Female Part-Time Managers: Networks and Career Mobility

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Abstract

This paper explores sixteen part-time female managers’ promotional prospects and mobility during full-time and part-time employment and the role of networking as a career progression strategy. It attempts to explain the labour market position of female part-time managers, given their assumed privileged status in relation to other part-time workers. Findings reveal that the majority had successful career histories while full-time but that these careers stalled once a transition to part-time work was made, women voicing frustration with their employment prospects in terms of mobility and promotion. Mobility was particularly limited given the perceived lack of quality jobs at managerial level in the external labour market. There was recognition that networking had made an important contribution to career progression but for most women, the transition into part-time employment meant that opportunities to network decreased due to time constraints.
1. Introduction

While a small amount of research has focused upon the experiences and employment profiles of female part-time professionals (Dick and Hyde, 2006; Lawrence and Corwin, 2003) there is very little research on the experiences of female part-time managers in the UK. Of all women working part-time, just 4.4 percent are managers compared with 15.5 percent of women working full-time (Manning and Petrongolo, 2004). Little is known about their motivation, career histories and experiences and the extent to which they utilise career progression strategies, such as networking. We do know that transitions into part-time work for those working at managerial level have significant, usually negative, implications for career prospects (Tomlinson, 2006a) and that flexible working arrangements often lack connection with careers (Benko and Weisberg, 2008). This paper offers an in-depth, qualitative analysis of sixteen female part-time managers’ experiences, activities and aspirations, in an attempt to engage with these critical issues.

Part-time work has risen dramatically since the 1960s (Booney, 2005). Despite this increase, recent data (LFS, 2008) confirms the low number of part-time managers in the UK (217,000 women and 68,000 men); these numbers include ‘senior officials’. Women are most likely to be employed part-time in ‘Administrative and Secretarial jobs’ and high proportions are found in private and public services, sales, hotels and restaurants (Francesconi and Gosling, 2005: 32). While female part-time managers share some characteristics with more traditional part-time workers, they are likely to have negotiated a reduction in working hours from the organisation for which they work (Tilly, 1992, 1996; Tomlinson, 2006a) rather than being recruited as part-timers. This is because employers are reluctant to advertise part-time managerial jobs in the external labour market through fear of this being interpreted as ‘downgrading’ senior management roles (Grant, 2009).

The objectives of this paper are to explore the career mobility, strategies and aspirations of these rare and hard-to-reach managers. It explores their past labour market mobility, future promotional prospects and how networking (or lack of it) may have helped or hindered career mobility. To achieve these objectives we focus on three related themes: (i) female part-time managers’ career histories, including promotions, demotions and transitions in and out of part-time work; (ii) part-time managers’ career aspirations and perceived future mobility; and (iii) the relationship between career mobility and networking activities.

2. Gendered careers and part-time work

Women’s careers are often positioned as different to those of men (Halford et al., 1997). Men are often positioned as the ‘ideal’ and ‘unencumbered’ worker (Acker, 1990; Lewis, 1997) which in turn informs organisational discourses and ideologies around recruitment and promotion practices and creating ‘in’ and ‘out’ groups (Ozbilgin and Woodward, 2004). Conversely, women’s careers have been
characterised by assumptions about their commitment, capabilities and maternal responsibilities (Wilson, 1998). Male senior managers often hold stereotypical perceptions about the skills and ambitions of their female workers and this contributes to a lack of career progression for women (Smithson and Stokoe, 2005) especially in organisations with flatter structures and large numbers of part-time workers, such as call centres (Durbin, 2006).

Cultural, structural and action dimensions each form the context in which women’s career choices are made and differentially affect the occupational destinations and career trajectories of women and men (Evett, 2000). While women make choices in the labour market and organisational contexts, they do not do so in unconstrained settings. One key set of constraints rarely encountered by men, are those related to women’s roles and responsibilities caring for children and other dependants. The strongly masculine culture of management reflects the belief that what constitutes ‘good’ management conflicts with women’s roles and responsibilities around caring, relatedness or connectedness (e.g. Schein, 2007). The structural-cultural dimension is reflected in the division of labour and departmental systems, as well as promotion and career paths. Acker (1990) postulates that organisation structures consist of promotion ladders and hierarchies of work positions that influence women’s paid work and career experience.

It is also argued that women’s under-representation in management stems from inadequate career opportunities, gender-based stereotypes and ‘old boy’s networks’ (Oakley 2000). The managerial role is sex-typed as a male occupation, and the ‘think manager-think male’ attitude remains intact (Schein, 2007). Liff and Ward (2001) argue that many women in middle management do not perceive themselves as being able to reach senior management given the culture and long hours. Under these conditions, it seems unlikely that women trying to reconcile both family and career aspirations could succeed while working less than full-time hours.

Transitions to part-time work have significant implications for career prospects and degree of occupational gender segregation in the UK. Labour Force Survey data show that 60 percent of mothers working part-time are clustered into four occupational areas: ‘elementary administration and service occupations,’ ‘sales and customer service occupations,’ ‘caring personal service occupations,’ and ‘administrative occupations’. In contrast, just 3 percent of mothers employed on a part-time basis were corporate managers (Tomlinson et al 2009).

Whether women work part-time out of preference or through constraint is a central theme in research on women’s employment (Gash, 2008; Hakim, 2000; Walsh, 1999). This debate is important since it can be thought to make a statement about women’s work orientations (Hakim, 1996). Part-time employment in the UK is consistently documented in academic and policy literature as being inferior in terms of job prospects, training, and quality of work when compared to full-time employment (Hoque and Kirkpatrick, 2004; Rubery, 1998). The perplexing trend of women appearing to ‘choose’ to work in jobs with inferior employment conditions and prospects has led Hakim (1996, 2000) to suggest that distinctions can be made between commitment to work and career orientation of individuals, particularly women, depending upon whether they work full- or part-time. She argues that we can
witness societal transformations cumulating in a ‘new scenario’ where women can ‘fully realise’ their work-lifestyle preferences.

The situation is, however, more complex. For instance, women’s work histories usually comprise both full- and part-time jobs (Blackwell, 2001) and therefore it becomes problematic to associate orientations to work over the life course with either full- or part-time status. Orientations to work and careers may be relatively stable for some women, as Hakim suggests, but evidence shows change and fluctuation in the work and career orientations of the majority of women over the life course (Crompton and Harris, 1998; Stone and Lovejoy, 2004; Tomlinson, 2006b).

Tilly (1992, 1996) identifies two dualistic categories of part-time work: ‘secondary’ (typically involuntary, low skilled, low paid, with few career prospects situated in the secondary labour market) and ‘retention’ (typically voluntary, highly skilled, highly paid, with career prospects). Tilly argues that part-time managers fit the category of ‘retention’ because they are concentrated in managerial, professional and technical occupations, enjoy higher levels of pay and benefits, experience lower turnover and have access to promotion ladders. Importantly, Tilly suggests that whilst secondary part-time workers are usually recruited on a part-time basis, retention part-time workers tend to be recruited initially as full-time workers and then granted a reduction in hours some time later. Retention part-time employment is therefore, by its very nature, exceptional and a process of negotiation on an ad hoc basis.

An explanation for the scarcity of part-time managerial jobs is provided by Crompton and Harris (1998). Professional careers, they argue, are often more sustainable for women because autonomy over their working time is less constrained, whereas expectations of managerial careers typically require long hours, geographical mobility and networking after hours. This is referred to as the ‘male model of working’ (Lewis, 1997). Reasons for the reluctance by managers to recruit part-time managers stems from perceptions that senior jobs require full-time workers and that employing part-time workers would result in uncompleted tasks, an increased burden on those managers who worked full-time and a delay in decision making. There is a common view amongst managers that part-time jobs are only suitable at lower levels (Grant et al., 2006). Employers do not see part-time work as compatible with a ‘corporate career’ (Hewlett, 2007). Burchell et al’s (1997: 215) observation that, ‘moves towards opening up management jobs on a part-time basis’ were ‘slow’ and ‘embryonic’ remains the case more than a decade later.

3. Careers and networking

Female managers, in a predominantly ‘male’ world, utilise a range of strategies to cope with token status, including, ‘visibility’ management and the formation of strategic organisational alliances (Kanter, 1977). A complementary strategy is to engage in networking activities, particularly to improve career development prospects. Women network for both social and career-related reasons, the latter as a means to gain access to work-related opportunities (e.g. promotion), to make professional contacts and to gain career advice and support (McCarthy, 2004; Vinnicombe et al., 2004). Women’s lack of advancement to higher levels of
management is partly the result of their having less developed internal networks than men (Powell, cited in Lineham, 2001).

While women’s networking activities have been well researched and documented, this rarely includes female part-time managers whose approach and experiences may be different given their working-time patterns. Before considering the extent to which female part-time managers use networking as a career advancement strategy, it is useful to review the networking literature to establish the link between women’s networking and career progression.

The term ‘network’ signifies a social relationship between actors based upon content (products, knowledge, information), form (closeness/distance of the relationship) and intensity (e.g. communication frequency) (Seufert et al., 1999). Networking is defined as, ‘...activities between individuals attempting to develop and maintain relationships with those with, or perceived to have, the potential to assist them in their work or career’ (Singh et al., 2006). Networking is also a mechanism for social exchange (Blau, 1967) where reciprocity and trust are built around informal relationships and social obligations to exchange favours.

Women network to access and use resources embedded in social networks to gain both expressive and instrumental benefits. Expressive networking tends to be based on trust, closeness and friendship (e.g. for social support) instrumental networking on the exchange of information and material resources (e.g. for career advancement) (McGuire, 2000; Singh et al., 2006). Expressive and instrumental networking can be both formal and informal, the latter usually being formed consciously with both work-related and social benefits (Ibarra, 1993). In contrast, formal networks tend to be based on formally structured relationships between individuals, who may share professional credentials and/or work-related projects. Formal and informal networking activities and behaviours are often presented as dichotomous activities when in reality, their boundaries may be blurred.

The underlying assumption is that employees enjoy equal access to networks though this is often not the case (Durbin forthcoming) the ‘old boys’ network’ being a case in point (Forret, 2004). One response to this is for women and/or their employing organisations to set up women-only networks to attempt to overcome ‘token’ status (Pini et al. 2004) and to access advice and career development opportunities (Singh et al., 2006). Women-only networks are consciously constructed, publicly visible and formal (Schmuck, 1986), and can provide an alternative to an aspect of business life seen by many women as alien and intimidating. However, they have been criticised for being discriminatory and divisive (Pini et al., 2004) and as having negative connotations associated with ‘victimhood’ (McCarthy, 2004).

Very little, if any, attention has been given to the networking behaviours of female part-time managers, and this research offers a valuable insight into the career strategies and outcomes of this sub-group of managers. We postulate that the form and intensity of networking will be different for part-time workers, due to time restrictions and domestic obligations.
4. Methods

The research is based on sixteen semi-structured interviews with female part-time managers, located in the South, South East and South West regions of England. Eight worked in financial services, the remainder in pharmaceuticals/cosmetics, marketing/PR, manufacturing and research and development. All but three were employed in the private sector. The majority were aged 36-40 years and had at least one child under the age of 12. All women identified themselves as ‘white British’ (see Appendix).

Seven women held senior posts and nine held middle management positions. Full-time Equivalent (FTE) annual salaries ranged from £143,750 through to £37,500. The mean average FTE annual salary was £58,300. The majority were well qualified to at least Degree level, four held Master’s/MBA qualifications and one a PhD. Thirteen had switched from full-time to part-time work with their current employers whilst already employed on a managerial grade. The remaining three had joined their present company on a part-time basis. All switched to part-time working for maternity or childcare related reasons.

Interviewees were selected through a combination of personal contacts, employers and research networks. One early contact, an HR manager, was keen to take part in the research as she had switched to part-time work after the birth of her first child. After returning to work, she felt that her job had been downgraded, as she was no longer included on the circulation lists of important meetings. All of the women interviewed told similar stories and were keen to understand the experiences of other women in similar positions through our research project. We also interviewed four of the sample group’s line managers, where multiple part-time managers were found within one organisation. Within our small sample, we were thus able to collect a wealth of data from interviewees representing a wide range of organisations, salary levels and positions in their respective corporate hierarchies.

Semi-structured interviews lasting one to one and a half hours, allowed us to ask the same set of questions with each interviewee while also retaining some flexibility to discuss their unique experiences. Most interviews were conducted by telephone, to save costs, tape recorded and fully transcribed. The interviews were based on a socio-biographical approach, the respondents’ working lives being explored within the context of their life histories. The data was subjected to thematic analysis, each set of questions being grouped under one of three themes – career mobility, aspirations and networking. First, the women were asked about the point at which they had left education and their entry level qualifications when they began work. Then, every employment transition such as a promotion or changes in responsibilities, job title, department, employer or working-time were mapped up to their current role. Second, more probing questions were asked about these women’s careers, focusing on what the women thought helped or hindered their progression and what future aspirations they held. Points at which women switched to part-time work and their career prospects following these transitions were explored in depth. Third, networking opportunities and activities were discussed in relation to their experiences as both full- and part-time workers.
5. Career trajectories prior to part-time work

In line with other research findings, most of these female part-time managers held their positions full-time before negotiating a reduction in their working hours. All had previously worked full-time, experienced varied working lives and been keenly committed to their career. They had actively sought promotions and positioned themselves strategically within organisations in order to gain access to training and opportunities for progression. Their successful progression and development had occurred in most instances while they were employed full-time and often prior to forming families.

Seven of the sixteen interviewees had worked only for their current employers but had changed jobs and been promoted during this time. Their most recent promotions ranged from as long ago as nine years, to as recently as one year, with the majority having been promoted within the last couple of years. None of the interviewees experienced promotion following their transition to part-time employment. The remaining nine had worked in an average of four jobs each before joining their current organisations (the highest number of jobs being six and the lowest three). Six had remained in the same profession (e.g. marketing, finance or HR) while three had a change in direction (one from sales to financial services, another from clerical to law and another from clerical to HR). All had gained promotions with each job change but again, none had been promoted since reducing to part-time hours.

The following extract is indicative of the high level of flexibility and mobility:

I spent five years or so [at global retail company] and then I went to [a different retail company] and I was trade marketing director there. I had about two or three roles there actually; I was trade marketing director, then channel planning director and then latterly field marketing director.

So you’ve had quite a lot of senior roles?

Yes, when I got to [company] in my first directorship, I wasn’t a board director; I was a functional director, so it was a step down from the board. I stayed there for another four years or so and then I had a complete aberration one night and I decided to get some non-food experience and I went to work for [company]. I knew nothing about telecoms at all and thought it was about time that I broadened a little bit and I was still very much on the career path and ladder and all that sort of exciting stuff. I went to work in their global marketing team and I was head of retail for their shops, basically, head of global retail was my title (Respondent H, Commercial Director)

Interviewees also spoke of how they worked hard to maintain visibility on particular projects through training, development and working additional hours:
I got to the point where it was anything that needed doing, I was willing. I was like, you can put me on this course, I can learn how to do that. Because I knew that what they did in the departments was to move you around and I wanted it so that when it came to move on to a different area, I had done so much work that they would say, oh, you better stay and do this or finish this. So I immersed myself in projects so I didn’t have to hand them over to other people (Respondent M)

6. Working lives and careers after deciding to work part-time

All of the women interviewed switched to part-time work after becoming mothers and thirteen negotiated a transition from full-time to part-time work with their current employer. While just two interviewees described themselves as their children’s ‘main carer’, the remainder split childcare between themselves, partners, relatives, childminders, schools, nurseries and after-school clubs. There was some use of state-sponsored childcare but much more reliance on the family and childminders/nurseries. These women’s decisions to work part-time were a result of multiple factors including their own ideas about active parenting and the demands of their own and often their partners’ careers, as indicated in the following quote:

My husband works really hard at one job and I work very hard trying to keep a part-time job going at quite a responsible level, keep the house together, sort all the children out and everything that goes with that really… I might be busy at home but that’s just my life choice really and with my children, yes I think that’s a good balance… I had the choice of going for the senior business partner role and you know my husband looked at the job description, he said, ‘you could do that why aren’t you going for it?’ I said ‘I’m not going for it because I have three children to look after, I have a house to look after and you have a job where you work extra long hours’ (Respondent N)

Several women stated that they were comfortable with and accepted that the reduction in working hours meant that their career prospects were on hold. Most stated that achieving a work-life balance while maintaining a job that was interesting, with good conditions, was a compromise they were willing to make.

The level of success women spoke of changed dramatically when they reduced hours and became part-time. Initially, most of the women were positive about their employers and the accommodation of their working hours. However, when probed in more depth about their job and career prospects while working part-time, many women voiced frustrations about their progression and prospects.

Some women indicated that their return to work part-time had resulted in a role change and loss of status. This woman initially said she was ‘lucky’ to be employed by her company but then recalled that her line manager was not initially supportive
when she attempted to reduce her working hours, requiring her to take a less senior role:

…nobody had ever proposed that before, just because of the profile of the people that worked there; they tend to be quite young. I think I actually had [daughter] when I was just thirty and so I don’t think they’d really come across it that much but, because I’d been there a decent length of time… I went on maternity leave and I didn’t know what role I could go back to… I was only off for about five months, we then discussed exactly what role I could do four days a week and it was a less senior role, but obviously the title and the benefits and everything stayed the same (Respondent D)

Another respondent gave a more ambivalent account. She negotiated the reduction in working hours and said numerous times during the interview that she liked the company she worked for and had formed a good working relationship with her boss. However, the reduction in hours had been at the expense of a varied and more challenging career trajectory, which she ultimately found frustrating:

I suppose, ideally, I would have liked to have been in a different job…. having done the personnel consultant job for five years I was looking for some other things because my love is about learning and development and newness and challenges - you know, dealing with the itchy feet and I suppose there’s a bit of internal frustration that I’ve ended up back at this job because, whilst there is a slightly different focus on the job, I kind of feel I was leading edge (Respondent L)

She stated that she may have been overlooked for promotion partly due to returning to work part-time. Discussing a different role, which she unsuccessfully applied for on return from maternity leave, she says:

I love challenges… I’m not good when I’m not stretched. … I hoped I wouldn’t go back to putting slippers on [at work]. I hoped I’d be able to find another pair of outdoor shoes (Respondent L)

Despite thinking that their environments were becoming more conducive to ‘non-standard’ working patterns, other research indicates women spoke of considering returning to full-time work due to the persistence of negative perceptions of part-time workers (Grant, 2009). Similar sentiments were voiced by respondents in this sample:

I’ve found that there is a genuine worry among senior managers for sure that part-time employees aren’t as committed as full-time employees. I don’t believe that’s the case myself, but it’s a persistent belief. They are very reluctant to recruit new part-time people. Once somebody has been here full-time and gone part-time, which my other two part-time colleagues have, they’re considered to have proved their worth, proved their commitment, their loyalty, they’ve got credibility… I had a royal battle to prove my credibility because I was only here part-time (Respondent F)
This respondent also highlighted that she felt her opportunities for progression were much more limited while working part-time (echoed by other women in the sample), and that it had impacted negatively on her promotion prospects:

> Actually, in between going from 80 per cent down to 50 per cent, I was offered a promotion, but could only take that promotion if I went back full-time and I decided not to do it.

> So they wouldn’t give you that promotion on a part-time basis?

No. We had quite long discussions over it and I was quite up front and said that we could at least test it for a three month period and then review. But it was heading up the team and they didn’t seem to think that [the client] as a customer of ours would appreciate the fact that somebody wasn’t contactable five days a week, because they are pretty demanding…. At the time I was pretty frustrated, because I knew that I could have done the role and it was certainly a decent enough progression to keep me motivated (Respondent D)

Another woman had been looking to move out of a role that she felt hadn’t been ‘rewarding’. While being highly complementary of her boss, she felt disappointed when she applied for a job that her boss encouraged her to go for, only to be unsuccessful on the basis of her working hours:

> When I did go on maternity leave, I found out that my boss was moving on internally. I knew she was recruiting people and I had a conversation with her about a couple of the roles… she was very keen for me to apply… whilst I’ve been very much singing her praises, I was also let down a little bit at that stage. She thought I was the right person for the role, but not if I could only work three days (Respondent K)

7. Aspirations, future career mobility, and organizational ties

Many of the women interviewed believed that even though they had negotiated a reduction in their working hours while retaining their management status, they would be highly unlikely to find similarly graded work via the external labour market under the same conditions (i.e. reduced hours). Importantly, they felt tied to their organisation and job due to securing a rare part-time managerial position, these feelings being heightened when their future aspirations and career mobility were undermined.
After feeling somewhat rejected after an unsuccessful attempt to change jobs internally, the following respondent reflects on whether there would be better opportunities for her externally:

I have thought about whether I should look at other options but in truth I do know that I don’t want to work more than four days right now. When I’ve spoken to companies, in my direct way, saying would other companies ever consider a ‘four-dayer’ the honest answer I’ve been given is you have to be absolutely the best candidate and that the second or third [best] who’d probably be taking on five days might get it…. I think when you’re going external you have got to be better than the second, third and fourth candidate (Respondent L)

Others voiced similar concerns about their employment opportunities in the external labour market:

I did want to do a more all round marketing role, because I’ve got so much more experience than [company] has seen because of the nature of the role I do. I didn’t feel I was getting the opportunity to exhibit a lot of those skills… I’m on a good package with [company] if I’m honest, because I am working flexibly…the problem is, if you want to go and find another job, then you tell them you want part-time, it’s not going to be easy, so I am better off staying where I am (Respondent K)

8. Part-time careers, work, and networking

There is a realisation amongst the women interviewed that part-time employment effectively places their careers ‘on hold’, restricts further career progression and leads to them feeling ‘stuck’ and sometimes frustrated in their current jobs and there are few suitable opportunities to secure more rewarding, challenging work elsewhere. There was some acceptance that they had made a trade-off between family and career and that career progression would resume upon switching back to full-time hours but for some women with very young children, this could take several years. But were these women merely sitting back and waiting to resume full-time working, or were they actively engaging in career progression strategies such as networking?

The majority of women described themselves as ‘networkers’ who actively engaged in networking activities while employed full-time and this had contributed to their career progression. They also participated in networking activities to some extent during their part-time working hours, predominantly within their own organisations but most acknowledged that they had cut back on this since reducing their hours. There was also a recognition that networking was a work-related activity undertaken for instrumental reasons and that this had made a contribution to career progression:

I suppose my current role is partly about bringing in new business, partly about finding good people. At the end of the day, we’re a human capital
business...I think primarily its about developing new business and actually just keeping in touch with what’s going on (Respondent H)

There was also an awareness that ‘getting on’ with people was important, denoting a social as well as instrumental aspect to networking (McCarthy, 2004; Vinnicombe et al. 2004) although the social element of this appeared less important:

Yes, definitely. It certainly is now because the bosses that I worked for back at [company] are now in really powerful positions. That’s really helpful. You kind of always know that if you needed a job, you could probably get one (Respondent H)

The strategic nature of networking was a continuing theme running throughout the interviews, some indicating the importance of it simply for support, whereas others perceived it as a possible channel for knowledge and learning:

I think it’s tapping into some information, which is always great. It’s also just learning a little bit more about what’s happening in the wider world....But I think ultimately it’s about if I need a career change, then I’ve got some contacts who can just give an insight or guidance and that kind of thing. Certainly it’s about that, but also it’s about information exchange and just being a bit supportive (Respondent I)

Although some women mentioned that they ‘tapped into’ external networks for information about working practices and career changes, very few mentioned that they felt external networking would be influential in securing a part-time position with another organisation.

Just one respondent (P) stated that networking had been influential in facilitating a transition to a part-time management position. This manager, who worked in legal compliance, found a job share partner through an external accountancy network. This respondent felt the responsibility had been hers to find a job share partner and without doing so, would not have been granted the request to work part-time as her job was considered too extensive and senior for one part-time manager to undertake. A job share, in this particular case, was a more favourable option to management. This does suggest that if women had more time to network, they may be better placed to establish exactly what opportunities are open to them.

For most, networking was an essential part of their job and although having to be selective due to time constraints, interviewees recognised that, ‘it was important to be seen from time to time’, sometimes attending networking events because they felt that they should. It was also felt that networking allowed interviewees the opportunity to lobby other senior members of the organisation about important issues, as part of a broad trust-building, relational approach (Blau, 1967). Others mentioned the importance of networking due to being involved in international research and for building up a list of contacts, keeping up with industry developments, and staying up-to-date with current legislation.
The majority stated that they were not members of any kind of formal network and the few who were, held membership of professional associations (e.g. the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development and the Chartered Institute of Marketing) rather than inter-company or cross-sector formal networks. Membership was therefore based upon the interviewee’s professional qualifications and experience. A large number said that although a member, they often did not have the time to attend networking events, some preferring to stay in touch via the professional associations’ websites. Membership of formal, women’s networks was also very limited, the majority of interviewees expressing a negative view based on consensus that they are divisive, antiquated and sexist:

I loathe and detest them! I would not join them on point of principle… I don’t believe women in business are any different from men in business. I think they are unnecessary, divisive and, quite frankly, antiquated. I think it gives the wrong impression that there is a difference and I don’t believe there should be and I don’t believe in the [company] there actually is (Respondent C)

Most interviewees indicated that they preferred informal networking, describing how they approached this in their own companies. One said that she kept her networks ‘slightly oiled’ by catching up with people from time to time:

I have very little time for networking, I mean, I walk past people in the corridor and say hello, and I’m the sort of person that will always say hello to somebody and always pass the time of day, but it won’t necessarily be quality – let’s go out and grab a coffee – sort of stuff, or really getting into the depths of what’s happening, more in just passing the time of day. But it does help if you want to talk to those people later….work-related stuff in the past is helping me for the future (Respondent K)

Interviewees also accepted that there was less time to network, now that they were employed on a part-time basis:

I have done in the past, when I’ve had more time, well, before children if you like (Respondent K)

I don’t do enough of it. The reason I don’t do enough of it is time. I tend to get my head down when I’m sat at my desk when I’m in the office…having said that, today I have spoken to two people which have been networking calls, which is unusual…yes, it’s really important (Respondent H)

Critically, the majority of women said that they struggled to network outside of their part-time working hours, mainly due to domestic circumstances. Most needed to get home to their families at the end of the working day, although there was some recognition that they were missing out on an important ‘informal’ after-hours activity.
Those who did manage to network after hours kept this to a minimum, at around two to three hours a month.

It’s harder when you’ve got small children. It is, because you have to make particular arrangements. You can’t be spontaneous...you know, you have to book a babysitter, you have to check that your husband will be there to drive the babysitter home and then you have to think “Well, it’s going to cost me £20, how much value do I attach to this event?” So you’re more choosy about what you do (Respondent F)

9. Conclusion

This article contributes to the small amount of literature and research on women and part-time managerial work. It offers new insights into the working lives of this relatively rare and hard-to-reach group and at the same time, positions them critically within the extant literature. Although sharing similar labour market experiences with other part-time workers, they also experience a different kind of exclusion, one that clearly detracts from the perception of them as a relatively ‘privileged’ group of workers, especially in relation to their full-time counterparts.

Whilst the interviewees shared some of the characteristics outlined in Tilly’s research on part-time work, Tilly’s ‘dualism’ is over-stated and a little too optimistic. The experiences of the interviewees give further support to the notion of ‘retention’ part-time work. Most of our respondents were accommodated once they had achieved managerial positions on a full-time basis, with part-time hours being negotiated in a retention strategy once interviewees had ‘proved their worth’ to the organisation. Our findings here support those of other studies exploring the creation of part-time managerial jobs (Grant et al., 2006, Tomlinson, 2006a). Our findings depart from Tilly’s analysis since it did not appear to be the case that these female part-time managers were treated like their full-time counterparts.

The biographical accounts of the female part-time managers indicate that their opportunities for progression, development and mobility were substantially different from when they were employed in the same organisation full-time. Their careers clearly stalled once a transition to part-time work was made, and this was rarely articulated as a choice or preference. Indeed, these women voiced disappointment and frustration at their lack of opportunities for development internally and employment externally. While women did speak of their transitions to part-time work as voluntary choices, their choice for part-time work did not mean that they were satisfied with the resultant work prospects and opportunities.

All the women interviewees had held full-time managerial positions before switching to part-time work, the majority with their current employers, indicating that reductions in hours were negotiated within the internal labour market (Tilly, 1992, 1996; Grant, 2009). Whilst working full-time, they had followed successful career paths and utilised career progression strategies, such as networking. One of the contributions of this article is that it maps these transitions from full- to part-time working and the associated career outcomes, using the reduced ability to network as an example.
Among the respondents there were high levels of awareness of the benefits of networking, with obvious links with strategic choices and career progression during full-time employment. The majority of women described themselves as ‘networkers’ but there are a number of limitations to consider. There was a degree of reluctance to network due to lack of time and the constraint of domestic responsibilities, which may have contributed to slower progression. Powell’s (2001) argument that women’s lack of advancement is due to having less developed internal networks would appear to apply in this case, even though informal networking within the interviewees’ organisation was the most popular form of networking, this was more a matter of ‘keeping networks oiled for future use’ rather than strategic networking for future career progression.

Although acknowledging the importance of networking and its association with job opportunities, this was now a limited activity. Despite claims that formal networking is becoming a key activity for women (e.g. McCarthy, 2004; Vinnicombe et al., 2004) this was not the case amongst these part-timers, who viewed women-only networks as especially discriminatory and divisive. It would seem that part-time employment and associated domestic roles act as barriers to networking, especially out-of-hours, a time when important networking takes place (Forret, 2004), and in turn, this has a knock-on effect for a lack of career progression and mobility.

On switching to part-time working, most respondents voiced favourable attitudes to their employers who accepted their requests for a reduction in their working hours. It was also the case that a minority of women did voice satisfaction with their work-life balance and articulated a clear shift in priorities from being career-focused to looking for a better balance between work and the rest of their lives. Part of this new arrangement was an acceptance that their careers were unlikely to progress while working part-time. Others revealed a more ambivalent relationship with their employer once key issues, such as future aspirations and quality of part-time work, were explored in greater depth. The feelings of frustration and discontentment these women reported were intensified by a lack of comparable part-time jobs in the external labour market.

Future promotion prospects look limited for these women, and a lack of time to network will not help in this regard. Part-time work, even at managerial level, remains gendered, marginalised and relatively careerless. Gender is clearly important in explaining the different experiences of career development (Halford et al., 1997; Acker, 1990), and this paper goes some way in illustrating how gender, families and household responsibilities can impact on working-time and consequently career progression of non-standard workers, in this case, part-time managers.
Works cited


Part-time Female Managers


### Appendix: Respondent characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent &amp; weekly hours of work</th>
<th>Job Title</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marital status, children, No. and age</th>
<th>Main Carer</th>
<th>Highest Qual.</th>
<th>Salary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A (25 hours)</td>
<td>Managing Scientist</td>
<td>36-40</td>
<td>Married, 1 child aged 4.5yrs</td>
<td>Interviewee</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>£39K FTE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B (3 days)</td>
<td>Managing Scientist</td>
<td>36-40</td>
<td>Living with partner, 1 child, aged 2</td>
<td>Interviewee/ partner</td>
<td>Postgraduate degree</td>
<td>£22.5K FTE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C (18 hours)</td>
<td>Senior Project Manager</td>
<td>46-50</td>
<td>Married, twins aged 8</td>
<td>Interviewee/ School</td>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>£22K FTE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D (three days)</td>
<td>Business Development Manager</td>
<td>36-40</td>
<td>Married, 2 children aged 8 &amp; 6</td>
<td>Interviewee</td>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>£26.5K FTE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E (3 days)</td>
<td>Account Manager</td>
<td>31-35</td>
<td>Married, 2 children</td>
<td>Nursery/ Friends/ relatives</td>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>£27.5K FTE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F (3 days)</td>
<td>HR Manager</td>
<td>36-40</td>
<td>Married, 2 children aged 4 and 5</td>
<td>School/ after-school</td>
<td>Postgraduate degree</td>
<td>£27.5K FTE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G (24 hours)</td>
<td>HR Manager</td>
<td>36-40</td>
<td>Married, 1 child aged 7</td>
<td>Interviewee/ school/clubs/</td>
<td>Postgraduate degree</td>
<td>£38.1K FTE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H (3 days)</td>
<td>Commercial Director</td>
<td>36-40</td>
<td>Married, 2 children aged 9 &amp; 6</td>
<td>School/ childminder</td>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>£79K FTE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I (24.5 hours)</td>
<td>HR Business Partner</td>
<td>41-45</td>
<td>Married, 1 child aged 9</td>
<td>Interviewee/ partner/ relatives</td>
<td>A Levels</td>
<td>£32.75K FTE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J (4 days)</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>41-45</td>
<td>Living with partner, 1 child aged 4</td>
<td>Nanny</td>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>£115K FTE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K (hours not stated)</td>
<td>Senior Manager</td>
<td>31-35</td>
<td>Married, 1 child aged 18 months</td>
<td>Interviewee/ partner/ nursery</td>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>£50K FTE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L (4 days)</td>
<td>HR Business Partner</td>
<td>36-40</td>
<td>Married, 2 children aged 2, 3 months</td>
<td>Nursery/ childminder</td>
<td>A Levels/ CIPD</td>
<td>£22K PT 45K FTE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M (2 days employed + 20 hours self-employed)</td>
<td>HR and self-employed</td>
<td>41-45</td>
<td>Married, 3 children aged 24, 22, 11</td>
<td>Grandparents</td>
<td>A Levels/ CIPD</td>
<td>Not calculated as highly variable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N (21 hours)</td>
<td>HR Business Partner</td>
<td>36-40</td>
<td>Married, three children aged 8, 7, and 4</td>
<td>Interviewee/ nursery/club/ friends</td>
<td>Diploma management studies</td>
<td>£29K PT 45K FTE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O (21 hours)</td>
<td>Legal Compliance Manager</td>
<td>31-35</td>
<td>Married, one child aged 1 yr</td>
<td>Interviewee/ Grandparents/ partner</td>
<td>Law degree and post-grad law qualifications</td>
<td>£41K PT 65K FTE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P (job share, 21 hours)</td>
<td>Senior Tax Manager</td>
<td>36-40</td>
<td>Married, 2 children aged 8 &amp; 6</td>
<td>Interviewee/ husband</td>
<td>MA qualified</td>
<td>£41K PT 65K FTE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>