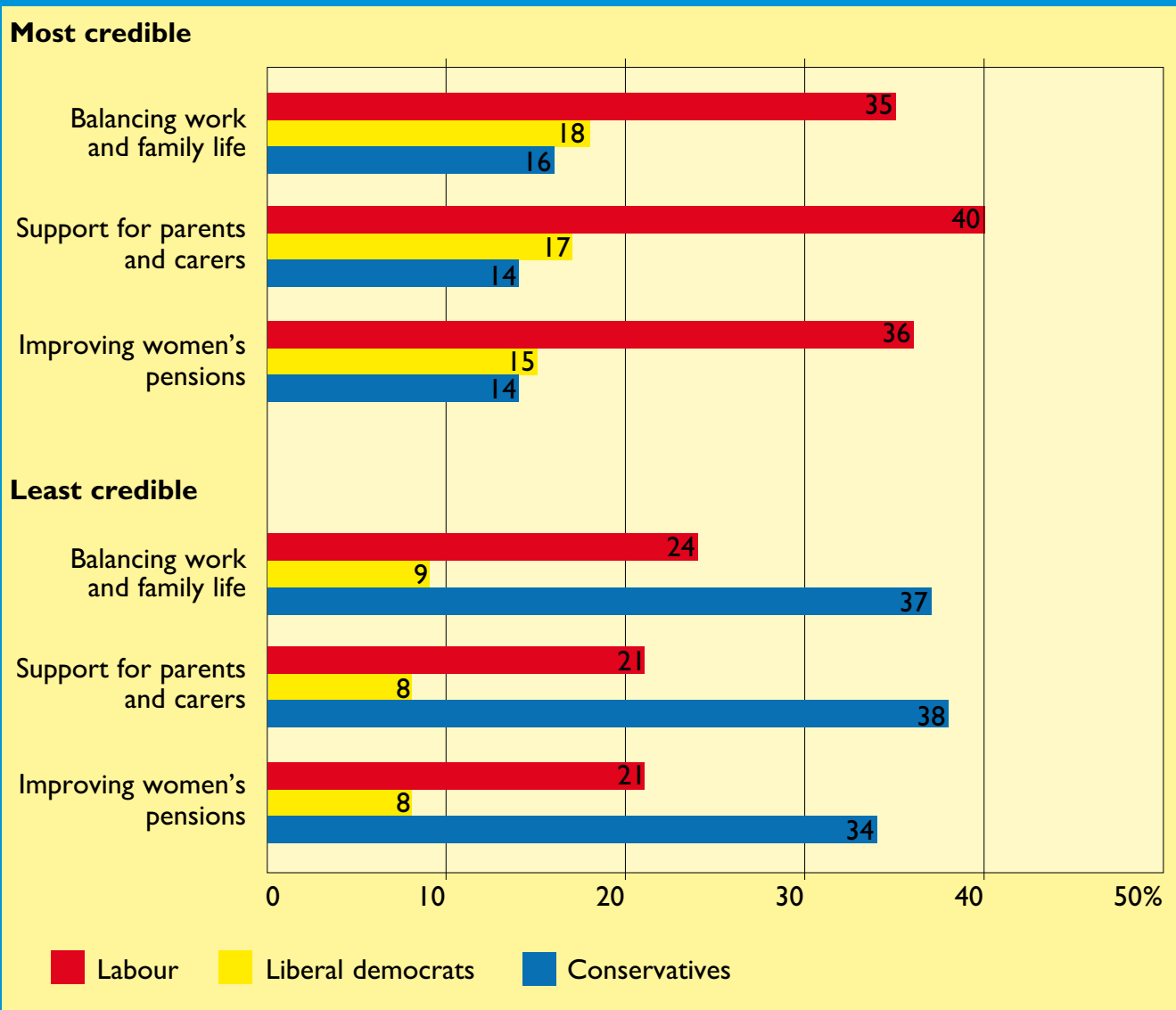
Women's votes won it for Labour in 2005.² It is estimated that if only women had voted at the last general election, the Government's majority would have been over 90, and if only men had voted, it would have been reduced to a very narrow 23. Women tend to be more concerned than men about the issues highlighted in this report and are more likely to be responsive to political parties that address them. Our findings indicate that all political parties face a credibility gap on policies which affect parents and carers. The gap is largest for the Conservatives. A new political battleground is opening up. The polling results show that the parties will be better able to connect with their electorate if they address the daily private individual and family struggle of balancing work and home, and provide greater support for parents and carers. Increasing the number of women candidates would help here too.



Women. Men. Different. Equal.
Equal Opportunities Commission

The credibility gap

There is a lot to do. Despite thirty years of the Sex Discrimination Act, sex equality is a thin veneer that cracks for many women as soon as they take on caring responsibilities. The EOC's recent investigations have found that shockingly high numbers of women experience discrimination when pregnant at work, and if they choose to work part-time or flexibly they often end up with low pay and poor prospects. Four out of five part-timers, most of whom are women, are working well below their potential,³ and many have had to trade down to a lower level job.



What's more, they experience a part-time pay gap of nearly 40% (the pay gap for full-time work is 17%),⁴ and one in five women face poverty in retirement.

As women still carry out the lion's share of the caring role, better support for parents and carers will do much to help close the pay gap. But it is also true that men's and women's lives are becoming more alike in their struggle to balance work and family. Fathers want to play a significant role caring for their children, but policy makers and employers haven't caught up with that reality. The EOC is therefore calling on all politicians to set out a vision and policy agenda to deliver better support for modern families.

We would like to see a new approach to the welfare state to catch up with the realities of modern life – for example, through better childcare, greater recognition of the role of fathers with shared parental leave in the child's early years, better maternity leave, greater support for independent living, the right to ask for flexible working extended to everyone and pensions that don't penalise those who have taken time out of the labour market to do unpaid caring work for others. We believe the extent to which politicians engage with these issues – and the extent to which they are perceived as credible – will be crucial in the next election. The Conservatives have the most ground to make up, but no party can afford to be complacent in this changed political landscape.

Summary

Work and family – attitudes outpace change

A majority of people surveyed were more worried about what family life will be like for their children and grandchildren and having enough time to spend with them than they were about the quality of their local schools or health services, indicating the extent to which these issues are moving up the political agenda. Thirty years after the Sex Discrimination Act, nearly three in five people believed balancing work and family life has actually got harder for working women. A majority also believed fathers who take paternity leave when a child is born will change their role in the family for the better. And significantly, 7 in 10 people thought that women's and men's lives are becoming more alike in terms of their need to balance work and family.

This indicates that supporting families to manage both home and family is now a public policy issue, rather than simply a private struggle. Our polling strongly suggests that those politicians who respond, both by identifying with that private individual/family struggle and by putting relevant policies that support parents and carers at the heart of their agenda, stand to gain. A large majority of voters are more likely to listen to them, and nearly half are more likely to vote for them. Broadly, this applies to both male and female voters, although women are more likely to respond positively than men.

However, all three main parties are suffering a 'credibility gap' in terms of their support for helping families balance work and home, with the Conservatives confirmed as the least credible and Labour as the most credible. But worryingly for Labour, opinion around the Government is increasingly polarised, with a significant credibility gap emerging for them too. Liberal Democrat policy on the work and family agenda is lacking impact, suggesting poor visibility.

- 7 out of 10 people were concerned about what life will be like for their children and grandchildren. Nearly half (47%) were very concerned. A similar proportion of women and men (around 62%) were concerned about spending enough time with their families, more than were concerned about the quality of their local health services (58%) or how safe they feel in their local area (52%) or the quality of local schools (51%).
- 3 out of 4 (74%) people agreed that hearing a political party arguing for policies aimed at supporting parents and carers would make them more likely to listen to that party. Nearly half (47%) would be more likely to vote for them.
- More than 6 out of 10 people would be more likely to listen to a politician talking about work life balance issues, 4 out of 10 would be more likely to vote for them.
- The Conservatives were rated as the least credible in their support for parents and carers, their policies on balancing work and family life and improving women's pensions. Labour was rated as the most credible.

A fair deal for women in retirement

Anxiety about pension provision is also high, particularly amongst those yet to retire. This is coupled with widespread confusion about the pensions system and surprise and shock about the deal that women currently receive. There was almost universal agreement (94%) with the view that women should have their own individual pension rights and not have to rely on their husband or partner. Focus group participants doubted whether politicians would take the long-term view needed on pensions because they might be unpopular with the electorate in the short-term. But polling shows they are very concerned about having enough money in retirement, and this is likely to influence their vote.

- 3 out of 4 women voters were more likely to listen to parties that talk about women's pensions. 4 out of 10 (39%) were more likely to believe them, and half (50%) were more likely to vote for them.
- 7 out of 10 (70%) were concerned about whether they will have enough money in retirement.

Choose a winner, select a woman

At a time when cynicism with politics and politicians is widespread, selecting candidates who can engage the electorate is critical – and in marginal seats it could mean the difference between winning and losing. Existing Electoral Commission⁵ evidence shows that turnout amongst both women and men goes up where a woman candidate is elected and voters are also more likely to believe that 'politics benefits people like me'. There was a strong consensus from our focus groups that balanced representation matters because it enhances a sense of ownership of democracy. Support for this principle was expressed equally by men and women.

When we asked voters whether they are more likely to believe a woman or a man, as expected the vast majority said it makes no difference. However, when we asked the same question of young women (18–24s), a significant number (13%) said they were more likely to believe a woman and none of them (0%) said they were more likely to believe a man, suggesting that engagement with younger women voters, in particular, could be enhanced by having more women political representatives.

- There was a strong consensus from our focus groups in favour of balanced representation.
- For young women in particular, gender does matter. 1 in 8 (13%) young women (18–24) surveyed were more likely to believe a woman, and none (0%) were more likely to believe a man.

Detailed findings

Work and family life – the private becomes public

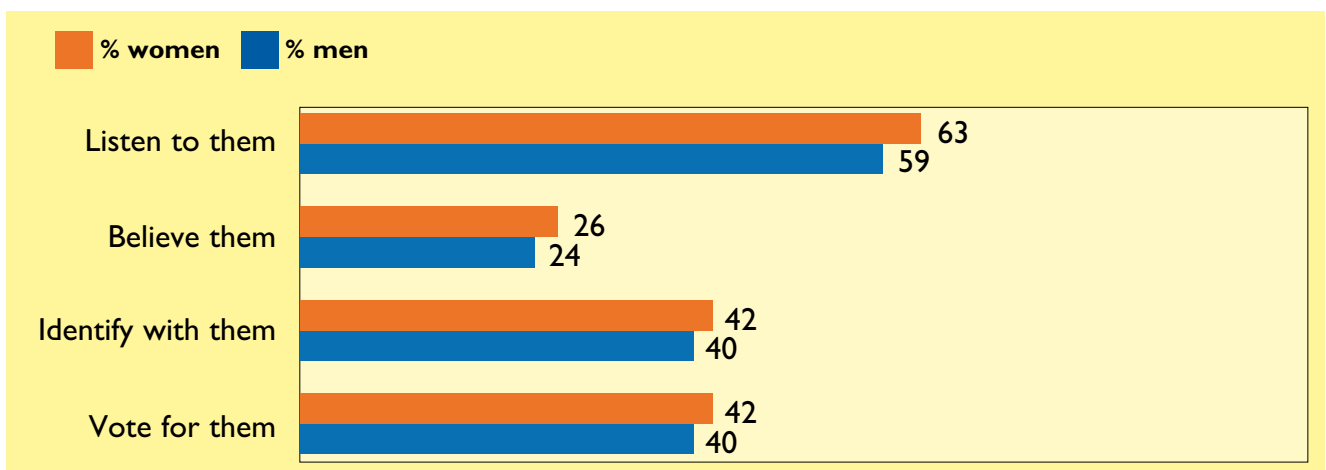
“Men aren’t necessarily the breadwinners any more”

– Female, 18–35 yrs, Cardiff

The EOC is calling for a strategic approach to support the modern family in all its diversity, including support for those caring for children, older people and the disabled. The EOC argues that despite thirty years of the Sex Discrimination Act, for many women sex equality is a thin veneer that cracks as soon as they take on caring responsibilities. Men’s and women’s lives are becoming more alike. Fathers want to play a significant role caring for their children but policy makers and employers haven’t caught up with that reality nor with public opinion.

- **Nearly 3 out of 4 (74%) people agreed that hearing a political party arguing for policies aimed at supporting parents and carers would make them more likely to listen to that party. Nearly half (47%) agreed they would be more likely to vote for them. Younger voters and Labour voters were the most responsive groups but Conservative and Liberal Democrat voters were not far behind, suggesting this agenda’s broad appeal.**
- **The Conservatives were rated as the least credible in their policies on balancing work and family life (37%) and in support for parents and carers (38%). Nearly 1 in 10 of their own voters said they were the least credible on this issue. Labour was rated as the most credible on both policy areas (35% and 40% respectively). However, between 1 in 4 and 1 in 5 respectively rated Labour as the least credible in these policy areas.**
- **More than 6 out of 10 people would be more likely to listen to a politician talking about work life balance issues, 4 out of 10 would be more likely to vote for them.**

If you hear politicians arguing for policies and services designed to improve the balance between work and family life would you be more likely to...



- Nearly 7 out of 10 (69%) women and men agreed or agreed strongly that women's and men's lives are becoming more alike in terms of their need to balance work and family life. 1 in 4 (24%) Conservative voters strongly agreed.

"Women are taking a lot more control over their lives"

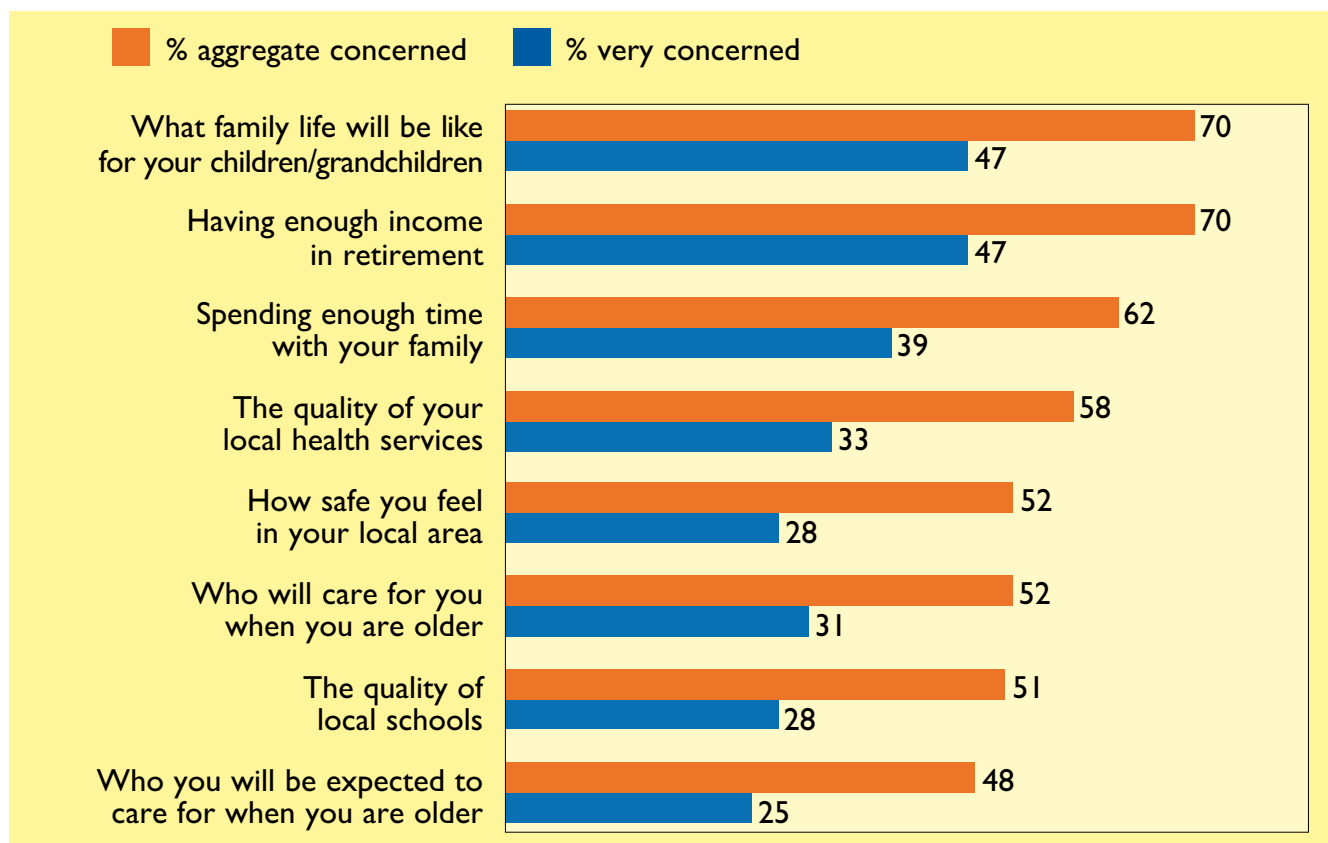
– Male, 33–55yrs, Bradford

- Nearly 3 out of 5 of those questioned (59%) thought that it is harder for working women to balance work and family life than it was 30 years ago. Significantly, over half of men aged 35–44 thought it was harder today for men than 30 years ago.
- In general, focus group participants thought that women's employment had improved as women had more opportunities and better pay than 30 years ago. But they recognised the gap between women and men in terms of pay and the numbers in senior management and this was considered unacceptable, especially among younger people.

"I don't think it has been as big a change as some people think"

– Female, 25–45 yrs, Lancaster

In relation to your own life, how concerned are you about...

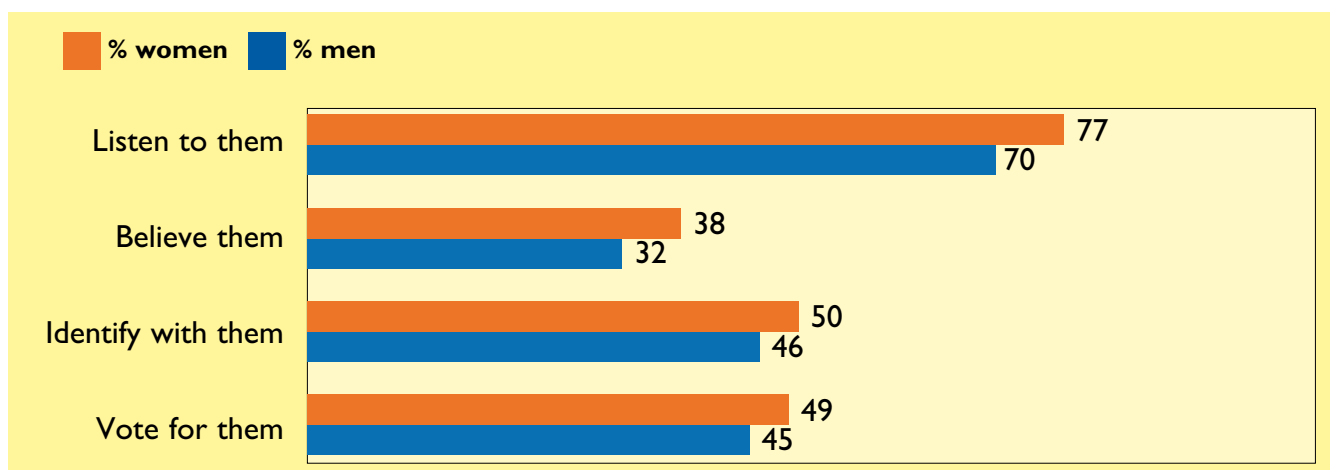


- 7 out of 10 people were concerned about what family life will be like for their children and grandchildren, nearly half (47%) were very concerned. More than 6 out of 10 (62%) were concerned about spending enough time with their family. Both rated higher in voters' concerns than the quality of local health services, local schools or how safe they feel in their local area.
- Giving mothers and fathers the choice to share paid leave – currently only available to mothers – is popular with a majority of both women and men. Almost 4 out of 10 women (39%) and just over one third of men (34%) strongly agreed that parents should have the choice. Almost 3 in 10 (29%) Conservative voters strongly agreed. Focus group participants also agreed.

“I think that’s a great idea” – Female, Cardiff

- 7 out of 10 people agreed or agreed strongly that having time off work when a baby is born will change the role of fathers within the family for the better, this rose to over 80% of those aged 18–34. 3 out of 10 Conservative voters strongly agreed, while almost half (46%) of Labour and Liberal Democrat voters strongly agreed. Our focus groups indicated that men taking on caring roles are no longer regarded as unusual and there’s a high degree of acceptance for this, indicating that public policy on fathers, in particular, is lagging behind public opinion.
- Over half (55%) thought that the Government should pay fathers to take additional paternity leave, but attitudes varied greatly with age. Over 7 out of 10 of those aged 18–34 agreed but less than 3 out of 10 over 65s agreed.
- Almost all (95%) of those questioned thought that someone who cares for an elderly or disabled relative, partner or spouse should have the right to ask their employer if they can work flexibly, while almost 7 out of 10 (69%) agreed that those caring for a neighbour or friend should also have the right to request flexible working.

If you hear politicians arguing for policies aimed at supporting parents and carers would you be more likely to...



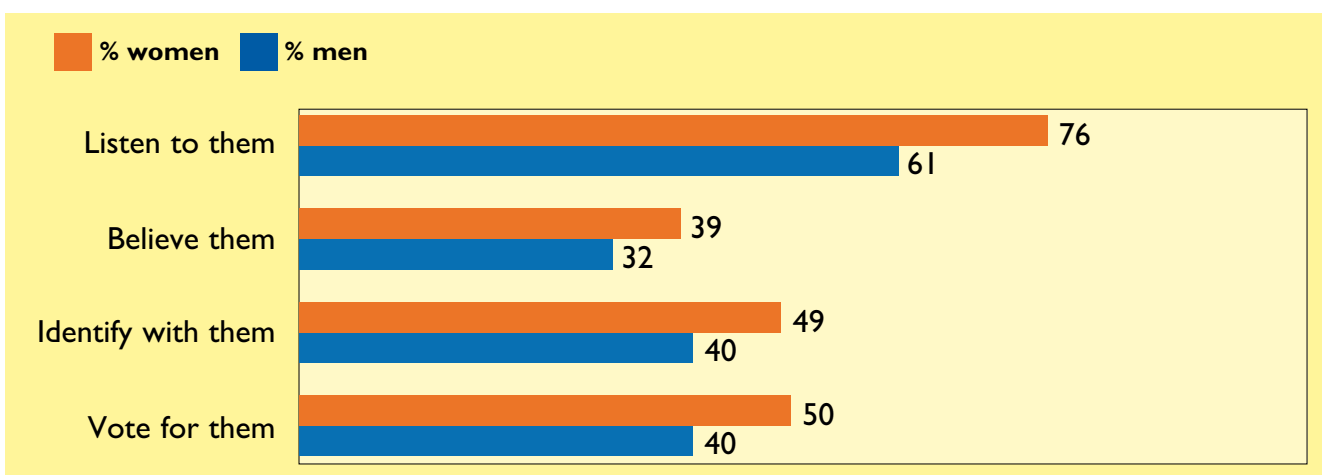
Women's pensions – confusion, anxiety, anger... votes

"It's a bit of a lottery" – Female, over 65 yrs, Putney

The EOC is calling for Government to put women's pensions at the heart of their reforms, valuing and recognising the unpaid caring work that mostly women do throughout their working lives. Women have always had unpredictable periods in and out of the labour market because of time spent bringing up children or caring for older relatives. But fragmented working patterns are increasingly becoming the norm for women and men, so we argue that if we get it right for women, we'll get it right for everyone.

- **76% of women voters were more likely to listen to parties that talk about women's pensions. This applied across party affiliation. Nearly 4 out of 10 (39%) women were more likely to believe them and half (50%) said they were more likely to vote for them.**
- **In addition to women, older voters tended to be more responsive than other age groups with over half (51%) over 65s more likely to vote for a party and a similar proportion (50%) more likely to identify with them.**

If you hear a political party talking about women's pensions are you more likely to...



- The Conservative Party was rated the least credible on improving women's pensions, but 1 in 5 voters rate Labour as least credible. The Liberal Democrat's pensions policy, which was largely aimed at women, may have enhanced their credibility rating.
- More people (70%) are concerned about whether they will have enough money in their retirement than they were about the quality of their local health services (58%) or how safe they feel in their local area (52%). Almost half (47%) said they were very concerned.
- Older people in the focus groups were the least worried for themselves but tended to be more concerned about future pension provision for young people.

"What will happen to my children?" – Male, over 65, Putney

- Over a third (37%) thought that everyone was entitled to a full basic state pension.
- A vast majority of people (94%) thought that women should have their own individual pension rights and not rely on their husband or partner.
- Nearly 6 in 10 people (57%) agreed that National Insurance contributions should rise by 1% to give those caring for children or caring for others the same state pension rights as those in paid work.
- Nearly 6 out of 10 (58%) Conservative voters agreed, a quarter of them strongly, that those who have been doing unpaid caring work should have the same state pension rights as those in paid work. Two thirds (66%) of both Labour and Liberal Democrat voters agreed, more than a third agreed strongly.

“They’re contributing to society even if they are not paying any taxes” – Male, Brent

- Less than 1 in 10 respondents (8%) knew that fewer than 20% of women qualify for a full basic state pension based on their own contributions.
- Nearly two thirds of women (63%) and over half of men (56%) thought that it was unfair or very unfair that only fewer than 20% of women get a full basic state pension in their own right, compared with 78% of men.
- A majority of respondents thought that the difference between men’s and women’s pension entitlement was unfair or very unfair – a consensus regardless of party affiliation. They were also surprised and shocked by the difference between women’s and men’s pension entitlement. Half of women (52%) said that they were angry.
- Nearly 3 in 5 (58%) thought the main responsibility for ensuring that every individual has an adequate retirement income lay with government.
- Focus group participants thought that politicians from all parties were afraid of taking tough decisions on pensions and a longer term view, because they may be unpopular with the electorate.

Women candidates – connecting with voters

“You can’t just have a load of men representing the country”

– Female, 18–24yrs, Brent

The EOC is calling for positive action now by all political parties to address glaring gender inequality in political representation. Without it, we will have to wait 200 years for equality in the House of Commons. Less than 20% of MPs are women. The UK ranks 54th in the world for women’s representation, behind Iraq, Rwanda and Afghanistan. Yet Electoral Commission research⁶ shows that where women MPs have been elected, turnout for both male and female voters goes up and women are more likely to believe that ‘politics benefits people like me’. We want to see an increasing number of diverse women candidates selected by all the main political parties.

- **There was a strong consensus from our focus groups that balanced representation matters because it enhances a sense of ownership of democracy. Support for this principle was expressed equally by men and women.**

“Some old white guy on TV” – 18–24 yrs, Brent

- As expected, the majority of voters (88%) felt that if a politician was male or female made no difference to whether they were more likely to believe them. But for a significant number of young women (18–24s) gender did matter. 1 in 8 (13%) said they were more likely to believe a female politician and none of them (0%) said they were more likely to believe a male politician.

The challenge ahead

EOC polling and focus groups suggest that public opinion is driving equality issues up the agenda. But all the main political parties have some way to go before the electorate really believes that they want to support parents and carers, value and recognise caring roles, particularly in pension reform, and improve the balance between work and family life that people struggle with every day.

The credibility of all the political parties is thin here, but the Conservative Party has the most ground to make up. By consistently addressing the issues explored in this report, parties may well be able to address that. They cannot afford not to. This is about engaging with the electorate in what is all too often a daily personal struggle that is becoming a growing political one. And doing so with a party that looks and sounds like the people they seek to represent is now a political necessity.

EOC/ICM⁷ polling before the election showed women voters consistently responded to Labour’s agenda on supporting parents and carers, flexible working and childcare. The only way that Labour can hold on to those votes and the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats can challenge for them is to set out a vision and a policy agenda that addresses the daily personal struggle in women’s and men’s lives.

Notes

- 1 ICM Research interviewed a random sample of 2,015 adults aged 18+ by telephone between 26–30 October 2005. Interviews were conducted across the country and the results have been weighted to the profile of all adults. ICM is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules. Further information at www.icmresearch.co.uk Between December 2005 and January 2006 Ipsos-MORI conducted six discussion groups with undecided voters in marginal constituencies. Participants were recruited according to quotas on age, working status, gender, socio-economic group and more specifically, on whether they were a parent or carer. The groups explored in greater depth attitudes to politicians, men's and women's changing lives, the role of fathers, pension reform, and the value participants attach to unpaid caring work. Ipsos-MORI is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules. Further information at www.mori.co.uk
- 2 2005 election data shows that the Conservative vote amongst women voters fell in almost every category while the Labour vote amongst women increased in almost every category. According to Ipsos-MORI, Labour's majority would have been over 90 if only women had voted in 2005. *Guardian* 8 May, 2005, Sir Robert Worcester, Chairman of Ipsos-MORI.
- 3 Darton, D & Hurrell, K (2005) *People working part-time below their potential*. Those working below potential have previously worked in jobs requiring more supervision or management of staff or a higher level of qualifications or skills, or agree that they could easily work at a higher level.
- 4 The full-time gender pay gap compares women's and men's mean full-time hourly earnings, whilst the part-time gender pay gap compares women's part-time and men's full-time hourly earnings. Office for National Statistics (2005) *Annual Survey of Hours*.
- 5 Electoral Commission *Gender and Political Participation*, 2004.
- 6 Electoral Commission *Gender and Political Participation*, 2004.
- 7 ICM survey and focus groups summary February 2005 www.eoc.org.uk/PDF/icm_poll_summary.pdf

Equal Opportunities Commission Helpline

Free, confidential and impartial advice and information on sex discrimination and equal pay

0845 601 5901

9am – 5pm Monday – Friday

Calls from BT landlines charged at local rates

Calls may be monitored for training purposes

Interpreting service available through Language Line, when you call our Helpline

Typetalk service available on 18001 0845 601 5901

Arndale House,
Arndale Centre,
Manchester
M4 3EQ
Email: info@eoc.org.uk
Fax: 0161 838 8303

You can find out more about us by visiting
our website www.eoc.org.uk

For specialist legal information
visit www.eoc-law.org.uk

