The Breakthrough series of five reports brings together the findings of one of the most extensive studies of women's lives in the Yorkshire and Humber region. Based on empirical research conducted in 2006 and 2007, the study draws on the knowledge, experience and histories of women from across generational, social, cultural and geographic backgrounds. This series arises from and is led by those women's voices. It is a testament not only to the richness and diversity of women's lives, but also the commonalities of their experiences. More specifically, the study identifies the key problems that women face in breaking through the barriers of both gender-based and other forms of social exclusion, and uses critical social science perspectives to help facilitate a clearer understanding of these complex issues. It also evaluates the contribution of public and voluntary sector organisations, including the work of individual women within those organisations, in meeting women's everyday needs, raising aspirations and providing the necessary support to enable women to achieve those ambitions. As a whole, the series provides the empirical detail and grounded analysis from which to address broader policy questions at the local, regional and national levels.
Breakthrough: Researching Gendered Experiences of Education and Employment in Yorkshire and Humberside

Report 3

*Motherhood: Choices and Constraints*

Julia Holdsworth, Suzanne Clisby, Hannah Miles and Anne Fairbank

This report is based on research commissioned by the European Social Fund, Learning and Skills Council and Hull Women’s Network. The facts reported and the views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the commissioners.
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1.0 Introduction to the ‘Breakthrough’ Series

The aim of the ‘Breakthrough’ study was to explore women’s life histories and experiences specifically in relation to education and employment trajectories throughout the Yorkshire and Humber Region\(^1\). Through a combination of extensive interviews, focus group discussions and an extended questionnaire survey in 2006 and 2007, we have generated a rich and unique dataset that draws on the knowledge, experience and histories of over 500 women from across generational, social, cultural and geographic backgrounds. This is one of the largest studies of its kind in the region.

The original remit of the project was to address current strategic objectives laid down by Government Office for Yorkshire and Humberside and those set out by the Learning and Skills Council and Hull Women’s Network. Specifically, gathering information and evidence from women in Yorkshire and Humberside, we focused on capturing information about the gender related barriers women face in their attempts to access learning opportunities, employment, career development, and personal progression. This will inform planning for future delivery of accessible, gender-aware and socially inclusive learning opportunities.

\(^1\) Hull Women’s Network established a working partnership with the Gender Studies Department at the University of Hull in order to collaborate on research into issues of gender discrimination for women in the job market. This collaboration resulted in the development of the Breakthrough Research Project proposal which was subsequently funded by the European Social Fund, the Learning and Skills Council and Hull Women’s Network.
Along the way, however, a wide range of themes and issues were raised through women describing their educational and employment experiences. Hence, rather than a single report, the findings of this study have been produced as a series of five research reports which develop the themes of:

1. Gender, confidence and mental well-being
2. Gender, education, training and aspiration
3. Motherhood: choices and constraints
4. Women’s experiences of work: breaking through the barriers
5. Transforming women’s lives: women’s voluntary and community services in the Yorkshire and Humber Region

Each of the reports in the ‘Breakthrough’ series are led by women’s voices and give testament, not only to the richness and diversity of women’s lives, but also the commonalities of their experiences. Using a gender analysis and critical social science perspectives to facilitate a clearer understanding of these complex issues, the research identifies the key problems that women face in breaking through the barriers of both gender-based and other forms of social exclusion.

The study also evaluates the contribution of public and voluntary sector organisations, including the work of individual women within those organisations, in meeting women’s everyday needs, raising aspirations and providing the necessary support to enable women to achieve their ambitions. Working closely with women’s groups and the voluntary and statutory sectors across the region, we have explored what women themselves think would help and what has helped them get to where they want to be.
1.1 Why a gender analysis of women’s lives?

A gender analysis is essential in order to understand the ways in which women’s lives both in the Yorkshire and Humber Region and in the UK as a whole are conditioned by socio-cultural and patriarchal structural frameworks. As succinctly explained by Nayak and Kehily (fc.2008);

‘By examining gender practices, and in particular how they are produced, regulated, consumed and performed, we can gain a fuller insight into broader gender patterns and arrangements. This enables us to interpret the relationship between gender and power and to see how gender is institutionally organized, discursively constituted, embodied and transfigured in social life. It can begin to explain how gender relations are embedded within the social fabric of human societies and serve to shape the choices and possibilities open to us as gendered subjects. This suggests that gender is not simply a matter of choice, but a negotiation that occurs within a matrix of social and historical forces enshrined in the ideological arenas of law, religion, family, schooling, media, work and so forth’ (Nayak and Kehily, fc.2008:5).

A gender analysis of women’s lives continues to be of critical importance in today’s society despite equalities legislation which might suggest otherwise. Women have come a long way since our grandmothers and great grandmothers fought for the right to vote. We have made major advances in the kinds of work we are permitted to do, the institutions we are allowed to be members of, and the levels of political, educational and sporting attainment we have
reached. From being excluded from education, over the course of the past hundred years women have entered educational institutions at every level to the extent that they are now out-performing boys and gaining better overall grades at primary, secondary and higher educational levels (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2006).

Women are now allowed to become doctors, lawyers, judges and ‘captains’ of industry. We see high profile women succeed in all walks of life and enter previously male-only domains. Indeed, the extent to which women have pushed at the glass ceilings, jumped off the sticky floors, and knocked down barriers to equality of opportunity can lead many younger women in Britain today to feel as if they have it all, to believe that they do not face discrimination on a daily basis. However, despite the real advances we have made as a result of women’s continued and extensive struggles over the course of the 20th century, the goal of gender equality has not yet been reached. Gender discrimination and segregation across public and private spheres continues to be a stark reality of women’s lives in 21st century Britain.

Politics is still a man’s world

Formal politics is still largely a man’s world, and this in itself inhibits women’s entry and participation. Politics continues to be seen as a ‘male space’. The House of Commons, for example, has been likened to a gentlemen’s club, famous for having a shooting range but no crèche, a barbers but no hairdressers, and far too few women’s toilets. Following 80 years of women’s suffrage less than 20% of MPs in the UK Parliament are women (Women and Equality Unit, 2007), of these only two MPs are Black and there has never been an Asian
women MP (Fawcett Society, 2007). At this rate it will be another 200 years before women achieve numerical equality of political representation, rising to 300 years for Black and Minority Ethnic women. These facts speak volumes about the status of women in positions of power and decision-making (EOC, 2007, Fawcett Society, 2007).

**Gender segregation in education continues**

Despite girls gaining higher grades than boys at every level of education, they continue to be faced with complex socio-cultural pressures that lead to extremes of segregation in education along traditional gender lines. At F.E. and H.E. levels, for example, the vast majority of students studying literature and languages are female, whilst the overwhelming majority of those studying sciences, engineering and computing are male (ONS, 2006). Vocational training is even more highly segregated: 97% of early years care and education and 90.1% of hairdressing apprentices are women, compared with men constituting 99.2% of apprentices in construction, 94.8% in engineering manufacture and 98.6% of apprentices in the motor industry (Fuller, Beck and Unwin, 2005).

**This in turn contributes to gender segregation in paid employment**

Women continue to be concentrated in low-paid, gender stereotyped (and often part-time) jobs, representing, for example, 79% of workers in the health and social care sector, 98% of childcare workers, 95% of receptionists, and 76% of cleaners. At the other end of the scale, only 10% of senior police officers and 9% of the judiciary are female, whilst 83% of directors and chief executives and over 70%
of private sector managers are male (EOC 2006). Women still face a stark gender pay gap, earning an average of 17% per hour less than men in full-time work, rising to a gender pay gap of 38% for part-time employees (EOC, 2007). Within individual employment sectors the gender pay gap can increase, for example, women earn 22.5% less per hour than men in full-time work in the private sector as a whole, rising to 41% in the banking and insurance sector (EOC, 2006).

**Gender discrimination at home**

Women clearly continue to experience gender discrimination in the public sphere, and despite women’s place supposedly being ‘in the home’ discrimination also permeates the private sphere. Women perform, and take responsibility for, most of the reproductive and community management work in the household: cleaning, cooking, shopping for household provisions, managing household finances and maintaining extended family networks. Women also take most responsibility for caring: for children, for disabled or sick relatives and for elderly family members.

The feminist movement has been calling for greater recognition of this work for decades, including demanding wages for housework on the basis of its direct value to the national economy. A recent UK government report, through the Office of National Statistics, made an attempt to put a value on housework. They calculated that if the time spent on unpaid work was valued at the average rate for paid employment it would be worth over £700 billion a year - more than three quarters of the value of the paid economy (BBC, 2002). Data also shows that women spend an average of just over 3.5 hours per day on unpaid domestic and child care tasks in addition to their
regular paid work. That’s almost twice as much time as the average man spends on similar tasks (Gershuny, Lader and Short, 2005).

The home as a site of domestic violence

Despite, and because of, all their hard work within it, women can find their homes a source of comfort and security, but all too often the home is a site of fear, abuse and violence. In the UK, one incidence of domestic violence is reported to the police every minute and one in four women experience domestic violence during their lifetime. On average two women are killed every week by a male partner or former partner, constituting over a third of all female murder victims (Home Office, 2007).

It is clear then, that gender inequalities continue to exist at both national and regional levels. However, in order to understand the experience behind such statistical representations, we have to speak to women about their lives and experiences inside the household, in local communities, in the work-place and in educational establishments. Empirical research such as that undertaken in this study is crucial as women themselves are best-placed to understand and communicate their own life experiences. However, this research not only documents the continuing social barriers and inequalities that women face: it also provides evidence of the struggle of women, both as groups and individuals, to challenge and break through those barriers and to ensure that other women find the help and support they need to do so.
2.0 Methodology

This research employed both qualitative and quantitative methods, underpinned by a methodological approach grounded in feminist research and praxis as well as ethnographic understandings. The adoption of a mixed-methods approach, led by the collection of qualitative data, was chosen to best facilitate the capturing of broad gendered experiences of education and employment in this region. The employment of qualitative research strategies facilitated the collection and analysis of personal beliefs and experiences, commonalities and women’s own understandings of their lives.

Initially in this section we present some of the epistemological and theoretical stances which underpinned the approach to data collection and analysis that was adopted. We then proceed to outline some of the main data collection methods employed.

Feminist research methods

This research was informed by a feminist standpoint and research methodology. Ethical considerations were paramount in all aspects of carrying out this research, and were informed by the ethical guidelines produced by the British Sociological Association, as well as academic debates about ethical procedures in research. Brayton (1997) suggests there are three methodological elements which make research feminist:
1. **Addressing power imbalances between research/researchers and research subjects**

This research was conceived in collaboration with Hull Women’s Network (HWN), a strategic partnership of women’s service providers in Hull. The design of the research activities was done with the needs of participants in mind. We adopted a reflexive approach throughout the research process, for example, early findings were fed back to participants and they were encouraged to comment on the appropriateness of the emerging themes and the researcher's depictions of women’s lives.

The findings presented in these reports are presented as subjective understandings created through dialogues between people, each of whom brings to the topic a set of pre-conceived perspectives and positions. Such an approach facilitates the recognition and integration of different standpoints and experiences through allowing women’s voices to speak for themselves.

2. **Politically motivated and with the aim of promoting social change**

This research aims, through presenting women’s understandings and experiences of the opportunities and barriers they face in their day to day lives, to promote better appreciation of gendered opportunities and constraints. Further, this research has developed practical and strategic recommendations for the improvement of gendered experiences in the Yorkshire and Humber Region.

On a strategic level, this project has, where possible sought to contribute to individual participants’ empowerment. Taking part in a
research project such as this can enable women to reflect on their lives and on the ways which individual, socio-cultural and structural factors impact on their situation and the choices available to them. This facilitates women’s understandings of their lives as situated knowers.

Practically, the researchers have sought to facilitate and support the self-development of participants where possible. Being involved in research of this nature, and re-telling life histories can call up all manner of emotional experiences for women. For many this is, ultimately, a positive experience and most women in this research commented, after the interview, on the fact that having someone to just sit and listen to them was itself, a rewarding experience. Some women raised aspirations during interviews, such as wanting to get back into education, and, where appropriate, researchers sign-posted them to possible training or sources of information or, for other women, to other relevant support services.

Whilst such support is not the primary role of researchers, in a research project exploring gender inequalities, to ignore such possibilities of pointing women in the direction of potentially life-changing services would have been failing the participants and the wider goals of this research.

3. Begin with the experiences and standpoint of women

This research has sought to understand and articulate women’s perspectives and experiences as they are framed within the patriarchal context of today’s UK society. The themes and issues which have become prominent during this research have been defined and refined by the participants themselves. Analysis was conducted
in a grounded manner, developing the main themes and analytical concepts from close scrutiny of the experiences of women in the Yorkshire and Humber Region.

**Research methodologies**

The methods employed in this research were all informed by the epistemological stance developed in the discussion above. A range of different techniques were employed, which are briefly outlined below.

**Interviews**

The main data collection strategy for this research was through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. A total of one hundred and ten separate interviews were conducted with women and key professionals across the Yorkshire and Humber Region. These were subdivided into two main types;

- **Life histories**

  Life histories, lasting from around 1 to 4 hours in single or repeated sessions, were collected from women across the region. This strategy was adopted in order to capture the complex interrelations which exist between different parts of women’s experience and to elucidate the ways in which gendered identity constructions impact on women’s lives. Life histories were conducted using an interview guide, however, researchers were not constrained by the question areas in front of them and, instead, allowed women to focus on and develop particular issues as they arose.
• **Key Theme Interviews**  
Interviews were conducted with key service providers in the arenas of education, vocational training, community and voluntary services, employment, business, social and emotional support provision, local government and statutory services.

• **Focus Groups**  
The team conducted a series of twelve discussion groups involving 69 people with a range of diverse groups:

- Women returners to education  
- Women in ‘traditional’ gendered occupations  
- Women making decisions around work/care after having a first child  
- Young parents  
- Women users of community and voluntary services  
- Women service providers

Focus groups were employed for a number of reasons, particularly as they can encourage participation from people who may feel nervous about a one-to-one interview. Further, a major strength of focus groups is that they facilitate observation of group dynamics by promoting open discussion, questioning and interaction between group members. This means that the parameters are not set entirely by the researcher, but instead come to reflect what members of the group feel are important and relevant to the topic introduced.

Focus group discussions were designed, in each case, to cover topics relevant to the people comprising the group. Each of these discussion groups lasted between 1 and 2 hours, dependent upon the wishes of
the group and were either recorded using a mixture of sound recording equipment and note-taking or solely through note-taking.

**Participant observation in a women's centre**

Part of the research team were based in a working Women’s Centre in Hull for the duration of the project. This provided insight into the issues which women face on a daily basis as well as the major issues experienced by people working in the voluntary and community sector. Such close level involvement elicits insights and understandings which are difficult to gain from methods which do not take such a long-term approach.

**Questionnaire/Survey**

Following initial literature reviews and exploratory interviews with key informants a number of themes were identified as central to understanding gendered experiences of education and employment in the Yorkshire and Humber Region. A questionnaire was designed to cover these themes and was delivered through both electronic and paper media. This resulted in a total of 323 responses collected from across the Yorkshire and Humber Region. All questionnaires were anonymous and provided respondents with the opportunity to contact the project for more information.

Two main distribution methods were used for the questionnaire:

- The electronic version was designed and delivered using a web-based survey creation tool. Hyperlinks to this questionnaire were placed on the web-page of the Hull Women’s Network (HWN) and on the project website as well as being distributed to relevant email lists and through personal networks. This way
of distributing the questionnaire meant that respondents could click on the link and complete the questionnaire anonymously.

- Paper copies of the questionnaire were targeted to parts of the population for whom computer skills or access to internet could be issues in preventing them completing the questionnaire.

Finally in this brief section on methodology we return to the issue of ethics to address two areas directly.

**Confidentiality and informed consent**

All participants in this research project have confidentiality assured through being identified by pseudonyms, allocated in a random pattern using the letters of the alphabet in turn. In a small number of cases it has also been necessary to amend or omit certain other personal details to ensure anonymity. Participants’ quotes are coded by pseudonym, age-range, occupational sector, if they are a parent, and geographical sub-region. For the purposes of confidentiality, ‘North Lincolnshire’ has been combined under ‘Humberside’.

Participants were informed, as far as possible, of the uses to which the information they provided will be put. They were also given the opportunity to withdraw part or all of the information they provided in interviews. Where contactable, participants were invited to the research dissemination events\(^2\) and provided with copies of the executive summaries of the reports.

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\(^2\) The dissemination of the research is also an example of feminist praxis in as much as a wide a range as possible of people were invited to the events, including the research participants.
3.0 Executive Summaries

3.1 Report 1: Gender, Confidence and Mental Well-Being

Whilst not initially setting out to focus on women’s mental well-being, it soon became clear in the course of the research that mental well-being was a recurrent issue for women, cutting across indices of difference such as socio-economic background, age, ethnicity, educational attainment, occupation and location. In addition to clinically significant experiences of depression, self-harming and other mental health issues, women repeatedly raised - both explicitly and implicitly - a range of broader well-being issues such as low self-confidence and low self-esteem as obstacles to their personal and professional development.

Key findings:

The impacts of reduced self-esteem and under-confidence can include:

- Impacts on employment, for example, loss of earnings for women and costs to employers through physical and mental ill-health
• Lower dynamism and initiative in the workplace. This can become reflected in economic disadvantage, for example, in terms of reduced earning potential
• Being less able to protect oneself from harm, for example, bullying or harassment at home, school and in the workplace
• Limiting educational and career aspirations, posing obstacles to reaching one’s full potential. This can include women being self-limiting
• Negative affects on women’s physical health, potentially contributing to chronic ill-health and the related impacts on those around them

We accept that there are aspects of self-esteem and mental well-being that can be especially gendered experiences for women qua women. We argue, however, that there must be a reconfiguration of the individuation of these connections and a recognition of the fundamental implication of socio-cultural structures in the creation of mental ill-health as a ‘woman’s problem’. In other words, whilst the ways in which women’s gendered identity is constructed leave them more prone to mental ill-health, the flaw lies not with individual women but in the normative patriarchal constructions of their gendered beings: of femininity, women’s roles, divisions of labour and their relative status in society.

Women are more likely than men to seek support, are more likely to be offered medical treatment, and to be ‘labelled’ as having mental health problems. It is crucial, however, to recognise that mental health issues impact on both women and men. Thus, whilst calling for greater resources and support for women and men with mental well-being issues, the cultural construction of mental health as a
feminised arena per se should be resisted. Rather, we need greater understanding and acknowledgement of the ways in which mental ill-health is a condition of human society which is fundamentally conditioned by the constructions of both men’s and women’s gendered identities into falsely immutable categories.

We focus in this report on three areas that are particularly gendered in terms of women’s experiences and mental well-being: gender socialisation; motherhood; and domestic and sexual violence. Finally, we look briefly at the role of women’s and women-oriented voluntary and community services, particularly in the context of women who have been supported through experiences of domestic and sexual violence. We argue that there is a need to employ a gender analysis to address both the causes and consequences of low self-esteem, lack of confidence and issues of mental well-being in the broadest sense.

**Recommendations:**

- Taking far more seriously the problematic gender stereotyping in social institutions such as the family, schooling and in the media and discourage negative gendered discourses

- Increase gender analysis training for educators, employers, civil servants, health specialists etc.

- There needs to be a renewed debate about the structural causes and consequences of domestic and sexual violence and a wider recognition of the long term impacts of such violence on millions of people’s lives
• Undertake a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis of providing greater levels of service provision and increased resources to tackle both the causes and consequences of domestic and sexual violence

• Greater emphasis needs to be placed on social rather than individual models of mental well-being in approaches to mental health care provision

• Provision of more personal development training and the development and valorisation of ‘soft skills’

• Provide more individual, familial and institutionally-based support for mothers and women-returners to facilitate transitions from employment/education to motherhood, and for women returning to paid work or training after a break. This might include, for example, more systematic development and application of mentoring systems putting in place support strategies within work places or educational institutions.

3.2 Report 2: Gender, Education, Training and Aspiration

This report explores the impact of gender on women’s aspirations and on their experiences of education and training. These research findings show that women’s experiences of education and training continue to be strongly influenced by gendered socio-cultural
expectations which are also translated into structural gendered norms and practices. By placing women’s educational experiences within broad context this research also makes clear the ways in which gendered experiences of education have life-long implications in terms of the kinds of paid employment and other roles men and women do and the rewards they accrue for these.

During this research we talked to women about current experiences of, and future aspirations for, higher, further, and adult education and training. We also explored women’s reflections on their schooling and other previous educational experiences. This report presents the various factors which constrain or enable women in imagining possible futures and attaining them for themselves.

**Key Findings:**

- Education continues to be experienced largely along gendered lines despite long-term efforts to equalise boys' and girls' education. When choice becomes available, girls and boys tend to choose different types of subjects due to a complex mix of factors including; peer pressure, ideas about ‘suitable’ subjects and imaginings of appropriate futures

- Subjects which are traditionally seen as ‘boys’ subjects continue to be valorised over those traditionally seen as ‘girls’ subjects

- Formal and hidden curricula structures ‘stream’ students into particular subject areas, often along gendered lines
The careers advice which participants received was often directed along gendered lines, meaning that pupils may not be provided with the full range of career options, limiting possibilities for both boys and girls.

The impact of educational choices is often life-long. Although girls outperform boys at almost every level, this does not translate into economic and social rewards due to the differential rewards which ‘male’ and ‘female’ occupations attract.

When women engage with education or training as adults they often feel that their multiple roles and responsibilities are not recognised or catered for. Women commonly experience problems such as finding childcare whilst in learning, or may struggle to juggle domestic responsibilities and learning commitments.

Gendered Issues are often particularly marked for women undertaking education/training in areas traditionally thought of as ‘male’ areas.

Community-based education often provides a vital resource for women. Such organisations aim to offer a range of educational provision and do so in supportive environments in which holistic approaches are taken to understanding the needs of women learners.
**Recommendations:**

- Continue to promote equality of opportunity and expectation in schools and work to further address the impact of the formal and hidden curricula constraints.

- Through the promotion of gender awareness training, work towards provision of more broad-ranging careers advice in schools which provides equality of opportunity for both girls and boys.

- Work to challenge gendered stereotypes of subject and occupational value, and encourage awareness of the consequences of valorisation of particular subject areas for women’s life chances.

- Exert pressure on providers of further, higher and adult education to recognise and support the multiple roles parents and carers occupy.

- Address issues of gender disadvantage in areas of education and training which are not traditionally taken up by women.

- Consult with, and provide support to, community based education and training programmes which work with women and recognise the value of a holistic approach to women’s adult learning.
3.3 Report 3: Motherhood: Choices and constraints

This report focuses on the impact of motherhood on women’s choices, particularly as it relates to domestic roles, educational chances and employment. These research findings show that, although women’s lives have changed significantly, and more women are combining work and motherhood, the ways in which they do this are heavily constrained by cultural and institutional gendered identity constructions and expectations. This means that mothers continue to carry a heavy burden of domestic labour and, where they take on paid work outside the home, are concentrated in low-pay, low-status work with fewer chances for progression than either men or non-mothers. Utilising women’s stories of motherhood and non-motherhood this report presents the various factors which constrain or enable women in developing successful roles for themselves.

Key findings:

- Women are increasingly seeking to combine motherhood and paid employment outside the home

- The impact of motherhood for women’s choices and opportunities is much greater, and more detrimental, than that of fatherhood for men

- Experiences of direct discrimination amongst mothers and women who are pregnant are rare. Women can, however, feel that they are not fully supported when they make decisions about maternity leave or returning to work
• Socio-cultural expectations and stereotypes mean mothers often struggle to negotiate satisfying and successful roles both in and out the home. This is worsened by the conflation of childcare responsibilities with other domestic labour, meaning mothers often also take greater responsibility for, and spend more time on, tasks in the home.

• Time spent at home can result in loss of self-confidence and well-being, in underestimation of women’s transferable skills and in women feeling ill-prepared to re-enter education/employment.

• Opting for part-time work in order to achieve a work/family balance has serious implications for women’s career progression chances and mothers continue to be concentrated in low-pay, low status employment.

• Women generally welcome recent UK government work/family policies however these are not always flexible enough to meet the diverse situations of mothers.

• Childcare remains a significant barrier to mothers’ participation in paid work and in education. Concerns about childcare are not simply about levels of provision and affordability, but also quality, location and flexibility.

• Whilst motherhood is still the norm for women in the UK, and undoubtedly brings personal and emotional rewards, increasing numbers of women are delaying (or refusing)
motherhood in order to concentrate on achievements in other areas of their lives

Recommendations:

- Take far more seriously the continuing gender stereotyping in social institutions such as the family which mean there is a perception that women are responsible for caring and domestic labour

- Work to promote the understanding that there is no necessary link between caring for children and other domestic labour and encourage greater parity between men’s and women’s roles in the home

- Provide more individual and institutionally-based support for mothers and women-returners to assist in women’s transitions both from employment/education to motherhood, and after a career break when women choose to return to paid work

- Promote recognition in institutional structures, families and policy that fathers also have responsibilities for childcare and work to increase parity of opportunity for mothers and fathers, for example through enhancing paternity leave provision

- Work to address the gender discrimination inherent in much UK work/family policy which continues to place women in the home to a greater extent than men
• Improve the flexibility and affordability of childcare for children of all ages, as well as increasing the numbers of places available overall

3.4 Report 4: Women’s experiences of work: breaking through the barriers

This report focuses on the importance of gender in women’s participation and progression in the work place. Here, we make visible the profoundly gendered nature of our everyday worlds. Women’s experiences and practices, both at home and at work, are set within the social context in which they live and embedded in their individual biographies. The study shows that although the world of work is changing, for women there are many factors that continue to operate to their disadvantage. This report presents the issues that, in women’s experience, have helped or hindered their participation and progression in the labour market.

**Key findings:**

The key factors that women felt limited their participation and progression in the work place are:

• Processes of gender socialisation can negatively impact on women’s levels of self belief which, in turn, can cause them to be self-limiting in their expectations and aspirations

• Gendered expectations of families, friends and peers mean that women are encouraged/discouraged to enter particular kinds of employment
- Women’s triple burden of paid, reproductive and community management labour, for example, women retain the majority of responsibility for caring roles, domestic work and community-based labour in addition to their paid labour.

- Career breaks to raise children mean that women can experience occupational disadvantage upon returning to employment.

- The difficulties of finding appropriate, flexible and affordable childcare continue to be a barrier to women’s equal participation in the paid labour force.

- Part-time work, frequently opted for by women, continues to be associated with the highest level pay differentials, is feminised, and attracts poorer working conditions and lower status.

- Part-time workers can be perceived as lacking commitment to their paid work and so are less likely to be considered for promotion or more responsible tasks.

- Gender segregation in education combined with poor career advice can serve to limit career options.

- The lack of role models in non-traditional female occupations and in high-level positions limits women’s aspirations.
Women continue to experience gender discrimination and sexual harassment at work

**Recommendations:**

- Work to challenge gendered stereotypes of occupational value and promote equal value for ‘traditional’ female occupations

- Encourage equality in family and home life through wider debates around power relations in the home with the aim of closing the unequal division of domestic labour

- Exert pressure on Government and Local Authorities to provide more flexible, affordable, accessible, quality childcare

- Through the promotion of gender awareness training, provide better quality careers advice in schools which provide equality of opportunity for both girls and boys

- Develop links between schools, industry and commerce in order to broaden the range of possibilities which school pupils imagine for their futures

- Positively promote female role models in non-traditional occupations to help dispel the myths that work to limit women’s aspirations

- Continue and formalise funding for first-rung interventions in women-oriented voluntary and community sector services
• Promote and enable women’s self-development through proactive support programmes which encourage women to apply for promotion and through the increased development of mentoring programmes designed to meet the needs of women

• Recognise issues of diversity and difference and seek to promote organisational structures which are not predicated on hegemonic masculinity, where women’s needs are seen as ‘other’

• Promote campaigns to end gender discrimination and sexual harassment in the work place

The stories provided by many women in this research clearly show that gendered expectations affect their experiences of education, careers advice, work and home thus impacting upon women’s careers. Policies need to be further developed which aim to widen women and girls’ horizons. However, it takes more than policies to change deeply engrained cultural norms and values. What is needed is a genuine will and concerted action at all levels to create ‘joined up thinking’ in all areas of life. Mainstreaming gender, that is, bringing gender into discussions in families, schools, popular culture and the wider community is an important first step. We need to push the boundaries and encourage girls to ‘think outside the gender box’.
3.5 Report 5: Transforming Women’s Lives: 
Women’s Voluntary and Community Services in the Yorkshire and Humber Region

This report focuses on the role of women’s voluntary and community sector organisations in the Yorkshire and Humber Region. Within this we develop a particular focus on the work of women-only and women-oriented services. In particular, we examine the transformative power of engagement with women’s voluntary and community services for both individual women and their local communities.

Despite there being thousands of such services in the UK and hundreds in the Yorkshire and Humber Region, there is little empirical data examining the work of women’s organisations and the economic impact of their interventions. This report contributes to the debate about the value of voluntary and community service provision through using the voices of service users and providers to explore women’s differing experiences of, and motivations for, engaging with women’s services.

*Key findings:*

Throughout this research the participant’s voices make explicit just how vital women-only services are in transforming women's lives. However, the continued existence of women’s centres and women-only safe spaces is constantly under threat. Both the lack of understanding and suspicion of the services themselves, and the
myth that gender equality has been achieved, result in under-appreciation of the work that women’s organisations do. This can contribute to the problem that women’s services exist in a state of perpetual insecurity, surviving largely on short-term, and increasingly declining, funding sources.

Women’s and women-oriented voluntary and community services:

- Fill gaps in levels and areas of statutory service provision
- Offer women-only ‘safe spaces’ which provide an environment where women can be supported and encouraged to reach their full potential
- Adopt a holistic approach to engaging with women and provide a range of services in one space
- Provide ‘first-rung’ training in a range of different skills, through both accredited and non-accredited courses. These can be an effective first step for women seeking to re-enter education and employment
- Provide encouraging and supportive environments through a range of different means, including, providing positive role models and working to raise women’s aspirations and self-confidence
- Seek to engage with women who are socially excluded through outreach work
Recommendations:

- A fuller study needs to be undertaken to assess the social, cultural and economic impact of women’s organisations for society as a whole. This could include a cost-benefit analysis

- Further assistance could be provided to support organisations with funding applications and the application processes themselves could be simplified and made less time-consuming

- There should be greater recognition of, and financial provision for, the work that women’s organisations do in ‘filling the gap’ and ‘picking up’ from statutory services

- Promotion of greater networking and knowledge-sharing between women’s organisations, be they based on locality, religious or ethnic affiliation, or around particular gender issues such as domestic and sexual violence, education or employment. This would also encourage the recognition of diversity as a strength of the sector
References


Report 3: Motherhood: Choices and Constraints

1.0 Introduction

‘I don’t think there’ll be like gender equality until... I think just the concepts themselves of like masculinity and femininity [...] until we’ve broken down those roles and men can accept, society can accept that men can take care of kids, it’s child care, it’s the work at home that nobody recognises... you can’t even get into the labour market until you’ve sorted out the home I think, I think it has to start in the home’ (Helen, early 20s, student, Humberside).

‘You know like you get these feminists who say women shouldn’t be housewives, they should all go out to work and that? I suppose I used to be like that; thinking that all women should strive to get a career and everything. But I think now it’s more like people should have a choice to do what they want rather than, because I think that’s just sorting people into another stereotype really, isn’t it?’ (Carol, late teens, student, Humberside).
This report explores the intersections between motherhood\(^3\), education and employment. Recognising that people’s lives are complex and different areas of women’s lives impact on each other, this report considers both:

- The ways individual and family choices around parenting and caring impact on women’s education and employment choices and, conversely
- The impact which factors such as educational achievement, employment and aspiration have on decisions around parenting and caring roles

The salience of motherhood to women’s lives in this region is highlighted by the fact that the topic of motherhood was raised in almost every interview conducted during this research, even by women who were not mothers and did not intend to become so. Consequently, in this report we are concerned with the various ways women’s expectations connected with their own motherhood, and other people’s expectations of women generally, intersect and impact on women’s lives.

Suggesting that parents’ roles in childcare and the household are closely linked to their labour market status, and that this impacts particularly on women, is not new (Women and Work Commission, 2006, Grimshaw and Rubery, 2007). As Lewis and Campbell (2007) note, ‘balancing work and family is inherently, although not exclusively, a gender issue’ (2007:5). The findings of this research again confirm the impact of parenting on women’s life chances. Here

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\(^3\) Throughout this chapter we use the term ‘motherhood’ to mean the natural and/or social female parent of a child, and whilst we recognise that men can take prime responsibility for childcare, we are, here, focusing on the choices and constraints that women face as mothers.
we employ rich qualitative data and, in particular, the voices of women themselves, to explore how different women in the Yorkshire and Humber Region seek to negotiate a successful and happy balance for themselves and their families.

Almost all the women participating in this research were explicit in describing the ways their choices around motherhood had a direct opportunity cost\(^4\) in other areas of their lives, and, more significantly, that their male husbands/partners (if they had them) were not similarly affected\(^5\). Women experiencing direct discrimination relating to pregnancy or children were rare, although this still occurred, whilst other women felt that they had been treated unfairly. Erica, for example, described how she was sidelined in her firm, asked to disguise her pregnancy as long as she could when she met clients, and began to be excluded from meetings;

\[\text{‘I wasn’t invited down to a lot of meetings as I started to sort of get bigger and bigger…’ (Erica, mid 30s, self-employed, mother, North Yorkshire).}\]

Erica’s experiences of discrimination, and subsequent downgrading when she returned after maternity leave eventually caused her to resign. Instead of experiencing direct discrimination such as Erica’s, most women in this study described feeling required to make education and career choices subordinate to their role as mothers because of the cultural and structural ordering of mothering in the UK.

\(^4\) This is range of alternatives that have to be forgone in order to pursue a particular option. For mothers this might include promotions, wages earned, etc.

\(^5\) This research talked to women in a wide variety of different social positions, and who were in a wide range of relationships or outside of a relationship.
In fact, in western societies ‘womanhood’ is often still equated with ‘motherhood’ (Oakley, 1979) and, through hegemonic constructions of gender identities, motherhood becomes romanticised and viewed as a normal ideal and appropriate occupation for women which, therefore, needs little attention and few support systems. The positive effects of motherhood for many women should not be underestimated, as it can potentially provide a close and loving relationship, new status for the women and increase women’s sense of purpose. Erica describes how she loves being a mother, but still wants other things in her life;

‘You know, I would never not be a mum, you know, I just love being a mum, I love my kids and everything, but I just think, um, I just want something else for me as well and I’ve got to have that other sort of aspect in my life’

(Erica, mid 30s, self-employed, mother, North Yorkshire).

For some, especially younger mothers, motherhood can be closely linked with attaining a socially accepted womanhood, and, as in cultures around the world, being seen as an adult. Motherhood may also provide the motivation for women to aim for self-development, and fight to create positive futures for their children. For example, several women attending basic skills courses in women’s centres said they had entered adult education because their reading, writing or number skills were weak and they wanted to be able to help their children in school. As Ella notes;

‘I spoke to young women who’ve said ‘oh I hated school, I hate reading, I hate writing, but I have to learn’ [...] they only start having aspirations because they want something
Women and families negotiate their roles inside and outside the home in many different ways. More significantly for this report, women also have different abilities to translate these ideals and preferences into actual outcomes in the areas of education, work, mothering and family and community life. This report explores some of the factors which influence women’s abilities in these fields and the choices they wish to make.

1.1 Family roles and the UK policy context

UK Work/Family policies in recent years have been built largely upon traditions drawn from Classical economics which assume a basic form of family. This would be one that is headed by a heterosexual couple and there is a clear division of labour in which men’s principal role is main wage earner, with women responsible for care of children and the elderly. The ways such ideas continue to influence public debates have real and lasting implications for women, for example in the 1.5 earner model which has informed much recent UK policy (Lewis and Campbell, 2007). Such models impact heavily on women’s employment aspirations as they can lead to the false assumption that women’s work is predominantly for ‘pin money’ or ‘extras’ rather

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6 Such an image clearly does not reflect modern UK society. There are 24.9 million households in Britain and 17.1 million families, 7.4 million of these had dependent children. There are 2.3 million families headed by a lone mother (both dependent and non-dependent children). Nearly 9 out of 10 lone parent families were headed by a lone mother. The number of families headed by a lone father is relatively constant at 2% of the total number of families (Smallwood and Wilson, 2007).

7 This model assumes one full-time wage earner in the household, supplemented by a second person working part-time, normally in order to also fulfil caring responsibilities.
than, as is often the case, a significant and equal contribution to household finances. This has been shown to have negative impacts on employment terms and conditions (Harkness et al, 1997) and lead to assumptions that women may be willing to work for lower wages (Barrett and McIntosh, 1990, Andersen, 1993).

In the UK, additionally, there has been an assumption within policy making organisations that the ‘family’ is part of a private sphere of decision making. Since 1997, then, Government policies have focused on achieving a better balance for those with children through 3 main mechanisms:

- introducing new forms of leave and extending existing ones
- investing in childcare provision
- addressing people’s working hours through a statutory ‘right to request’ flexible working and a campaign to persuade employers to adopt best practice (Lewis and Campbell, 2007).

These, however, are not necessarily focused on gendered issues and rarely mention gender equality, talking instead about the need for ‘parents’ to make choices about how to balance work and family (Lewis and Campbell, 2007) and reconcile paid work with unpaid caring work with little consideration for the structural and cultural factors that constrain choice.

This is matched by further policy moves in recent years which have encouraged groups previously disadvantaged in the labour market, to enter paid work. One of the groups that is increasingly being encouraged to be economically active is ‘mothers’, a group which continues to be subjected to contradictory discourses about their
roles in and out of the home. Active participation in paid work is increasingly being used as a test for social citizenship, meaning that working is seen as an essential element of participation in society. Paid work is also seen as a major strategy for reducing the incidence of child poverty, again encouraging mothers to enter paid work. These initiatives and broader social trends (for example, the high costs involved in home ownership) mean increasing numbers of women with dependent children are opting to work:

- In 2005, the economic activity rate for men was 79% for men and 70% for women (Labour Force Survey, Spring 2005)

- 68% of mothers with dependent children work, however the age of the youngest child affects mothers’ employment rates; 56% of those with children under 5 work, 71% whose youngest child was between 5 and 10 work, and 77% whose youngest child was between 11 and 15 work (ONS 2006)

In spite of the fact that the majority of younger women now expect to work outside the home after having children (ONS, 2005) mothers are not necessarily reaping equal financial reward for returning to work\(^8\). It is still the case that UK mothers tend to work in low-pay, part-time jobs (Bennet, 2005) and, overall, mothers have significantly lower earnings than both non-mothers and men in the UK (Harkness and Waldfogel, 1999, Joshi et al., 1999). Also:

- Women are more likely to suffer economic penalties associated with working part-time, as 41% of women in the labour force work part-time compared to 9% of men (Women and Work Commission, 2006)

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\(^8\) For a fuller discussion of women’s experiences of employment see Fairbank et al. (2007) Women’s Experience of Work: Breaking through the Barriers (Report 4 of this series).
• Research shows that most women work part-time at some point in their life course (Blackwell, 2001, Joshi, 2002, cited in Bradshaw et al., 2003)

• Half of all lone parent families are on low incomes (compared to one in five couples with children). Two fifths of children in low income households are in lone parent households (New Policy Institute, 2007). This is particularly significant for women/mothers as lone parent households headed by a father make up only 2% of families in the UK and nine tenths of lone parent families are headed by women (ESRC, 2007)

Women’s experience of work is both limited and enabled by the range of opportunities available, but what is often equally important is whether they are in a position to take up these opportunities. In this case cultural assumptions about appropriate mothering, and structural components all play a part. This report now turns to discuss elements from both socio-cultural and structural arenas which women in Yorkshire and Humberside feel impact on the choices available to them both inside and outside the home.

2.0 Socio-cultural expectations of mothering

A key finding of this research is that many women continue to feel subject to confusing, contradictory messages about the status and value of mothering, and the part they are supposed to play in public arenas, meaning they can never be sure they are ‘getting it right’.
From the moment women become pregnant other people feel justified in offering advice, comment and criticism about all aspects of child-rearing, from the way a woman’s body changes during pregnancy, to the choices parents make about work and childcare. The willingness with which other people comment on what might be thought to be private matters means parents’, and more particularly mothers’, decisions are constantly scrutinised and judged in public arenas.

Key points of contention in the debates surrounding appropriate mothering roles, both in the public domain, and raised by participants in this research include:

- The positive impacts of working mothers as inspirational role-models for children, and girls in particular, set against the often perceived negative impacts of children not being cared for by a parent at home

- Constantly changing and contradictory findings on the ways formal childcare environments in children’s early years impacts on their development

- Social problems, such as anti-social behaviour amongst young people, are often attributed to lack of ‘good enough’ parenting

Although there can often be undoubted economic benefits for many women in working, such decisions are complicated by deeply held cultural values. As Duncan (2003) notes, mothers’ decisions to take paid work are not necessarily made according to economic rationality, but ‘with reference to moral and socially negotiated (not individual) views about what behaviour is right and proper, and this varies between particular social groups, neighbourhoods and welfare
Duncan et al. (2003) note further that, although women’s choices around mothering are diverse, they are uniform in that a mother’s ‘gendered moral rationalities still involve their primary responsibility for their children’ (2003:327).

The adoption of child-rearing choices into public debates, and the concomitant sense of social and public interest and, to some degree, control, over women’s decisions in how they organise their time meant that many women we spoke to absolutely felt that they were subject to unfair external pressures, based on what other people thought were appropriate ways of behaving.

2.1 Traditions and stereotypes - why do women end up ‘holding the baby’?

This report now moves on to explore the social context within which women and families in this region make choices about children. We explore attitudes to mothering and caring roles in particular, as well as the division of domestic labour more generally, showing the impact these have on women’s power and participation in family structures and wider society.

Many of the women in this study were heavily influenced, in their ideas of what constitutes ‘good’ parenting, by the roles that their own parents had adopted. The majority had grown up in what can be termed a ‘traditional’ family structure, with the mother staying at home, at least while the children were small, and then taking on a mixture of part-time and temporary posts once their children had
started school. The quotes below are typical of many respondents’ childhood experiences;

‘She gave up her work to bring up me and my sister, as most women did then, [...] and she went back to work when my sister and I went to school’ (Lynne, late 30s, manager, civil service, Humberside).

‘She worked on and off, but my dad, he never put his foot down, but he used to say ‘I’m the bread winner, I like to bring the money in’. But she went out to work, he never stopped her, but she was mainly a housewife’ (Gayle, mid 30s, education sector, mother, Humberside).

As we discuss below in greater detail, there is often a conflation of the responsibilities of childcare and other forms of domestic labour, reinforcing notions that women are responsible for the domestic sphere. Women whose mothers did work outside the home in paid employment often stated they also continued to do the majority of the housework.9

‘Very traditional, is my father, in that way. In that even though my mother worked, she still had to do everything’ (Becky, late 30s, part-time administrator, mother, East Yorkshire).

Women often talked about how their choices are less ‘individual’ than men’s, and are influenced by family pressures from older generations, as well as their partners. Dawn, for example, recalled

9 Anne Oakely’s famous study of housework (1974) found that few men participated in domestic chores. More recent research shows that, in heterosexual households, even where women work, they still tend to do the majority of the domestic labour (Bianchi et al., 2000, Hochschild, 1990, cited in Crompton et al., 2005).
how, when her choice to go to work after having a child conflicted
with what her mother thought was appropriate, her mother’s
disapproval was made clear at particularly difficult times;

‘I think I was very much influenced by my mother and I
know when I first started talking about going back to work
she was quite disapproving. If [daughter] was poorly or
anything she would say ‘oh well I’m sure she wouldn’t
have been ill if you were at home with her’, what
difference that would have made I don’t know’ (Dawn,
late 50s, civil service, mother, West Yorkshire).

Some women noted that it was not just parents and family who felt
justified in commenting on women’s choices. Polly recounts feeling
judged by other people whose conflicting demands and expectations
meant she could not avoid disapprobation - as both by staying at
home or by working she attracted criticism;

‘In other circles that I’m in, I find it’s almost the opposite.
It’s kind of like, ‘Oh, you go out to work.’ You know,
‘You’re not at home for your family.’ Not so much now
that they’re older, but certainly before my youngest
started school. I suppose you kind of feel like it’s
[working] part of your identity... I don’t know. I suppose it
just makes you feel like you’ve got some worth. But, at
the same time, it’s not really that worth that’s most
important to me. I don’t know’ (Polly, early 40s, part-time
community sector, mother, North Yorkshire).

In some social arenas a mother’s role in raising her children is
thought to supersede all other roles and aspirations she may have.
Ella, who works with young mothers, describes how pressures on women to provide socially (and locally) acceptable levels of care for their children limits the other opportunities available to them;

‘We had a young woman in [...] who asked to be re-housed away from there because she was actually getting hassled for being a bad mother for going to college, the people who lived there they were stopping her in the street and saying ‘oh we’ve heard about you, you go off to college, you want to be staying at home and raising that baby properly’’ (Ella, late 30s, manager, community sector, volunteer, East Yorkshire).

Social roles and expectations which place women in the home as carers also mean that women tend to assume greater responsibility for domestic chores overall. This expectation of taking on the majority of domestic labour had become internalised for many women, who thought that women just tend to fall into caring roles more easily than men. Research shows that ‘women’s increased participation in paid work during the twentieth century has not been matched by men’s increased participation in unpaid household and caring work’ (Pilcher, 2000:774), and that even where men are doing more in the home this is often still seen as ‘helping’ and responsibility still remains with women (Pilcher, 2000). As was found by Duncan (2003), talking about middle-class women in Leeds, women can perceive of themselves as feminists, whilst also believing that their role as a ‘good mother’ means to be there in the home for their children to a greater extent than the father.

The real problems women face in managing careers and children are influencing factors in a trend which is receiving media attention at
the moment due to the low birth rates amongst some sections of the UK population - the increasing numbers of women who are not having children. Schober (2007) notes that increasing numbers of women find compromises in work and caring problematic and, ‘[a]s a result, they may renounce on having children or reduce the number of children they have’ (Schober, 2007:2). The reasons women are choosing not to have children are complex, and of course each individual woman will have personal reasons for such a decision. There is no doubt, however, that these reasons are influenced by wider social factors. As one woman commented, talking about figures she had read that by 2010 25% of women will be without children;

‘That could come down to the career question and also, our generation. We were dealt an uneven hand as it were, because we had all the women of our mothers’ generation who fought really hard so that we had the same opportunities and rights as men in the work place [...] although it’s not necessarily the case. And also I had a good education, and it was almost beholden upon me, you know, you have a good education, you use it... and so you do that and then once you find yourself in a normal workplace it’s like, you think ‘if I’m going to give this the attention it deserves I’ve got to focus on this for several years’, [...] if you’re focusing on your job you don’t necessarily meet the bloke [...] And then also, the whole biological clock, it’s only when you’re in your mid thirties that you feel you’re financially in the position to have children [...] and I think a lot of women are finding now that they concentrated so much on their career or they didn’t meet the bloke they wanted to and stay with him
and that means that the window of opportunity to have children is gone and I think that happens to a lot of women...’ (Karen, late 30s, entertainment sector, mother, West Yorkshire).

Helen is not sure she wants to have children, partly because she is convinced that her future career aspirations would be unfairly affected as she feels the social pressure to stop work and bring up her children for several years would be strong. As she says;

‘I don’t think that’s my role but society does...’ (Helen, early 20s, student, Humberside).

2.2 The interplay of socio-economic structures with women as carers

Alongside the common cultural belief that women are ‘just better at it’, there are structural elements which mean that women often end up bearing responsibility for childcare in spite of other working commitments (Dench et al., 2002). Structural gendered inequalities leading to differential earnings for men and women mean that it often makes economic sense for women in a partnership to give up work or go part-time. Although many of the women we spoke to felt this is the logical solution, they were not necessarily happy with it. No matter how much they appreciated being at home with their children, they felt coerced due to the ways policy and wider society are structured. Although the government has recently made more positive noises about supporting paternity leave, benefits and breaks from work are almost all directed at women in the form of maternity
leave and maternity pay, meaning that even if couples with children want to negotiate who stays home and who goes to work in the child’s first months, financially this is often impossible.

The ways in which families and women negotiate the pressures of childcare and work are frequently related to education, social class and occupation. Women in highly skilled professions, for example, are often more able to use employment policies and legislation to obtain maternity provisions and, partly because the skills they have may be more in demand, may be able to negotiate more flexible options when they return to work. Each woman and family find their own solutions to the problematic of childcare and work. In this report, we allow the voices of women to speak for themselves and, rather than concentrate on what separates different groups of women, we draw out the common threads of experience which run through women’s lives.

The assumption that the woman is the primary carer is ingrained in the ways in which domestic and public spheres operate, and so organisational structures come to further constrain women’s choices. Here, Ella talks about the impact of such institutional stereotyping on the way that male and female students are treated;

‘But it tends to be only young women tend to be asked ‘well have you got childcare issues?’, so we’re trying to say ‘well actually it’s young men’s responsibility, it’s your responsibility as an agency to check out that that’s not a barrier for them...’” (Ella, late 30s, manager, community sector, volunteer, East Yorkshire).
In the next section of this report we investigate some of the ways that women negotiate the various pressures which they experience. We explore the range of solutions that women have found, and the way that they feel about the choices they make. We begin by exploring the ‘value’ which the job of mothering attracts in the UK.

### 2.3 The ‘value’ mothering attracts

The role of ‘mother’ is one that many women interviewed felt was taken for granted and, because of the ways that motherhood is seen as being a ‘natural’ and ‘instinctive’, it is rarely appreciated for the range of different skills it requires. Dex suggests that the lack of pay for domestic labour also leads to it being undervalued (2003). Becky has always taken responsibility for looking after her and her husband’s child, working part-time to fit around their child’s needs, and also taking on the majority of other domestic labour not connected to mothering. She makes it clear that her husband has little appreciation for the amount of labour she provides to support the family and his career;

‘I think we are sometimes, especially if you have children, in a no-win situation, because society doesn’t value motherhood as much as it should […] I mean, he [husband] was on about months ago getting life insurance, and I said, ‘Maybe you’ll have to get life insurance for me as well.’ He said, ‘Why?’ I said, ‘Well, if I drop dead’, god forbid, ‘but if I drop dead, do you know how much it’s going to cost you to get the cleaner, the nanny? […] And he was like, ‘Oh. Oh well, I’d have to take off all the times when
she’s asleep and I’d have to take off all the times when you’re at work, so it wouldn’t cost that much.’ And I thought ‘you have no idea’” (Becky, late 30s, part-time administrator, mother, Humberside).

**Partnerships and divisions of domestic labour**

Some women described significant changes in the relations between them and their partners since having children. This is partly because many of the women we spoke to, unsurprisingly and confirming other research (Schober, 2007), thought their lives had changed a great deal more than their partner’s as a result of having children, and that men seem much more able to continue in a ‘straight line’ whilst women make sacrifices. Ina describes how she feels her partner has reacted to the responsibilities they both now have as parents;

‘I don’t think for one minute that my partner has considered sacrificing anything in terms of fitting around family life, I think he’s taking it as a given that he can go on and just do what he needs to do, and I’ll be the one who shuffles around and fit in with everything, and that’s not disrespect that he has for me, it’s all down to your paradigm, it’s preconceived ideas you don’t even realise that you’ve got, and he doesn’t even realise he’s acting on them’ (Ina, mid 20s, student, mother, Humberside).

She goes on to describe how she feels that her partner has expected her to take on gendered roles and aspirations which she is clearly not entirely comfortable with. She says that her partner thinks she should be content with being a mother;
'I think he does, I think he thinks I should just make that sacrifice because that’s how life is, he’s made it clear to me that I’m not going to be able to pursue a career until [daughter] starts school because of childcare, which I wouldn’t have wanted to do anyway, but the fact that he’s put forward... actually while we were having the debate it slipped out of his mouth and he knew the minute that he said it because he put his hand over his mouth, he said ‘but yes, you’re the woman’ (Ina, mid 20s, student, mother, Humberside).

A recurring theme of this research is that women’s lives are organised differently from men’s, and that these divisions become more marked after having children. Not only do women take more responsibility for childcare but they are also expected to take responsibility for general household management and domestic labour. Data also shows that women spend an average of just over 3.5 hours per day on unpaid domestic and child care tasks in addition to their regular paid work, almost twice as much time as the average man spends on similar tasks (Gershuny, Lader and Short, 2005). The results of a survey conducted in this research confirmed that women continue to bear the majority of the burden of domestic labour. When asked approximately what percentage of domestic/housework they believed they contributed to the household, of the 133 women who responded to this question, 88% said they did more than 50% of this work and 50.4% said they did 75% or more of this work.

This impacts on both the nature of their relationships at home and women’s chances of returning to work full-time. As Becky notes, her husband has developed greater expectations of her housework duties;
‘When I’m cleaning he’s ‘Oh you missed that bit.’ Before [daughter] was born we used to share these things fifty-fifty you see’ (Becky, late 30s, part-time administrator, mother, East Yorkshire).

Elaine also talks about the way she has come to be in charge of household duties. She is realistic about taking a greater share of the physical labour as she is home more of the time, but she has also ended up with the responsibility for domestic labour;

‘Yes, if I’m the one at home, I mean, I don’t feel that I’m spending a lot of time cleaning and things at home. I mean, [husband] […], is as equally likely, to do that kind of cleaning at home as I am, or it just doesn’t get done. Um but because I’m there with the children, of course I’m cooking their tea and I’m sorting out their stuff for school. I’m the one who’s keeping all that stuff in my head on top of, um, going to work. So I know when they’ve got to take their recorders to school or they need their swimming stuff or what they do after school’ (Elaine, late 40s, civil service, mother, North Yorkshire).

Fern clearly shows how the responsibility for domestic tasks is gendered in her household;

‘Yes, yeah. He’s very willing. He will do anything I ask of him. It’s just teaching him to do those things spontaneously, um, that’s more of the problem’ (Fern, mid 40s, agricultural sector, mother, North Yorkshire).

Polly’s experiences are similar;
‘He will help out in a crisis. If I have two that have got to be in different places at the same time and if he can sort of take an hour off work, he’ll do things. So he’s fairly involved but I’d say that it’s down to me to make sure that things happen and to be organised about and just give him instructions’ (Polly, early 40s, part-time, community sector, mother, North Yorkshire).

It is clear that it is women that have to fit work around the needs of children and the home, as is shown by Justine’s description of arrangements should one of her children be ill and absent from school;

‘If he’s [husband] not working that day fine I can go to work but he doesn’t actually, they’re [husband’s work] not very good at giving them time off for children’ (Justine, late 20s, part-time manager, civil service, Humberside).

Kirsty echoes similar thoughts in talking about the way she and her partner organise work and childcare during school holidays;

‘When it comes to school holidays my husband just goes to work, whatever he has to do on his rota he just does it, and I’ve got to work out what days I can work and school holidays I’ve got to organise ‘are they going to their grandmas?’, you know, ‘what day off I can have to fit around his shifts?’, he has to go to work and I have to work around him’ (Kirsty, early 30s, catering sector, mother, North Yorkshire).

Feeling underappreciated and under-valued for their work as mothers was a common theme throughout this research, one which
contributes to women’s low self-confidence and self-esteem, an issue which is explored further in Report 1 of this series (Clisby et al., 2007). Furthermore, as mothering is popularly assumed to require ‘no great skill’ and to be something which women should be naturally good at, women who struggle can be made to feel that this is some individual problem which they face, something which they, personally, lack. Sally talks about the way women struggling after the birth of a child are treated;

‘Quite often women will be encouraged to see it as their individual problem rather than a reaction to circumstances they are in... I really worry that women are encouraged to individualise and diagnose their problems rather than look at the situations they are in and why they are feeling like that’ (Sally, early 30s, manager, health sector, volunteer, West Yorkshire).

2.4 Mothering roles and mental well-being

Although many of the women we spoke to for this research talked about the rewarding aspects of looking after their children they also related less pleasant ones. Mothers repeatedly told us about the monotony of being at home with children, feeling undervalued, the ways they felt isolated and alone, often starved of adult company and how over time this had serious implications for their self-esteem. Comments such as those below reveal the ways that caring for children at home can be a contradictory and conflicting experience for women.
Miranda had a successful career before having her children, had recently separated from her partner and was struggling to cope;

‘It’s nice to be at home with the kids, but it can be boring, it’s hard to keep yourself motivated, sometimes watching a bit of daytime tv is the only adult thing you get all day… what is stimulating for the kids is not necessarily stimulating for you’ (Miranda, late 20s, non-traditional sector, mother, East Yorkshire).

Fiona had expected to love having children, looking forward to the experience but, as she admits, her expectations were idealised versions of motherhood and the reality was quite different;

‘So I was very lonely for the first year and I thought it was going to be wonderful and I was so lonely’ (Fiona, late 40s, manager, community sector, volunteer, mother, Humberside).

Octavia also talks about feeling isolated and thinking that she was becoming a burden to others as she did not have many places to go;

‘I did feel very isolated, I was very isolated and although I did, I make friends very easily, but you know people have still got their own lives to lead, you know, and I hated being stuck at home, so most days I would end up going off in my car and maybe visiting people, but then even, you know yourself, they’d get sick of me, you know, so I needed something different, and something else to focus on, because I found that you end up going down in a spiral, and you know you start losing your self-worth, and I
needed something else’ (Octavia, late 40s, mother, volunteer, Humberside).

Tracey’s experience of being at home for several years with her children contributed to her losing self-confidence and becoming introverted;

‘I just I didn’t go anywhere I just stayed at home, went up to school, it’s just you get in the comfort zone where my confidence was like totally zero, I hadn’t got any, used to walk with my head down hoping nobody would notice me, which is really horrible because I was never like that, that’s just not me, and I think it’s because I spent so much time at home just me and the kids and [husband] and not really got out and met new people’ (Tracy, early 30s, part-time, community sector, mother, North Yorkshire).

Tracey was persuaded by an old friend to join a women’s support group in her home town. She describes this as ‘life-changing’, it gave her a focus, somewhere to go and meet people, as well as offering her the chance to learn new skills and gain self-confidence. She has since begun working part-time, supporting other parents into education.

A further issue which many women felt discomfort with was financial dependence. This was problematic both for lone parents and for women in relationships. Women giving up work can become dependent on their partners financially, affecting how women see their place in the partnership. For others, dependence on state benefits was also problematic or simply not being ‘at work’. Vivienne, who had worked full-time before having children describes
being both indignant and awkward about her husband taking on financial responsibility for her;

‘At that time, the biggest... my biggest concern was, erm, poll tax, because although I had no income, you know, I couldn’t get anything, my husband he was responsible for paying mine... I thought it was so wrong that I should have to pay it when I wasn’t actually earning and he was responsible for paying mine, so therefore he had to pay two’ (Vivienne, mid 40s, community sector, mother, Humberside).

Another woman told us about similar financial discomfort. Jane had worked for several years after leaving university and had been paying some loans back monthly. She explained that when she stopped work to care for a new baby she wanted to defer her loan payments and was asked to get her husband to certify, on her behalf, that the amount of money he gave her each month as ‘housekeeping’ was less than the earnings limit at which the loan had to be repaid. The company were unhappy with her response that this was not possible as they shared their monies equally. Having previously dealt with all her finances independently she found this insulting and demeaning.

All of these aspects; being in the home, social isolation, financial dependence and assuming greater responsibility for domestic labour often lead to women losing a sense of their ‘old’ self, a loss of identification which contributes to low self-esteem. As Jackie, who works as a lone-parent advisor, puts it;
‘And you know, because they lose their own personality. You lose your individualism. You’re a mum, you know’
(Jackie, early 40s, civil service, mother, North Yorkshire).

The experiences of women in this research show clearly that social constructions of appropriate mothering for women in the Yorkshire and Humber Region mean there are great, and often contradictory, pressures on women as mothers. Whilst motherhood is undoubtedly a positive experience for the vast majority, the social and cultural expectations placed on mothers mean that they can end up feeling isolated and under-valued in their mothering roles. In the next section we explore some of the factors which influence when and why women choose to have children.

2.5 Women’s choices and the timing of children

This study talked to women who had had their first child at a range of differing ages; often, although not always, this was associated with personal career and educational aspirations as well as family and social expectations. Connected to this, Joshi et al. (2004) note that the least advantaged tend to have children earlier whilst the most advantaged women tend to defer having children. Wider society tends to associate early motherhood with lack of aspiration as suggested by these two quotes;

‘but they just don’t seem to, there’s no sort of like motivation with them [...] and that’s because that’s what their mums, mums did, and their mums did, it’s just something, it seems to be like a generation thing and they just tend to get a job, get pregnant, they get council flats,
they get a council house and then they have more kids and that’s it’ (Tracy, early 30s, part-time, community sector, mother, North Yorkshire).

Tracy goes on to describe her own experience of having children at a young age. She gave up work rather than take maternity leave as she felt that finding appropriate, affordable childcare would have been too difficult and working would not have been financially rewarding;

‘I was with my partner so it was like, it wasn’t as scary as it could’ve been, but it was still really scary, and then I think I just got into this like ‘well ok, there’s no point going back to work, I might as well have lots of kids’ and I had the first two’ (Tracy, early 30s, part-time, community sector, mother, North Yorkshire).

Although some of the women interviewed saw few other options available to them and perceived little reward in delaying motherhood, for others, it is clear that early motherhood can provide a sense of purpose, self-respect and adult status to their lives (Hallam and Creech, 2007). Motherhood itself is an aspiration for young women, as suggested by these two women’s comments;

‘I mean I had one woman say ‘well I was only going to work in a factory so what difference does it make’ there just doesn’t seem to be very high levels of aspirations around what young women can do’ (Ella, late 30s, manager, community sector, volunteer, East Yorkshire).

‘Umm, I remember some women I do think, it was a case of having not succeeded at school and having left school with no or few GCSEs that it would be a case where um,
their uniqueness stood because... existed because they could bear children’ (Kashvi, late 20s, student, part-time, community sector, Humberside).

Other women talked about the various ways they tried to make motherhood fit in with other aspirations by trying to plan motherhood for a time of their lives when they felt stable emotionally and financially. This delaying of motherhood was evident amongst women from all socio-economic groups and suggests, again, that the expectations on women to fully participate in both economic and domestic spheres create significant pressures on women’s lives;

‘Most of my friends was maybe about 18 or 19 and what we tended to do was we just... I don’t know maybe it’s because me mum never really had much and when I did want... I always knew that I wanted to have children, but I didn’t want to have them until, [...] we was financially secure [...] so we knew that I could afford for me to go part-time’ (Vivienne, mid 40s, community sector, mother, Humberside).

It has been shown that numbers of women are, increasingly, delaying having children until they have achieved goals in other areas of their lives\textsuperscript{10}. This is not just occurring in the UK, but across the European Union (Nicoletti and Tanturri, 2005) and other parts of the world. This is especially the case for women with career/professional aspirations who feel that having children early could have a negative impact on their prospects. The example of Jane shows the ways that

\textsuperscript{10} The mean age for giving birth in the UK has increased from 28.6 years in 2001 to 29.2 years in 2006 and the mean average age for first birth in 2004 in England and Wales was 27.5 (http://www.mothers35plus.co.uk/intro.htm).
various elements combine to influence decisions around when women (or couples) have children.

Jane is in her early 30s, is married and has one child. Before having her daughter Jane held a professional job. She and her husband planned for having children to fit in with their economic and social positions. She says;

‘[husband] and I have been together 10 years now and we always knew that we wanted to have children but we didn’t want to have children until we got married so we got married three years ago so that was 2004 and we started trying [...] we always said we wouldn’t have children until his salary was at a certain level so that I could give up work if I wanted to [...] I’m probably at the stage now, hopefully, where even if I take some time out I can maybe step back into at least somewhere near where I was before I had [daughter]’ (Jane, early 30s, mother, West Yorkshire).

Before having her daughter Jane was quite certain she would return to work, at least part-time, after her maternity leave and they planned financially for her to take a year off with their daughter. However, Jane realised that she wanted to be at home with their daughter for a longer period. The way she describes coming to this decision makes clear just how much women’s choices are influenced by how they think these choices will be received by those around them, and the conflict which many mothers face;

‘I found it a really difficult decision to make to not go back to work... as I said I had thought I would go back part-time, by the time she was about 6 months I really started thinking
about what I wanted to do and I think that deep down I actually knew that I wanted to stay at home but I think that I felt that I ought to be returning to work. I felt that there was a real expectation that you have your children and you go back to work and you go back to work full-time and you are a success at work and you’re a marvellous mother and... I found it really difficult to almost justify to myself that decision to stay at home [...] I felt there was a lot of pressure and expectation ... [not so much from her husband] from society itself [...] but then, conversely my parents were very much against me going back to work which very much conflicts with the way they brought me up’ (Jane, early 30s, full-time mother, West Yorkshire).

Decisions around motherhood are closely linked, not only to how women perceive, and plan for, their careers, but also around the value which mothering is given in different contexts. Women’s experiences as mothers and carers, as we have seen, can have positive and negative aspects.

**Increased role conflicts are a factor in women’s decisions not to become mothers**

Concerns about the impact of children on other areas of women’s lives are so strong, and the conflicts facing women about ‘when’ to have children are so complex that some women are rejecting motherhood altogether. Of course, the reasons women do not have children are complex and include physical and social issues as well as personal choice. This research found, generally, that women without children often appear to underestimate the impact which motherhood could have on their employment and educational
aspirations. There are two key findings among the women who are not mothers:

- Many of the older women we spoke to who don’t have children appear to underestimate the impact that having children would have on their careers
- Those who have managed to get to the top of their chosen profession have often had no children. There is an additional point here that very successful women with children have tended to have ‘wrap-around’ childcare and other support to replace their domestic labour

This is not to say that some women don’t very successfully negotiate both children/domestic responsibilities and careers, a lot of women recognise that this is just much more difficult.

Ann, in common with several women who did not have children, thought that children would somehow just ‘fit in’ with her lifestyle and aspirations. In contrast to this, we spoke to several women who said they had had similar expectations before having children but, once they became mothers, their priorities had changed and they chose part-time work or full-time motherhood instead;

‘I think it’d be alright. I think I could still do everything. You’d probably just adapt as it went along really. I don’t think that that’d cause a problem really. I think it’s more just psychological than anything else’ (Ann, late 20s, self-employed, caring sector, East Yorkshire).

Rhona, as with Ann, feels that having children would not really have impacted on her career;
'I don’t know, because I, I am so determined that, and so driven that, I uh, I’d have found a way around something I’m sure to uh, to work it out’ (Rhona, mid 30s, engineer, West Yorkshire).

Other women, though, had a different perception of the impact of children on their career prospects. Helen’s comments are typical of many younger women’s assessments of the effect of having children, although she is rarer in being sure that she does not want to have any children herself;

‘I personally I don’t want kids, I think for me that automatically gives me a boost in what I want to do … there’s always a problem with getting child care and things like that, that I probably won’t have to deal with’ (Helen, early 20s, student, Humberside).

In the UK, a range of factors including economic imperatives, personal satisfaction and the significance of professional based gendered identities mean that increasing numbers of women are seeking successful ways of combining motherhood and work. The next section of this report explores some of the ways women understand what a successful work/life balance is, and some of the strategies they employ to achieve this.

3.0 Squaring the circle of work/family balance: women as individuals, mothers, workers and learners
'In the UK, necessity has created a selfhelp form of work-life balance, particularly for women workers. They take part-time jobs and care for their children and elderly in their non-paid time' Rita Donaghy.

Having explored some of the socio-cultural expectations placed on women around reproduction issues, we now turn to explore the ways in which decisions around having children impact on women’s professional identities, career and educational aspirations and achievements outside the home. In recent years women’s participation in the work force has increased dramatically, partially enabled by the changing nature of work in the UK, which has resulted in the expansion of part-time opportunities and increased possibilities for flexible working. This is allowing many more opportunities for women to combine mothering roles and employment, particularly by taking up part-time positions.

3.1 Women and Work/Family Initiatives

The UK government believes that employment is a positive option for parents as it enables them to participate in society, and as a means of decreasing levels of child poverty. Since the Labour Government came to power in 1997 a range of measures have been introduced designed to assist families, particularly mothers, into work. These have included: enhanced maternity leave rights, rights to paternity leave, parental leave and pay and leave for family reasons. Alongside

these measures there have been other developments such as the Working Families Tax Credit system and the Working Tax Credit scheme which sought to provide additional income for families on low wages.

In 1998 the UK government introduced a National Childcare Strategy, designed to ensure the local provision of accessible, affordable, and quality childcare for children from birth to 14, or to 16 for children with special educational needs or disabilities (Prime Minister’s Office, n.d.). In 2000, the Department for Education and Employment launched a new initiative which widened the extent of flexible working in British workplaces, and since April 2003 parents of children under 6 have had the right to request flexible working arrangements, with employers being required to consider such requests seriously.

For many then, flexible and part-time working is providing an answer to the pressures which women and, to a lesser degree men, face balancing work and home. However, some women are suspicious of the underlying motivations of this drive to encourage mothers into work. Lynne feels that these policies serve to place even greater pressures on women and may not be for women’s benefit;

‘I feel as though the government have encouraged women to go back to work when in actual fact they might be happier staying off and bringing their children up. I’m wondering whether there’s actually a financial agenda behind it. I know they’ve sold it as a ‘we want to keep women’s skills at work and it’s important for them to get back to work because we’re not using their skills’, but they might actually want to bring their children up and I
think it’s put a lot of pressure on women really in the workplace and it’s difficult for them’ (Lynne, late 30s, manager, civil service, East Yorkshire).

Other women felt that the various Government initiatives had positive aspects but that they were not necessarily designed in ways which suited women/mothers. Several of the women we interviewed, for example, received Working Tax Credits\(^\text{12}\) but felt that the system was not flexible enough to meet their needs and be really effective. Imogen’s experiences of assistance were mixed;

‘One of my huge arguments is childcare for holidays, childcare while [daughter’s] on summer holidays….So if I only needed a six week block in the summer holidays for school, I can get 80% of that, but I would get that proportion spread out say from whenever I applied July through to the end of March… so how many lone parents, parents can then afford to pay out £50, £60 a week for that six week block because you’re not getting it back then. You’re getting it back over a period of that year… On the one hand government is saying get back into training, get back into training, get back into work, the next hand they’re not giving that…’ (Imogen, mid 40s, part-time administrator, mother, North Yorkshire).

Other women were put off by the complexities of paperwork they were expected to complete;

\(^\text{12}\) ‘Working Tax Credit is a payment to top up the earnings of low paid working people (whether employed or self-employed), including those who do not have children’ (HM Revenue and Customs, n.d.).
‘Err, you know at the time I said to my friends I really don’t know what I’m doing, if I’d have known how hard it was going to be to get childcare sorted, sort all the paperwork out and everything else I don’t think I’d have done it... And then Housing Benefit and Council Tax, one week it’s term time and you get that much and the following week is half term or holidays and you get that. And every time you get another letter and then... because like there was the summer holidays and he’d been at nursery and then started school, I had a childminder so that all changed, so then I had to fill in loads more forms and take them down to the Council and sort all that out again. And... and you’re just constantly filling out forms and taking in wage slips and... childminders fees and, you know’ (Tessa, late 30s, part-time clerical, mother, North Yorkshire).

Other women felt they would be no better off through working, in spite of extra assistance, as they only expected to be able to get low-paid jobs, and working part-time would not be financially rewarding.

Another major strand of Government-led interventions designed to facilitate mothers’ increased participation in the labour force are new laws on gender discrimination, which were recently tightened in April 2007 with the introduction of the Gender Equality Duty. However, many of the women we spoke to were sceptical about the ability of legislation to make significant improvements to their work experience, as this would not effect change on a cultural level. Ina’s understanding of the in-built unfairness in the UK system reveals the ways many women felt about their chances of receiving equal treatment;
'Unless the Government are going to subsidise a company directly for loss of earnings from an employee who has to leave on maternity, then I don’t think it’s going to change anything, I really don’t, if you’ve got a man and a woman both eligible, both as experienced, both as qualified, they’re always going to pick the man for that reason, because if you leave and have children they’re going to be losing money while you’re gone’ (Ina, mid 20s, student, mother, Humberside).

All this may lead one to question; why mothers choose to work. Returning to work after having children is not a simple choice and is often influenced by economic necessity. For other women, however, working is not simply about economics but is a positive choice for themselves and a key way of maintaining a sense of identity other than the gendered construction of themselves as ‘mother’. The identity women have prior to becoming mothers is one that they have held for much longer than the time they have had children, and so it is unsurprising that it is important for many women that they attempt to maintain this. Very often women were choosing to work even when this was not necessarily financially rewarding. As Becky explains;

‘I mean, the thing is you see, working since [daughter] was born has not been about the money because most of my money goes straight on childcare [...] it’s not actually financially viable is work [...] It gives me a sense of identity. It gives me a sense of being useful. Not that being a full-time mother isn’t. It’s a very important job, but that’s not something I can do solely’ (Becky, late 30s, part-time administrator, mother, Humberside).
Kirsty neatly encapsulates her main motivations for returning to work in one sentence;

‘It was being able to have a conversation with an adult, and I remember thinking I could go to the toilet on my own without having her [daughter] strapped to my leg’ (Kirsty, early 30s, catering sector, mother, North Yorkshire).

3.2 Maternity leave provision and career breaks

Mothers’ entitlement to return to their employment after childbirth was introduced in 1973, and there have, since, been numerous improvements both to the duration of paid leave, and the range of mothers eligible to benefit. These provisions changed again recently, and for babies due on or after April 1st 2007, women are entitled to 52 weeks maternity leave in two parts, the first 26 weeks of which are available to all women regardless of the length of their service to employers. Again, cultural and institutional expectations on women as main carers mean that fathers do not experience parity in these rights. Provision for fathers is slowly changing, and from April 2003 fathers\textsuperscript{13} were given the right to 2 weeks consecutive paternity leave, again with conditions attached. However, it is almost always the women who take career breaks when people have children. In fact, in the survey carried out during this research, only 1 man stated they had taken a break of more than four months from work to care for children. Mothers are, in general, showing higher rates of return to employment following maternity leave, and diminishing lengths of

\textsuperscript{13} This leave is offered to all biological and non-biological fathers or partners of mothers, where a declaration is given that they are either the parent of the child or the partner of the mother, and live with the mother in an enduring family relationship.
time out of the employment market (Dex and Ward, 2007:5-6) with large numbers of women taking no more time out than their maternity leave provision (Hansen et al., 2006).

It is clear from this research that the increasing availability and improved conditions of maternity leave are appreciated by women. Many of the older women said that this had not been available to them and the norm had been for women to give up work when they had children. Whilst, in this study, almost all the women who were employed at the time they had children took maternity leave of varying length, the main limiter of the length of maternity leave appeared to be economic, as maternity pay may not be paid for the full possible length of leave. A few women also commented on the fact that this leave is only available to mothers, and that they would have liked to combine leave with the child’s father. Nevertheless, improved maternity leave conditions were significant in women’s choices around returning to work.

However, it is shown that women’s ability to access maternity leave is linked to educational qualifications as women with higher qualifications are more likely to be employed during pregnancy (Dex and Ward, 2007), and some women still find it difficult to know what their options are;

‘When I was pregnant I had to chase up all my own information on pregnancy and risk assessment, nothing was made public or published, nothing was offered to me, I had to do all the leg work’ (Miranda, late 20s, non-traditional sector, mother, East Yorkshire).

Motherhood has well documented economic penalties for women, not
least because of the impact which career breaks have on overall lifetime earnings and subsequently on pensions. Joshi et al. (1999) note one of the significant reasons for the low earning power of mothers compared to others is that they take a career break. Estimates suggest that over the life course an average women who works full-time could lose £300,000, which increases if she takes a career break to care for children or undertakes low paid part-time work (EOC, 2007, Cabinet Office, 2000). Gregg et al. (1998, cited in Bennet, 2005) note that, on average, women experience a drop in pay of about 16% (twice that of men) after taking a year out of the labour market, whilst others point to the downward mobility that is faced by many women after an employment break (Warren et al., 2001, Smeaton, 2006), or that the pay gap between mothers and non-mothers continues.

Women, it seems, face disproportionate costs for taking a career break. This is because the timing at which women may take career breaks or reduce their working hours when having children may well be at a crucial point in promotion structures. These are often linked to age and expect that all staff can be assessed for promotion at the same age, or after the same number of years of service. ‘The cumulative impact of this small break in career can be expected to far outweigh any real difference in actual, and certainly in potential, ability’ (Grimshaw and Rubery, 2007). Whilst typical men’s working patterns are full-time and continuous, women’s typical patterns are reduced and discontinuous due to caring commitments (Warren et al., 2001). In the following sections we present the experiences of women in this study connected to their decisions around returning to work after having children.
3.3 Returning to work

It has been clearly documented that mothers, as a group, tend to occupy lower status and lower paid jobs than both men and non-mothers, and that they tend to be employed in areas of high gender segregation. This is largely because, as mothers take prime responsibility for managing home and work roles, the occupational choices which they perceive as open to them are influenced by the structuring of different occupational areas. Essentially, women often see little point in trying to manage a high-pressure, full-time career when they additionally expect that they will take on the majority of household labour. For example, occupational areas where jobs typically have very long working hours, and do not offer part-time work or hours of work that fit within boundaries of childcare provisions, are likely to be less attractive to women when they have young children (Tomlinson et al., 2005). This was raised repeatedly in discussions around women entering Non-Traditional Occupations such as construction, trades such as plumbing or electrician, or areas such as engineering, where inflexible working patterns militate against women with children being able to participate.

One argument which is often used to counter the fact that women experience less reward from their professional work is that they get additional benefits in other areas of their lives. This assumes that a drop in wage and break in career progression are balanced by the time gained to spend on rewarding activities in the home arena, and that mothers occupy employment positions which take their needs into account. There is little evidence, however, that job areas which mothers do are inherently more ‘mother-friendly’ than other jobs, other than that they are part-time.
Findings from this study show how moving back into work can make women feel that they are already labelled in some way as ‘not as good employees’ as demonstrated by the way Miranda felt when she returned to work;

‘I took a career break for maternity leave for around 8 months, it does really hold you back and I think this is more so in male dominated careers... When I came back from maternity it was like being on probation all over again... I felt like I had to prove I could still do the job’ (Miranda, late 20s, non-traditional sector, mother, East Yorkshire).

Other women feel they are not considered as seriously committed to their work, that colleagues/bosses think they constantly have half their thoughts on their children, and so are passed over for promotion or positions of responsibility. The women we spoke to, however, felt that characterisations of them as less committed to work were unfair\(^\text{14}\). Instead, many of the women thought employers could do more to help women returners, suggesting that what exists is a situation in which ‘male’ needs are the norm and women’s/mothers’ needs are seen as aberrations and, therefore, problematic. Miranda’s experiences of trying to fit in her needs as a mother show how unsympathetic working environments can be predicated on gendered needs and understandings;

‘When I was breastfeeding I asked if there was somewhere private I could express my milk, I was told I could use the

\(^{14}\) There is debate around this issue. Catherine Hakim, in a 1995 article called ‘Five feminist myths about women’s employment lists, as number two, ‘The myth of no sex differential in work commitment and work orientations’ (1995:432). She argues that women, in fact, do display greater levels of commitment to the domestic sphere than men.
first aid room but if there was an emergency I would have to get out straight away, or I could use the toilet, I said to them, would you make a cup of tea in a toilet? [...] There was [hundreds] people working there, many of them women, surely this problem has been raised before, but nothing was done ever about it [...] never wanted to be treated differently; I just wanted to have the resources to be able to do my job to the best of my ability’ (Miranda, late 20s, non-traditional sector, mother, East Yorkshire).

Although these experiences are clearly related to gendered understandings of appropriate working conditions and practices, some women also noted the lack of support and understanding that they felt from female colleagues, especially those without children. Again this reflects the earlier discussion on the ways that women without children can underestimate the impact that this would have on their lives. It is noticeable how gendered stereotypes are played out in such situations though, as women seemed to expect a greater degree of solidarity and understanding from female colleagues than male ones, showing how ingrained the notion of women as carers is within gendered identity constructions. Dawn’s comments demonstrate this clearly;

‘I know when [daughter] was small and I was working I know that if I had to have time off because she was ill or there was something on at school that I really felt I ought to go to, I know the women there who didn’t have children very much resented it ‘oh why’s she being allowed to have time off just because she’s got kids’’ (Dawn, late 50s, civil service, mother, West Yorkshire).
Polly’s experiences reveal similar problems for women with children balancing work and family commitments;

‘I felt there were some people higher up in the company or one particular person who was the PA to the Chief Executive, she didn’t have children and her attitude could be quite scathing of people that needed to look after children and things’ (Polly, early 40s, part-time, community sector, mother, North Yorkshire).

Earlier in this report we discussed the impact of motherhood on women’s self-confidence and self-esteem and the ways this is associated with undervaluation of women’s mothering and caring roles. This means that women who are seeking to return to work after a career break to look after children often underestimate the range and depth of skills they have which can be utilised in the job market;

‘Yes, I think it is, and I remember saying exactly the same thing, well I don’t have any skills, you know, I think we’ve all said it at some time, you are a mother, you go shopping, you do all these things but you just don’t see it [...] and that’s because it’s just not recognised here that looking after children is an important role and it is a job [...] they think you’re just doing nothing’ (Carla, mid 40s, manager, community sector, mother, North Yorkshire).

When women return to work after children addressing issues of self-confidence are critical, and many of the efforts of women’s voluntary and community services are focused on addressing issues of women’s self-confidence as a first step to re-entering education or
employment\textsuperscript{15}. Jackie, whose work involves assisting parents into work notes;

‘Er, we’ve a desperate need for, for something for lone parents to access, whether it’s for counselling, or confidence building, or getting just to meet other lone parents, and, you know, just a beginning point. [...] Erm, confidence… is a big thing. Er, feeling they’ve got a lack of skills, if they’ve been out of work and been at home for a number of years, they don’t feel they’ve got any skills’ (Jackie, early 40s, civil service, mother, North Yorkshire).

These thoughts are echoed by other professionals working in similar fields;

‘A lot of the women do suffer from the confidence, a lack of self-confidence and self belief and that usually emanates from having time away from work because of responsibility with children, or through a bad relationship, or through a bad work and bad employers’ (Edward, early 40s, manager, education sector, father, North Yorkshire).

3.4 Working and childcare

All of the above evidences the extent to which caring for children is a significant obstacle to women’s ability to achieve ambitions in work and education. Childcare continues to be one of the major barriers to women’s participation outside the home. In our survey only 40% of people indicated that their children can go into appropriate,

\textsuperscript{15}This is discussed at length in Miles et al. (2007); report 5 of this series.
affordable childcare when needed. We also asked who took prime responsibility for caring for, or arranging care for family members. Of the 159 women for whom this was relevant, 65.4% either agreed (24.5%) or strongly agreed (40.9%) that they took prime responsibility for caring for, or arranging care for family members. Only 22 men felt this question was relevant to them, of whom 2 agreed or strongly agreed that they took prime responsibility for caring for or arranging care for family members.

Thus, the lack of suitable, flexible, affordable, and accessible childcare continues to mean that women are concentrated in part-time work, do not return to work or can be hugely underemployed when they do so.

The National Childcare Strategy aims to increase the number of formal childcare places available, and has created over 700,000 new places (Women and Work Commission, 2007). For example, in 2001, this scheme offered every four year old a subsidised nursery education. However, these measures have not been successfully translated into reality. In 2004/2005 there were 3.8 children aged under 8 in England for every place with a childminder, in full day care or in out-of-school day care (Ofsted, 2005). Imogen, in common with many other people taking part in this research, placed issues of childcare as fundamental to enabling a mother’s participation outside the home;

‘How can you have a lone parent at home, you know, some of the youngsters that could have three, or even a family where they would be at work, you know, umm that want to achieve but then we’ve got the obstacles of... and why does it always come to damn childcare? It always seems to
come back to this’ (Imogen, mid 40s, part-time administrator, mother, North Yorkshire).

This research calls attention, however, to the fact that women are concerned that simply increasing numbers of childcare places will not adequately address their needs. Many women we spoke to were unhappy about placing their children into caring services and many, where possible, used family members. Where women used formal childcare facilities they judged these by a range of criteria, the most important of which were affordability, accessibility, flexibility and appropriateness. Gabriel suggests that, ideally, women would like to be able to have childcare in the workplace or where they are;

‘A lot women don’t just want childcare they want childcare on the premises because they are unhappy to leave a child somewhere they haven’t got erm immediate access if you like or the fact that they can peek through a window and check everything is going as they want it to be’ (Gabriel, early 40s, part-time administrator, mother, Humberside).

Hazel talks about the conflicts which mothers face around using formal childcare. She also calls attention to the fact that it is inappropriate to consider childcare facilities without exploring connected issues such as flexible working;

‘Yes I think, I think one is flexible working and the other is childcare. I think those two areas, one if childcare isn’t on-site then it makes working more difficult because there are the working hours plus the picking up the children, those can become quite a long day. It’s employers
understanding the needs of the families and understanding that particularly in single families that they have to make concessions when a child’s ill or when the school finishes at quarter past three. Because although we’re looking at the Extended Schools, it doesn’t mean that that mum wants that child to be in that childcare all that length of time’ (Hazel, early 40s, manager, community sector, mother, North Yorkshire).

Problems of flexible childcare provision are particularly severe for women who work part-time, do seasonal work or shift work. Some women complained about having to pay for a whole day of childcare when they were only working two/three hours whilst others noted that school holidays were a major problem due to the lack of formal childcare places available, and the prohibitive cost. As Imogen explains, this means she has to make informal arrangements which can take a lot of time and energy to sort out, as well as causing mothers to feel that they are relying, unfairly, on the goodwill of others;

‘I have to get mum and dad back to the control, you know, for summer holidays umm. And a lot of people have to do that, rely on your friends, rely on your parents and rely on, in the year 2007, on everybody else to look after your children, so you can go and work. It seems ludicrous’ (Imogen, mid 40s, part-time administrator, mother, North Yorkshire).

This research demonstrates that responsibility for arranging formal childcare is almost always the woman’s role, as much as is informal childcare within the home. This leads to women experiencing further
contradictory feelings about their decision to work as often they, as well as wider society, feel that they are best placed to care for their children. Consequently women’s decisions to place their children into childcare often result in feelings of guilt, not lessened by conflicting, but well-publicised, reports on the impact of childcare on children’s development. This resulted in women going to great lengths to try and ensure their children were getting the best childcare possible as suggested by Heather, whose decision to work left her with strong feelings of guilt that she now recognises may have been inappropriate;

‘Well, that again was a bit mad really in that, um, I, err, probably felt quite guilty about going back to work, even just for the two days. So I found the best possible provision which was [local town], which is the opposite direction of my work. So I used to drive all the way out there and drop him off at the [nursery] and then drive back into work. So I added about an hour and half/two hours onto to my day just because I was sort of adamant he would have the best childcare if I wasn’t going to be there. Um, but then after a year or two I sort of realised that was being a bit silly and just put him locally’ (Heather, late 30s, self-employed, mother, North Yorkshire).

Shirley Conran notes that guilt over work is something which only mothers feel, not fathers, and that women need to stop and follow her advice; ‘All working mothers feel guilt. Working women don’t tend to feel guilt, only working mothers. The second you feel guilt say ‘does my partner feel guilt?’ Then you’ll be rolling around on the floor laughing merrily at the very idea’ (Tyler, 2007).
In the final section of this report we explore, in some detail, the ways that part-time working, adopted by many mothers as a solution to managing their responsibilities and identities as mothers and individuals actually does help women fulfill their potential.

### 3.5 Working and part-time/flexible arrangements - benefits and costs

As society demands women are both effective carers and economically active, many women struggle to work out what is best for them and for their children. Not all women make the same choices or face the same opportunities and barriers, and some women in this research welcome the increased range of options open to them relating to flexible working and childcare.

*I think, as well, there’s been a, a tide change around this idea of women... I don’t think women, younger women, feel they have to go to work full-time anymore, with babies. I think [...] it’s much more acceptable to sort of have a combination of work and, and care. And I think, I always felt that it was one or the other, and that, you know, you couldn’t get on if you chose to do the caring*’ (Belinda, mid 40s, manager, health sector, mother, South Yorkshire).

Throughout this report we have presented part-time working as the most common way mothers seek to resolve the tensions between economic necessity, their identities as workers and their roles as mothers. Smeaton (2006) suggests that overall satisfaction with work
is decreasing and, resulting from this, fewer women are willing to work ‘as hard as they can’ to the detriment of other areas of their lives. She suggests ‘[a]s a consequence of these apparent shifts in work orientation, women may increasingly come to reject the equality agenda and embrace instead alternatives to uninterrupted career trajectories and the long hours of standard permanent contracts’ (Smeaton, 2006:7). In this section we consider how women in the Yorkshire and Humber Region feel about the choices available to them.

In spite of recent initiatives the majority of part-time work remains low paid, and attracts low social status. As Dex and Joshi (1999) explain; ‘part-time openings have been mostly in low level occupations. Many women trade down, accepting a convenient job with reduced hours but lower status, as a way of combining family responsibilities with income-generating employment’ (1999:649), or, as Sally notes;

‘It has always been the case that when you have a career break as a woman usually to have children, then you are going to miss out on your experience and once you go part-time as well it is a lot harder to climb the career ladder and I think that has always penalised women more than men’ (Sally, late 30s, manager, health sector, volunteer, West Yorkshire).

Xandra describes how her work became devalued when she first returned to work after having children as she struggled to find a work/family balance;

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16 Whereas the gender pay gap for full-time work is 17%, this rises to a gender pay gap of 35% for women who work part time (EOC, 2007).
‘Well, in the [previous job] I was an officer. I think it was um ... a personnel officer and sort of just ... I took a really big back step but it fitted in with my family commitments’ (Xandra, mid 40s, manager, education sector, mother, South Yorkshire).

As a consequence of negative attitudes towards part-time working, and inflexible organisational structures which often prevent part-timers from accessing career paths, coupled with the problems of finding appropriate childcare, some women look for alternatives such as self employment which allows women to design their own flexible working practices. This, however, can mean that women are underutilising their professional skills;

‘I suppose the only thing I think is quite sad is that, um, actually the playground mums, um, it’s a nice village here and we have lots of, um, coffee type things and handbag parties and jewellery parties, and there’s lots of stuff like that, and you meet the most intelligent women who’ve had the most demanding jobs and who feel they can’t work now because they’ve got children. And I just think that’s such a shame. Um, you know, you’ve got people who were sort of like international execs and things who, you know, just say they can’t find anything that fits in with the children’ (Heather, late 30s, self-employed, mother, North Yorkshire).

Whilst women often choose part-time work in order to combine mothering and professional roles, and see this is as the most logical option economically and personally/professionally, women were also keen to share with us how unfair they felt the system was for what
they saw as effectively being ‘forced’ into low paid, low status work. Such feelings were so strong that women themselves were often quite demeaning about the work they did. As Gayle and Charlotte report of their experiences of work whilst raising children;

‘I stayed at home all the time, if you don’t count like evening jobs in with that really. My… I’ve been in this job 5 years full-time, my last full-time employment was before my first child was born, so in the intervening years I’ve done part… I did Avon for a short while, not very successfully [laughter]. I’ve worked behind bars, I’ve been a waitress, you know the jobs that fit in, so I have worked but only as you were saying earlier the little fitting in jobs really’ (Gayle, mid 30s, education sector, mother, Humberside).

Or, as Charlotte assesses her employment history;

‘It was literally, it was jobs that I suppose anybody could have done. I was either in the kitchens in the restaurant, or as a waitress […] Cleaning jobs, anything like that […] and I worked on a weekend and on an evening… So that’s, that’s why I worked the hours I did. I had to work evenings or weekends when her dad could have her, basically, that’s how I got into work. And when I went to college it was at night as well. It wasn’t a day time course. It was a night-time, an evening course’ (Charlotte, early 40s, part-time clerical, mother, North Yorkshire).

Fay and May both talk openly about the trade-off they have made, remaining in unchallenging professional positions in order to fulfil the
roles they feel are appropriate to ‘good’ mothering. Talking about how she found combining work and children Fay says;

‘I didn’t find it particularly difficult but I... particularly went for job that wouldn’t be challenging, so that I could leave it at work, which is unlike my present job, so I wouldn’t have to work outside of work hours, and one that would give me the time off for school runs and for the holidays, so I targeted a job that would fit in rather than a job that I wanted, but I did enjoy it having said that...’

(Fay, early 50s, manager, community sector, mother, South Yorkshire).

May feels that once women have made the choice to have a family they should accept that other areas of their lives will also change;

‘Um and I think, obviously, it’s been my choice to have children and it’s been my choice in lots of ways to work part-time as a way of negotiating that balance between work and family. Um I could try and work full-time but I think that I would suffer in ways to do with my kind of physical and mental health, I think, would probably suffer because what I couldn’t probably foresee is a situation where we had equal division of labour at home’

(May, late 30s, part-time, education sector, mother, North Yorkshire).

However, by choosing to work part-time, women incur a further penalty in that research suggests part-time workers are not taken as seriously as full-time employees, and that employers often take the view that women are working for pin money rather than seeking to succeed as a (part-time) employee (Grant et al., 2005). May, for
example, is convinced that her part-time status has had a negative impact on her career;

‘My career would be different if I didn’t have children and it would be different, probably, if I hadn’t have decided to negotiate those demands by working part-time. I think the um career structure in the [institution], as in many other institutions, doesn’t really work for part-time workers. I think it’s very much still built around the full-time working model’ (May, late 30s, part-time, education sector, mother, North Yorkshire).

Whilst many women opt for part-time work in seeking an appropriate work/family balance this does not always result in happy outcomes and women end up in low paid, low status positions, often underutilising their skills. Current changes in UK working structures, in which part-time and flexible working are becoming more common may begin to change this situation and facilitate women being able to maximise their potential as both workers and mothers.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

This report has developed a discussion of choices and constraints which women face as a result of decisions about motherhood. Through employing the voices of women from across the Yorkshire and Humber Region, and from a diverse range of cultural, geographical and socio-economic backgrounds we have sought to draw out the threads which are both individual and common to women’s experiences. This report, therefore, adds subtle and
nuanced understandings to the debates around women’s roles, status and aspirations in the modern UK social context. To conclude, we will reiterate some key findings of this research, and, following this, will provide a number of recommendations for future policy and research development.

We begin this concluding section with an extended case study which draws together many of the themes discussed throughout this report.

**Career History Case Study: motherhood and occupational downgrading**

**Patti’s Story**

Patti is white British and in her late 30s. She describes her background as working class and she was brought up in a working class suburban area, she went to school ‘on a deprived sink-estate’. She left school with few formal qualifications and little in the way of positive reinforcement. Nevertheless, through evening classes and sheer determination she gradually gained an advanced education, and completed 2 university degrees. The encouragement, support and confidence-building of key female lecturers during her undergraduate studies was a driver to continuing onto postgraduate research. She now has a doctorate and has significant teaching experience. She is married with 2 young children and lives in West Yorkshire. The case history detailed below began when Patti was a single younger woman determined to make a successful career for herself.

It details the complexities of women’s lives, career patterns and decisions they make. However, what it also serves to demonstrate are the ways in which even the most determined and successful of women can find their career aspirations changed in ways that are not necessarily under their control. Patti’s story also illustrates the interrelationships between a lack of self confidence and gender, class and weak support networks, and how these can impact on career choices. Finally, it is a stark example of the kinds of career down-grading that women can
encounter when they return to work following maternity leave:

Patti worked as a waitress, bar-person and hotel receptionist and completed an Access course before starting her undergraduate degree as a mature student in the mid 1990s. She continued to work almost full-time throughout her studies but managed, with a great deal of hard work, to gain a very good degree and developed a passion for her subject. It became apparent through the course of her degree that she was, contrary to the messages she received during her childhood, a very intelligent woman with the potential to go far. After graduating she sought funding to enable her to undertake further postgraduate studies, finally managing to secure a PhD scholarship and basic stipend in exchange for an increasingly substantial teaching load;

‘My work load was immense, I taught a whopping 7 modules whilst also managing a research project and completing my thesis’

Shortly before successfully completing her doctorate, she found academic employment on a series of temporary contracts, but she felt engaged in, committed to and satisfied with her academic career. However, the workload and expectations were again high, and the temporary nature of the employment left Patti feeling insecure about her future;

‘I was aware my contract was due to end [...] and was quite worried about where my next years' salary was going to come from’

Patti saw a permanent non-academic post advertised in the same institution. It was a difficult decision to move out of a vocation she was committed to, and had sacrificed so much to get into, and move into what she saw as ‘a job rather than a career’, but;

‘After years of long working days, working weekends, and dealing with the pressure of not knowing where my next years’ salary was coming from [the new job] felt like a safe haven. I told myself compromising academic
ambitions and a job I was good at and enjoyed was worth the security this new role offered me’

One could argue that the lack of confidence both to endure the insecurity of temporary contracts and to expect to gain a permanent academic position, were influenced by Patti’s gender socialisation and socio-economic background. Negative experiences and lowered self esteem during her earlier years had left their legacy and, moreover, as a working class woman in a male-dominated, middle class arena, she lacked confidence not only in her abilities, but in the belief that she really belonged in that role. Nevertheless, Patti feels that the decision was the right one at the time, particularly as shortly after starting her new job she developed a debilitating illness which necessitated several months off work. The stress of the previous several years, struggling to complete her doctorate, manage on a low income and build up her career with little socio-emotional support may well have contributed to the onset of her physical illness;

‘The hard work I had done over the past few years finally caught up with me. Within a month of starting work [date] I was rushed into hospital. The following 6 months were very hard. I was quite unwell, at times totally incapacitated, I was admitted to hospital fairly frequently, and unable to work for almost 5 months. I remember being very embarrassed to be unable to work for my new department. Colleagues were as supportive as they could be. I returned to work [date] in a very fragile state. There were times during the summer of [date] when I was too weak to wash my own hair. Organising benefits and looking for work, had I continued with my lectureship, would have been impossible. I was immensely grateful to have a continuing contract, to have had sick pay whilst on leave, and to be able to return to a job at all. It is good to [...] remember why I made the decision to leave an academic career behind me and why that difficult decision worked so well for me at the time’

After returning to work, Patti’s health improved and she also developed an emotionally fulfilling and secure relationship with the man she has since married. Two years later, not expecting to be able to have children after her
illness, Patti became pregnant. This was very welcome news for both her and her partner, however, due to her medical history, her age and the nature of the pregnancy;

‘I was told by my obstetrician to be very careful as I was at a ‘high-risk’ of losing [this pregnancy], I told my line manager as soon as possible and alerted [my employers] to my having to go on maternity leave at 36 weeks, as I was advised. I had the necessary risk-assessments and met with the occupational health nurse. I followed my doctor’s advice to the letter’

As her pregnancy progressed, Patti became ‘increasingly immobile’ and the occupational health nurse advised her to work from home as much as possible, a request to which her line manager initially agreed, however;

‘she later requested a meeting with me, a HR advisor and the occupational health nurse. I thought this was going to be a discussion of how I could work effectively without jeopardizing my pregnancy. I was told I could not work at home and advised to use holiday time to shorten my working week. No suggestions as to how to reduce my actual work load in line with a shorter working week were offered. I continued to work until January. At this point I was exhausted and quite uncomfortable. I saw my doctor regularly, I had fortnightly iron injections as I was very anaemic, he insisted I take sick leave until my maternity leave started in February. Although I was reluctant to do this I realised that I had to put the well-being of my [family] before my commitment to [my employer]’

Patti’s identity as a professional employee as well as a mother is very important to her and she had intended to return to work 4 months after she gave birth. However, she soon ‘realised that this was a foolishly ambitious plan’ and finally arranged to take a combination of 12 months maternity and unpaid leave and to return to work on a 4 day week. However, during her period of unpaid leave her line manager contacted her to discuss her role. She was told that there was no longer funding for her post and that she was to be moved into a different job elsewhere in the institution. Her managers requested a meeting to discuss
the changes that would take place, but did so in a way that seemed not to appreciate Patti’s family circumstances;

‘I did not drive at this time and was breastfeeding. My partner works full-time and we do not have any childcare support. A meeting was going to be very difficult to attend. I explained this to the secretary and gave a list of dates and times (which were very few and quite specific) which I could make. She came back with a time that suited every one, but not one that I had suggested. I explained my difficulties again and was told that this was the only time every one else was free. I had no choice but to attend. My husband rearranged his [work] to look after the [family]. This was the first time I had left the house without my [child] since...delivery, 7months previously. It was the first day I did not breast feed ... at lunch. I attended the meeting feeling dazed and overwhelmed. I was told my post should move to the [new office]. Although I tried to put up some resistance most of my energy was being spent on just keeping up with an officious conversation. I left the meeting to get my taxi home feeling somewhat confused: why would [they] fund my post in one department but not another? What would that mean to my working practice? To my career? These thoughts soon disappeared when I got home and returned to my domestic life’

As the date when Patti was due to return to work on an 80% contract drew nearer, she began to feel that she was not ready to return, and that her baby was not ready to leave her full-time care. As such, she postponed her return date by 3 months and then returned on a reduced 60% contract. However, due to an administrative error, she was not paid for 6 weeks after returning to work and when she did receive her new contract, she found the nature and value of her job had been significantly downgraded. She feels undervalued, sidelined and worried about her future career. This in turn has impacted on her sense of mental well-being;

‘My new contract stated I was now holding an administrator’s post, rather than the academic-related post I had applied for back in [date]. My job had been
evaluated [...] whilst I was on leave. I had not been consulted.

[I] feel increasingly dissatisfied with my working life. After 9 years experience working in HE, after a degree and a doctorate, I am now doing a job I could have done when I left school. Working out of an academic context is very different to any work I have done at the [institution] before, I am finding the transition hard.

Looking at my career as it has panned out over the past 10 years, it is clear to me that both my class, my previous status as a single woman and my gender have informed all of my choices and dictated recent events. I would not have given up an academic career had I been more confident in finding work in academe, if I had had a partner to support me should I not find work immediately, or if I had had monies of my own. Had I not been on maternity leave I doubt my post would have changed so easily. If I had been more engaged at the meeting last Autumn instead of distracted with thoughts of my [child’s] hungry cries and the reliability of my breast pads I would have offered a robust challenge to the management team’s decision.’

Patti has since managed to partially challenge her employers regarding the downgrading of her contract, which has been returned to the academic-related rather than administrative category. However she continues to feel disillusioned with and alienated from her career and is actively seeking alternative employment.

4.1 To reiterate...

- The strength and persistence of gendered stereotypes

Much of social life continues to be organised around gendered stereotypes and expectations which place women ‘in the home’, with unpaid responsibility for the reproductive and community management work, whilst men are expected to engage in the public
sphere as primary income earners. Popular imaginings of appropriate
gendered aspirations and behaviours also mean that motherhood
continues to be equated with womanhood, and women who do not
display ‘appropriate’ caring/mothering aspirations and talents are
seen as aberrant, sometimes even by themselves.

- Women’s lives change significantly more when they become
  mothers than men’s when they become fathers

The persistence of gendered expectations means that for many
women, becoming a mother is one of the most life-changing and
significant events in their lives. This is not to underestimate the
impact which fatherhood has on men’s lives, however, the impact on
women is manifested in all areas including, social, economic, mental,
professional, domestic and physical.

- Women’s lives change in the domestic sphere as they
  become mothers

Due to structural and socio-cultural constraints, alongside personal
choice, women often have prime responsibility for looking after
children, and most women continue to take some time away from
paid work, at least while children are young, and then proceed to
part-time or full-time work. Most women we spoke to found that their
role in caring for children was translated into an overall increased
responsibility for domestic labour, impacting on both roles within the
home and on women’s possibilities of participating in public life
outside the home.

This was the case, also, for women that worked full-time, which
meant that they were under great pressure to be ‘good enough’ both
at work and at home.
- **Women’s lives change in the labour market when they become mothers**

In spite of improved maternity leave conditions and benefits, time out devoted to caring for children can have long-term negative impacts on women’s career progression and earnings, further compounded by the common pattern of women to return to work part-time after having children.

Women may well miss out as they are taking career breaks at crucial promotion times, and when they return to work they often experience occupational downgrading. Many participants opted for part-time work as the best option, in order to try and obtain a good work/life balance, but this can seriously disadvantage women’s position relative to men in the labour market. Part-time workers often have lower wages, poorer working conditions and are taken less seriously in employment contexts.

- **Motherhood can have deleterious effects on women’s self-esteem and mental well-being**

One of the key issues to emerge during the course of this research was the connection between motherhood and women’s sense of mental well-being, self-esteem and levels of confidence. In spite of service provision designed to support mothers, and their children, negative circumstances combine and often result in women losing self-confidence which, again, has serious implications for women’s position when they seek to return to work.

This report has found that women continue to face conflicting and irreconcilable expectations when they become mothers. UK policy initiatives that encourage mothers to work often have negative, as
well as positive consequences, meaning that many women we spoke to were ambivalent, to say the least, about expectations that they should, increasingly, juggle home lives and work lives. Expectations that men operate in the public sphere and women in the private appear to have been replaced by expectations that women should, largely, assume responsibility for the private sphere as well as participating in public arenas without a concomitant shift for men.

4.2 ...and to recommend:

Finally, in this report, we offer some strategic and practical recommendations which address the main themes raised in this discussion.

- **Encourage equality in family and home life**

There needs to be a renewed public debate which increases awareness of the value of domestic labour and, additionally, to raise the value given to the people who perform this labour. This would open up possibilities for encouraging wider debates around power relations in the home.

The work of caring for children needs to be disentangled from other areas of domestic labour which will present a mechanism through which the inequitable gendered division of domestic labour can be addressed.

There needs to be greater recognition of, and support for, the skilled nature of caring work.

- **Work to promote better working practices**
Employers need to be encouraged to adopt more flexible working practices to help both men and women achieve a better work/family balance. This has wide ranging implications as flexible working is increasingly being seen as a positive option and is being recommended as a choice for everyone, not just for those with caring responsibilities. As part of the Gender Equality Duty (2007), the option of flexible working for all those with caring responsibilities, including non-mothers, fathers and carers was introduced.

Greater acceptance of flexible working in practice would enable women, and men, who work part-time to experience the same career development opportunities as those that choose to work full-time.

- **Provide more support for women returning to education/employment after a career break**

There is a need to explore types of support which are available at all levels for women who are seeking to return to paid work, or education, following a career break. Women often feel they lack appropriate skills and self-confidence, and struggle to meet the demands of work and home related roles. Employers, managers, or teachers, for example, should ask themselves what further practical strategies could be implemented within their institutions and organisations to assist women’s transition back into education or employment. Strategies such as mentoring and support systems designed to meet the needs of women, appropriate childcare facilities and consideration of parents' multiple roles would all effect real change in the lives of parents and the ways they manage home/work lives. Rather than viewing the problems which parents face in managing their home and work responsibilities as individual issues, there needs to be a greater awareness of the socially
constructed nature of these problems, and the ways in which structural elements impact on people’s lives.

- **Address parents’ concerns over childcare**

Childcare provision continues to be a major obstacle to women’s full participation in social and economic life. Issues relating to childcare raised by women in this study are not just about the affordability and availability of places, although these were perceived as significant problems, but also about the quality and flexibility of childcare on offer. There needs to be continued development of childcare provision. Connected to this, there needs to be work done which addresses the problematic perception of childcare provision as a profession, which is reflected both in poor wages and low status.

- **Joined up policy thinking**

The issues which women, and mothers, face, which lead to the constriction of their choices and chances in all areas in life result from an intricate mix of socio-cultural and structural factors. There is no use simply enacting new policies or new legislation without also working to promote change in social and cultural understandings of appropriate roles for men and women, and to change the values attached to these roles. Because of this, the final recommendation of this report is that there needs to a continuing and vigorous debate focusing on the ways gendered identities and roles are constructed in the UK.
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