Manchester Metropolitan
University

Generating Routes for Women's Leadership Project (GROWL)

GROWL Enquiry Tool 4/6

Synchronising Women's Leadership Career Pathways and Family Lives

NORTHERN
POWER WOMEN

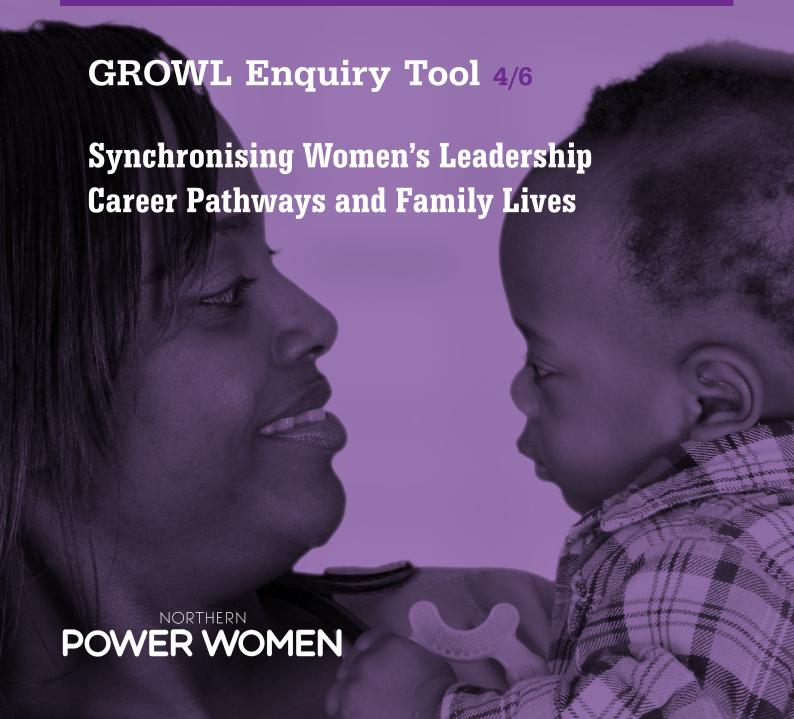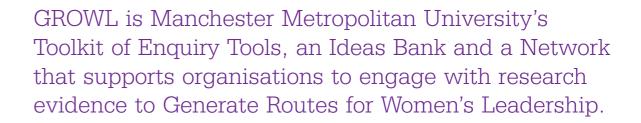GROWL is Manchester Metropolitan University's Toolkit of Enquiry Tools, an Ideas Bank and a Network that supports organisations to engage with research evidence to Generate Routes for Women's Leadership.

We are taking research evidence out to organisations to create a dialogue about how they can Generate Routes for Women's Leadership (GROWL). Our approach involves supporting you to draw on six GROWL Enquiry Tools, a GROWL Ideas Bank of 'better practice' and a GROWL Network to reflect on your context and Generate Routes for Women's Leadership that fit with your organisation. We are learning about engagement as we go and invite you to learn with us and our network.

Getting Started
Developing Girls' and Young Women's Leadership Identities

Investing In
Leadership Training that Supports Women

Valuing
Mid-life Women Leaders

GROWL Enquiry Tools
Generating Routes for Women's Leadership

Developing
Mentoring and Sponsoring to Generate Routes for Women's Leadership

Returning and Recharging
Creating Non-Linear Leadership Pathways

Synchronising
Women's Leadership Pathways and Family Lives

Synchronising Women's Leadership Career Pathways and Family Lives

Summary

- Productive synchronicity that creates work-life enhancement is possible when leaders and colleagues co-create efficient and adaptive rhythms of work and family.

- If organisations set as their benchmark the 'Ideal Worker' (who is available whenever and wherever the organisation wants and always prioritises their work role), costs will arise from work-family conflict and many women will be knocked-off linear, hierarchical career pathways. Diverse leadership demands creative synchronisation of work and home across a range of family contexts.

Synchronisation of Roles, Careers and Pregnancy/New Motherhood

- Paying attention to talent development is particularly important during pregnancy and new motherhood because women are having negative experiences and being discounted despite senior leader intentions to support maternity.

- Pregnant and breastfeeding bodies can be taboo in masculine workplaces causing women strain as they defend their reputations by performing 'maternal body work' and 'maternal stoicism'. Women are often side-lined and the costs of managing maternity are exaggerated. In these contexts, adaptions must be 'earned' meaning maternity depletes women's organisational credit and perceptions of their value.

- Instead, we need workplaces that respect pregnancy and maternity, champion and make resilient women's positions on leadership pathways and invest in processes that enable co-creation of innovative and productive ways of organising work to synchronise with pregnancy/new motherhood.

Adaptive, Productive and Flexible Working

- Organisations are extending flexible working options but if this results in permanent arrangements, ongoing mutual adjustment is lost. It's time to create adaptive 'i-deals'.

- Flexible working policies are only as good as the line manager who enacts them and the organisational culture in which they are embedded. It's time for senior leaders to advocate and practice flexible working, to improve management of flexible working and for career penalties arising from flexible working to be tracked and eradicated.

- Watch out — flexible working using new technology can result in complete 'boundary crossing' from work to home. It's time to craft 'human sized' jobs and e-protocols that place healthy boundaries on online responsiveness.

Synchronising Women's Leadership Career Pathways and Family Lives — Taking an Overview

Being productive means intelligently combining resources to create lean products or services. Team members are a key resource but they must also synchronise their work effort and career progression with family commitments.

When we achieve synchronisation of family, role and organisational routines we create

work-life enhancement: a happy worker who is highly engaged at work and flexibility that is mutually beneficial. When it goes wrong, there is **work-family conflict** that creates costs all round.

Intelligent leadership involves working with colleagues to create adaptive rhythms of work and family that synchronise with organisations to enable happy, productive work and sustainable career pathways.

Is the 'Ideal Worker' Your Benchmark Man?

Some organisations benchmark the work rhythms of emergent and existing leaders against an 'Ideal Worker' — someone who is available whenever and wherever the organisation wants and always prioritises their work role. The 'Ideal Worker' is a myth because human beings require rest, exercise and relationships, as well as work. It's also outdated: how many workers are the traditional male breadwinner who has no active family role and a caregiving wife with no desire or need to work?

Organisations founded on a mythical, outmoded idea of an 'Ideal Workers' are likely to have fragile routines out of rhythm with the reality of family commitments. They also create linear, hierarchical career pathways that exclude many women.

➤ **Enquire: How alive is the Ideal Worker model as a benchmark in your work culture?**

Shouldn't Women Shake-Off the Family-Orientated Stereotype?

We focus on women leaders because:

1. Women alone do the vital work of pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding.
2. Women face persistent (if outmoded) cultural expectations that they should take the lead in domestic work, parenting and elder care.
3. Women's increased participation in the labour force has not been met by an equal increase in men's domestic work or comprehensive state support for childcare or eldercare so many women do a 'double shift' at home and work.

Women are well advised to choose a partner who 'leans in' to family life and supports their career. Nevertheless, most women have limited power to shake off traditional (outmoded) expectations of their family role from their partners and wider society.

The challenge of managing work and home is particularly demanding for women in lower-paid work who cannot buy-in support, single parents when they have little co-parent support, and women from ethnic backgrounds where families tend to be larger and expectations on women more traditional.

➤ **Enquire: Discuss with your senior team how developing diversity in your pipeline of leaders will mean enabling synchronisation of work and home across a range of family contexts.**

Are Your Role Models All 'Superwomen'?

'Superwomen' who have successfully juggled work and home to become leaders have often made hidden sacrifices. They may have had fewer children than they wanted, compromised on family time, relied on siblings for elder care or privately endured intense work-life conflict.

'Superwomen' are admirable pioneers, but if they are your exclusive role models then your norms may still be close to the 'Ideal Worker' benchmark. Many women may still be pushed off time-hungry and linear 'Ideal Worker' career tracks.

➤ **Enquire: Can you identify and promote new role models of women developing leadership careers who have been supported to flexibly and adaptively synchronise work and family?**

Changing markets and technologies often mean we can be creative in defining roles and routines.

Indeed, regular adjustment as businesses, careers and families evolve can become normal, creating resilience, engagement, loyalty and appreciation in staff and teams.

It's helpful to think about returns on investment in women's leadership career pathways over the medium- and long-term.

This can be brave if your own managers focus on short-term objectives, but it's a sign of real leadership to think about long-term talent development.

Smart Objectives and Creative Work-Life Routines

➤ **Enquire: Could you give some leaders, teams and colleagues smart output-related objectives rather than monitoring them on clock-time?**

Smart output-related objectives are essential to driving task efficiency and ensuring that trust-based work is accountable. Combine smart objectives with flexible working policies, communication technology and a degree of autonomy — teams or individuals may be really innovative in creating work rhythms that synchronise with family life.

For example, two women may create a convincing plan to perform a role excellently through job share. Creative solutions are likely to involve mutual adjustment: creativity and compromise by staff, teams, managers and families to achieve a solution that suits everyone over the medium-term.

In the following sections we focus in on two key challenges in synchronising women's leadership careers and family lives: the phase of pregnancy and new motherhood and the process of developing adaptive, productive flexible working.

Synchronisation Of Roles, Careers and Pregnancy/New Motherhood

Research shows that **paying attention to talent development is critical during pregnancy, maternity/shared parental leave and return to work**. Recent, large scale research showed that **three out of four new mothers in the UK experience negative or possibly discriminatory treatment in the workplace**.

We know that — wedged between an avalanche of expectations around being an 'ideal mother' and hostile work circumstances — far too many women are discounted from leadership pathways. Note that the gender pay gap is largely a motherhood pay gap: its genesis is in pregnancy and maternity. Research repeatedly demonstrates that pregnancy and maternity do not affect women's work capability or commitment. It's time to innovate workplace cultures and leadership pathways to enable productive and healthy synchronisation of careers and pregnancy/new motherhood.

Four out of five employers believe they should support pregnancy, maternity and return to work and that pregnant women and mother returning to maternity are as committed as other employees. It seems that **many women are having negative experiences in organisations where people at the top say they want to positively support pregnancy and maternity**. There is a will for change to overcome the policy-practice gap: here we take a 'deep dive' into causes and potential solutions

Worrying Findings From A Large, National Review (HM Government/EHRC, 2016)

11% of women felt so poorly treated they were forced to leave their job

20% of women experienced harassment or negative comments

51% of women who returned to work flexibly suffered negative consequences

Workplace Cultures

Maternity policies are only as good as the workplace cultures in which they are embedded.

We know it is pretty common for line managers and co-workers to make comments or inferences about pregnant women being unreliable, emotional, and un-promotable and motherhood automatically and permanently reducing career motivation. Women subjected to this hostility feel side-lined, invisible and de-valued. In anticipation of a bad reaction, women commonly hide their pregnancies for as long as possible which means their wellbeing and any workplace risks cannot be properly managed.

Pregnant women worry about disclosure and tend to work stoically through all challenges and supra-perform once pregnancies are announced to signal that they are the 'same', valuable worker.

Synchronisation Of Roles, Careers and Pregnancy/New Motherhood (continued)

Creative Synchronising of Organisational and Pregnancy/Maternity Rhythms

Ideally, line managers, teams and pregnant women should engage in creative dialogue to explore new ways of synchronising work rhythms with pregnancy, maternity/shared parental leave and new motherhood (Stumbitz et al., 2017).

Managers should reflect on, and learn from, each maternity process they manage to build their capability. Women, managers and teams may be supported in this process through a third party trained in maternity coaching or via maternity policies that **promote positive engagement**.

When managers resist maternity management because they view workplace pregnancy as an illegitimate condition, it undermines leadership of change and management learning. Opportunities for productive innovation are lost.

In these cases it is all too easy for managers to treat the time spent learning about maternity policies and managing maternity as a 'cost'. Maternity leave, in particular, may be conceptualised like this, forgetting that the Government recompenses employers for Statutory Maternity Pay and that productive planning can enable innovations such as team multi-skilling and trialling of maternity cover for team roles.

Women may agree to 'Keeping in Touch Days' that enable her to remain involved in crucial or client-facing operations and that sustain her skills to ensure a productive return to work.

A ray of hope is that line managers with more experience in managing maternity have less exaggerated ideas about the disruption and cost of maternity management. Manager resistance is often born of fear, inexperience and false presumptions about women's exclusive and 'proper' focus on mothering. It is vital to train inexperienced managers to counter these tendencies.

➤ **Enquire: How can you support line managers and teams to 'unlearn' rigid 'Ideal Worker' ideas, value staff pregnancy and invest in co-creating productive solutions to workplace maternity? How can you enable managers to reflexively build their maternity management capability?**

How Taboo are Pregnant and Breastfeeding Bodies in Your Workplace?

The awesome capacity of the pregnant body to produce another life can be very troubling in more masculine workplace cultures. It can be interpreted as leaky, vulnerable and difficult to contain – the opposite of the tight, contained, athletic body of the 'Ideal Worker' who is eternally strong and unpolluted by domestic responsibilities.

In these contexts, women invest energy in 'maternal body work' to try to approximate fixed corporate expectations and 'maternal stoicism' to deny the true demands of pregnancy, breastfeeding and infant care (Gatrell, 2013). Obviously, workplace cultures **can** be different: adaptive, awed and supportive of the pregnant body and infant care.

➤ **Enquire: How taboo are pregnant, breastfeeding and infant bodies in your workplace and how can you change your culture to be appreciative and supportive of pregnancy and new motherhood?**

Does Mutual Adjustment Mean Adaptions Must Be Earned?

Line managers and teams may lack motivation to adapt unless a woman has earned 'credit' through long service or exceptional contribution. They may keep a 'balance sheet' so that by the time a woman has gone through pregnancy, maternity leave and negotiation to return to work, she is viewed as seriously in deficit to the organisation and of low value.

Overcoming the balance sheet approach is particularly important under circumstances that require additional adaption such as when pregnancy is preceded by infertility treatment, includes periods of ill health or when babies are premature, unwell or disabled. It is also vital during negotiations about return to flexible working because – under a balance sheet approach – women's negotiating power may be seriously eroded by the end of the maternity process.

Yet, an open, creative negotiation about flexible working is most likely to create productive synchrony on return to work. If a woman's entitlement is questioned because she has 'spent' her credit, she may not feel empowered to help you solve your management dilemmas.

➤ **Enquire: Explore how far the logic of 'earning' adaptions through a 'balance sheet approach' shape maternity management on the ground in your organisation.**

Adaptive, Productive Flexible Working

Adaptive 'i-deals'

Work-life balance or flexible working policies tend to offer a menu of options that conceive of roles differently to full-time (e.g. part-time work, job share) or enable work to be undertaken in 'different' times and spaces (e.g. homeworking, flexi-time, term-time only, shift work).

Any of these may enable work-family synchronisation at particular stages in a career, family or business life course. If they solidify into permanent arrangements, the potential for ongoing mutual adjustment — as families, businesses and roles evolve — may be lost.

It's time to think flexibly about flexible working and to create adaptive 'i-deals' that synchronise the rhythms of particular phases in business, family and career life courses (Atkinson and Sandiford, 2016).

Clearly, not all work roles are amenable to being organised in any flexible way. Equally, a key limitation to creating 'i-deals' is lack of willingness or imagination to think past social norms and invest time and creativity in dynamically re-organising roles and routines. Flexible working policies can also pose a problem when they offer only a rigid 'menu' of options.

'Disruption' As Normal

A study of nurse careers showed that movements from one form of flexible working to another was a common pattern on career pathways. Nurses undertook shift work, part-time work, bank nursing and other work patterns adaptively as their family needs evolved. They were enabled by a high demand for nursing labour and NHS flexible working policies. Careers were not vertical, consistent progressions but the women did have, and achieve, career objectives. Adaptive flexible working proved to be productive because it enabled careers and families to be resilient and sustained a flow of scarce labour (Maher, 2013).

➤ **Enquire: How could you regularly create the strategic space and autonomy for teams and line managers to think about how roles and routines could be organised differently to create adaptive, productive flexible working?**

When Outmoded Social Norms Undermine Productivity

Take the example of a single parent providing an advice service to consumers who wants to work part-time in the office during 'normal hours' and part-time in the evening at home. When her employers resists, she leaves the company, sets up her own practice and demonstrates that clients with busy jobs often prefer evening meetings mediated by new technology. They even understand occasional 'intrusions' from a waking child because their children may also 'border cross'. The employer's slavish compliance with outmoded social norms cost them a productive worker and productive innovation in their business offer.

It's All About Line Management: Managing Informal and Formal Flexible Working

Research on flexible working commonly concludes that:

1. Policies are only as creative, productive and fair as the line manager who enacts them; line managers who work conventionally often fail to grasp the potential productive benefits of flexible working and handle requests for flexible working negatively.
2. Sometimes, informal arrangements that are adaptive to short-term circumstances or involve adaptive 'give and take' can be more appropriate than formal flexible working arrangements but not all line managers are confident to use their discretion to create these deals or use this discretion fairly.
3. Line manager motivation and capability to develop flexible working is poorly developed, monitored or incentivised.

➤ **Enquire: What work do you do, or could you do, to develop your line managers to be motivated, capable and creative in their management of flexible working?**

Dilemmas, Dilemmas…

Sometimes it is genuinely difficult to honour a request for flexible working. A manager may share their dilemma with a work team and develop a modified offer that fits productively with an adapted work routine.

Manager and team willingness to adapt may be constrained by concerns about fairness, however, Daverth et al. (2016) found that managers respond using three different concepts of what fairness relates to: need (the colleague's family needs), equity (a response to the colleague's superior organisational contribution) or equality (granting everyone the same flexibility).

Each logic may inadvertently impact routes for women's leadership. Granting only mothers' flexible working may reinforce presumptions that motherhood erodes commitment and capability.

If equity is chosen, women may end up supra-performing to gain work flexibility, or work under their potential and pay entitlement in exchange for flexibility; this is a major cause of the gender pay gap. If equality is your criteria, a one-size fits all approach may not address serious work-family conflict.

➤ **Enquire: How can you support and incentivise line managers and teams to pull together to support flexible working and leadership career routes for women colleagues?**

Adaptive, Productive Flexible Working (continued)

From Initiative to Workplace Culture

Ultimately, flexible working is just an 'initiative' — and take up of its provisions comes with hidden career penalties — unless it is embedded in workplace cultures. To achieve this, creative methods of synchronising work and family must be **viewed positively from the very top of the organisation**, flexible working should be practised by senior leaders and line managers will be **properly trained and incentivised to deliver work-life enhancement as a productive priority**. Flexible working should also be integrated into people and operational management and service design.

➤ **Enquire : Can your staff take-up flexible working without career penalty?**

Three ways of monitoring this include :

1. **Re-read your flexible working policy to consider its tone**
2. **Talk to staff about perceptions of career penalties**
3. **Monitor how fast flexible workers are rising through your ranks**

Work Intensification and Border-Crossing Technology: New Causes of Work-Life Conflict

We end this section with a warning: work intensification, which is often allied to use of mobile technology, may be creating flexible working that simply re-models the 'Ideal Worker' model. If logging on 24/7 and being ever available to respond is becoming normal, you need to pay attention to your workplace culture.

We must avoid online presenteeism because it threatens complete 'border crossing' from work to home. We know that parents who split their presence between bath time and email experience stress and that children and partners dislike 'barely present' relationships.

Staff also need rest to be resilient and creative. Now is the time for **smart conversations within teams to set objectives and roles that are human-sized and to develop e-protocols that place healthy boundaries on online responsiveness**.

PLEASE HELP US BUILD THE GROWL IDEAS BANK

Do you have a 'better practice' idea that relates to one of our GROWL themes?

Please get in touch so we can add it to the GROWL Ideas Bank and share it with the GROWL Network!

Just drop an email to Dr Helen Woolnough at h.woolnough@mmu.ac.uk to get started.

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References to research are published on our website at www.mmu.ac.uk/growl.

GROWL is led by Professor Julia Rouse, Dr Helen Woolnough and the Sylvia Pankhurst Gender and Diversity Research Centre at Manchester Metropolitan University. It is sponsored by Faculty Pro-Vice Chancellor, Professor Julia Clarke, and the Governing Body.

GROWL is passionately supported by Northern Power Women and advised by academics and practitioners.

(From left to right) GROWL project leaders Dr Helen Woolnough and Professor Julia Rouse are joined by Lindsey Watkin, Faculty Director of Global Programmes at Manchester Metropolitan Business School, at the Northern Power Women Conference 2017.

We are interested in researching all issues covered by GROWL and the process of engagement. Get in touch to talk about commissioning research or consultancy in your organisation by emailing Dr Helen Woolnough at h.woolnough@mmu.ac.uk.

To join the Network, find out more about the rest of the Enquiry Tools, and contribute to the Ideas Bank, please email Dr Helen Woolnough at h.woolnough@mmu.ac.uk

For more information on GROWL, visit our website at **www.mmu.ac.uk/growl** or see us on Twitter **@mmu_sylvia**.

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