

Women of Vision survey

2010 was a landmark year for women eye care practitioners in the UK as, for the first time, female optometrists outnumbered men in the workforce.¹ In fact for the past four years, a majority of optometrists on the Opticians Register have been women, and female dispensing opticians overtook their male counterparts back in 2003.

The latest figures show that 56 per cent of registered optometrists and 58 per cent of dispensing opticians are women.² Contrast this with 30 years ago, when the corresponding figures were just 18 per cent and 26 per cent. The number of women entering the profession is also set to grow, with 63 per cent of optometry students and as many as 71 per cent of student DOs now female.

The GOC regularly collects demographic data and this year published its first full report on equality and diversity in the profession. But information about women's working practices and attitudes to job opportunities and career progression is hard to find. Other professions, particularly pharmacy, have explored these issues in detail in a series of independent reports.³

Although a Women in Optics group was active in the 1990s, little attention has been paid to women's issues in recent times, despite the increasing numbers of female practitioners. In the US, a Women of Vision organisation coordinates opportunities for education, mentoring and networking between women optometrists.

In March this year, CIBA Vision UK held the first in a series of dinner events for female eye care practitioners and an online discussion with invited groups of women optometrists, DOs and contact lens opticians. The aim was to explore thoughts and experiences of

Part 1: Working practices

In the first of two articles, **Alison Ewbank** reports on the findings of a major survey into women eye care practitioners in the workplace and their attitudes to their jobs and career



The survey reveals many significant differences in working practices

women who work in optical practice and some of the challenges they face in their careers.

Optician and CIBA Vision have now conducted a survey to explore working practices and attitudes of women practitioners to their jobs and careers. The aim is to stimulate debate about women in the profession and then examine issues arising from the survey in a series of articles in *Optician* in the coming months.

The first of two articles on the survey findings will look at how and where women work and how much they are paid, how those with children manage their childcare and their motivations for choosing a job.

Method

An online quantitative survey was conducted on behalf of *Optician* and CIBA Vision by Reed Business Insight.

The survey was sent out by email to *Optician's* database of 12,047 contacts and also posted at www.opticianonline.net. Fieldwork, data processing and analysis took place in July, August and September 2010.

Our sample

The maximum response to any one question was 808 replies and just over half (54 per cent) were from women. Six out of 10 respondents were optometrists, nearly one in three (32 per cent) were DOs, and 6 per cent were contact lens opticians. Other respondents (3 per cent) included pre-registration students in practice.

Women in our sample had been qualified on average for 16 years and men 21 years, and the average age for women was 40 years compared to 46 years for men. About half of the total sample (54 per cent) cited 'don't have children' in response to a question on childcare.

The geographical spread of respondents' practice (or principal practice) locations was broadly representative. In response to a question on ethnicity, about three in four (77 per cent) stated white/white British and one in eight (12 per cent) stated Asian/Asian British, the only other sizeable ethnic group.

Since our sample is self-selected and the survey was conducted by email and online, the findings may not be representative of the whole profession. However, in some respects it is similar to the full registrants responding to the GOC's 2009 equality and diversity monitoring which used a different methodology but was also self-selecting. The proportion of women replying to the GOC survey was similar (56 per cent).

Our survey has a lower proportion of optometrists (60 per cent) than either the GOC sample (69 per cent) or the current number of registrants (67 per cent). We also have a higher proportion of practitioners aged over 45 years than the GOC found in its survey (47 per cent vs 36 per cent). No

TABLE 1 Salary comparisons

	Average salary		Pro rata salary		Average hours worked	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
<6 years qualified	£32,865	£29,027	£19.38	£17.14	35.3	35.3
6-10 years qualified	£40,000	£32,371	£24.21	£20.93	34.4	32.2
11-20 years qualified	£40,458	£33,076	£22.65	£24.47	37.2	28.2
21-30 years qualified	£50,057	£35,370	£28.25	£26.84	37.0	27.5
31+ years qualified	£41,590	£37,559	£26.69	£26.92	32.5	29.1

data are available on the proportion of registrants who have children but our sample would seem to have fewer respondents with children than might be expected.

The proportion stating white/white British ethnicity is similar to the GOC sample (76 per cent) but those stating Asian/British Asian is higher in that sample (20 per cent vs 12 per cent), the ethnic groups were described differently and more respondents to our survey (7 per cent) opted not to answer this question. Both surveys are confounded by anomalies in ethnicity results due to factors such as multiple reporting.

All results reported here therefore apply to our sample rather than to the profession as a whole, the base is those replying to each question and differences are statistically significant at the 95 per cent confidence level or higher unless stated.

Workplace and status

We asked respondents what type of practice (or principal practice if more than one) they worked in and which job title best described their current job or principal job from a list of options.

- Women are more likely to work in multiples than men (33 per cent vs 26 per cent)
- Women are more likely to be employed practitioners than men (53 per cent vs 33 per cent)
- Women are less likely to be a practice owner or director (14 per cent vs 34 per cent).

Salaries and hours

We then asked our sample about their current annual salaries before tax and the number of hours per week they were contracted to work in practice, from which we calculated average hourly rates (Table 1). We also asked respondents whether they worked full or half days, school hours or term-time only.

- Overall, women ECPs in our sample earn less on average than men (£33.3k vs £42.4k)
- Fewer women earn £55k or more than men (5 per cent vs 21 per cent) and only six of the 21 practitioners in our sample earning more than £100k were women
- The gap between women's and men's actual salaries widens with years since qualification, with the largest difference at 21-30 years qualified (£14.7k)
- Women work fewer hours on average than men (31 hours vs 35 hours)

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

Reasons behind gender differences in salary attracted the most debate when CIBA Vision hosted a Women of Vision dinner in London to discuss the survey findings and gauge reaction among a group of female eye care practitioners and key opinion leaders.

For AOP education adviser Karen Sparrow, with nearly 10 years' experience filling pre-reg and qualified posts in the corporate sector, salaries in the profession were location driven. 'I don't think there'd be a difference between men and women within one particular company at entry qualification level. But there'd definitely

be a difference between a salary in [London's] Oxford Street and a salary in Ipswich, because the Oxford Street job may have 12 people lining up whereas the other may have one or none. It's market forces, and it's supply and demand - we can't govern the market place but it should be even.'

Some commented that women were less confrontational than men when negotiating their salaries and tended not to be as motivated by bonuses. 'They'll go for a rewarding day in terms of the interaction, communication and problems they've solved for their patients,' said Sparrow.

- Overall, women earn less pro rata than men (£22.73 per hour vs £25.04 per hour)
- The gap between women's and men's pro rata salaries varies with years in practice, with the smallest difference at up to five years qualified
- Women earn more pro rata than men at 11-20 years qualified (£24.47 per hour vs £22.65 per hour) and again at more than 30 years qualified
- Women with children earn less than women without (£30.9k vs £35.3k) whereas men with children earn more than those without (£45.5k vs £38.5k)
- But women with children earn slightly more pro rata than those without children (£23.72 per hour vs £22.07 per hour)
- Women and men are almost equally likely to work full days (93 per cent vs 96 per cent)
- Very few women work half days (7 per cent) or school hours only (4 per cent) and none work term-time only.

Childcare arrangements

We asked men and women whether, if they had children, who took primary responsibility for childcare in the family while they were at work.

- Women are more likely to take primary responsibility themselves for childcare while at work than men (13 per cent vs 4 per cent) and less likely to rely on their partner to take responsibility (13 per cent vs 37 per cent)
- Women are more likely than men to look after sick children themselves during working hours (54 per cent vs 16 per cent)
- Women are more likely to rely on a relative to look after sick children than are men (35 per cent vs 18 per cent).

Choosing a job

To explore gender differences in choice of job, we asked how important various factors were when

selecting a new job.

- Location, salary and type of practice are the three most important factors to women when choosing a new job
- Women are more likely to state location is important in their choice than are men (88 per cent vs 79 per cent)
- Women are more likely to state flexibility of working days is important than are men (46 per cent vs 32 per cent)
- Women are more likely to state flexibility of working hours is important than are men (40 per cent vs 24 per cent) although almost all work full days.

Working practices of Asian/British Asian women

The GOC's equality and diversity monitoring report 2009 shows that, relative to full registrants, a much higher proportion of responses were from students of Asian origin (predominantly Indian and Pakistani). About half (49 per cent) of all students in the GOC survey were Asian and among optometry students this group represented the largest category (59 per cent). Working practices among Asian women already in the workforce are therefore of interest.

Of all those responding to the ethnicity question in our survey, 83 cited Asian/British Asian ('Asian') of whom 49 were women. Caution should be exercised in interpreting these results since the sample is small and Asian women qualified, on average more recently (11 years) than other women (17 years) or the rest of the sample (19 years).

Given these caveats, our findings suggest that Asian women are less likely to work in independent practice than other women (27 per cent vs 46 per cent) or the rest of the sample (48 per cent) and are less likely to be practice owners/directors than Asian

men (10 per cent vs 32 per cent). Overall, Asian women earned less on average than the rest of our sample (£32.3k vs £37.8k). This group was slightly less likely to work full days than other women (83 per cent vs 94 per cent) and placed more importance on flexibility of working days (61 per cent vs 44 per cent).

Discussion

Since more women than men are both entering the profession and already in the workforce, their working practices have important implications for manpower and recruitment. Our survey shows many significant gender differences in the issues explored. While the focus is likely to be on salaries and job status, it is important to note that, overall, women in our sample were younger than men (average age 40 years vs 46 years) and had been qualified on average for fewer years (16 years vs 21 years) so it is not surprising that, overall, they earn less and are less likely to be in managerial positions.

Nevertheless when women's and men's salaries are compared against years in practice, it is clear that pay differentials increase with years in practice with respect to actual earnings, with the least difference in the first five years in practice and the greatest difference when men's salaries show the largest increase, 20 years after they qualified.

However, the pro rata salary findings, taking into account women's shorter working hours, are more difficult to interpret. Overall, women's salaries are still lower but those qualified 11-20 years appear to earn more pro rata than their male counterparts at a time when their working hours are decreasing. And although actual salaries for women with children are lower than those without children, their hourly rate is slightly higher.

The fact that salaries have historically been higher than they are at present may also influence our findings, since more women have entered the profession recently. That said, overall, the average salary reported here for all practitioners (£37.5k) is slightly higher than *Optician* salary surveys using a similar methodology and with similar demographics found in 2006 (£36.2k) and 2008 (£35.5k). It was in the late 80s and early 90s, prior to a marked increase in recruitment to universities, that starting salaries of £60k or more for recently qualified optometrists were not unusual.

Whether women fail to take up



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Women are more likely than men to look after sick children themselves during working hours

managerial positions or open their own practices or franchises out of choice, to fit in better with their lifestyle and work/life balance is also unclear, although in Part 2 we will examine career and job satisfaction and future plans in more detail.

One of the most surprising findings from the survey is that women are almost as likely as men to work full days and very few work half days or school hours. Almost all practitioners (94 per cent) say that 'full days' best describes their working arrangements. None of our sample, men or women, have term-time only contracts.

Yet almost half of women say that flexibility of working days and working hours is an important factor when choosing a job. In a workforce where a majority are women, there should surely be greater opportunities for flexible working arrangements. In households where responsibility for childcare is shared, men might also benefit from more flexible hours.

In fact our survey shows that childcare responsibilities in our profession tend to fall to women rather than men to organise. It would be interesting to compare the findings on flexible working and childcare with other similar professions and workplaces.

That women are more likely than men to cite location as important when choosing a job also has important implications for manpower, recruitment and salaries, given persistent problems recruiting staff in some areas. With increasing numbers of women entering the profession this problem is likely to be compounded. Our survey confirms that salaries are lower on average in the Midlands,

North West and London and higher in the rest of the country, in particular the South West. There are reports that, whether for economic, family or other reasons, many students are studying at a university close to home and want to stay in these urban locations on qualification. Reluctance to relocate might therefore disadvantage women in the job and salaries market.

While our survey findings for women of Asian ethnicity are of interest, we would caution against drawing any firm conclusions from these results. In particular, because of the small sample size, it is not possible to breakdown the results by age or years since qualification. A different methodology would be needed to find out more about the working practices of this group and their attitudes to their jobs and career.

Other professions, notably pharmacy, have undertaken detailed studies of work, employment and early careers by gender and ethnic origin. These issues deserve similar attention in optometry, to determine whether or not inequalities exist. Stereotyping by either gender or ethnicity without such detailed analysis would be, at best, unwise.

In summary, the aim of the present survey was to stimulate debate about women in the profession. The results should be seen as a snapshot of the current situation on working practices among female optometrists and dispensing opticians and a starting point for that debate to begin. ●

● Part 2 will examine women's motivations for choosing a career in optical practice, satisfaction with their career and job, the elements of their work they enjoy most and their plans for the future.

Acknowledgement

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References

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