Hewitt decries 'career sexism'

Plans to extend paid maternity leave beyond six months should be prominent in Labour's election manifesto, the Trade and Industry Secretary has said.

Patricia Hewitt said the cost of the proposals was being evaluated, but it was an "increasingly high priority" and a "shared goal across government". Ms Hewitt was speaking at a gender and productivity seminar organised by the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC). Mothers can currently take up to six months' paid leave - and six unpaid. Ms Hewitt told the seminar: "Clearly, one of the things we need to do in the future is to extend the period of payment for maternity leave beyond the first six months into the second six months. "We are looking at how quickly we can do that, because obviously there are cost implications because the taxpayer reimburses the employers for the cost of that."

Ms Hewitt also announced a new drive to help women who want to work in male dominated sectors, saying sexism at work was still preventing women reaching their full potential. Plans include funding for universities to help female science and engineering graduates find jobs and "taster courses" for men and women in non-traditional jobs. Women in full-time work earn 19% less than men, according to the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC).

The minister told delegates that getting rid of "career sexism" was vital to closing the gender pay gap.

"Career sexism limits opportunities for women of all ages and prevents them from achieving their full potential. "It is simply wrong to assume someone cannot do a job on the grounds of their sex," she said. Earlier, she told BBC Radio 4's Today programme: "What we are talking about here is the fact that about six out of 20 women work in jobs that are low-paid and typically dominated by women, so we have got very segregated employment. "Unfortunately, in some cases, this reflects very old-fashioned and stereotypical ideas about the appropriate jobs for women, or indeed for men. "Career sexism is about saying that engineering, for instance, where only 10% of employees are women, is really a male-dominated industry. Construction is even worse. "But it is also about saying childcare jobs are really there for women and not suitable for men. Career sexism goes both ways."

She added that while progress had been made, there was still a gap in pay figures. "The average woman working full-time is being paid about 80p for every pound a man is earning. For women working part-time it is 60p." The Department for Trade and Industry will also provide funding to help a new pay experts panel run by the TUC.

It has been set up to advise hundreds of companies on equal wage policies. Research conducted by the EOC last year revealed that many Britons believe the pay gap between men and women is the result of "natural differences" between the sexes. Women hold less than 10% of the top positions in FTSE 100 companies, the police, the judiciary and trade unions, according to their figures. And retired women have just over half the income of their male counterparts on average.