



# **Women's choices in the labour market**

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## Report summary

### Mothers labour market patterns

Three-quarters of mothers return to work within 18 months of maternity. Return is lower after the second child. Return varies with mothers' characteristics and is more likely the higher the mother's qualifications, the greater the mother's training and if the mother has a partner. The period before return is more varied for higher paid.

Employment after maternity often entails reduced hours, including a move to part-time employment, occupational downgrading, reduced hourly pay, and temporary employment.

Labour market withdrawal, occupational downgrading, hours reduction and moves to temporary work also occur when children enter school.

The patterns suggest difficulties combining childcare and paid working, with constraints higher with two children than with one. They also occur in relation to young children's schooling.

### Preferences

There is very little direct evidence on mothers' preferences over labour market participation.

'Preference theory' has posited that there are three type of women: those committed to work, those committed to family and those in between (adaptive) and that these different types make differing labour market choices. These differing choices result, on average, in mothers performing poorly in the labour market. This approach has been widely criticised for its lack of recognition of individuals having a set of preferences (and not solely a preference over looking after one's child or working), dismissal of constraints affecting choice and the lack of recognition of 'choices' being socially constructed.

Women's keenness to work does not differ between mothers and non-mothers. Mothers are no keener than fathers to stop working. It appears that fathers face greater constraints to working part-time than do mothers.

Around half of parents (53 percent) saw their own work/care arrangements as governed by necessity rather choice and only 42 percent of women believed it was possible to meet their work/care needs and the needs of their children.

### Childcare

Mothers' employment is constrained by the lack of availability of high quality full-time childcare. Its lack is particularly a barrier to mothers with children aged under eleven, especially lone mothers, those on lower incomes and to those with more than one child. Schooling introduces major difficulties.

Problems include:

- availability;
- hours available; and
- affordability.

Concerns about quality appear to have declined.

Juggling childcare across a range of providers is a major problem, particularly for lone parents and for mothers without access to informal care.

Childcare constraints affect employment directly (participation, hours of work) and may affect it indirectly (through stress, time demands), particularly the juggling of different provision.

### **Non-family-friendly working**

The UK has a long-hours working culture. This may increase occupational downgrading amongst mothers, as well as reduce participation. For two parent families it may encourage the gender division of paid work/childcare, with fathers working long hours and providing less childcare and mothers working part-time and providing care.

Working outside standard working hours (e.g. evenings, nights and weekends) is widespread amongst parents, particularly fathers. For some this may be a positive choice, to share childcare ('shift-parenting'); for others it is a necessity due to childcare difficulties.

The availability of family-friendly policies appears to have a strong influence on whether mothers return after maternity. Flexible working, particularly part-time employment, is widely available. Data exists on the availability of flexible working for existing employees (i.e. whether an employee might move to flexible working), but not on the availability for job applicants. Reduced working hours, flexitime, jobshare are available to around 50 percent of existing employees. A compressed working week and annualised hours are available to around one third and working from home available to around one quarter. However, the types of practice available may not always suit the needs of employees and there is a belief that flexible working is seen by employers as lack of commitment.

The evidence on the availability of flexible practices by occupational level is mixed. However, part-time is concentrated in lower level occupations, constraining choice and resulting in occupational downgrading.

### **Other factors**

The necessity to commute can lead to withdrawal from the labour market for part-time workers. Cost, time and difficulties arranging childcare are all likely to play a part. This may explain the low return to work after maternity of mothers in London.

Partners' earnings affect the return to work, with mothers less likely to return the higher their partner's income.

Maternity pay and leave are major influences on the timing of the return to work. Half of women return to work at the end of statutory maternity pay entitlement (26 weeks) and almost all the remainder return by the end of the statutory maximum leave period (52 weeks). However, there is evidence of a lack of knowledge about entitlements, particularly amongst those in lower level occupations.

Comparisons across Europe suggest that lengthy statutory leaves are associated with greater labour market participation following leave, although the effect on pay and career prospects are worse.

## **Fathers**

Fathers appear to be more constrained in their choices than mothers, both in their preference to work and to work part-time. This is likely to be influenced by the social expectations around gender roles, exacerbated by the lack of provision of family-friendly working in at higher occupational levels and in 'male' jobs. This is further exacerbated by the gender pay gap and the UK's long hours culture, which encourage two-parent families to split work and caring along traditional gender lines.

## **Policy conclusions**

To enable parents to choose their preferred childcare/paid work balance requires:

- increased provision of childcare which takes into account preferred working patterns;
- flexible working being provided across the spectrum of employment and being seen on a par with full-time working i.e. ending distinctions between full-time and part-time working.

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Background

In July-Sept 2009, 5.8 million women worked part-time. This represents 42 per cent of all women in employment and three-quarters (76 per cent) of all part-timers (LFS 2009). Almost all women with children under-16 who work part-time do so to combine care with paid work. However, for women, part-time working leads to a long-term reduction in pay and seniority and part-time working has been identified as the most important factor reducing mothers' earnings. A range of factors contribute to this, including occupational downgrading on becoming part-time or reducing hours of work (a common feature for women returners). Evidence suggests a high percentage of those working part-time work below their potential. Occupational downgrading may occur due to restricted availability of part-time jobs, a need to reduce work pressures or reduced importance placed on paid employment.

Against this background the Government Equalities Office (GEO) commissioned the National Institute of Economic and Social Research to conduct a rapid evidence review to improve the GEO's understanding of mothers' choices in the labour market.

### 1.2 Aims and scope of the study

The aim of the research was to critically review the evidence on mother's choices in the labour market. It was to focus on mothers'

- preferences for work and for raising one's own family; and
- on decisions on:
  - whether to participate in the labour market;
  - the hours of work, including whether to work part-time or full-time;
  - to downgrade to a lower status occupation; and
  - to change employer owing to maternity/caring responsibilities.

As such, the focus of the study is women's dual role (as earner and as nurturer and, specifically, as parent) and of the choices made which impact on these roles.

These choices depend on individual preferences over bringing up children, preferences over paid working and constraints and opportunities. The study is not concerned with how childcare and work preferences have been formed, but with how preferences, constraints and opportunities interact to affect mother's employment choices and work patterns.

Where the father is present, outcomes also depend on joint decisions over working and caring. Although there is evidence of fathers wishing to spend

more time with their children, in the large majority of families the mother remains the main care giver (Ellison *et al.*, 2009).

### 1.3 Method

The study was based on a comprehensive literature review focused on women's decisions to change their labour market participation. A rapid evidence assessment approach in which the evidence was identified, systematically reviewed and appraised, both as to relevance and to rigour.

The review covered academic publications, both published and working papers and research literature from Government Departments and agencies, the European Commission and key stakeholders. The review focused on research literature and policy documents published in the last 10 years. It focussed on the UK, but international, and comparative, research was also considered.

Only research based on robust approaches was included.

More details are provided in the Appendix.

### 1.4 Sources of data

Mothers' choices may be examined in two ways: directly, through discussions with mothers about their decision making, preferences and constraints and indirectly, through examination of the pattern of labour market participation, i.e. outcomes. Both approaches are problematic, the former requires mothers (or researchers) to be able to identify preferences irrespective of existing constraints; the latter needs to be able to identify how outcomes are influenced by preferences and constraints.

Our review found most literature used quantitative, outcome data. This identifies constraints to mothers' employment by identifying how mothers with different employment patterns differ e.g. that those with two children are less likely to work than those with one child, those with higher qualifications are more likely to work full-time than those with lower qualifications. Data sources used in the literature include cross-sectional regular surveys (e.g. the Labour Force Survey, the Work-Life Balance Survey, the Maternity Rights Survey), the national cohort surveys (e.g. the National Child Development Survey, the British Cohort Survey), as well as *ad hoc* surveys and qualitative research.

Very little literature was found in which women had been asked about their preferences or about their decision making. Since these issues are not covered by any of the national published surveys, such studies relied on *ad hoc* surveys and qualitative research.

### 1.5 The report

The report starts by describing mother's working patterns. It then considers the evidence on mothers' preferences between paid work and bringing up children. It then moves on to constraints: childcare, flexible working, maternity pay and information. These constraints do not work separately, but interact to



affect whether a mother, given her preferences, continues in similar, paid work, reduces hours, downgrades or withdraws from the labour market to care for her child full-time.

## 2 Mother's working patterns

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter briefly describes mothers' working patterns and how participation in the labour market, hours and the nature of work alter with changes in family composition. The pattern changes as children age, with mothers continuously adjusting their approach in the light of children's changing needs (e.g. age and pre- or at school) and the resources at the parent's disposal (Ellison *et al.*, 2009).

### 2.2 Employment patterns

The 2007 Maternity Rights Survey found 76 percent of mothers returned to work within 12 to 18 months of childbirth. Eighty-six percent of these returned to their pre-birth job (La Valle *et al.*, 2008). However, return to work following maternity is often temporary (Paull, 2006).

The pattern of return varies with the number of children:

- the time taken to return to work increases with each birth and is quicker for women who work before the birth (Brewer and Paull, 2006) and
- labour market withdrawal now tends to occur after the second child (and not, as previously, after the first) (Francesconi and Gosling, 2005).

The withdrawal after the second child is interesting. Whilst this pattern could indicate that those who have more than one child have a stronger orientation towards family life, this seems inadequate. Such an explanation would require greater non-return after the first child as many mothers will go on to have a second child. A more plausible explanation is that the barriers to combining work and children are greater (more complicated and costly) with two children than with one child (Smeaton and Marsh, 2006; Francesconi and Gosling, 2005).

Labour market withdrawal also occurs when children enter school (Paull, 2006). This suggests childcare difficulties also arise at this stage.

#### 2.2.1 Mothers' characteristics and employment patterns

A number of characteristics are associated with mothers' likelihood of returning to work and with the period of return. Return after maternity is more likely:

- the higher the mother's qualifications;
- the greater the mother's training; and

- if the mother has a partner (La Valle *et al.*, 2008; Elliott *et al.*, 2001).

The period before return is more varied for higher paid mothers (Smeaton and Marsh, 2006). This may suggest greater choice.

The association between education and return to work can be interpreted in different ways: higher qualifications might increase employability, but better educated women might also have a stronger personal interest or higher incentives to return to employment (Schroder *et al.*, 2008). Alternatively it may reflect Hakim's contention that women who are orientated towards employment develop their human capital (see below).

### 2.3 The quality of employment

Children not only affect whether a woman works, but also the quality of employment.

Returning after maternity often entails:

- a reduction in hours (Paull, 2006) (37 percent in the 2007 Maternity Rights Survey, with the percentage working full-time falling from 63 percent to 34 percent (La Valle *et al.*, 2008));
- movement to temporary and non-supervisory positions (Paull, 2006); and
- a reduction in hourly pay: 15 percent of those who did not reduce their working hours saw their pay fall (La Valle *et al.*, 2008).

These changes are less likely to occur after the first, than subsequent, births, although women are more likely to change their employer after the first birth (La Valle *et al.*, 2008). Movement to part-time work now tends to occur after the second child (and not, as previously, after the first) (Francesconi and Gosling, 2005).

As with labour market withdrawal, downgrading, hours reduction and moves to temporary work also occur when children enter school (Paull, 2006).

Overall, care demands appear to lead to working below potential (Darton and Hurrell, 2005), whether working full-time (Holmes *et al.*, 2007) or part time. This may be due to reduced importance placed on paid employment (Grant *et al.*, 2006), difficulties juggling care and paid work and, for part-timers, the concentration of part-time jobs at the lower level and in limited occupations.

### 2.4 Summary

Three-quarters of mothers return to work within 18 months of maternity. Return is lower after the second child. Return varies with mothers' characteristics and is more likely the higher the mother's qualifications, the greater the mother's training and if the mother has a partner. The period before return is more varied for higher paid.

Employment after maternity often entails reduced hours, including a move to part-time employment, occupational downgrading, reduced hourly pay, and temporary employment.

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The patterns suggest difficulties combining childcare and paid working, with constraints higher with two children than with one. They also occur in relation to young children's schooling.

### 3 Preferences and choices

#### 3.1 Introduction

Mothers' employment patterns are an outcome of the interplay of their preferences (including over paid employment and child rearing) and constraints on their ability to realise these preferences. Much of the literature places little emphasis on preferences, focussing on outcomes and possible constraints. However, some research has focussed on preferences and, particularly, that the poorer economic performance of mothers is due to different preferences.

This chapter first discusses the main research in this area, that of 'Preference Theory' propounded by Hakim. It then discusses research which looks at evidence on the interplay of preferences and constraints.

#### 3.2 'Preference theory'

'Preference theory', as developed by Hakim (1991, 1992, 1993a, 1993b, 1995, 1996a, 1996b, 1998, 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c, 2006, 2008, 2009; Hakim *et al.*, 2008), propounds that there is a gender difference in work commitment and that this accounts for gender inequality in employment. In relation to mothers' employment, she posits that there are three type of women: those committed to work, those committed to family and those in between (adaptive). The type of woman one is affects, firstly, whether one chooses to have a child, secondly, whether the mother works full-time, part-time or withdraws from the labour market and, thirdly, general commitment to work.

Whilst some research has provided support to Hakim's theory, there has been substantial criticism of this theory<sup>1</sup>. In respect of mothers' choices the key issues are:

- the characterisation of individuals into discrete types in respect of their role in motherhood
- the lack of recognition of individuals having a set of preferences (and not solely a preference over looking after one's child or working)
- the range of constraints affecting choice

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<sup>1</sup> For a review of the evidence, see, for example, Warren (2000).

- the lack of recognition of 'choices' being socially constructed.

Moreover, there is a problem of lack of robust evidence to support the theory. Most of the evidence has been cross-sectional. However, longitudinal data is required to counter the possibility that preferences are shaped by experience, constraints and opportunities, as has been found by many studies (Johnston and Swanson, 2006).

### **3.2.1 The characterisation of individuals into discrete types**

Hakim's characterisation makes preferences absolute: one is in one of the three groups, there is no room for strength of preference. This is unrealistic. Mothers will lie on a continuum from those who very strongly wish to provide full-time care and those who wish to work full-time (Walters, 2005).

### **3.2.2 The lack of recognition of individuals having a set of preferences**

People's behaviour is affected by their whole set of preferences and not solely a preference in respect of motherhood. Mothers have preferences over their financial situation, financial autonomy, social contact, exercise, leisure activities, intellectual stimulation, etc., as well as over their role as a mother and employment. All these preferences affect choices, with different preferences being balanced and played off against each other. Again, this leads to a continuum of preferences, with the balance between preferences affected by the opportunities available.

### **3.2.3 Constraints affecting choice**

Hakim does not examine the limited range of part-time working as a constraint, although she focuses on trying to demonstrate that this limited range is due to women's choices, rather than constraining choice. Within her models, she does not fully investigate the role of the limitations of part-time work (or flexible working more generally), nor other major constraints (such as the nature, availability and cost of childcare, family decision making, income and pay gaps, discrimination), for which there is ample evidence on affecting choice.

### **3.2.4 The lack of recognition of 'choices' being socially constructed.**

Finally, Hakim does not allow for choices being socially constructed, constructed by gender stereotyping and by constraints. Cross-national studies show how women's preferences vary, including with social, political and economic conditions (Torres *et al.*, undated).

Without consideration of constraints and the social construction of constraints, it seems difficult to conclude that the pattern of employment is merely an expression of preferences, rather than a combination of preferences and constraints.

### 3.3 Other direct empirical evidence on preferences

A recent study provides direct evidence on preferences over labour market participation (Odone, 2009)<sup>2</sup>.

- A high percentage of women (and mothers) who say they would work even if not financially necessary:
  - 70 percent of mothers with a child aged under 11
  - 76 percent of mothers with a child aged 11 to 17<sup>3</sup>
  - 72 percent of all women.

Thus women with children aged 11 to 17 seem to be as keen to work as those without children and those with younger children only slightly less so. Preference theory would suggest that, on average, mothers would be less keen to work than non-mothers.

- Fathers are at least as keen as mothers to stop working if it were not financially necessary<sup>4</sup>:
  - 31 percent of fathers with a child aged under 11 (compared with 28 percent of mothers)
  - 32 percent of fathers with a child aged 11 to 17 (compared with 23 percent of mothers).

For all men and women, there is no gender difference in the percentage who, if it were not financially necessary, would not work (27 percent and 25 percent respectively).

If preference theory explains the poorer performance of mothers, unless fathers and mothers face differing labour market constraints, fathers' keenness to stop working should result in fathers also performing poorly in the labour market.

These figures suggest that there is no gender difference in people's keenness to have a paid job and that parenthood affects this very little.

The real gender difference is not in working, but in whether parents wish to work full- or part-time. Depending on which of Odone's figures are used, this difference appears fairly small (46 percent of fathers and 56 percent of

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<sup>2</sup> The data, but not the arguments, are taken from Odone (2009). However, Odone focuses on other data on people's views on whether a mother should work when there is not the financial need. Interestingly, people seem more likely to think that mothers, in general, should not work than think that they themselves would not work in the same circumstances. This implies that, in responding to this type of question, respondents take less notice of all the reasons that a mother might choose to work and more notice of the idea that a mother should look after her child.

<sup>3</sup> The data are also given for all those with a child aged under 18 (71 percent preferring to work) and all mothers (68 percent preferring to work). There is no explanation as to why these totals (which include additional respondents) show fewer wishing to work than the data where the age of the child is given.

<sup>4</sup> The figures for all fathers and all mothers are identical, 31 per cent, but there is no explanation why, when the data are given by the age of the child, more fathers than mothers wish to not work.

mothers would choose to work part-time if it were not financially necessary to work) or large (39 percent of fathers irrespective of the child's stated age, compared with 56 percent of mothers with a child aged 11-17 and 59 percent with a child aged under 11). Given the small percentage of men and large percentage of women who work part-time, this suggests that fathers' choices are more curtailed than mothers'. Moreover, it is likely that men's willingness to work part-time, compared with women's is depressed by the gendered pattern of part-time working, its concentration in traditionally female, low-paid and low level jobs, together with gendered social expectations.

### 3.4 Women's choices

The approach taken by Hakim results in debate over women's (and mothers') preferences as though they are a simple trichotomy (or dichotomy) and solely relate to paid work and childrearing. Women have a multiplicity of preferences (over children, childcare, working, income etc.) with each lying along a continuum, which may change over time. The combination of preferences affect choice. The actual choice made in respect of paid employment (and how well each individual's preferences are met) depends on the opportunities and constraints faced.

Major constraints and influences include childcare (availability, cost, flexibility, quality), the availability of family-friendly work practices, family situation and partners' preferences, income and earnings and these are discussed in more detail in subsequent chapters.

Both preferences and constraints will vary with the perceived needs of the child. They will also change with the age and number of children and they will change with the mother's situation, i.e. her expressed preferences can be conditioned by what she does (her preferences provide a *post hoc* justification of her actions) and her options (Fagan, 2001; Steiber and Haas, undated).

The interplay is described in the 2007 Maternity Rights Survey (La Valle *et al.*, 2008). This describes five different 'types' of mothers who do not return to paid work within 12 to 18 months following childbirth:

- high orientation towards parental care, but saw barriers to working, notably childcare and flexible working; one third said they would work were these barriers addressed;
- low orientation towards family care and saw high barriers to working (childcare and flexibility); many said they would return if barriers were addressed; younger were particularly prevalent in this group;
- high orientation towards parental care, with no intention to return irrespective of barriers; older, highly qualified, partnered and high income were particularly prevalent in this group;
- low orientation towards family care and saw low barriers to working; a minority said they would return if barriers were addressed; lone mothers and those with low qualifications were particularly prevalent in this group;

- low orientation towards family care with high barriers to working (lack of qualifications, fears of leaving benefits); some said they would return if barriers were addressed; lone mothers, low qualified and low income and younger were particularly prevalent in this group.

This typology, whilst retaining a categorical (rather than continuous) approach, shows how preferences, barriers and opportunities interact, with only the third group seemingly able to make a relatively unconstrained choice.

Around half of parents (53 percent) saw their own work/care arrangements as governed by necessity rather choice and only 42 percent of women believed it was possible to meet their work/care needs and the needs of their children (Ellison *et al.*, 2009).

The state may affect these constraints, making it easier or more difficult for an individual to maximise their preferences, and resulting in more or fewer women being able to work or to stay at home and look after their children. Which constraints policy addresses will depend on a balance of the aims of the government and the financial constraints it faces.

### 3.5 Summary

There is very little direct evidence on mothers' preferences over labour market participation.

'Preference theory' has posited that there are three type of women: those committed to work, those committed to family and those in between (adaptive) and that these different types make differing labour market choices. These differing choices result, on average, in mothers performing poorly in the labour market. This approach has been widely criticised for its lack of recognition of individuals having a set of preferences (and not solely a preference over looking after one's child or working), dismissal of constraints affecting choice and the lack of recognition of 'choices' being socially constructed.

Women's keenness to work does not differ between mothers and non-mothers. Mothers are no keener than fathers to stop working. It appears that fathers face greater constraints to working part-time than do mothers.

Around half of parents (53 percent) saw their own work/care arrangements as governed by necessity rather choice and only 42 percent of women believed it was possible to meet their work/care needs and the needs of their children.

## 4 Constraints: childcare

### 4.1 Introduction

The availability of high quality full-time childcare affects the propensity of mothers to work and whether they work full-time (Longhi and Platt, 2008). Its lack is particularly a barrier to mothers with children aged under eleven and, especially to lone mothers with young children (Li *et al.*, 2008; Francesconi

and Gosling, 2005) and to those with more than one child (Francesconi and Gosling, 2005).

The difficulties of childcare at various stages are indicated by the massive increases in likelihood of working part-time depending on the presence of a child under school age (by 900 percent) and the presence of a child of school age (and under 12) (by 300 percent) (Francesconi and Gosling, 2005).

#### **4.2 Availability of childcare**

There is evidence that the choice of some women to work is constrained by difficulties finding childcare. The most recent Childcare and Early Years Survey of parents reports that over a third of parents say there are not enough childcare places available in their area, with particular gaps identified in access to before and after school provision in their child's school, and difficulties in finding holiday care and suitable childcare at atypical hours (Speight *et al.*, 2009). Other research has found location of childcare to be a key restraint on choice, with the need for parents to be able to manage the journey to childcare and then to work in the morning and to collect children after work (Himmelweit and Sigala, 2003).

Until recently, concerns about the quality of childcare were seen to constrain its use. However, recent evidence from the Department for Schools and Families (DCSF) Childcare and Early Years Survey suggests that many parents are positive about the overall quality of childcare with only 13 per cent describing it as fairly poor or very poor (Kazmirski *et al.*, 2008).

Much publicly funded childcare and early years provision is part-time and only enables parents to work if they arrange additional wrap-around care. Parents must organise and pay for this care unless they work very short hours. It is possible that Extended Schools, which provide before and after school activities either on the school's own premises or at neighbouring schools, have helped parents to exercise the choice to work by extending hours of care. However, Extended Schools were not developed with this policy aim and their role in enabling parents to work has not been fully evaluated (Wallace *et al.*, 2009).

#### **4.3 Information about childcare**

For parents to exercise their choice to work, they must have information about childcare. There are public sources of information about childcare which parents can use to find out about provision in their area. Government funded Families Information Services produce marketing and publicity material, including information to parents and provide information over the telephone (Wallace *et al.*, 2009). Many parents use word of mouth and rates of use of official sources of information, including Families Information Services, have been found to be low (Kazmirski *et al.*, 2008; Philo *et al.*, 2008). Information provided by word of mouth may not enable mothers to make well informed decisions about childcare and employment, particularly since it may not include information about financial support for childcare.



#### 4.4 Affordability of childcare

The cost of childcare has been found to act as a strong disincentive to work for some mothers. In recent years financial support for childcare has increased, including through tax credits and free part-time early years provision for 3 to 4 year olds. However, research studies have found some women to report affordability of childcare as a factor in their decision not to work (Hansen *et al.*, 2006; Ellison *et al.*, 2009). In the most recent Childcare and Early Years survey of parents, 37 per cent believed that the affordability of childcare in their area was fairly poor or very poor (Kazmirski *et al.*, 2008).

Despite government subsidies for childcare, the capacity to pay for childcare remains crucial in facilitating mothers' employment (Ellison *et al.*, 2009; Crompton and Lyonette, 2008). Formal care is used disproportionately by better off women, those working full-time and for younger, pre-school, children. Income and social class differences in childcare use are found in a number of surveys:

- The Childcare and Early Years Surveys (2007 and 2008) show the higher the household income, the higher the take up of formal and informal care. Both years show more than half of parents with an income of £45,000 or more had used formal childcare, compared to a third of families with yearly income below £10,000.
- Analysis of the Millennium Cohort Study has found that mothers in professional jobs are more likely to use some formal childcare than those in other types of employment.
- The National Child Development Study have also found that mothers with partners in professional jobs are more likely to use formal childcare than those with partners in non-professional jobs (Hansen *et al.*, 2006).

Public Service Agreement targets for the DCSF include increasing the take-up of formal childcare by lower-income working families. The Childcare and Early Years Survey 2008 shows no change in the proportion of children in lower-income working families who received formal childcare over 2004-2008 (Speight *et al.*, 2009).

Although all social class groups use informal care, lower income groups and lone parents are less likely to use formal care (Speight *et al.*, 2009). Research suggests a need for lone parents to be well informed about assistance with childcare to encourage their use of formal rather than informal care (Bell *et al.*, 2005).

Parents' choice of childcare reflects ability to pay. Research with 4,500 parents in 2009 by YouGov for the Equality and Human Rights Commission found that over a third of parents with an income of over £50,000 make use of nurseries while only 17 per cent of parents with an income of between £15,000 and 30,000 use this form of care. Higher income families are also more likely to use a childminder. Other types of paid-for care are also used disproportionately by parents on higher incomes, including after-school care (Ellison *et al.*, 2009).

Parents with higher household incomes are more likely than those on lower incomes to say that their childcare and working arrangements are by necessity rather than choice (Ellison *et al.*, 2009).

#### **4.5 Other factors affecting childcare use and non-use**

Qualitative research suggests that mothers have a range of additional criteria when choosing to take up childcare and in their preference for types of care. In some cases the criteria used by mothers in choosing childcare is complex and may place limits on the availability of suitable care (Himmelweit and Sigala, 2003). Trust appears to be a factor affecting the preference of some mothers for informal care by a relative (Himmelweit and Sigala, 2003). Research on the childcare and employment decisions of lone parents suggests that this is a preference held by some lone parents (Bell *et al.*, 2005). Research suggesting that mothers prefer a personal recommendation may help to explain low rates of use of formal information sources (Himmelweit and Sigala, 2003).

#### **4.6 Juggling work and childcare**

Studies of parents' childcare use suggest that parents make complex arrangements over childcare in order to work. These involve combining free public care, typically in pre-school and primary school with paid-for after-school and private provision. Coordination is particularly complex where parents work part-time and have part-time childcare. Working parents of children aged 3 and over typically make use of multiple carers (Kazmirski *et al.*, 2008). Informal care and support, particularly from relatives, is commonly used (Ellison *et al.*, 2009).

Qualitative research on the childcare arrangements of 40 mothers concluded that coordination difficulties are a disincentive to employment and are not sufficiently considered by current policy (Skinner, 2003). Full-time work and caring is easiest to coordinate and part-time work and caring results in the most complex arrangements. The greatest difficulties are reported in coordinating pre-school education with wrap-around care. The research highlighted the role of fathers, including in transporting children to childcare and in providing wrap-around care. Where fathers or other informal carers were not available to carry out this role, coordination difficulties were such that some mothers, particularly lone parents, felt they could not work (Skinner, 2003).

Qualitative research for the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) on lone parents, childcare and work found some lone parents with complex arrangements requiring coordination, either by themselves or by others, and commonly multiple forms of support. Coordination problems were greatest where lone parents worked long hours or where long journeys were involved. Some lone parents had negotiated arrangements with their employer to make their lives more manageable. However, the research conveys the difficulty for lone parents of combining work and childcare. The report states that: 'Coordinating work, childcare and education tended to take considerable time

and effort and was rarely a mundane or straightforward aspect of lone parents' lives' (Bell *et al.*, 2005).

Other qualitative research conveys some of the difficulties experienced by working mothers, particularly those returning to work following maternity leave. These include physical, emotional and logistical demands associated with having young children and working (Himmelweit and Sigala, 2003). Research on mothers' employment and childcare has suggested that these problems could be addressed by having childcare to meet the needs of the child, and employment to fit around childcare (Himmelweit and Sigala, 2003).

Changes in mothers' circumstances appear to lead to a re-evaluation of the choice to work or to stay at home. There is churn in women's labour market participation when children start school. At this time mothers leave as well as join the labour market, possibly as a result of the loss of full-time paid day care and move to sessional education (Brewer and Paull, 2006). Spatial and time gaps between early years' education and childcare can cause problems of coordination and act as a disincentive to mothers wishing to work (Skinner, 2003).

Using data from the Families and Children Study (FACS) and the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) Brewer and Paull found that working mothers who use informal childcare, including help from family, before children start school are significantly less likely to be in work after a child starts school than mothers who use most other types of care. In contrast, mothers who use formal types of care for pre-school children are more likely to continue working when their child starts school. Use of informal care is also associated with a lower probability of being in work two years later. The report's authors suggest that the more fluid labour market participation of mothers using informal care may be explained by a lower attachment to the labour market among this group of women and also that it may reflect lower wages and greater movement in and out of work (Brewer and Paull, 2006). Other research confirms that parents using formal childcare have, on average, higher incomes (Ellison *et al.*, 2009). It is possible that both their higher income and use of formal childcare give them a firmer base in the labour market which is less likely to be affected by events such as starting school.

#### **4.7 Lone parents and childcare use**

A number of studies refer to particular barriers to work for lone parents and the limitations on choice they experience and to a difference in attitudes to work and childcare among some lone parents.

With regard to affordability, the Childcare and Early Years survey of parents found a substantial minority of lone mothers saying they could not afford to work because they would not earn enough to make it worthwhile. At the same time, the proportion of mothers who do not work because they do not want to lose benefits has declined over the last decade, which the authors explain with reference to the introduction of tax credits (Speight *et al.*, 2009).

Qualitative research with lone parents for the DWP has found this group of parents to have a range of attitudes to work and childcare depending on their orientation to work and views on parental childcare (Bell *et al.*, 2005). These

were found to stem from a wide range of current and past influences such as the parent's own upbringing, beliefs, education and work history, children's ages and specific events such as relationship break-up or death of a partner. These orientations were found to be liable to change over time, for example as children got older. These findings indicate the complexity of decision-making around work and childcare and its volatility. This research highlights the complexity of decision-making about childcare and employment, which involved making 'compromises and trade-offs' (Bell *et al.*, 2005).

#### **4.8 Summary**

Mothers' employment is constrained by the lack of availability of high quality full-time childcare. Its lack is particularly a barrier to mothers with children aged under eleven, especially lone mothers, those on lower incomes and to those with more than one child. Schooling introduces major difficulties.

Problems include:

- availability;
- hours available; and
- affordability.

Concerns about quality appear to have declined.

Juggling childcare across a range of providers is a major problem, particularly for lone parents and for mothers without access to informal care.

Childcare constraints affect employment directly (participation, hours of work) and may affect it indirectly (through stress, time demands), particularly the juggling of different provision.

## **5 Constraints: non-family-friendly working**

### **5.1 Introduction**

Being able to adapt working around care preferences and needs is important for mothers' employment. It may enable them to meet better their childcare and employment preferences and to adapt in the face of childcare constraints.

Three aspects of family friendly working have been examined in the literature:

- the length of full-time working hours; and
- atypical working times (e.g. evening and nights shifts and weekend working; and

- family-friendly working practices (e.g. choice over hours of work, ability to reduce working hours, flexitime, term-time working and ability to work from home).

## 5.2 The length of full-time working hours

The UK has a long-hours working culture. Given the gender difference in caring roles, this disadvantages mothers, as it places greater pressure on those in paid employment to work long hours and may increase pressures on mothers to downgrade (Perrons and Sigle-Rushton, 2006).

However, it is also likely to affect the gender division of caring and hence mother's tendency to reduce hours or withdraw from the labour market. A substantial minority of fathers work more than 48 hours per week (La Valle *et al.*, 2002). This may be seen as either enabling their partners to work shorter hours through raising earnings or forcing their mothers to take on a greater care and lesser employment role (Hegewisch, 2009; Holmes *et al.*, 2007). Certainly, the fathers working longest hours (those in managerial and professional jobs) were least likely to be involved in their children's care (Hegewisch, 2009; Holmes *et al.*, 2007).

## 5.3 Atypical working times

A neglected area in examining mothers (and parents) employment is the use of atypical working times (e.g. evening and nights shifts and weekend working).

Jobs with atypical working times are widespread amongst parents and amongst fathers in particular (La Valle *et al.*, 2002). For some, atypical working times is a positive choice, enabling both parents to work and to share childcare ('shift-parenting'), without recourse to other carers. It can enable both parents to be involved with their children. Parents in professional jobs who worked atypical times were more likely find it satisfied their employment and care aspirations.

However, for others, atypical working times are a necessity in the face of childcare costs and the difficulties juggling childcare demands. Given that families with fathers in lower socio-economic groups are more likely to 'shift-parent', it seems likely to be a response to financial constraints, particularly since such families were more likely to see no other option, due to lack of availability of other flexible working arrangements. In such cases, atypical working can prevent parents being as involved with their children as they desire.

Thus, whilst jobs with atypical working times reduce constraints on taking paid employment and are a positive choice for some, they can be the least poor of the available options for others.

## 5.4 Family-friendly practices

The availability of family-friendly policies appears to have a strong influence on whether mothers return after maternity (Smeaton and Marsh, 2006): 86

percent of mothers whose pre-birth employer had at least five family-friendly arrangements returned compared with 42 percent where no arrangements existed (La Valle *et al.*, 2008). This pattern was found irrespective of mothers characteristics, e.g. qualification and occupational level (La Valle *et al.*, 2008).

Flexible working is widely available and available in some form to 90 percent of employees (Hooker *et al.*, 2007). Part-time is most available (to 69 percent), with reduced working hours, flexitime, jobshare available to around 50 percent, a compressed working week and annualised hours available to around one third and working from home available to around one quarter. However, the types of practice available may not always suit the needs of employees (Visser and Williams, 2006).

Availability and take up of different types of flexible working varies by occupation, sector, establishment size and management discretion (Hayward *et al.* 2007; Hooker *et al.*, 2007; Himmelweit and Sigala, 2003). Most evidence suggests that flexible practices are less available at higher levels, for managers and for recruits (Hayward *et al.*, 2007; Metcalf and Nadeem, 2007; Perrons and Sigle-Rushton, 2006; Turgoose *et al.*, unpublished, 2006) but Hooker *et al.* (2007) suggests greater availability of some flexible working practices for managerial employees. At the same time, mothers in low level occupations and temporary employment pre-birth were less likely to say these practices were available (La Valle *et al.*, 2008). This seems to suggest there may be stronger barriers to employment for these groups, particularly as childcare costs are more likely to be prohibitive.

The evidence suggests that the flexible working options available to mothers do not necessarily enable them to make choices unconstrained by care demands (Walters, 2005). Hyman *et al.* (2005) in a study of call centre and software workers, found large differences in the ability to control work-life balance: the latter being able to make adjustments for their own benefit, whereas for the former, flexibility was designed for the employer. Call centre workers were reliant on shift swapping and family support to enable them to work, with those unable to do this, leaving.

Differences in the availability of family-friendly working between the public and private sectors may account for the greater movement of women out of the labour market for caring (predominantly childcare) from the private than the public sector (Golsch, 2002; Golsch, 2004).

Concentration of part-time work in certain occupations and lower levels will constrain choice. The result is that a high percentage of those working part-time work below their potential (Darton and Hurrell, 2005). Occupational downgrading may occur due to restricted availability of part-time jobs and a need to reduce work pressures (Holmes *et al.*, 2007).

Differential provision of family-friendly has been found to contribute to women doctors' concentration in general practice, which, although well-paid is of lower status (Crompton and Lyonette, 2008).

There is a belief that flexible working is seen by employers as lack of commitment (Crompton and Lyonette, 2008).

### 5.5 Permanent homeworking

Permanent homeworking (i.e. where the home is the main the workplace) provides a solution to some mothers in paid work and childcare, both in terms of costs and who should care for one's children. In a US study, Edwards and Field-Hendry (2002) particularly identified the influence of cost. Others have also identified issues around flexibility (Christensen, 1985).

### 5.6 Summary

The UK has a long-hours working culture. This may increase occupational downgrading amongst mothers, as well as reduce participation. For two parent families it may encourage the gender division of paid work/childcare, with fathers working long hours and providing less childcare and mothers working part-time and providing care.

Working outside standard working hours (e.g. evenings, nights and weekends) is widespread amongst parents, particularly fathers. For some this may be a positive choice, to share childcare ('shift-parenting'); for others it is a necessity due to childcare difficulties.

The availability of family-friendly policies appears to have a strong influence on whether mothers return after maternity. Flexible working, particularly part-time employment, is widely available. Data exists on the availability of flexible working for existing employees (i.e. whether an employee might move to flexible working), but not on the availability for job applicants. Reduced working hours, flexitime, jobshare are available to around 50 percent of existing employees. A compressed working week and annualised hours are available to around one third and working from home available to around one quarter. However, the types of practice available may not always suit the needs of employees and there is a belief that flexible working is seen by employers as lack of commitment.

The evidence on the availability of flexible practices by occupational level is mixed. However, part-time is concentrated in lower level occupations, constraining choice and resulting in occupational downgrading.

## 6 Constraints: commuting

Commuting imposes a cost on working both in terms of money and time. Costs, relative to earnings, decline as pay and hours rise. Commuting can also affect the practicality of childcare arrangements.

Women in London are much less likely to return to work post maternity (La Valle *et al.*, 2008). Those who do return are less likely to reduce their working hours than those outside London (La Valle *et al.*, 2008). To us, these suggests barriers due to commuting (rather than the high cost of living in London, as suggested by La Valle *et al.*), with barriers raised by commuting costs, commuting time and the difficulty of arranging childcare when commuting.

Commuting time does not only affect Londoners working. For part-time workers, commuting has been found to have an effect on withdrawal from the labour market only for those commuting more than one hour (Francesconi and Gosling, 2005). However, the presence of a young child (aged under five) in the household substantially increases the likelihood that mothers working part-time withdraw from the labour market (by 43 percent) if they work more than 15 minutes from home (Francesconi and Gosling, 2005).

## **7 Other influences: income and earnings**

The financial implications of working or not affect the choice to work. This is dependent on the mother's earnings and, in two-parent families, her partner's. Income and earnings also affect the ability to pay for childcare and childcare opportunities. The effects can go in opposite directions: higher income enables mothers to stay at home, but higher mother's earnings impose a greater loss to not working<sup>5</sup>.

The effect of family income suggests a negative effect on employment as family income rises. Mothers with a low paid partner and mothers with a mortgage are more likely to return to paid work after childbirth (Smeaton and Marsh, 2006). Conversely, those with a highly paid partner are less likely to return (Smeaton and Marsh, 2006).

Parents with higher incomes are more likely to believe it possible to meet both their work/care needs and the needs of their children and less likely to believe that their work/care arrangements are governed by necessity rather than choice (Ellison *et al.*, 2009).

In two-parent heterosexual households, whilst the choice on the balance of work and caring for each partner is undoubtedly affected by social norms and traditional patterns, it is also affected by the gender pay gap, as parents allocate paid work to the better paid in a couple (Ellison *et al.*, 2009).

## **8 Other influences: maternity pay and leave**

### **8.1 Period and pay**

Maternity pay and leave provisions affect the timing of return after childbirth (La Valle *et al.*, 2008). When the end statutory minimum leave entitlement was 26 weeks, few mothers returned before 26 weeks but half returned by the end of this minimum (La Valle *et al.*, 2008). Almost all who returned did so by 52 weeks, when the statutory maximum period of maternity leave was

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<sup>5</sup> Referred to by economists as the income and substitution effects.



reached (La Valle *et al.*, 2008)<sup>6</sup>. After statutory ordinary maternity leave was extended in 2003, the length of maternity leave taken increased (Smeaton and Marsh, 2006). Although, at the extreme, the length of maternity leave available will affect the decision to return, it is unclear whether changes in the length of maternity leave that have been made (or would be likely to be made) affected this decision.

Comparisons across Europe suggest that lengthy statutory leaves are associated with greater labour market participation following leave (Pronzato, 2009), although the effect on pay and career prospects are worse.

However, maternity pay is the single most important factor affecting the duration of maternity leave (Smeaton and Marsh, 2006). Many mothers return at the end of statutory maternity pay entitlement (26 weeks), rather than when their leave entitlement ends, suggesting the importance of pay (La Valle *et al.*, 2008). Moreover, the 2003 increase in leave entitlement was accompanied by a rise in statutory maternity pay (Smeaton and Marsh, 2006). There is some evidence that women with more generous maternity pay packages are more than twice as likely to return to work than those who receive no maternity pay (La Valle *et al.*, 2008). However, it is not clear whether this is due to the maternity pay or related to differences in who receives these better packages.

## 8.2 Knowledge

The effectiveness of statutory maternity provisions depend on mothers' knowledge of their entitlements. La Valle *et al.* estimated that only about half of women entitled to Additional Maternity Leave were aware of this and that mothers in low level occupations were least likely to be aware (La Valle *et al.*, 2008).

## 9 Conclusions

Irrespective of mothers' preferences between childcare and employment, women's choices in the labour market are constrained by a range of factors, notably childcare (availability, particularly hours, and costs) and the availability of family-friendly working. The need to co-ordinate across a range of childcare providers is a major problem, particularly for lone parents and those lacking access to informal childcare. Constraints are strong for those with young children, whether pre-school age or older. They are greatest for lower occupational groups, lower income groups and for lone parents. They are exacerbated by the need to commute.

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<sup>6</sup> The findings of return after childbirth are skewed by the sample method. Mothers were interviewed 12 to 18 months after childbirth. Those who had not returned by interview were counted as non-returners, so those interviewed at , e.g. 12 months, but returning after 13, were counted as non-returners.

These constraints lead to withdrawal from the labour market, occupational downgrading, reduced hourly pay and temporary working.

Fathers appear to be more constrained in their choices than mothers, both in their preference to work and to work part-time. This is likely to be influenced by the social expectations around gender roles, exacerbated by the lack of provision of family-friendly working in at higher occupational levels and in 'male' jobs. This is further exacerbated by the gender pay gap and the UK's long hours culture, which encourage two-parent families to split work and caring along traditional gender lines.

Maternity pay and leave affect the timing of the return to work post maternity.

To enable parents to choose their preferred childcare/paid work balance requires:

- increased provision of childcare which takes into account preferred working patterns;
- flexible working being provided across the spectrum of employment and being seen on a par with full-time working i.e. ending distinctions between full-time and part-time working.

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## 10 Appendix: Method

To meet the research aims and objectives we carried out a comprehensive and focused literature review on women's decisions to change their labour market participation. The research was aimed at identifying themes and issues arising from research, assessing and synthesising this evidence.

The review covered academic publications, both published and working papers and research literature from Government Departments and agencies, the European Commission and key stakeholders. The review focused on research literature and policy documents published in the last 10 years. Its focus was on the UK, but international publications were also considered. This literature included a large number of reports aimed at evaluating government policy in areas of most relevance to women's choices, such as childcare.

We adopted a rapid evidence assessment approach in which the evidence was identified, systematically reviewed and appraised, both as to relevance and to rigour.

Relevant studies and reports were identified using a range of approaches, including use of electronic academic databases of journal articles to identify the most robust research; paper-based journal articles and academic books; and key websites.

As well as searching using electronic search engines, the research publications of the following were searched:

- Government Departments/Agencies
  - EHRC/former EOC

- GEO
- DCSF
- BIS
- DIUS
- DWP
- HMRC
  
- European Commission
  - DGV
  - Eurofound
  
- Research institutes and networks
  - The LSE's Gender Institute
  - IPPR
  - IES
  - IER
  - PSI
  - Natcen
  - The Work Foundation
  - Demos
  - GENET (Gender Equality Network) (ESRC network)
  - Gender inequality in production and reproduction (ESRC network)
  
- Research funders
  - ESRC
  - Nuffield Foundation
  - Joseph Rowntree Foundation
  - Esme Fairburn Trust
  
- Other
  - Fawcett Society
  - Working Families
  - CIPD
  - Opportunity Now
  - Daycare Trust
  - European Professional Women's Network

The GEO's review of women's choices also involved making use of the substantial research and literature reviews already undertaken by NIESR in this area. These include a review of policies and programmes aimed at increasing gender equality, carried out by NIESR for the GEO in 2009.

To assess the strength and reliability of findings we used quality criteria in the form of four questions:

- Does the research addresses clearly defined research questions?
- Is there is an explicit account of the research process, including design and methods and analysis of data?
- Are the methods appropriate and reliable?

- Are the findings are reliable, credible and clearly related to evidence?<sup>7</sup>

Studies which did not meet a high level of rigour were excluded. This meant that most of the research included was based on large and detailed studies, using either quantitative or qualitative methods, or both.

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<sup>7</sup> These are based on the criteria developed in the following reviews of quality in research evaluation:

Becker, S., Bryman, A. and Sempik, J. (2006) Defining 'Quality' in Social Policy Research. Social Policy Association: <http://www.social-policy.com/documents/spaquality06.pdf>

Spencer, L., Ritchie, J., Lewis, J. and Dillon, J. (2003) Quality in Qualitative Evaluation: A framework for assessing research evidence, Cabinet Office: [http://www.gsr.gov.uk/downloads/evaluating\\_policy/a\\_quality\\_framework.pdf](http://www.gsr.gov.uk/downloads/evaluating_policy/a_quality_framework.pdf)