

# Jobs not careers

Summary findings of a 3 year longitudinal study of  
80 mothers in London, who have been searching for work



Commissioned by the Timewise Foundation with thanks to:



Women Like Us  
provided the sample  
and peer researchers



Inclusion designed  
and conducted the  
core research study



Groundswell trained  
the peer researchers



LOTTERY FUNDED

# Introduction

It's very, very stressful. Especially when you have been financially independent, you have your own money. Suddenly, I had my children, I don't have that freedom anymore, like your whole life is just completely changed. You are not progressing any more.

This research tracks the experience of 80 women over a three-year period as they negotiated a return to work after motherhood. Increasing the maternal employment rate is increasingly recognised as a critical policy issue. It holds the key to the rise in living standards in the last decade and potentially the next, to tackling child poverty, and to enabling women to realise their own career aspirations and financial independence. For most women taking part in this research, returning to work post motherhood was no longer a choice, but a necessity.

It is now well known that the UK lags behind European competitors in this area, and that mothers in London lose out compared to those in the rest of the UK. But the problem is not that we don't know about the issues facing women trying to return to work. This report builds on many others in outlining the ways in which motherhood impacts on women's careers, raising challenges of lost confidence and skills, childcare that is too often unaffordable or inflexible, and constraints in the availability of high quality part time work. These factors cut across income and educational divides.

Nor do we lack solutions. We know that programmes that offer tailored support can help replace lost confidence and skills. Childcare requires investment to make it affordable, but there is more that can be done with existing spending to make provision flexible enough to meet parents' needs. Additionally, many employers are beginning to see both the social and economic benefits of a more agile labour market with part time and flexible working patterns now seen as key in enabling businesses to build efficiencies, increase productivity and retain talent – of both genders.

But despite the huge range of evidence we have accumulated on what matters for women returning to work, and what works in addressing these problems, the response by policy makers is still slow. The Timewise Foundation hopes to add some urgency, as part of our work to stimulate demand for a more flexible jobs market that works for women, families, business and the state. We drive change through social innovation, and we are not alone. Across London and the UK a range of innovative organisations are focused on using social innovation to shape new types of jobs markets, to create effective solutions for businesses seeking talent and for individuals locked out of work.

This research, conducted through Women Like Us, part of the Timewise Foundation, sets out practical steps which policy makers at a local and regional level can take to significantly improve the employment prospects of mothers. But it is also intended to focus government at all levels to consider how it can best use its influence and existing budgets far more effectively, by building on the best examples of social innovation already taking place.

**Emma Stewart**  
**Co-founder and Director**  
**Timewise Foundation**

# Methodology and sample

This research was a three-year tracking study amongst mothers hoping to return to work. Research was undertaken in three annual waves and comprised of the following elements:

- A literature review to understand existing evidence on what works best to facilitate mothers' return to work, post career-break.
- Qualitative research with 80 workless women with children, through in-depth one to one interviews. In the second year, 60 of the same women were interviewed again; in year three, 40 of these were interviewed again.
- Additional peer-led research was undertaken. Five peer researchers were recruited from the Women Like Us (WLU) service-user population and completed a week-long training in research methods. These peer-researchers undertook qualitative research with 20 additional mothers through a combination of one to one interviews and focus groups, over years two and three of the project. Findings from the peer workstream were then triangulated with the formal research findings to provide mothers with a voice throughout the project.

The 80 participants were all recruited through WLU. 60 of them had used WLU support services, while 20 had registered to receive WLU newsletters but had not used any of their services.

The women came from a wide range of backgrounds, and four broad typologies were identified:

- 1. Lone mother with many barriers to work** - typically living in social rented housing, and generally having low level skills. All of these mothers had claimed out of work benefits at some point up to and including the final year of the study.
- 2. Lone mother with few barriers to work** - many living in owner occupied housing with the next most common tenure being social rented accommodation. They tended to have at least mid-level skills with two-thirds having qualifications at Level 3 or above.
- 3. Coupled mother not comfortable on one income** - majority living in owner occupied housing, with one third living in private or social rented housing. These mothers tended to have high level skills, and household incomes between £25,000 and £44,000.
- 4. Coupled mother comfortable on one income** - vast majority in owner occupied housing or private rented accommodation. These mothers were almost all qualified to degree level or above, and had household incomes between £60,000 and £90,000.

The nurseries are expensive for a child who's under two... £60 to £70 a day... I don't think it's worth me working.

# Key findings

Caring for them has meant an enormous loneliness for me ... I had quite a good job, quite a lot of responsibility ... to suddenly be following a toddler and young children around is an enormous difference. Very, very lonely.

## WHY THE WOMEN WERE OUT OF WORK

A surprising finding at the start of this 3 year tracking study was that most women had left work involuntarily or reluctantly. Some had initially returned to work but left because they found it too difficult to balance family with full time work, or had experienced negative attitudes from their employers and colleagues.

Redundancy was also common, often during maternity leave or shortly after returning to work part time. In some cases this was linked to the recession, but other redundancies seemed to be discriminatory.

Only a small minority of mothers had chosen not to return to work at all after having children.

### KEY FINDING:

Most mothers want to work - many leave work involuntarily

## MOTIVATORS TO RETURN TO WORK

A range of familiar motivations for returning to work were reported.

### Financial issues

More than half of the participants expressed financial motivations for returning to work, particularly those whose families were struggling on one income and also lone parents with few barriers to work.

In addition to increasing household income, regaining financial independence was a key motivator for coupled mothers. Being dependent on their partners meant loss of freedom and contributed to loss of self-esteem.

For some of the single mothers too, financial pressure was linked to self-esteem, as they were emotionally uncomfortable about relying on benefits.

### The need for stimulation

Many mothers found the day-to-day reality of looking after young children lacking in stimulation. The loss of social interaction at work was felt keenly and loneliness was common. Women wanted to get back to their 'old self' by connecting with other adults and doing interesting, satisfying work outside of the home.

### Self esteem

Other participants emphasised the loss of self-esteem that accompanied the removal of status associated with work. They stressed that motherhood and domestic responsibilities are not valued in society.

## BARRIERS TO RETURNING TO WORK

### Parenting orientation

The degree to which mothers identify as workers or as parents emerged as a key factor influencing their decisions. Some participants, particularly at the start of the study, were strongly parenting oriented. They believed that mothers should provide full-time care for their children, and tended to hold negative attitudes to formal childcare.

Although many of these women expressed a desire to return to work, their personal aspirations received the lowest priority in the decision-making process. Family and financial considerations held the highest priority.

Work/parenting orientation shifted dramatically over the three years. Changing factors such as the number and age of children, length of time out of the workforce, or a partner's job situation, all had a significant impact.

#### **Lost confidence and feeling out of touch with work**

While regaining self-esteem is a key motivator to returning to work, loss of confidence as a result of being out of the labour market is, at the same time, a major barrier.

Even highly qualified, experienced participants suffered from lost confidence. They felt overwhelmed by rapid changes in their industries, and worried that younger candidates' willingness to work longer hours would be more attractive to employers.

#### **Childcare issues**

High childcare costs reduced the financial incentive to return to work, while the inflexibility of childcare opening hours made it impossible for some mothers to consider any job requiring them to leave before 8:00 am or return after 6:00 pm.

#### **Loss of networks**

Few mothers had attempted to stay in touch with former colleagues or developments in their industries, and this presented another barrier to returning to work.

## **WORKING PREFERENCES**

It was common for women to feel that motherhood had changed them, and that their work aspirations had decreased. Regardless of educational background, the key desire of most women was to find part time work that would give them a balance between interesting work and family commitments. Many women were prepared to downgrade their careers in exchange for flexibility.

However, as the study progressed over the three years, most mothers found it virtually impossible to find good quality part time vacancies. Some women reported that companies which initially seemed keen to employ them, changed their minds as soon as they expressed a wish for part time hours. There was also a feeling that, even taking pro-rata salary into consideration, part time jobs were poorly paid in comparison to equivalent full-time jobs. Part time working became increasingly viewed as a barrier to career progression.

I've changed massively. I don't want a high-powered career. I want low stress; I want flexibility without feeling guilty about leaving at quarter to five.

#### **KEY FINDING:**

Virtually all the women in the sample would only consider part time work while their children were young

Lots of women just want the term time or just want a 10 till 2 and that is a huge, huge barrier.

## HOW WOMEN OVERCAME BARRIERS AND FOUND WORK

40% of mothers overcame barriers quickly and were in work after the first year of the study. These mothers proactively took a range of measures to work around issues and concerns relating to employment.

By the third year of the study, 72% of mothers had worked. Those who moved into work between the first and second year of the study tended to have additional barriers relating to low-level skills and little work experience.

Mothers were asked to assess what interventions had been most effective in supporting them to become 'job ready' and to find work. The overwhelming response was that there is a virtual absence of available support. There was no awareness of the National Careers Service. In particular, mothers had found it very hard to find any services that specifically addressed the barriers they came across due to their caring responsibilities.

Many women nevertheless managed to find work with limited external support. They reported that persistence was vital, as was taking a pragmatic approach by compromising on the quality of work they would consider.

Some mothers overcame confidence issues by taking voluntary roles, or by applying for work experience as a step towards paid work.

## WHAT INTERVENTIONS WORK

A minority of women were able to access support: those on out-of-work-benefits got help through Jobcentre Plus, while 20 women in the sample received support from Women Like Us.

Analysis of mothers using WLU services highlighted a clear relationship between the number of hours of support and the likelihood of finding a job. On average, clients took just over six months to find a job.

### KEY FINDING:

Interventions need to focus on building confidence, networks, planning the return to work in the context of family life, and access to quality part time and flexible jobs

Women reported the following interventions as being the most effective, most of which came from feedback of using WLU:

- Help to develop practical skills necessary to complete CVs and application forms.
- Support with the practical and emotional steps of adjusting family life to the mother's return to work.
- Emphasis on raising confidence levels - mothers who attended WLU workshops described the benefit of meeting others in similar situations.

- Guidance to take into consideration long-term career plans.
- Support to develop a targeted approach to online job searching.
- Support with networking to find vacancies.
- Direct access to part time and flexible job opportunities across a range of fields and positions.
- Basic skills training through Jobcentre Plus had enabled some women to move into entry level work or voluntary positions.
- Increased support to meet the costs of childcare would enable women returners to consider a wider range of roles.
- Help to identify a new career that is both family-friendly and at an appropriate skill level, and help to find training.
- Support to become self-employed. It's important to note that all the mothers interested in this were currently working, indicating that the confidence gained through employment is a prerequisite to thinking about self-employment. Current targeting of self-employment support at those out of work may therefore miss the mark.
- Support with career progression, especially for those in part time jobs, those who had started new careers, and those who had taken temporary or zero hours entry level positions in order to break into the employment market.
- Employee support for women in part time work or working from home, to help integrate them with the rest of the team.

The support offered by Jobcentre Plus was seen as being unresponsive to the specific needs of mothers. In particular, there was dissatisfaction amongst mothers educated between levels 3 to 5. Some mothers explained that Jobcentre Plus staff pushed them towards any employment, regardless of their individual situations and career aspirations.

## **FURTHER INTERVENTIONS NEEDED**

Women identified the following additional areas of potential support, that would make a significant difference to their ability to find work:

- Extension of Jobcentre Plus support to mothers who are currently not eligible.
- A greater pipeline of good quality part time jobs would enable more mothers to move into work without downgrading.
- Increasing the availability of flexible childcare, especially outside 8am-6pm, and signposting parents to this where it does exist, would help mothers to widen their job search.

## **MOTHERS WHO DID NOT MOVE INTO WORK**

28% of mothers did not move into work. The majority of these mothers were far from the labour market at the start of the study, and were very close to moving into work at the end of the three waves due to engagement in training and skills development. Only a tiny proportion of mothers were not looking for work, usually due to caring for children or other family members with health conditions.

Lots of them seem to think because you're part time, they can get away with paying really low ... if you were in that industry doing full time it would be a lot better paid even though they say it's pro rata salary.



It's hideous and I'm ludicrously overqualified for it, and it's the duller thing I have ever done in my entire life.

## EXPERIENCES IN WORK

By the third wave of research, approximately three quarters of mothers had moved into work, predominantly in part time jobs as they strove to achieve a balance between their personal ambitions and the needs of their families.

Across the study, regardless of the level of work they moved into, mothers reported the importance of having a separate identity as a working person. They enjoyed working in a sociable environment and took pleasure in having time away from their domestic role.

Mothers across all typologies also reported an increase in household income and financial independence, even though the financial benefits were offset by childcare and travel costs.

However, in terms of job satisfaction, there were very mixed feelings attached to their predominantly part time roles.

### Only a small minority move into 'good' jobs

Very few mothers found work at a similar or more senior level to their pre-motherhood work. Some of these had taken on high level contract work or freelancing opportunities.

### Downgrading through choice

Many mothers had downgraded their aspirations in order to find part time or flexible work. This downgrading was successful for many mothers, who saw it as the most practical option, allowing them to stay aligned to their pre-motherhood profession at the same time as having enough flexibility to manage family life.

These mothers often recognised that they had redefined work in their own minds, and were accepting of the fact that they had moved from a 'career role' to a 'convenient job'. Many welcomed the lower levels of stress and responsibility of a job that brought in just 'enough' money.

### KEY FINDING:

Mothers make compromises when they return to work, and accept jobs not careers to fit work with family life

### Forced downgrading

However, many other mothers (especially coupled mothers not comfortable on one income and lone parents with few barriers to work) felt they had no choice but to downgrade. This was because of financial pressure to find a job quickly and, in the case of lone parents, because of the pressure of the Jobseeker's Allowance regime.

Low pay and lack of progression were noted by these mothers as negative characteristics of their work. Some of the lone mothers had degree level qualifications and good work histories, but were working in minimum wage occupations.

### Very low level work for some

Where the more disadvantaged women had moved into work, the jobs were very low level, requiring little or no previous work experience. Jobs were primarily part time and poorly paid with little scope for flexibility or progression.

### Many do voluntary work

One striking finding was the amount of volunteering pursued by the participants - possibly to get the job satisfaction that their downgraded jobs didn't supply.



However, despite often impressive achievements, most of the participants did not attach much value to their voluntary responsibilities. There is a perception that unpaid work is not really 'work'.

### Self employment is a long term aspiration

Many mothers wanted to be self-employed because they felt this would give them the flexibility to manage out-of-school time. However, it was generally a long-term aim that they would explore once they had several years' more work experience. Mothers were aware they would need considerable advice and support to start up in business, and were unsure whether or where they would be able to access this.

## JOBS ARE OFTEN NOT SUSTAINABLE

Although most mothers moved into work over the course of the study, many did not move into work that was secure, that offered opportunities for progression, or that allowed them to balance work and family life.

### KEY FINDING:

Early experiences of returning to work are often unsatisfactory, so continuing in work is precarious

These threats to sustainability emerged:

- **Difficult working hours.** For instance, variable hours that posed challenges for childcare.
- **Unreliable work.** Zero hours and flexible contracts meant the stress of having no long-term commitment from employers, and little financial security.
- **Marginalisation of part time workers.** For example, one participant reported that her employer did nothing to integrate her into the team, so she constantly felt behind and disconnected. The negative impact of this experience on her confidence and self-esteem ultimately resulted in her leaving the job.
- **Low salaries with no opportunity for progression.** Some mothers who had downgraded were already looking to increase their hours or move into better paid work in the future when their children were older.
- **Poor job satisfaction.** Others were unhappy being over-qualified and under-utilised in their roles. They wanted to find a higher level of job-satisfaction in the future.
- **High stress levels.** Mothers were still responsible for a disproportionate share of the domestic burden and struggled with the competing demands on their time. Many had concerns about lack of time with their children.
- **Childcare difficulties.** The rigid opening hours of nurseries and school clubs proved problematic for many, and was a particular challenge for lone parents. Participants with older children continued to struggle, stressing that teenaged children need just as much support.

Look at the amount of full-time mothers who aren't in receipt of benefits ... because their husband earned ... to be told by the Jobcentre: 'Come up and see us when the money runs out' is a terrible thing. There have got to be more agencies around the country that are helping women back to work by helping them transfer their skills.

# Conclusions and Recommendations

I had a great chat with [international children's brand] who told me how family orientated they are and how much they appreciate families and blah, blah, blah and then when I said I want three days a week they went, 'there's the door, bye'.

## CONCLUSIONS

The research investigates mothers' career trajectories over three stages: making an initial decision about returning to work, looking for a job, and experiences whilst working.

We found that:

- For a significant number of women the decision to leave work had been involuntary, resulting from redundancy during pregnancy or maternity leave, recession related job loss, or an inability to combine a previous job with looking after children.
- Unsurprisingly, motherhood affected participants' attitudes towards work. Most had a preference for part time employment, but many struggled to find this.
- Despite their wide range of backgrounds and experiences, most of the mothers we spoke to shared a common set of barriers to work. These were: low confidence, concern that there was a lack of part time and/or flexible work available, and concern that childcare was unavailable or unaffordable.
- Encouragingly, almost all mothers we tracked through three years of research moved into work or made progress towards doing so. Of those who entered employment, most found work through social and professional networks rather than replying to advertisements or engaging recruitment agencies.
- Mothers who moved into work strived to achieve a balance that suited their own personal ambitions and the needs of their families. Key to this was finding flexible work that reflected their earning potential. However, in order to achieve balance in their lives, many mothers compromised on working hours, salary and level of responsibility.

- Although most mothers moved into work over the course of the study, many did not move into work that was secure, allowed them to balance work and family life, and offered opportunities for progression.

Addressing the issues that women face in finding and sustaining work requires action in three key areas:

- Providing integrated employment support and advice which covers the spectrum from confidence building to high-end careers advice.
- Opening up intermediate and senior level roles to flexible and part time working patterns, to prevent women (and others with caring responsibilities) from having to compromise their career aspirations.
- Providing affordable, flexible, quality childcare.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Below we set out recommendations in three areas, for policy makers and providers to address these issues.

### 1. Providing integrated employment support and advice

**Government should undertake a review of effective social innovations that build new solutions for families locked out of the jobs market due to caring responsibilities.** The review should be led by the Cabinet Office, and identify opportunities for pooling existing government resources to build on 'what works'.

In addition:

- London government, namely the GLA, Local Authorities and London's Enterprise Panel, should prioritise both lone and coupled workless mothers (pre Work Programme) as a key target group when considering investment in future employment provision through the European Social Fund for 2014-2020.
- DWP should ensure that mothers with complex needs (including potential second earners under the new Universal Credit regime) should have access to an adviser with specialist training in managing work and family issues. Advisers should be given discretionary funding through Flexible Support Fund, ring fenced either to support childcare costs during training or to commission tailored provision.
- The Department for Business Innovation and Skills should take on board the recommendations of both the Women's Business Council and the London Assembly and prioritise women as a key target group within the Adult Careers Service, and consider aligning this funding with ESF provision in order to plug the gap in support for coupled mothers.
- Welfare to work providers should ensure that frontline customer facing staff are trained and experienced in understanding the specific needs of parents with caring responsibilities, and the challenges in moving from 'caring to earning'.

## **2. Opening up intermediate and senior roles to part time and flexible working**

**Government should take a clear lead on articulating and selling the business case for part time and flexible working** by working with employer groups and intermediaries to showcase best practice examples of organisations with progressive

approaches to flexible working, and role models of individuals working in senior flexible and part time roles; also by **taking a lead in considering flexibility across all of its HR strategies and recruitment practices.**

In addition:

- At a regional level the GLA should act on the mayoral commitment to create 20,000 part time jobs, by taking a leadership role through its own recruitment practices.
- Best practice information and case studies, making the business case for flexible working and flexible job design, should be promoted to intermediaries through membership organisations such as ERSA and the Recruitment & Employment Confederation.
- JCP's National Employer Services Team should develop a programme of capacity building support and best practice guidance on the business benefits of flexible and part time working for its employer engagement teams.

## **3. Improve the availability of formal childcare and childcare subsidies**

**Government proposals to increase childcare support should be assessed for their ability to enable low income mothers to access flexible childcare, particularly in London where the high costs of childcare act as an additional constraint on working.**

In addition:

- In London the GLA should closely monitor the impact of Camden Council's recent decision to increase free childcare provision to 25 hours for Camden parents.
- Government should consider guaranteeing childcare support while parents undertake training leading to a first full level two or level three qualification.

I do remember from one of the workshops I went on with Women Like Us, and they were emphasising, how and where have you found all of your previous jobs? And you suddenly realise that it was through contacts.



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TALENT THROUGH FLEXIBILITY

**About the Timewise Foundation**

The Timewise Foundation's vision is for everyone to be able to find the flexibility they need in their careers, without reducing their value in the workplace.

We work to achieve this by stimulating the growth of a quality part time and flexible job market; providing careers advice and support to women who need to fit work around their family; and raising public awareness of the social and business benefits of part time working.

**[www.timewisefoundation.org.uk](http://www.timewisefoundation.org.uk)**

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