

*Returning to Work after Childbirth:*  
An Exploration of Mothers' Experiences in the  
United Kingdom.

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My journey does not, however, end here.

## **Biographical note**

Before I embarked on this research project, I felt it was essential to include a biographical note to explain why I chose this topic and how it resonates with me on a personal level. The importance of this section relates to the phenomenological approach applied to this study which allows me to explore women's lived experiences in a meaningful way. I chose to follow the research pathway rather than a taught master's programme as I was keen to develop my researcher skills and focus on a subject that I was already passionate about, enabling me to explore it at an academic level through primary and secondary sources.

My passion for this topic stems in part from my own experiences. I have returned to work after maternity leave six times, each one has been a different experience, yet, there have been commonalities with each one in terms of childcare and career progression.

Childcare: since having children I have mostly worked part-time due to the cost of childcare; thus, I shared this responsibility with my husband by working opposite shifts to avoid the cost of formal care. Following my graduation from the BSc Social Policy programme at the University of Salford in 2016, I decided to put my degree to use and sought a position that would require some childcare. My current position is a Scheme Manager for Sheltered Housing, working 18.5 hours a week. I require childcare costs for three of my children; one with a childminder at a cost of £140 per week, and two at breakfast and after school club which costs £62 per week. I am able to claim a proportion of these costs through tax credits (TC), yet there is still a deficit to pay of £80 per week which is almost half of my part-time salary, reducing my hourly rate to just over £5 per hour, which is less than the minimum wage. Without the TC element, the total cost of childcare would exceed my salary. However, I do this as I have a



strong work ethic and I know that this situation will improve as my children get older. I also want to be a positive role model for my children, for them to recognise that with hard work and determination it is possible to achieve success and that having a family and a career is within their reach.

Career progression: before I started the BSc Social Policy degree, I had worked part-time for the NHS for four years and continued in the role throughout my degree. As I worked part-time, and despite my knowledge, experience, and capabilities as demonstrated by my appraisals, I was overlooked for progression many times due to being unable to commit to a 24/7 availability. Incidentally, many colleagues, with less experience, and length of service, were given opportunities to progress with seemingly little consideration to myself and other part-time colleagues. Following graduation, I decided to change careers, and began to apply for new positions, however, I found myself struggling to find a position that would enable me to use my existing skills, utilise my academic experience, and work part-time. Prospective employers were reluctant to consider flexible working and were insistent that the roles advertised had to be full-time. Although my current role is one that I enjoy, I am always looking for a new challenge. Thus, I frequently browse job adverts. However, it appears that little has changed, as the roles being advertised as open to flexible working are still in the minority. On average, if I was able to work full-time, I could be earning upwards of £25,000.

I recognise that my personal experiences may affect how I interpret my findings when analysing the data and that I may consciously seek out the similarities of my participants' experiences to that of my own. However, I am interested in exploring how my own personal experiences compare to other women's, which is why I employed interpretivism as the research paradigm for this study and as the epistemological

position of this is subjectivism this allows me, as the researcher, to explore my participants' experiences and helps to construct their meaning by realising my own subjective consciousness. This is explored further in the Methodology Chapter.

I hope this thesis will make a difference.

## List of Abbreviations

**EHRC** Equality and Human Rights Commission

**FT** Full-time

**FWR** Flexible Working Request

**FTSE** Financial Times Stock Exchange

**IPA** Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

**NDA** Non-disclosure agreement

**OECD** Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

**PT** Part-time

**SPL** Shared Parental Leave

**SPP** Shared Parental Pay

**SOC** Standard Occupational Classification

**TC** Tax Credit

**UC** Universal Credit

**UN** United Nations

**WLB** Work-life balance

## **Abstract**

This thesis reports an interpretive phenomenological study of women's experiences of returning to work after having children and the impact of this on their work-life balance (WLB), income, and career progression. Previous research relating to mothers returning to work after maternity leave has focused upon the individual aspects of women's experiences such as the impact on their career progression, and on their pay, and studies that centre around gender roles and how women balance their homelife and motherhood. Understanding the different aspects of women's experiences develops knowledge in a focused area, and many of these studies have found that mothers, generally, are undervalued, due to preconceived gender roles whereby they are expected to take responsibility for the greater share of household and childcare responsibilities, and when they seek to balance their paid work and home-life, there is often a negative impact upon their career progression. However, current literature lacks a recognition of how these aspects are connected and this holistic understanding is needed to capture the full complexity of women's lived experiences.

The aim of this study was to explore the lived experiences of women returning to work after maternity leave. The objectives are to explore why women choose to work full or part-time, how they balance their work and home life, their experiences of childcare provision, and career progression. An interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) (hermeneutic) approach was applied to enable a rich exploration of the lived experiences of mothers returning to work after maternity leave. This epistemological approach views knowledge as a process of creation between the researcher and the

participants. The researcher interprets lived experiences as described by participants through the lens of their own lived experience.

Fourteen mothers who had returned to work after maternity leave were recruited purposively from a variety of parenting groups on social media. Semi-structured interviews were conducted via Skype; transcribed verbatim and analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), assisted by NVIVO.

Four major themes emerged from the data analysis: **gender roles**; which looks at the division of labour, from traditional roles to a more egalitarian model, and how women undertaking paid work has evolved, historically to the present day, with a clear and concise analysis of relevant policies in this area; **flexible working and discriminatory practices**, presents how women balance their work and home lives, with a particular emphasis on flexible working requests (FWR) and part-time work, and considers the penalties and inequities of doing so; **childcare**, discusses the provision available and the cost incurred and how this can impact on a woman's decision to return to work after childbirth; and **career progression**, this final theme explores the consequences of flexible working, and the impact upon career progression. The study concluded that whilst gender roles have significantly evolved, and women are now working outside of the home, there are still expectations on women to take on greater responsibility in the division of labour at home. Subsequently, this negatively impacts on their career progression, and earnings, both now and in the future, known as the motherhood penalty. One way to overcome this is to remove the gender bias from government and work-based policies, and for changes to be made in the way childcare support is offered.

Recommendations for policy and practice include reducing the age of entitlement for 30 hours free childcare from age three to one along with greater support from employers; employers to redesign roles offering flexibility as standard, where appropriate, and be legally obliged to advertise positions as flexible by default; change shared parental leave to extended paternity leave; and protect women's maternity leave entitlement.

## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **1.1 Background Context**

Historically, until the rise of the feminist movement, women were subordinate to men and it was expected that once they were married, they would remain at home to raise their children rather than enter, or return to, the Labour market (Pascall, 2012). It was not until the First Wave Feminist Movement began to gather pace in the mid-1800s that these traditional ideals were first challenged by feminist activists who campaigned for female suffrage, and for the inequalities between men and women to be eradicated, which included enabling women to take responsibility for their own body and for their husbands to no longer take ownership of their wives upon marriage (Block, 2010). Significant victories, including winning the right to vote were realised in the early 1900s, however, challenging these traditional gender roles continued throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century (Pascall, 2012).

The idea of a woman working continuously throughout her lifetime was once thought to be in discord with her assumed reproductivity and would undoubtedly have harmful repercussions for workplace productivity or her fertility (Dex & Joshi, 1999). Importantly, throughout history, some women, mostly those below the middle and upper classes, have always undertaken some form of paid work alongside their family responsibilities (Hudson, 2011). Yet, the idea that women were homemakers as opposed to workers was an illusion created by the middle and upper classes who were afforded the luxury of being a housewife and mother rather than the working-class reality of working outside the home (Wilkinson, 2014).

The concept of maternity provision had no political importance until the early 1900s when the Chancellor, David Lloyd, proposed *The National Insurance Act* in 1911 that included a universal maternal health benefit, and a one-off maternity grant for employed, and insured women. Although this placed maternal rights on the political agenda for the first time and sparked political debates over the rights of new mothers, the focus was on maternal and child health rather than enabling women to undertake paid work (Williams, 2008).

However, after the Second World War had ended which had seen women being mobilised into the workforce, maternity allowance was introduced for the first time in 1948 and paid for thirteen weeks, rising to eighteen weeks in 1953, following childbirth (Sargeant and Lewis, 2008; Zabel, 2009). Nevertheless, maternity allowance, albeit a welcome contributory benefit, was not job protected and women did not yet have the legal right to return to work once maternity allowance had ceased, thus, there was still work to be done for women to successfully combine their paid work and motherhood (Zabel, 2009). Introducing formal maternity leave, alongside maternity allowance, remained off the political agenda up until the 1970s when the concept of maternity leave gained prominence internationally. In the UK, during this time, women were being routinely dismissed from their employment on account of becoming pregnant, and the idea of maternity leave remained of little political importance until the introduction of *The Employment Protection Act 1975* which afforded women the right to take forty weeks of maternity leave; eleven weeks before the birth and a further twenty-nine weeks after childbirth, and for their job to be protected. However, job protection was only for employees who had been working for their employer for a minimum of two years full-time or five years part-time (Zabel, 2009). Maternity allowance continued to be paid for eighteen weeks, the first six of which was paid at



90% of their earnings and the remaining twelve at a flat rate (Zabel, 2009). The consequences of the long qualifying period for maternity leave meant that only around half of working women were entitled to it until 1993 when it was extended to all working women as part of a European Union directive (Anitha & Pearson, 2013).

The last decade of the twentieth century saw small changes to existing maternity policies. In 1994, although women were still entitled to forty weeks of job protected maternity leave, part of their entitlement was no longer conditional based on their service length. The first fourteen weeks of maternity leave were now available to all women regardless of how many hours they worked and length of employment. The remaining twenty-six weeks of job protected maternity leave was granted to women who had two years continuous service (Zabel, 2009). Little improvement was made to maternity pay, now called statutory maternity payment, the provision was still for eighteen weeks; six of these being at 90% of their earnings, yet the remaining twelve weeks were now paid at higher flat rate (Callendar et al., 1997). Statutory maternity payment, continued to be increased over the following decade from eighteen weeks to thirty-three weeks, of which six were still paid at 90% of earnings, and twenty-seven were paid at the statutory flat rate, which was increased with other benefit rates each year.

A political shift took place from 1997 with New Labour gaining power. Their aim of reforming family-based policies was seen to be driven by an interest in further enabling women to undertake paid work, and for men to take on a greater share of the household responsibilities. These drivers underpinned many of New Labour's policy initiatives such as the introduction of TC, paternity leave, parental leave, and the extension of maternity leave (Pascall, 2012). Theoretically, women now found themselves in a position to combine their paid work and home responsibilities with

greater ease. However, in practice, there were still inequalities to be addressed at home, and in the workplace, with regards to pre-defined gender roles and the expectations placed upon women to combine their roles, take greater responsibility for childcare, and for their career to be secondary to their home life and to that of their husbands or partners (Pascall, 2012). Since 2010, there has been a Conservative-led government, who further enhanced family-based policies through *The Children and Families Act 2014* which introduced Shared Parental Leave (SPL) and gave all employees the right to request flexible working (Gov, 2013). However, whilst these policy changes aimed to create a more equal workplace for men and women and to remove gender bias towards flexible working (Atkinson, 2017), they operate within a wider set of conservative policies and motivations that may be contradictory, such as neo-liberal attitudes to work, and conservative attitudes to family which poses the question as to whether they are they token gestures to appease pressure groups, and feminist campaigners, without fully committing (Dalingwater, 2018).

## **1.2 Qualitative research on women's labour**

Prior to the 1960s, research on families was based on the unwritten assumption that women's role in the labour market was not important, gender divisions were uninteresting, and attitudes towards working women could be emphasised by a few stereotypes (Dex, 1985). The following quote from Alfred Lord Tennyson in 1847 epitomises this train of thought:

*Man for the Field and woman for the hearth  
Man for the sword and for the needle she  
Man with the head and woman with the heart  
Man to command and woman to obey  
All else confusion* (Tennyson, cited in Johnston, 1984, p.562).

Ann Oakley's book, *Housewife*, in the 1970s was at the forefront of the new trend of researching women's work at a time when the feminine ideal was marriage, motherhood and housework, which was invisible and not seen as important as paid work largely undertaken by men (Oakley, 1975). As qualitative research gained prominence, in the early twenty-first century, feminist writers such as Pascall (2012) and Young (2018) share the idea that whilst a woman's role may have changed to include paid work, evidence suggests that their primary role is often motherhood which remains feminised and undervalued. However, this is now studied and talked about a lot more.

There have been qualitative studies on issues that relate to this thesis topic, such as: the change in gender role ideology where men are now expected to share family responsibilities (Fagan & Norman, 2012) and studies that focus on the emotional challenges faced by women striving for a WLB (Miller, 2012) and how successive governments have introduced family-friendly policies in an attempt to support this (Lewis et al., 2016). When reviewing the existing literature, many focused on such individual aspects, and cited significant statistical evidence to support their research which has been helpful in gaining an insight to the topic, and understanding the policies underpinning the research. However, focusing on these individual aspects, rather than a wider contextual view, has presented a fragmented understanding of women's experiences which is not conducive to providing a holistic study that incorporates women's whole experiences. It is not enough to just explore individual aspects such as gender roles at home, or in the workplace, without considering the impact of them being pre-defined on how a woman is able, and possibly expected, to manage their work and home life effectively. Furthermore, I feel that it is important to go beyond the exploration of gender roles and examine not only the connection

between them and a woman's perceived WLB but to then explore the potential penalties of them working flexibly and consider the far-reaching consequences on their career progression and earning capability.

### **1.3 Phenomenology as methodology**

This research study endeavours to go beyond the accomplishments of prior research and employs an (IPA) approach: a study of lived experiences, which serves to understand an individual's perspective by creating a sphere of intersubjectivity between the researcher and participant (Austin & Sutton, 2014). To achieve this, there needs to be great input from women directly and for their experiences to be interpreted by harnessing the researcher's own subjective consciousness in such a way that knowledge is created meaningfully to present a deep understanding of their narrative. For IPA to be successfully applied, I will be led by the steps, as defined by Smith and Colleagues (2011). However, the steps are for guidance only, and for this study to truly align with the IPA ethos, there will be a deep level of interpretation in the analysis influenced by my own experiences.

Noon (2020) undertook a research study using a phenomenological approach, with the focus predominantly on first-time mothers returning to work and the decisions they make with regards to their careers. Likewise, Chung & Horst (2018) also conducted research that has similarities to this study with a focus on employment patterns of women returning to work after childbirth, with an emphasis on flexible working. However, the methodology of this study did not explore women's lived experiences, as phenomenology allows. Instead, the dataset came from *Understanding Society*; a large household panel survey which collates quantitative data. Both of these studies

were useful, and helpful, in understanding how women maintain their careers after childbirth. However, the lack of deeper exploration into women's lived experiences reinforces the need for research to be undertaken as this study aims to. Furthermore, it is argued that exploring work, home, and different parts of women's life as separate spheres is more suited to maintaining men's dominant position in society as some of the inequalities that face women may not be highlighted sufficiently if they are not interconnected throughout the research (Miller & Borgida, 2016). Thus, there is a need to go beyond the narrow, technical approach, which has for so long been dominant in social sciences (Fischer, 2003), if we are to understand the complexity of women's experiences.

In the absence of such holistic literature, I believe there is a gap that this study addresses which makes it unique and further demonstrates the need for more research to be conducted in this way. The rationale behind this phenomenological research study, is to consider a range of inter-connected aspects, as opposed to just one or two, by taking a holistic approach in exploring women's entire lived experiences of returning to work after having children; whether they have experienced any challenges or barriers to do so, and whether they feel that there has been an impact on their career progression, and their earnings, now and in the future. Therefore, this is an inclusive study for women working at all levels and is focused on the wider context, to give a clearer, and more meaningful, view of women's lived experiences of returning to work after having children. Conducting an inclusive study in this way adds rigour, and is a strength of qualitative, and phenomenological research (Silverman, 2019).

## **1.4 Research aims**

The research aim of this study is to apply an IPA approach to exploring the role of women in the home and within the labour market and to gather their personal, lived experiences of returning to work after childbirth. This study provides an opportunity for women to talk candidly about their work and home life, and whether they have experienced any challenges or barriers when returning to work after maternity leave.

The following quote from Ina May Gaskin epitomises the fundamental message that this study aspires to project. That is, mothers can often be undervalued in the workplace when they have to balance family commitments, yet, with access to flexible working arrangements, less emphasis on fixed full-time hours, and more emphasis on how they can achieve success in the workplace, women can be a valuable asset to any employer.

*“when we, as a society, begin to value mothers as the givers and supporters of life, then we will see social change in ways that matter” (Gaskin, 1995).*

## **1.5 Research objectives**

The research objectives are divided into four key areas and will be achieved through qualitative interviews which seek to explore the following areas:

1. Gender roles, and the division of labour in the home.
2. Why women choose to work full or part-time and their experiences of returning to work after childbirth and requesting flexible hours.
3. Women’s experiences of childcare costs and provision.
4. How working flexibly or part-time can impact on career progression.

## 1.6 Thesis structure

**Chapter One** introduces the background and rationale for the research and outlines the aims and objectives of the study. **Chapter Two** presents the literature review and a discussion of four key themes: *gender roles and working mothers; flexible working, penalties and inequities; childcare; and career progression*. Relevant policies will be incorporated into the discussion, particularly those from 1997 onwards when New Labour's ideological perspective began to build a framework of family-friendly policies with an emphasis on supporting women to combine paid work and motherhood and how they have evolved. The literature review will be examined in relation to the evolution of policy in this area, significant similarities and differences between policy theory and practice will be considered, and debates within the literature over the issue of women returning to work after childbirth will be analysed. **Chapter Three** presents the research paradigm employed for this study as interpretivism which allows me as a researcher to immerse myself in the study and help participants make sense of their experiences. This chapter also determines my ontological and epistemological position as phenomenology which is the most appropriate method to explore my participants' lived experiences. Following this, a discussion of the methods used in gathering and analysing the yielded data is offered. **Chapter Four** presents the key themes and research findings, from the interviews undertaken: *gender roles, flexible working and discriminatory practices, childcare, and career progression*. These themes are interlinked and demonstrate that there are still societal assumptions over women being the main caregiver and are often making the greater career sacrifices to uphold this responsibility. This chapter is a vital element to the whole thesis as it draws upon the lived experiences of women who have returned to work after having children in the last five years. This enables the research study to have a contemporary aspect,

and a third dimension to the dialogue, between the policy analysis, and literature review, which aims to strengthen the overall conclusion and recommendations. **Chapter Five** will consider how the participants' experiences correspond with the literature review by exploring how they perceive government policies to have been employed in practice. There will be a discussion of the strengths and limitations of the research, and how this study has contributed to knowledge. The final section will be an opportunity to reflect on my role as a researcher for this project and to offer my final thoughts. The final chapter, **Chapter Six** presents the recommendations for government policy and work-based practices with the aim of improving women's experiences in the workplace, to enable more women to return to work without detriment, and for more women to access the appropriate support to enable them to return. The last section focuses on my suggestions for further research and my dissemination plan.



## Chapter Two: Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an in-depth critical analysis of research previously undertaken on working mothers and will incorporate throughout how family and maternity based policies have evolved and been instrumental in the attempts to establish work-place equality for women who have children. The first section discusses the methodological approach of the literature. When reviewing the literature, it became apparent that there were a number of key themes that were relevant to my study. The rest of the chapter will be separated into themed sections: ***gender roles and working mothers***, that will review traditional gender roles from early to mid-twentieth century to set the context of the theme, before exploring gender role ideology and how the roles have evolved, and how they relate to working mothers; ***flexible working: penalties and inequities***, this theme follows on from the previous section and intends to explore the idea of flexible working and whether it is conducive to achieving a WLB; ***career progression and income***, an important theme that corroborates the previous discussion on flexible working, with an emphasis on part-time work, by examining the impact on a woman's salary and career progression when returning to work after having children and a discussion over government financial support in the form of Children's and Working Tax Credit, and Universal Credit; ***childcare***, a smaller theme, yet, an important one, as for many women finding and affording childcare is paramount for them to go out to work. Thus, this section will look at the costs and provision of childcare and how this can impact on some women who undertake paid work.

## **2.2 Methodology of the literature**

Before analysing the literature, it is important to consider existing literature based on the methodological approaches used in the studies and how well placed they are to make claims on the experiences of women returning to work after childbirth. All studies were valuable as they sought to address bias against women and, although progressive changes rarely come from single studies, they contribute to the wider academic discussion.

Much of the literature reviewed in this chapter was an analysis of existing qualitative literature, and policy development, with little mention of the methods used in their research, and women's experiences were omitted to present a general consensus over working mothers. Creighton (1999) discusses the male breadwinner model from a historical context and its subsequent rise. Whilst Dex & Joshi (1999) focus on how women combine work and motherhood by considering the development of family policies and the change in cultural traditions. Both of these papers and others, including (Crompton, 1997; Sargeant & Lewis, 2008), were instrumental in outlining the background and evolution of gender roles and women's participation in the workforce. Inevitably, the age of these studies mean that they are less useful in understanding more recent developments. Current qualitative literature such as (Atkinson, 2016) discusses and analyses working mothers, how they balance their paid and unpaid work, and, most importantly, their experiences and feelings are recorded, through the use of interviews, and by conducting a thematic analysis. Likewise, Young (2018) conducted qualitative research, presented as individual case studies, that served to understand working mothers and their experiences of managing a WLB through the use of flexible working arrangements, and the subsequent impact on their careers.

Quantitative studies conducted by Wheatley (2016) and Landivar (2015) analysed the use of flexible working arrangements, and the gender pay gap, through a survey analysis of The British Household Panel, The International Social Survey Programme, and Understanding Society surveys. Similarly, a study conducted by Bowlus & Grogan (2008) investigated the connection between women working full or part-time and gender wage differentials, and recommended that to reduce the part-time pay penalty, there should be better paying part-time employment opportunities available. Dex (2010); and Dolton et al. (2005), both conducted longitudinal studies into the occupational mobility of women and found that part-time employment was a consistent factor for women experiencing downward mobility in their careers and had little chance of progression. These quantitative studies provide excellent statistical insights and analysis. However, they focused more on presenting statistical evidence on women's participation in the labour market, and how motherhood affects earnings and career progression, consequently, they lacked a deeper understanding of women's experiences, their feelings, and the challenges they face when combining paid work and motherhood.

Some studies did adopt a phenomenological approach to their qualitative research, which is in-line with this study, by conducting research that focused on lived experiences. Durbin & Tomlinson (2010) focused on the perspectives of female part-time managers and career mobility through semi-structured interviews. Similarly, Noon (2020) tailors her research towards the experiences of first-time mothers by gathering data from interviews. However, whilst they have adopted a phenomenological approach, their research focus has been narrowed down to one area rather than considering the wider sphere of women's experiences, which is conducive to maintaining men's dominant position in society (Miller & Borgida, 2016). Considering

women's experiences in a holistic way, interconnects the different spheres of their lives, and highlights any inequalities that may otherwise be missed.

Other phenomenological studies such as those conducted by Byrne-Doran (2011) and Forbes et al. (2020) were unsuitable due to their geographical focus being outside of the UK and were therefore excluded from this literature review. Thus, whilst the use of secondary literature within this review is collectively invaluable along with the limited number of phenomenological studies, there is, however, a distinct lack of qualitative research conducted in the UK that considers all aspects of working mothers' experiences, with a clearly defined methodological framework and phenomenological approach as this study attains.

### **2.3 Gender roles and working mothers**

The division of labour, and mothers undertaking paid work were traditionally at odds with each other as men were the breadwinners and women stayed at home to care for children (Pascall, 2012). However, over time there has been a shift in these traditional gender roles towards one where women entered the workforce and men took on greater responsibility at home (Sargeant & Lewis, 2008). Thus, this theme has been disaggregated into smaller sub-themes.

#### **2.3.1 Traditional gender roles**

Historically, the most important role of a woman was to birth children and become a mother. Working outside the home, before and after having children, was secondary to family responsibilities and predominantly undertaken by working class women as opposed to middle- and upper-class women (Hurl-Eamon, 2010). This conception was further idealised by French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau who wrote the book, *Emile*, in 1762. Rousseau (1979) describes how men naturally desire women in pursuit

of happiness, yet they do not inherently need them. Whereas women both desire *and* need men therefore women should be taught only to fulfil men's desires and accept that their purpose is to procreate. Rousseau's work has long been criticized for being sexist, however, it has also been counter-argued that he was writing ironically, and his claims were simply about men and women only truly being happy when they accepted and conformed to their predisposed sex and gender roles (Jonas, 2015). Additionally, women were often seen as the weaker sex and treated unequally and as subordinate to men. Nevertheless, while a woman's traditionally assumed role was to be a wife and mother, some women did undertake paid work after they had completed their education, often in clerical, nursing, sales or teaching roles, yet, working outside the home would generally cease upon marriage and they would become dependent on their husband (Oakley, 1975).

The feminist movement was borne out of the desire to challenge gender stereotypes and create equality between men and women (Cochrane, 2013). This was apparent as early as the start of the 1900s as part of the suffragette movement who campaigned for women to have the right to vote along with their male counterparts. The campaign was eventually successful in 1928, ten years after legislation was first introduced, and women, for the first time, were afforded an equal footing, at least, when it came to vote (Liddington & Crawford, 2011). However, whilst achieving the right to vote was progressive, women were still facing inequalities in other areas of their lives and were part of a patriarchal society that was only concerned with asserting control over women who were deemed to be of lesser worth and social status (Liddington & Crawford, 2011). Many women longed for full citizenship rights and to be emancipated from patriarchy which was described as:

*“a multifaceted system that enforces masculine control over the sexuality and labour power of women”* (Chesney-Lind & Sheldon, 1989, p.102).

Theories were formulated compounding the idea that a woman's natural role was to be a homemaker and mother, and, consequently, a child's well-being was best served by being at home with their mother. These theories provided a moral justification for some women to be excluded from the labour market (Crompton, 1997). Furthermore, the *Male Breadwinner* model, assumed that men will earn enough to care for his family without the need for his wife to also work and can therefore stay at home to raise children. This model was entrenched within the Beveridge Report in 1942. This report was highly influential in the construction of the welfare state and formed the basis of early social policies (Creighton, 1999). The report stated:

*“The attitude of the housewife to gainful employment outside the home is not and should not be the same as that of the single woman. She has other duties. In the next thirty years housewives as mothers have vital work to do in ensuring the adequate continuance of the British Race and British Ideals in the world”* (Morgan & Evans, 2002, p84).

Successive post-war governments implicitly supported this gendered division of labour, and the male breadwinner model, particularly in the absence of providing childcare support (Pascall, 2012). New Labour, to a significant degree, represented a break with this pattern, as their, ideologically driven, family-based policies had a key aim of supporting gender equality and for women to work as a requisite for citizenship, which is seen as a move away from traditional roles (Pascall, 2012). New Labour's policy directions have arguably been as a direct result of feminist campaigners over the previous twenty years and from Labour women themselves, particularly those who became a member of parliament, nicknamed 'Blair's Babes'. Furthermore, some policies were developed from Conservative initiatives in response to the change in

family dynamics and the growth of lone parents (David, 1999). The driving force was to find ways to encourage mothers to work and offer support for their caring needs as part of a 'modernisation project' or 'the third way' (Giddens, 1998). This shift from traditional gender roles, resulting in women entering the workforce is explored further in the following subtheme.

### **2.3.2 Mothers and paid employment**

Patriarchy dictated that once a woman was married, they would cease to exist independently and, as mentioned earlier, they would no longer work, and control of their affairs would be assumed by their husband (Oakley, 1975). Women, especially those of the middle and upper classes, were expected to remain at home to raise their children rather than enter, or return to, the Labour market, and to be taken care of by her husband (Pascall, 1997). Yet, in contrast, working class women often found themselves working outside of the home to provide for their family (Hudson, 2011).

During the second world war, as men were called up to serve in the armed forces for their country, it became essential for women to be mobilised as part of the war effort, and a large number of women, from all social classes, worked outside the home. By 1941, as women were conscripted into the workplace, there were concerns over the need for childcare to assist women in undertaking paid work away from home, thus, from 1940 – 1943, the number of nurseries temporarily increased from 14 to 1435 to enable women in balancing their work and homelife (Nicholson, 2018).

Women were expected to return to domestic life when the war ended, despite their success at managing their home responsibilities and employment (Davis, 2014), and the state nurseries, that had been set up to care for children during the war, were closed (Davis, 2014).

However, there was still a labour shortage to be concerned with. Therefore, many women continued to work, often part-time, which was reluctantly accepted by society, and the number of women working gradually began to rise until the 1960s (Crompton, 1997). Consequently, women were fast becoming an important part of the labour workforce (Dex, 1985). Also, with the removal of *marriage bars*, which allowed employers to only employ single women, an increasing number of women also began to undertake paid employment following the maternity period. This was accompanied by a shift in attitudes towards women who were now seen to be able to balance their home and childcare responsibilities along with working outside the home, although still in most cases, part-time (Martin & Roberts, 1987). Subsequently, economic growth during the 1970s and 1980s had seen a demand for women to work, yet whilst this was welcomed by feminist groups and women alike, there were still structural issues that were a hinderance for women attempting to maintain their work and home life, and to be treated equally in the workplace (Fagan & Norman, 2012).

Thus, the second wave feminist movement from the late 1960s was instrumental in challenging the social attitudes towards traditional gender roles of men being the breadwinner and women being the homemaker and were also involved in lobbying for changes to legislation to reduce inequalities in the workplace. This resulted in *The Equal Pay Act 1970* which sought to ensure that women did not earn less than men for doing the same job role, and *The Sex Discrimination Act 1975* that aimed to protect both men and women against being discriminated against on account of their gender (Charles, 2000).

These Acts are heralded as being landmark legislation on improving gender relations (Walby, 1986). However, in practice it is argued that improvements were minimal (Gregory, 1982). This is essentially due to their ambiguous nature which was



determined by the minimal success rate when cases had been taken to a tribunal. In 1979, one hundred and forty-one complaints were made to the tribunal, yet, only fifteen were upheld. Thirty-two were dismissed, forty-nine were withdrawn without explanation, and the remaining forty-five were settled out of court (Snell, 1979). However, there was still an overall reduction in sexual segregation in the workplace following the implementation of the Acts (Gregory, 1982) and when considering the trends between 1901 to 1971, Hakim (1981) suggests that, without *The Equal Pay Act 1970* and *The Sex Discrimination Act 1975*, the reduction in sexual segregation in the workplace would have been four times less likely. The 1970 Equal Pay Act was amended in 1983 to include 'equal pay for work of equal value'. However, although these Acts were introduced to ensure that women were paid at the same rate as their male counterparts for work of equal or similar value, it was argued that workplaces were redefining job roles, so they were no longer seen as equal or similar value, to avoid compliance with *The Equal Pay Act 1970* (Snell et al., 1981) which contradicts the research by Hakim (1981). Likewise, between 1977 and 1987 there was no reduction in the gender pay gap, and by 1990 women's pay was still only at 77% of men. *The Equal Pay Act 1970* was in danger of becoming irrelevant (Gregory, 1992).

Furthermore, whilst the second wave feminist movement was lobbying for change, the UN adopted the *United Nations Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women* (CEDAW) on the 18<sup>th</sup> December 1978 and came into force on 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1981. The Convention came about through the United Nations commissioning body, set up in 1946, to review the status of women, following thirty years of research and is commonly described as an international bill of rights for women. As a human rights treaty, CEDAW stands out from others with its ambitious motivations above that of government's adoption of respecting rights, CEDAW goes

further than this and mandates change within the public and private sphere (Englehart & Miller, 2014). Waldorf (2007) argues that it is not simply enough to implement equality laws, there needs to be a change within society and the workplace that works towards the elimination of gender-based discrimination and stereotypes that are harmful to women. Although, enforcing these mandates requires substantial individual, social, and institutional changes which are deemed unachievable due to the lack of incentives and resources (Englehart & Miller, 2014).

The Convention explicitly defines what is tantamount to discrimination against women and sets out how to combat this with a comprehensive framework, made up of thirty articles. Specifically, articles eleven and twelve state that the dismissal of employees for being pregnant or for being on maternity leave is to be outlawed, along with affording women the right to maternity leave without losing contractual or social benefits, and to promote childcare for families to coordinate their work and family lives (Galtry, 2015). One hundred countries, including the UK, had signed up to the treaty by 1989, recognising that maternity leave and gender equality in the workplace is a human rights obligation (Gov, 2011).

Moreover, despite the 1970's Acts and CEDAW, there were variances in maternity leave between companies and entitlement was still determined by a woman's length of service which, as mentioned earlier, only half of women were eligible for the leave (Anitha & Pearson, 2013). Additionally, if a woman used a nursery that was subsidised by the workplace, this was seen to be a taxable benefit which often added between £700 to £1000 to a woman's tax bill. Further restrictions were made in 1987 when the universal maternity grant was removed, and restrictions were placed on entitlement to state-paid maternity allowance. The dark days continued when Maria Brown, a training supervisor, lost her lawsuit against her former employer for selecting her for

redundancy on the grounds of her being pregnant, which, under CEDAW should not be permissible. Consequently, a 1988 European Commission report exposed the extent that Britain was lagging behind its European counterparts in employment law and was the *only* member state not to provide full statutory maternity leave and had in fact blocked a draft directive in which the minimum standards on parental leave were set out (Jarvis, 2010).

There have been significant policy developments that support and allow women the opportunity to balance working with motherhood, predominantly since the 1970s second wave feminist movement and from European directives and international treaties (Dex & Joshi, 1999). However, the most pivotal changes began with the change to a Labour Government in 1997, along with a significant shift in ideological perspectives towards men taking a share in family responsibilities and a renewed commitment to supporting women in balancing their family commitments with their paid work (Fagan & Norman, 2012). The following sub-theme explores this further.

### **2.3.3 Gendered division of labour: sharing the load:**

Reforming family-based policies was at the forefront of New Labour's political agenda, with an emphasis on harmonising work and home life, and a range of measures were put in place (David, 1999). These initial support measures included the National Childcare Strategy which increased expenditure on childcare provision and offered pre-school education, initially from the age of four (Fagan & Teasdale, 2008) and legislation, such as *The Employee Relations Act 1999*, which afforded employees the right to take unpaid leave in an emergency that involved family and other dependents and for all employees to be entitled to three months unpaid parental leave for children under the age of five, and up to the age of eighteen for disabled children. Further policy

reforms included improvements to the existing maternity provision, and at the turn of the twenty-first century, women were now entitled to eighteen weeks paid leave following childbirth, an increase of four weeks (Gregg, et al, 2007) and job protected maternity leave increased from forty weeks to fifty-two weeks by 2003 (Zabel, 2009).

Underpinning these momentous policy reforms were ideals of achieving gender equality and social inclusion with expectations of supporting women's employment to be like that of men. Furthermore, New Labour's policies reflected, to some extent, the convergence of men and women's working lives (Pascall, 2012). However, there was minimal dialogue from government over how combining caring responsibilities and motherhood, and how men taking on a share of family responsibilities, would be accommodated in practice. Nevertheless, policy makers continued to discuss an alternative model of working, replacing the *Male Breadwinner* model, that would enable men to have the time to take on a greater share of family responsibilities, similar to that of women, which would see employers, and welfare policies alike, recognise everyone as a carer, not just women (Fraser, 1994). Consequently, a *Care-friendly* model of work was regarded as a resolution by the European Union, albeit a radical one, that would view the responsibility of care as every citizen's obligation which in practice meant that to enable both parents to take on an equal share of care, they would each work reduced hours to accommodate this (Pascall, 2012).

New Labour took a step towards a *Care-friendly* working environment by introducing two weeks of paid paternity leave in 2003 (Zabel, 2009) and towards the end of the New Labour Government, in 2009, additional leave and payments were implemented for fathers that allowed them to take up to twenty-six weeks of paternity leave, rather than just the standard two weeks. However, this was on condition that the mother had returned to work before the end of her maternity leave and could only be taken from

the twenty-seventh week after childbirth onwards and by the time the child was one year old (Zabel, 2009).

Recent statistics indicate that over seventy-two per cent of the British Public support the view that the traditional ideology of the male breadwinner model is no longer relevant in modern society, compared to just fifty-eight per cent in 2008 (BSA, 2017). Likewise, there has been a dramatic decrease from 64% of the public believing that women should stay at home to raise their pre-school children in 1989 to thirty-three per cent in 2012, yet, disappointingly, there has been little change in these figures over working mothers since 2012 (BSA, 2017).

These policies gave families the option to share their caring responsibilities, particularly during the maternity period. However, in practice, how a couple share their family responsibilities appears to be also influenced by their gender role ideology. According to Young's (2018), women believe or desire to share their responsibilities equally, yet their lived experiences suggest they take on more responsibility than their partners. Hochschild (1989) conducted a research study that argued how a couple believes their work and family obligations should be divided is key for a woman to then make decisions about her work and family arrangements (Young, 2018). Gender role ideologies, and how they are implemented in daily life, are reflected by gender role strategies and Hochschild's (1989) research suggested that there were three competing ideologies:

***traditional***; expects the man's career to be of more importance and the women to maintain the home and be responsible for childcare, akin to societal attitudes of the twentieth century and fits within the *Male Breadwinner* model.

**egalitarian**; where men and women both work and share the family responsibility equally, which fits within the *Care-friendly* model.

**transitional**; where it is expected that both men and woman work outside the home, yet the man identifies as the main breadwinner and although the woman is supported to work by her partner, she is expected to balance her paid work and family responsibilities herself. This ideology appears to fit somewhere between traditional and egalitarian.

This kind of belief-based explanation for gender roles contrasts with policy-based explanations, not least due to the focus on the household level rather than the national level. However, effective policy implementation is more straightforward when there is broad support for the policy (Park et al., 2014). It appears that gender role ideology has a significant role to play. By itself, this may not be enough though as many families would struggle to achieve an egalitarian division of labour in practice if there is gender discrimination in employment which presents obstacles to the employment of women after childbirth.

In the context of maternity and paternity leave, Hochschild's egalitarian ideology appears to be the aim of New Labour policies, emphasising the shared aspect of care. This was reinforced further when a Conservative government was formed in 2015 and significant changes were made to the additional paternity leave that was previously introduced in 2009 under New Labour. These changes were made in the interest of improving the gendered division of labour, believing that the length of maternity leave compared to paternity leave was perpetuating the idea that women are the main carers (Aitken et al., 2015). Paternity leave is for such a short time and not adequate for many families, thus, another option was made available to families from 2015 when SPL and

Shared Parental Pay (SPP) was introduced for eligible employees if they have had a baby or adopted a child. SPP is paid at the rate of £148.68 a week or 90% of an employee's average weekly earnings, whichever is lower, for a maximum of thirty-seven weeks and SPL is for a maximum of fifty-weeks which allows the woman to take the two weeks compulsory maternity leave and the remaining weeks to be shared (Maternity Action, 2019a). However, according to the government, the take-up of shared leave has been very low - around 2 per cent, partly because it is unaffordable for couples, particularly if the father is self-employed or earns more than the mother (Usborne, 2019). This illustrates the way in which policy change by itself may be insufficient. The rationale behind maternity leave is the association with maternal health and well-being, thus, if it is to be shared with the father then it is important to consider the effect this may have on the mother's health. There have been minimal studies in this area, however, some studies show that SPL can negatively impact on a woman breastfeeding by causing them to stop prematurely. Thus, whilst SPL may improve the gendered division of labour in theory, there are practical implications for mother and child, particularly around breastfeeding. Research undertaken by Ndzi (2019) suggests that some employers are not offering the level of support required for women to continue breastfeeding and work, thus, it may be easier, or preferred, for some to stay at home and not share their maternity leave with their partners. Furthermore, it is argued that although SPL is working towards gender equality, the emphasis on the leave being shared is a paradox if men are not granted their own entitlement, from the government, to take leave equal to that of women (Atkinson, 2017).

### **2.3.4 Summary: policy or ideology as the mechanism of change?**

Traditionally, until the later decades of the twentieth century, gender roles were predefined, and men were expected to go out to work and be the breadwinner whilst the women stayed at home as the homemaker and to raise their children (Crompton et al., 2007). Gender roles evolved from the male breadwinner model to a more care-friendly model as both men and women now work outside the home, supported by government policies to share the responsibilities. However, there were new expectations placed upon women once they became a mother and whilst having the right to work and raise a family concurrently was welcomed, it was still assumed that women would be the main caregiver and remain responsible for family life (Fagan & Norman, 2012). Over time, gender roles have evolved from the traditional ideology to a more contemporary view where women are now entering the labour market to undertake paid work and men are taking on a greater share of the unpaid work at home (Pascall, 2012). In contrast, Ely et al. (2014) suggest that many working women seek an egalitarian model of the division of labour, yet, in reality, their lived experiences are more akin to the traditional ideology. Thus, it appears that policy alone is not enough to change the concept of gender roles and that it also requires a change in gender role ideology. Several studies appear to focus on either policy as the main mechanism of change (Hakim, 1981; Fagan & Norman, 2012; Atkinson, 2017; Ndzi, 2019) or gender ideology at the household level (Hochschild, 1989; Pascall, 2012; Ely et al. 2014; Young, 2018). However, there is a need to consider both mechanisms and the way in which they influence the division of labour in the home.



## **2.4 Flexible working: penalties and inequities**

As the previous theme discussed, women are now active members of the labour market and are afforded legislative protection from the implementation of family policies. Additionally, there is now an expectation that fathers will be emotionally and physically involved in family responsibilities (Peck, 2014). These shifts in perspective are reflected in family-based policies and have led to discussions over flexible working to achieve a healthy WLB. Research suggests that in industrialised societies it can be assumed that participating in paid work along with family life is a desired and achievable outcome for many (Bailey & Madden, 2017). Moving the discussion forward is important at this point to enable a deeper understanding of the potential penalties and challenges that face working mothers once they return to work. A background to the concept of WLB is presented first in this section, before situating the idea in the context of flexible working and the policies introduced in support of this.

### **2.4.1 Work-life balance**

A woman submitting a request to work flexibly is often driven by their desire to improve their WLB (Beesley, 2014). The term *work-life balance*, previously referred to as *family-friendly policies*, was coined in the 1990s and became a political interest in the name of social justice, most notably during the Labour government from 1997 to 2010 (Lewis, et al., 2016). The rationale behind this being given prominence on the political agenda was to demonstrate that economic success could be bolstered by providing employees with privileges that would improve the balance between their home and work (Gregory & Milner, 2009).

The New Labour government promoted WLB policies from 1998 as being advantageous to businesses through greater recruitment, staff retention and service

delivery alongside being attractive to employees, making the concept mutually desirable and beneficial (DfEE, 2001). However, this term is contested due to the use of the word 'balance' which is argued to imply that the individual must decide the importance between work and home life and make the necessary sacrifices to manage the two (Burke, 2004). Feminist critiques also argue that policies supporting a WLB reinforce the gendered division of labour where women are assumed to be responsible for family commitments and men's role in the workplace is the expected default norm (Lewis, 1997; 2001). Additionally, WLB is criticised as too much of a simplistic concept that minimises, and fails to appreciate, how women's lives are governed by complexities and are often constrained, for example by childcare responsibilities, therefore, attempting to reconcile the two spheres may be futile and should really be referred to as 'work-life conflict' which more accurately describes the concessions required to be made (Crompton, et al, 2007). Likewise, replacing the word 'balance' with 'integration', for example, suggests that the two worlds *may* be able to exist harmoniously (Gregory & Milner, 2009). Nevertheless, despite the contested nature of the term '*work-life balance*', it has become widely known and accepted (Crompton & Brockmann, 2007).

It is important to note that as gender roles have changed for women, they have also changed for men and these gendered expectations are also at odds with fathers who are actively, or seek to be actively, involved in the care of their children. Some may feel that they are disadvantaged by organisational WLB policies, believing that as they are mostly aimed at women and that their employers may be averse to male employees utilising them (James, 2009). This is despite the origin of the policies being supposedly *gender-blind* (Smithson & Stokoe, 2005).

Maintaining a healthy WLB is seen to be in the best interest of both employer and employee, yet, since the 2008 recession, how it is implemented within institutions has been manipulated in-line with economic concerns as opposed to that of the employee. Lewis (2016) identifies three main discourses to aid the understanding of WLB: *practices embedded within the organisations despite times of austerity*; considers that WLB policies are deeply embedded within organisations and can subsequently withstand economic pressures as they are seen to be beneficial to working relationships. Opposingly, this can also be seen as policies being taken for granted (Lombardo, et al, 2009); *practices to relieve financial pressures*; this is probably the widest used discourse as it actively promotes the use of WLB policies to reduce costs for employers. For example, taking unpaid parental leave, or a career break can assist organisations in saving money for a fixed period as part of restructuring (Lewis, et al., 2016); *practices as personal responsibility*, this discourse promotes the integration of WLB into broader policies that focus on well-being strategies. By doing this, the emphasis shifts from an employer's responsibility to support employees to that of a personal responsibility, encouraging employees to look after their own work and health. Furthermore, the original concept of WLB policies being introduced as a mutual benefit has been distorted in favour of employment terms and conditions that recognise the pressures on employees away from the workplace, yet, encourages personal buoyancy towards any working conditions that may impinge on their WLB and well-being (Lewis et al., 2016). The reformed meaning of WLB in practice has raised concerns about its relevance in today's labour market (Lewis et al., 2016).

Moreover, it is important to consider why achieving a successful WLB may be important to women. Changes to work schedules, through an FWR, may be better suited to a woman's needs as opposed to that of an employer (Hill et al., 2008).

Whereas working part-time, shift-work, or on a zero hour contract may also suit the employer and not just the employee (Stavrou & Kilaniotis, 2010). From a Human Resources perspective, employees and employers will possibly have differing ideas on what creates a suitable WLB. What may be fitting for the employer may appear to be imposed upon the employee without choice (Gregory & Milner, 2009). Furthermore, women who have previously left the labour market to have children or concentrate on caring for a family member are often referred to as *returners* to the labour market. These women, along with decreasing fertility rates, and an ageing population, are part of the demographic changes that are impacting upon economic growth across Europe which may decrease labour supply. Therefore, by offering women *returners* the opportunity to return to the labour market, in such a way that can assist them in balancing their work and family responsibilities, may offer a solution for employees and employers alike (Tomlinson, Olsen, & Purdam, 2009). Yet, research undertaken by Liff & Ward (2001) suggests that when women do return to the labour market they often do so in a different sector, especially if their previous role was in a male dominated profession. This is largely due to the need for their employer to accommodate part-time or flexible working hours to suit their childcare arrangements (Liff & Ward, 2001). Consequently, this may mean that women are not fully utilizing their skills, and experience, which accordingly can affect their salary and career progression (Manning & Petrongolo, 2008). This is further explored in Section 2.5.

It is when a woman returns to work, following the birth of her first child, that she will encounter the notion of WLB on a personal level as opposed to just a policy idea. It is then, that women may require an alternative, more flexible working pattern to enable them to continue working whilst managing their caring responsibilities and they will look to their employer for guidance on how this may be possible (Hill, et al, 2008). A

woman pursuing a healthy balance between her work and home life may be doing so for a variety of reasons that include: childcare constraints, financial implications, or simply the personal desire to spend more time at home with her family. All these reasons are valid for a woman to cite when submitting an FWR to her employer in the interest of achieving a WLB (Crompton, Lewis, & Lyonette, 2007). However, Standing et al. (2013) found that some women faced emotional difficulties when attempting to balance their work and family life and experienced feelings of guilt. Van der Lippe & Peters (2007), found that mothers who wanted to work more flexibly, to enable them to spend more time with their children, faced particular difficulties, as this meant that they had to manage conflicting responsibilities and face the demands of their job expectations and parenting standards.

#### **2.4.2 Flexible working**

Flexible working was originally introduced under *The Employment Rights Act 1996*, and this Act was updated in 2002 by New Labour and flexible working was reformed in 2003 by New Labour who offered the right to request flexible working and to receive fair consideration for a request (Pyper, 2018). In practice, flexible working for a woman may include flexible hours that vary from the organisation's standard hours; reduced hours, working remotely from home, job sharing, term-time only, and/or extended maternity leave (Hill et al., 2008). A request could be made after twenty-six weeks of working for the same employer and was initially for men and women with children under the age of six, yet was extended to those with a child under the age of eighteen and other carers (Atkinson, 2016). Further small changes were introduced when the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats formed a Coalition government in 2010. During their five-year term, further policy developments were made for families, starting with *The Equality Act 2010* which made it unlawful for women to be unfairly treated if they

were pregnant, breastfeeding, or had recently given birth and during the period of maternity leave, female employees were permitted to maintain all terms and conditions of their employment including the accrual of paid annual leave, and non-cash contractual benefits such as professional memberships, mobile phones, and company cars (Maternity Action, 2019b). Later, 2014 saw a pivotal piece of legislation introduced, *The Flexible Working Regulations*, as part of *The Children and Families Act 2014*, which provided all employees, not just parents and carers, who met the minimum service requirements, the right to request flexible working in the interest of achieving a WLB, and for it to be considered fairly (Beesley, 2014).

However, recent statistics from the Working Mums Annual Survey show that almost a quarter of mothers have had their FWR refused (Garner, 2017). The results of the survey suggest that this is often due to employees lacking knowledge of how to make a request, and from employers not processing the requests in accordance with organisational policy (Garner, 2017). Furthermore, it appears that the outcomes of many FWR are inconsistent and determined by the decision makers' personal bias, and their level of commitment to flexible working (Cooper & Baird, 2015). Employers often view flexible working, and WLB, as a woman's issue and household responsibilities as a private matter. Their organisational discourse is centred on what they perceive to be the ideal *male* worker: visible, having continuity of service without career breaks, and being consistently available during their key operational hours (Lewis & Humbert, 2010). Thus, any deviation from the ideal *male* worker model conflicts with their organisational practices and expectations, which then may be seen to perpetuate the social construction of gender roles where women are seen as being of lesser value, than men, in the workplace (Wheatley, 2016). Women who have their requests refused then have to consider whether or not to challenge the decision

through an employment tribunal, however, some women find this emotionally difficult and instead choose to move on from the job and find alternative employment (Bingham, 2014).

However, The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) carried out a report in 2016 that found that fifty-four thousand women are pushed out of their jobs every year due to pregnancy or maternity leave, and 77% of working mothers have experienced discrimination at work (EHRC, 2016). Distressingly, these figures have doubled in the past ten years and only 0.6% of the women affected raised a tribunal claim (EHRC, 2016) citing the reason of an arbitrary three-month time limit to do so which is often missed due to this occurring at an emotional time when they are about to give birth or have recently given birth and are understandably preoccupied (Pregnant then Screwed, n.d). Subsequently, the mothers who do make a successful tribunal claim often sign a non-disclosure agreement (NDA) in order to reach a settlement, which is open to exploitation from employers who may seek to hide their discriminatory practices (Harris, 2019). These mothers often feel pressured into signing an NDA and feel intimidated by their employers, which may have a long-lasting effect on their mental health, and without stricter regulation, employers can become repeat offenders without contest (Dixon, 2018).

#### **2.4.3 Summary: flexible for whom?**

Achieving a WLB is often a key aim for women returning to work after childbirth and women have the right to request flexible working, and for their request to be considered fairly in accordance with *The Flexible Working Regulations 2014* (Beesley, 2014). However, despite there being legislative support for flexible working, many women have their requests refused which is often due to their employers misrepresenting the

policy guidelines and making decisions that are biased in the organisation's interest (Cooper & Baird, 2015). Similarly, their decisions are often based on preconceived ideas over what the ideal worker looks like in practice which is not always in line with a woman's FWR (Lewis & Humbert, 2010).

Yet again there appear to be inconsistencies between policy and practice which may be attributed to the way in which the policies are generalised for all employees and by the way in which employers unfairly consider the request (Cooper & Baird, 2015). This is demonstrable by the way in which some employers may be winning equality accolades, adhering to policy guidelines in theory, yet, in practice they have discriminated against women during pregnancy or maternity and are able to hide the information due to the use of a legal loophole through NDA which silences women from talking about their experiences of discrimination (Harris, 2019).

## **2.5 Career progression and income: consequences of flexible working**

This theme further explores flexible working and how women may seek flexible employment in the interest of achieving a WLB, and presents the idea that in doing so, women's career progression may be hindered and there may be a significant impact on their earnings. The first section presents a discussion on part-time work and why women choose it, before moving onto a discussion of the penalties and inequities of this form of flexible working. The final sub-section discusses in-work welfare benefits and how they may assist working mothers who work part-time or are on a low income.

### **2.5.1 Why women work part-time**

As noted in the previous section, flexible working can take many forms, and what may work for one family may not work for another. Working part-time is the most prevalent form of flexible working in the UK (Young, 2018). The growth of part-time working has



been significant in the last few decades and current statistics show that over a quarter of the population work part-time (ONS, 2019), with 40% of women working part-time, compared to just 13% of men (Devine & Foley, 2020). This growing trend is attributed to the upsurge in demand of Flexible Working Arrangements. Working flexibly not only assists employees in balancing their family commitments with their employment (Laurijssen & Glorieux, 2012), it also enables employers to vary their employees' working time in line with customer demand by recruiting more staff (Bolle, 1997).

Research undertaken by The Timewise Foundation (2013), aids our understanding of why women choose to work part-time. Over 70% of the respondents were female, of whom, 48% cited their reason for working part-time as being to work around their children and childcare responsibilities. Also, whilst a large majority of the respondents felt their employers offered sufficient opportunities to work flexibly and welcomed the opportunity to do so, a large majority reported that in doing so they felt that their careers would plateau and their expectations would be downgraded along with their salary and the level of seniority (The Timewise Foundation, 2013). These findings demonstrate that what an employer offers as part of their flexible working policies is not always carried out in practice. Consistent with this, Young (2018) suggests that despite a growing trend towards gender parity in higher education attainment and early employment following graduation, more women, than men, are likely to transition into part-time work once they become mothers (Sheridan, 2004). Consequently, this transition has a significant impact on a woman's pay and prospects, due to part-time work mostly being low paid and low skilled (Manning & Petrongolo, 2008), and is explored further in the following sub-section.

### **2.5.2 Part-time work, penalties, and inequities**

Working part-time is identified as a key factor in facilitating a WLB (Atkinson, 2016). A key policy measure introduced for part-time employees was the EU Directive for Part-Time Work, which the UK government signed up to in 1997. A framework agreement that aimed to improve the employment conditions, and to remove discriminatory practices for part-time employees that was later enshrined in The Part-time Workers (Prevention of Less Favourable Treatment) Regulations 2000. Since these regulations were introduced, there has been considerable protection for part-time workers with regards to their pay and benefits, due to provisions that they would not be discriminated against and would be entitled to the same pay and working conditions as their full-time colleagues (Bowlus & Grogan, 2008).

Statistically, as most part-time work is undertaken by women (ONS, 2019), often due to childcare restraints (Timewise Foundation, 2013), these regulations had the potential to have the greatest positive impact on women and aimed to ensure that significant improvements were made to workplace equality. However, whilst there is also legislative support, similar to flexible working, that prevents part-time workers from being unfairly treated compared to full-time workers, part-time work is synonymous with low pay and being unskilled (within specific industries Manning & Petrongolo, 2008), such as caring and hospitality, with minimal opportunities to progress beyond an entry level position (Dex, 2010) and generally, those who undertake part-time work, are assumed to have an overall lower level educational attainment (Salladarre & Hlaimi, 2014). Research suggests that this stems from the 1970s equal pay legislation which some employers manipulated to segregate employees so that women could not claim equal pay for equal work (Pascall, 2012).

On the other hand, part-time opportunities may have facilitated entry to the labour market; for some women who may have otherwise remained unemployed, and for women returning to work, on reduced hours, after having children, there has been an increase in *feminised* jobs, defined as being female dominated professions such as caring roles, being created where advancement is severely restricted (Landivar, 2015). This restriction is attributed to, what is known as, the glass-ceiling, which is used to depict the hidden aspects of discrimination in relation to advancement that continue to exist despite equality legislation (Hunt, 2016).

The EHRC report (2016) found that almost half of employers believed it was reasonable, during the recruitment process, to ask women whether they have young children and over half believed that a woman should have to disclose if she is pregnant at the interview. This may lead to discriminating against a woman at the recruitment stage by simply not hiring women with children or who plan to have them despite legislation stating that it is unlawful to do this. The same report also showed that 40% of employers believed that women put an unnecessary financial burden on the workplace, and they had seen at least one woman take advantage of their pregnancy (EHRC, 2016). These statistics support much of the literature that demonstrates how women are discriminated against during pregnancy and maternity leave and further validates the idea that women are restricted in career progression simply by having children, as many employers view this negatively. Mothers who continue to work full-time after having a baby are in the minority, yet, conflictingly, resuming full-time work is seen as paramount for career progression and to be afforded an equal footing with men, and women without children in the workplace (Kanji, 2011). Thus, transitioning into part-time work following childbirth may have implications for a woman's career progression and income (Manning & Petrongolo, 2008).

Furthermore, when a woman returns to work after having a child to work on a part-time basis after previously working full-time, there is evidence to suggest that she is overlooked for promotion and not seen as a valued member of the workforce due to the perceived, reduced commitment she is able to provide in comparison to full-time colleagues (Meyer, 2013). However, the onus could be on employers to change their perceptions over what constitutes commitment and results. Productivity in the workplace can be achieved in a variety of ways, not just in the nine to five sphere within an office and recognising that skills are not being utilised, therefore being wasted, when a woman is not enabled to work flexibly around her family commitments (Bailey, 2018). As well as being overlooked for promotion as an existing employee, potential new employees are also overlooked for advancement automatically by not even being given the chance to work for some employers. Consequently, when advertising a position as full-time, as opposed to part-time or flexible, may mean that employers are not receiving a full range of suitable applicants, thus, limiting their workforce. This could be simply addressed by changing the word of the advertisement to attract candidates who would have been previously been deemed to be unsuitable merely based on their lack of capability to work full-time hours (Meyer, 2013).

It is argued that women are at a disadvantage if they work part-time and are being restricted in their progression in the workplace (Connolly & Gregory, 2008) Likewise, reviewing the literature also poses interesting questions. For instance, whilst government policy supports women to work flexibly, they are often restricted and pigeon-holed, in the type of work they can undertake. Could it be argued that there are limits on whether women can fully participate in society if they are constrained in the workplace? This is an unfortunate reality for many working mothers who have the necessary academic qualifications and skills to participate on a much higher

occupational level than they are given the opportunity to. For example, there are many women who are trained in specific, high-level, careers that are not having their skills utilised simply because they are refused flexibility to manage their home life along with their paid work (Garner, 2019). Their skills are potentially wasted and the labour market in general is missing out on key candidates due to employer inflexibility and their failure to retain the skills of working mothers following maternity leave (Garner, 2016). However, in contrast, some women have been successful when working part-time, yet, this is not commonplace, as a recent study demonstrates that just 5% of women working part-time have progressed, compared to 18% of women working full-time (Garner, 2019). Women have described feeling devalued when being turned down for promotion instantly, purely based on the hours they work (Durbin & Tomlinson, 2010). This is a lose-lose situation for both employer and employee, and in the context of women it is aptly dubbed as being part of the *motherhood penalty*, which is described as the pay gap between mothers and women without children (Oppenheim, 2019). This is explored further in the following sub-section.

### **2.5.3 Motherhood penalty: the gender pay gap**

Economists analyse career progression by *human capital*, this term refers to a person's skills, knowledge, social status, and other attributes, that contribute to an individual's lifetime earnings potential. This analysis is built upon the lifecycle earnings model of Mincer (1958) and Becker (1964) who are credited with the pioneering concept. The measurement of human capital begins when an individual enters the labour market and where they are situated within it depending on their qualifications and how they progress through on-the-job training that focuses on productivity and growth within the workplace throughout their lifetime (Dolton et al., 2005).

As women are eligible to take time off for maternity leave, one of the penalties for those women, who return to work, is the significant impact on their pay, and the gap it creates between them and their male counterparts, and women without children, particularly if they work part-time. Similarly, lesser educated women with children, and who work part-time, exhibit less labour force attachment than men and women without children (Bowlas & Grogan, 2007). Also, statistics show that women who become mothers before the age of thirty-three earn 15% less than their colleagues (Allen, 2016). This idea is embedded within the *human capital* theory and it is argued that *human capital accumulation*, which is the acquirement of skills, knowledge, experience, and earnings, is impacted upon when a woman takes time out to have children which, in turn, reduces productivity and lowers their income, if they do not return to full-time work (Kahn, Garcia-Manglano, & Bianci, 2014). Women, after having children, may experience a change in their career journey to accommodate their childcare responsibilities such as moving to part-time from full-time employment, and may choose more flexible employment with less emphasis on progression, to fit around their family and home life. Consequently, this means that they are more likely

to achieve less compared to childless women who maintain full-time work and pursue career advancement (Gangl & Ziefle, 2009). Furthermore, women who become mothers at a young age, often below the age of thirty, and continue to have more children are even more likely to experience greater career and pay penalties compared to women who wait to start a family and have fewer children (Miller, 2011).

The gender pay gap, put simply, is the difference between what men and women earn and consequently reduces a woman's earnings over their lifetime (Striking-Women, n.db), affecting their pensions and is one of the leading causes of poverty in the retirement years. The gap varies between industries and regions, with the financial sector having the largest reported gap, and when part-time workers are included in the data, the gap widens further across all sectors and regions, largely due to part-time work predominantly being low-paid, and undertaken by women (Striking-Women, n.db). Recent statistics show that the average pay gap stands at 9%, and although the gap has been gradually closing over time, there has been a less than 1% change overall since 2012 (Olsen et al., 2018; ONS, 2020). The gender pay gap is almost non-existent for the under thirties age bracket, thus, it is not unreasonable to presume that women without children have a greater level of upward social mobility than women with children (Costa Dias et al., 2016).

The causes of the gender pay gap are complex and numerous. One reason is through direct discrimination whereby a woman is paid less for doing the same job as their male colleague; however, this only contributes in a small way to the statistics attributed to equality legislation (Striking-Women, n.db). Some of the main causes are linked to how women's skills are undervalued, demonstrable by how pay scales for comparable jobs, that require similar skills, are lower if they are mostly undertaken by women. The undervaluing of women's skills is reflected in organisations' promotion rates that

highlight gender stereotypes by perceiving that women, particularly as mothers, are less competent, and less likely to commit to managerial roles (Costa Dias et al., 2016). Contributing further to the pay gap is career interruptions such as maternity leave, which may result in a loss or decline of skills, and if a woman has more than one child, this loss increases (Bertrand et al., 2010).

Since 2015, companies with more than 250 employees now must publish the data that shows what their male and female employees earn in the interest of transparency (Francke, 2015). Since then, it appears the gap is widening amongst high earners and although women now make up a larger proportion of the high-income groups, they are still in the minority and become even more rare the higher they climb up the career ladder. In fact, only 9% of top earners in the UK are women (Rodionova, 2016). The supposed, sexist, rationale behind this is that women do not want the pressure, according to organisations that form the Financial Times Stock Exchange Group (FTSE). Some of these firms denied the existence of the gender pay-gap, and those that did admit its existence have given patronising and presumptuous excuses (Cosslett, 2018). According to Cosslett (2018), these companies believe that women do not want the hassle of being in the boardroom, or they do not have the right experience to move higher in their career, and use these reasons in support of why their company does not employ more women in senior roles.

There have been various suggestions for challenging the gender pay gap, and the motherhood pay penalty. Enforcing paternity leave is one way to address the consequences of career interruptions and may level the playing field for men and women, and for childcare to be subsidised once maternity/paternity leave ends rather than waiting until the child is three, which would enable more women to work if the cost of childcare is no longer a barrier (Atkinson, 2016b). This is explored further in



section 2.5. Furthermore, an equally bold approach is to enforce that employers advertise positions as flexible by default which would stop women being trapped in low-paid positions where their skills are not being utilised (Fawcett Society, 2019). Consequently, this may increase the value of these lower paid roles, undertaken primarily by women, particularly if those smaller companies are pushed to publish their gender pay gap data similar to how larger companies have to as they are currently not being scrutinised effectively (Atkinson, 2016b).

#### **2.5.4 Welfare benefits**

This section refers to in work and out of work welfare benefits. As mentioned in previous themes, some women who, after maternity leave, are now working flexibly (such as part-time), may experience a reduction in income due to working in lower paid roles which may impact financially on the household. However, in 1999, under a New Labour government, the introduction of Working Families Tax Credits, later changed to Child Tax Credits and Working Tax Credits in 2003, provided financial support for families with a complex award made up of various elements including additional payments for disabilities, and for working above thirty hours per week (Millar, 2009). There was also a childcare element that would pay up to seventy per cent of the cost of childcare. Once an award was calculated, based on a household's personal circumstances, and how many children are in the family, the amount of tax credits (TC) was then reduced by forty-one pence for every £1 that was earned over £6540 per year (Lewis, 2020). The financial support offered through these TC was considerably more generous than through the previous support of Family Credit, introduced in 1971, and revised in 1988. Family Credit had a low take up of claimants, and New Labour predicted that there would be considerably more claimants for TC (Dilnot & McCrae, 1999).

The purpose of TC was to remove the risk of welfare dependency by incentivising going out to work and redistributing income for lower earning families. The reasoning behind this was to reduce poverty, which, according to research, the number of families living below the poverty line, defined as a household income that is less than 60% of the median wage, from 35% in 1998/1999 to 19% in 2010/2011 (Nardelli, 2015) which would make the introduction of TC a success in terms of reducing child poverty. The Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS) (2010) reported that the introduction of TC did not incentivise paid work for couples, instead it was made easier for one parent to stay at home and have their household income increased by TC. It could be argued that this reinforced traditional gender roles as it was mostly women that would stay at home as they would often be the second earner and would see their TC income further reduced if they entered paid work (Pascall, 2012).

However, in 2012, under a Conservative government, there was a change in financial support under *The Welfare Reform Act*, which laid out the intention to introduce Universal Credit (UC) from 2013, a benefit that would incorporate six means-tested benefits, known as legacy benefits, into one monthly payment that included child and working TC (GOV, 2015). Similar to TC, UC was introduced to reduce poverty and welfare dependency, however, although the intention was to simplify the benefits system, concerns were raised about the decrease in financial support that would be available to working families; as the taper rate, which is the amount a family can earn before their benefits are decreased, would change from 41% under TC, 65%, under UC which meant claimants would lose a larger percentage of their benefits when they earned above the earnings threshold, compared to TC (Brewer et al., 2011; House of Lords, 2020). Furthermore, the Conservative-led government also introduced a two-child limit for claiming TC or UC, yet children born before 2017 were exempt from the

cap and families would be able to claim their full entitlement for these children but would be subject to the cap for those born after 2017 (Lewis, 2020).

However, unlike TC where eligibility was simply based on income, to be eligible for UC both parents must sign a claimant commitment agreeing that they will work as many hours as their caring responsibilities allow, concessions are made for having children below school age and for disabilities. In the absence of these concessions, there is an expectation that both parents will work, or earn the equivalent of, thirty-five hours a week paid at the minimum wage to be eligible for UC. This means that some families could have one adult working full-time and one working part-time, and their earnings combined are more than the minimum expected by the government (GOV, 2020). Research undertaken by the EHRC (2018) suggests that the largest impact of UC will be upon women with children and the potential risk to their independence and autonomy. The payment system facilitates a single monthly payment to couples, who then have to choose which partner receives it. The payment is automatically adjusted should the family's earnings rise or fall during a one-month period which may disproportionately affect women with caring responsibilities as they are often the second earner in the family, and the one to whom the benefit is paid, thus, it is their income that is then reduced (Griffiths, 2018).

It could be argued that the claimant commitment incentivises paid work for women more than it did under TC, however, it is possible for some claimants to be held in a benefits trap. This may occur particularly as women are often in low-paid part-time work, despite having the necessary skills and qualifications to earn more, as discussed previously. Thus, they may have little option but to claim welfare benefits, when, in theory, they may have been able to be a high enough earner to not be eligible, should the barriers of childcare, and lack of flexible working be removed (Johnson, 2019). In

contrast, under UC the childcare element is much more generous, at offering 85% of the costs, and there is no requirement to work a set number of hours as there is under TC (Griffiths, 2018). This is explored further in section 2.5. It is important to note that UC is not fully rolled out to all existing claimants of legacy benefits and although TC are no longer open to new claims, there are still families claiming TC who will be migrated over to UC by 2024.

### **2.5.5 Summary: overqualified and undervalued?**

A woman's worth in the labour market is judged by their ability to climb the *career ladder* and not by the unpaid work they assume as part of their family caring responsibilities, which is often undertaken parallel to their paid work (Barley, 1989; Kirton, 2006) and as part-time work is synonymous with low paid, and unskilled roles, many women find themselves undervalued by working below their skill level with limited opportunity to advance further (Dex, 2010). This situation, known as the *motherhood penalty*, is what affects *human capital accumulation*, and impacts upon a woman's long-term earnings potential through taking maternity leave; and being in a low paid role that they are overqualified for (Kahn et al., 2014). Furthermore, a third of employers believe that women who become pregnant along with new mothers who return to work, are generally less interested in career progression and maintaining a higher paid role in line with their skills (EHRC, 2016). Thus, compounding the view that women are undervalued and seen as a lesser worth in the workplace.

Fiscal support, in the form of TC or UC, are thought to incentivise paid work (Nardelli, 2015). Whilst government financial support is welcomed, in encouraging individuals to go out to work, there is a two-tier approach when analysing their impact due to both benefits running concurrently at this time: claiming TC is thought to reinforce gender

roles, rather than incentivising paid work, by allowing one partner, usually the woman, to stay at home and have their household income supplemented by welfare benefits (Pascall, 2012). In contrast, UC is thought to incentivise paid work, as both partners, in the absence of disabilities and having a child below school age, are encouraged to work, or earn the equivalent of a full-time job paid at the minimum wage to be eligible for the benefit without experiencing a cap on what they can receive (Gov, 2020). However, neither TC or UC address the idea that for some women, government financial support is not enough to have their worth in the labour market recognised, thus, leaving them feeling undervalued, with un-utilised skills, and claiming benefits that they may not even be eligible for if they were better supported to be in suitable employment that aligns with their skill set.

## **2.6 Childcare**

This final theme discusses the barrier of childcare that some women find challenging to overcome due to the often overwhelming costs, and the lack of provision available. Disaggregating this theme into smaller sections is helpful to see how government support for childcare provision and financial support has evolved, and how this may impact on women returning to work.

### **2.6.1 Government policies on early years education and nursery provision**

Government intervention into early-years education and nursery provision for children below compulsory school age did not begin until the early 1900s and its development was sporadic over the following decades (West & Noden, 2016). *The 1918 Education Act*, introduced by the Liberal government Prime Minister; David Lloyd George,

allowed local authorities to apply for grants to assist in the setting up of nursery settings, should they choose to. This provision was expanded temporarily during the Second World War to provide essential childcare for women who were mobilised into the workplace as part of the war effort, yet, was later rescinded as the war ended (West & Noden, 2016). Following this, *The 1944 Education Act* implied that nursery provision would become universal, however, this was not realised, and state intervention declined due to economic pressures. There was minimal progression until the 1960s when the Pre-School Playgroup Movement was formed by a group of mothers' intent on creating their own provision, now known as the Pre-School Learning Alliance (PLA) (Nutbrown & Clough, 2013). Though, it was not until *The Plowden Report 1967* was carried out that the government's interest in nursery education was renewed and it was recommended in the report that new nursery schools should be immediately built-in areas of social deprivation in the interest of raising educational standards for pre-school children between the ages of two and five (Nutbrown & Clough, 2013). Early educational provision continued to be developed, with social and welfare issues at the heart of its fundamental concern for children. These concerns, along with the effects of the war years and the recognition of the needs of young children, fuelled the development (Nutbrown & Clough, 2013).

However, despite there being more women working outside the home and a need for childcare, policies for early years were originally focused on the importance of early education and were not oriented towards providing childcare to working families, which meant that informal childcare arrangements were often made, such as family members taking care of the children (Bryson et al., 2006). It was not until 1998 when *The National Childcare Strategy* was launched by New Labour: a revolutionary policy that, for the first time, put childcare provision on the political map. The strategy outlined the

government's commitment to providing affordable, and good-quality childcare (DfEE, 1998). The rationale behind the strategy was to achieve better outcomes for children through early education, and for parents to access childcare that would enable them to undertake paid work (Nursery World, 2001). Then, as part of the ten-year strategy for childcare, the Department of Education and Skills (DfES) (2004) indicated plans to develop policies that aimed to provide childcare for all parents that was affordable and flexible.

The policies that evolved from the strategy aimed to offer support for families, in the interest of aiding them to take-up employment, by raising the standards of childcare and expanding childcare provision and support (Bryson et al., 2006). A universal and free early years childcare place for every child aged four was initially offered for twelve and a half hours per week for thirty-three weeks of the year; extended to all three-year olds from 2004. This was further extended to thirty-eight weeks of the year in 2006 and then increased to fifteen hours a week from 2009 but only for 25% of each local authority's most disadvantaged children. The provision of free early years childcare places is offered at settings such as private and state-run nurseries, school nurseries, and childminders and parents had the choice over where to send their child (Bryson et al., 2006).

Since 1998, in addition to the introduction of free early years childcare places, there have been various universal and means-tested childcare initiatives and funding streams introduced to support families, particularly women, in undertaking paid work (Pascall, 2012). Financial assistance was introduced by New Labour in the form of children and working TC which supplemented a family's income dependent on their earnings and includes an element towards the costs of childcare that pays up to 70%

of childcare fees at a maximum of £175 for one child and £300 for two or more children (Fagan & Teasdale, 2013). However, although childcare settings can take many forms such as nurseries, childminders, nannies, out of school clubs, and holiday schemes, they do have to be registered with the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED) rather than a family member or friend, and for every £1 that a household earns above £6540, TC awards are reduced by forty-one pence which means some families will have a limited, or zero entitlement to financial support for childcare (Lewis, 2020).

Under a Conservative-led government, between 2010 and 2015, extensions to childcare provision continued and the fifteen hours a week entitlement was rolled out for all three- and four-year-olds (West & Noden, 2016), and a further investment of £380 million was pledged to expand the fifteen hours entitlement for disadvantaged two year olds for a further 130,000 children by 2014/2015 (HM Treasury, 2011). Furthermore, UC was introduced and is gradually being rolled out to replace TC although it is argued to be less generous, yet, this is counteracted by the childcare element of UC being more generous than TC with payments of up to 85% of childcare costs (CPAG, 2014).

However, the childcare element of UC is paid in arrears and as such means that families must pay this amount upfront which may be unaffordable, particularly for someone starting a new job who then may have to wait for their first wage (CPAG, 2018). Furthermore, *The Childcare Act 2016*, under a Conservative-led government, set out their commitment to maintaining the fifteen hours funding for all three- and four-year-olds, and for there to be an extension to the entitlement to thirty hours per week for families where both parents are in employment (GOV, 2016). A further funding



stream introduced as part of *The Childcare Payments Act 2014* offered tax free childcare for families who were not eligible for TC or UC due to their income being too high. This initiative provides families, earning below 100k per year, with twenty per cent towards the cost of childcare for every child up to the age of eleven up to a maximum of £2000 per child per year or £4000 for children with disabilities. In practice, parents open up a childcare account, and for every £8 they transfer into the account, the government top this up to make £10 to be used to pay for OFSTED registered childcare providers (Lewis, 2020b). A further funding issue is focused on the provision of childcare. In order for the free early years childcare places to be offered by providers, the costs of the places are funded by the government. However, in reality, these places are underfunded by the government and do not reflect the true cost of childcare provision which, consequently, means some providers are suffering a financial loss, which then impacts on their ability to offer the free places and may cause some providers to cease trading (Ferguson, 2018).

Whilst there have been significantly positive policy developments in relation to the expansion of universal childcare provision since 1998, entitlement to financial support continues to be means-tested and not all families are eligible. This is likely to impact upon women returning to work after having a baby and is discussed further in the following section.

### **2.6.2 Childcare - a barrier for women returning to work?**

One of the key considerations for families when women return to work after maternity leave is who will care for the child whilst both parents are working (Wiesmann, 2010). Research suggests that the decisions made around childcare are not explicitly discussed by both parents, instead most parents make the decision based on either

*social comparisons*, how their peers manage childcare; *individual preferences*, where one parent may express their desire to take greater responsibility for childcare; or a couple's *gender ideology*, whether that may be traditional, egalitarian or transitional (Wiesmann, 2010). A significant concern when making the decisions is based on the financial cost of childcare and it is thought that low- and middle-income earners are more likely to choose that one parent stays at home, or work flexibly, which may involve a reduction of hours or working part-time, due to the high cost of formal childcare (IPPR, 2014). In contrast, high earners are more likely to be able to afford the cost of childcare without either partner sacrificing their careers (Risman, 2011).

However, the consideration of affording formal childcare based on a family earning model of being low, middle, or high earners, is too simplistic and does not consider individual families' financial situations (Hacohen et al., 2018). The reality of childcare costs and the impact on women returning to work have a more complex dynamic. The independent thinktank, The Resolution Foundation (2014) found that two-thirds of women state that childcare costs are a barrier to working more, particularly for low-income earners (Wintour, 2014). Creating an unworkable situation whereby women are keen to work, or work more, but are prohibited to due to childcare constraints that can leave women paying out more in childcare than they actually earn (Ferguson, 2015).

Between 2010 and 2018, childcare prices for one child under the age of two cost an average of £255 per week in the most expensive local authorities, and the median wage for women living in these areas was £530 per week. Comparatively, in the least expensive local authorities, childcare for one child averaged £160 per week which is much lower, however, the average wage for a woman was also much lower at £425

per week. This demonstrates that childcare prices are related to the average wage for that area (Brearley, 2020). These childcare costs will increase if a family has more than one child, and as access to government financial support is means-tested, some families may be eligible to claim part of the costs, yet, for some families the full cost may need to be met by themselves.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) found that the UK has one of the most expensive childcare systems in the world, that is not sufficiently regulated to ensure access to all, regardless of income (Oppenheim, 2019). Government response to this data was to endorse their childcare policies on financial support through UC, and tax-free childcare. However, these policies are not enough in a society where women are expected to work, and want to work, yet are forced to sacrifice a disproportionate amount of their salary to pay for their child to be cared for, or have to sacrifice their career progression by working part-time to reduce their childcare costs (Oppenheim, 2019; Brearley, 2020).

### **2.6.3 Summary: who cares?**

This theme has highlighted the positive developments in government intervention for providing childcare support for working families in the form of provision, and financial support. In theory, women are able to make a claim for welfare benefits and have up to eighty-five per cent of the cost of childcare paid for (CPAG, 2014), and once their child turns three, they are entitled to thirty-hours a week of childcare for 38 weeks of the year until they start compulsory schooling, as long as both parents are in paid work (GOV, 2016). However, these childcare places remain underfunded by the government and as such- a childcare crisis may be imminent if providers are unable

to maintain their service and are forced to reduce the number of free places, or even close the business down (Ferguson, 2018).

Furthermore, the claim for TC/UC childcare element does not guarantee entitlement as it is means-tested, which means that some families have to cover the costs themselves, and as the free childcare places are only available from the age of three and during term time, a shortfall remains between the end of the maternity period and the age of entitlement, where the cost is deemed to be expensive, particularly if a family is not entitled to welfare benefits (Bartholomeou, 2009). This has been partially addressed through tax-free childcare, yet the maximum claim a family can make is 20% of their childcare costs, up to a maximum of £2000 per year, or £4000 per year if a child has disabilities (Lewis, 2020b). However, this still leaves a shortfall of 80% and if a family's childcare costs are high, or have more than one child, they may have a significant amount to pay out themselves, if not the whole amount, which may mean it is not worth the woman, usually as the second earner, to work full-time. Consequently, this means they may be forced to reduce their hours or change their job to part-time, potentially sacrificing their careers and future earnings potential.

## **2.7 Conclusion: career or motherhood?**

Throughout the twentieth century, there has been a shift from traditional gender roles and there has been a stark rise in mothers being employed, compared to women without children. In particular, the number of women with pre-school children who work has risen from 31% in 1980 to 67% in 2016 (OECD, 2016). Furthermore, there have been momentous policy developments throughout the twentieth, and into the twenty-first century, that have placed maternal and family interests at the heart of policy making. Policies have evolved to the point where women now have the right to job

protected paid maternity leave for fifty-two weeks, which can now also be shared with the father. Moreover, pregnancy, breastfeeding, and the period of maternity leave are now protected characteristics under *The Equality Act 2010* which protects women against discrimination during these periods. Likewise, *The Flexible Working Regulations 2014* affords all employees the right to request flexible working, and the introduction of TC and UC has provided means-tested financial support, including an element for childcare for some families.

The culmination of life-cycle changes, challenging the concept of traditional gender roles, and the implementation of policy and legislation to reduce inequality have been successful in aiding women to access paid work whilst raising their children. However, this progression may be limited for women who work flexibly. The most prominent form of flexible working is to work part-time, and women choose to do so in the interest of balancing their paid work and home-life, often due to childcare constraints, and is supported in this choice by government policy (Young, 2018). However, there appears to be an unavoidable negative impact on women's earning potential and career progression when doing so (Manning & Petrongolo, 2008; Pascall, 2012), commonly known as the *motherhood penalty*. Furthermore, whilst the term WLB may be contested, it has become a key aim for many employers, and is welcomed by employees, especially women and it could be argued that any detriment to their career progression can be offset by being able to spend more time at home with their children, therefore, it is worth the career sacrifice (Young, 2018).

The policy developments discussed in this literature review have evolved since the early 1900s, however, it is important to consider how they are implemented in practice. Has the protective legislation improved equality in the workplace, particularly for women? and are women able to balance their work and home life effectively? or is

there a mismatch between government ideology and reality that is causing women to choose between their career and motherhood? (Young, 2018). As this study has a phenomenological approach and aims to consider all aspects of women's lived experiences of returning to work, the answers to these questions will be discussed in **Chapter Five**, along with the research findings.

## Chapter Three: Methodology

### 3.1 Introduction

Historically, the lives of women and their labour have received minimal sociological attention (Young, 2018). However, in the 1970s, Ann Oakley (1974) wrote her book *Housewife*, to highlight the unpaid role of women in the home. This was written during a time when women traditionally stayed at home to raise a family and look after the home rather than undertake paid work. However, housework was not considered *work* and was mostly ignored (Young, 2018). Today, women *work* inside and outside the home and there is a growing body of research on how they combine the two forms of labour (Young, 2018). Since the 1970s, substantial research into working women has been carried out and has predominantly been qualitative. This is due to the studies being concerned with exploring the lived experiences of women, therefore they have generally used qualitative methods such as interviews, narrative approaches and focus groups (Kim, 2016).

Throughout this chapter I will define the methodological practices and complexities. The first section discusses the methodological framework and where this study was ontologically and epistemologically situated. Following this I will focus on the interpretive paradigm, and interpretative phenomenological methodology and justify why it was the most appropriate approach to explore my research question. I will also address data collection, the analytical procedure, reflexivity, and the ethical considerations for this study.

### **3.2 Methodological Framework**

Approaching this study from a qualitative perspective relates to its original aim to explore the lived experiences of women returning to work after childbirth, based on the literature review findings. The objectives were to explore why women choose to work full or part-time, how they achieve a WLB, their experiences of childcare provision, and career progression. Consequently, the yielded data would enable an exploration of their personal lived experiences of returning to work after childbirth.

Deciding on the right framework for a qualitative research project can be arduous, as according to Snape and Spencer (2003), several key philosophical debates arise when considering how the social world is examined. It is therefore important to understand that research questions, methodology, and methods are all influenced by philosophical structures (Grix, 2004). A research paradigm consists of the following components: ontology, epistemology, methodology and methods, and can be defined as a 'Worldview', an epistemological stance, that has a shared set of beliefs between members of an area of specialty (Scotland, 2012). Employing the interpretivist paradigm for this study was the most appropriate method, as meaning was constructed from the interaction between subjective consciousness and the world (Scotland, 2012). Furthermore, this study aimed to understand a phenomenon from each participant's point of view, however meaning can be constructed in different ways by different people and it is the relationship between the researcher and the participant that determines how the phenomenon is interpreted (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Ontology is the study of 'being' and what is real, or reality (Crotty, 1998). It has further been defined as 'the nature of the world, and what we know about it' (Snape & Spencer, 2003). Furthermore, social ontology can be defined as a 'philosophical



consideration in research', which questions whether there is a social reality that exists independently from human conceptions and interpretations (Urmston et al., 2014). The ontological position of interpretivism is relativism, which focuses on the subjective view of reality and how it differs with everyone (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Likewise, this branch of ontology assumes that there are as many realities as there are people and that reality is skewed by human input (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Relativism can help researchers determine the certainty of their study, and whether they can claim that what they believe to be the truth about reality is legitimate. Furthermore, relativist ontology is focused on the philosophical idea that reality is a construction formed in the human mind and that rather than there being one single reality, it is instead dependent on the experience of individuals (Moon, 2017).

Within ontology is epistemology, another branch of philosophy concerned with the theory, or nature of knowledge and the assumptions made about society (Snape & Spencer, 2003). Epistemology is important for researchers as it is focused upon the methods in which they acquire and produce knowledge and its legitimacy, and it guides how they frame their research. The broad epistemological position of interpretivism is subjectivism, which is concerned with the idea that reality is fluid and can be shaped by the individual perceptions of a person's experience in the world (Moon, 2017). Thus, by employing an interpretivist approach, I was able to explore each individual participant's experiences as their own subjective reality. Interpretive methods allowed me, as the researcher, to gain meaningful insight into their perspectives, as opposed to the views of others. Yet, although interpretative methods allowed the findings of the study to emerge without coaxing from the researcher (Carter, 2007), it is accepted that my own personal background and experiences will have influenced the findings (Langridge, 2007).

The knowledge gained through this paradigm has been labelled as having limited transferability when it comes to policy making, due to findings being fragmented (James, 2012). For example, the experiences documented in this study are each unique, albeit with some shared similarities, yet their validity can be brought into question as the overall findings are unlikely to produce a coherent body of evidence to influence policy changes (Berliner, 2002). However, this study does not claim to achieve uncontested certainty, instead legitimacy and trustworthiness are required for its findings to be credible and for them to be replicated by someone else (Scotland, 2012). Likewise, it is important for a researcher to produce a consistent and justifiable qualitative study, thus methodological rigour is essential to draw conclusions from the findings (Willig, 2001).

Within interpretivism, phenomenology is a methodological approach applied to the study of lived experiences. This approach serves to understand the subjective nature of an individual's perspective of their 'lifeworld' (Austin & Sutton, 2014). The term lifeworld refers to how a person's subjective construction of reality is formed based on their life circumstances (Kraus, 2015). This can be further understood as a humanistic approach to research, which explores the whole person in depth, thus providing a unique window into their meaningful experiences (Mapp, 2008). Furthermore, the intention is not to understand these experiences as factual, but rather to understand the meaning behind these experiences and create knowledge from an individual point of view (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004). Likewise, phenomenology allows the researcher to see deep into the heart of a person's experience, driven by the fascination of discovering new meaning and the creation of knowledge from it (Van Manen, 2007).

Descriptive phenomenology, also known as transcendental phenomenology, was developed by Edmund Husserl in 1927, who believed that human phenomena could

not be studied by using experimental scientific research as it was detached from human experience. Instead, he worked to derive an alternative way of studying humans which would find meaning in their experiences (Crotty, 1996). He also believed that researchers could set aside their own experiences and assumptions to derive understanding of the phenomenon (Smith et al., 2011), by 'bracketing', which means the researcher is able to disregard their own preconceptions so as not to influence the participant's experience (Parahoo, 2006). By adopting a descriptive approach, knowledge is created by using intentional analysis which is concerned with describing how experiences are constructed and described by participants, without presuppositions (Osborne, 1994).

Interpretive phenomenology, also known as hermeneutics, was developed by Martin Heidegger in 1927, who was a mentee of Edmund Husserl. Heideggerian phenomenology differs to that of descriptive Husserlian in the belief that the interviewer is unable to set aside or be detached from the research process. Thus, their own lived experiences form part of the phenomena and the process of interpreting the data (Langdrige, 2007). Furthermore, hermeneutics extends beyond just describing lived experiences, as the researcher's consciousness is stripped of all prior knowledge, by probing further into the participant's experiences to examine and understand the phenomena on a much deeper level. It is also possible for the researcher to extract meaning from the experiences that may not even be perceptible to the participant but can be garnered from the narratives created (Lopez & Willis, 2004). This serves to create knowledge derived through co-constitutionality, a concept that blends the meaningful experiences of the participant with the interpretation of the researcher (Koch, 1995). Interpretive phenomenologists ultimately believe that to

interpret and give meaning to something, their own life experience and preconceptions are paramount (Alase, 2017).

My personal aims for this study were to carry out research, which was interesting, and relatable to women with or without children, even if they had different experiences to others involved in the study. It is important to provide a platform for women, albeit a small number of women, to have their meaningful experiences heard and documented in such a way that they cannot be disregarded as irrelevant or insignificant, and for their experiences to be transferable to other contexts. Furthermore, I recognised that my own personal experiences of motherhood and employment would certainly influence the way in which I carried out my research due to the intrinsic human nature of having a standpoint on topics of interest. Thus, it would be challenging to remain completely objective, as per Husserl's (1927) philosophies. Hence this study identified with Heidegger's (1927) philosophy of interpretative phenomenology, as my ideology helped to shape the meaning constructed from the participants' experiences (Langdrige, 2007). However, I also appreciated that, whilst being immersed in the study may be valuable to the findings, it was similarly important to ensure that my experiences did not supersede the participants' knowledge and experience, as their experiences were paramount to the research objectives.

The following section focuses on the research methods informed by interpretative phenomenology: the sampling strategies used in recruiting participants, how data was collected, and the sample characteristics.

### **3.3 Research Methods**

This section will describe the interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach to sampling and data collection, based on interpretive phenomenological theory by Smith and colleagues (2011). I decided on this approach in accordance with Heidegger's philosophy that a phenomenological study follows an interpretative process from inception (Smith et al., 2011). An IPA approach to conducting research can be characterised by a set of common processes (Smith et al., 2011). These are not meant to be specific steps to adhere to, rather guidelines to follow when applying this approach to a research study and I used the following guidelines throughout this study.

#### **3.3.1 Constructing a research question and recruiting a sample**

Within IPA, a research question is generally open and is not an attempt to test a hypothesis. My research heading is not framed as a question, instead it is an exploratory title that is open-ended to allow inclusivity of all experiences. Interpretive phenomenology informs sample recruitment by purposive selection, as participants are selected based on their representation of a particular perspective as opposed to the wider population (Smith et al., 2011). When deciding on a sample size there are several deciding factors to consider, yet there is varying guidance on what constitutes an acceptable number of participants. Research undertaken by Guest, Bunce, & Johnson (2006), identified just seven sources that suggested a specific sample size. Guidance upon two specific types of qualitative approach, grounded theory or phenomenology, was cited by six of the sources and only one discussed qualitative research in general, suggesting that fifteen would be the smallest acceptable number

of participants in qualitative research. In contrast, a later study by Ritchie et al. (2014), determined that sample size was dependent on different factors, such as the rationale and approach to the study, and therefore a sample size of between five and twenty-five would be most appropriate, while suggesting fewer than fifty. The reasoning behind this is that unlike quantitative research which is concerned with statistical importance and therefore requires a much larger sample, qualitative research is more concerned with yielding a more detailed, and deeper, account of participants' experiences.

Therefore, when deciding on a sample size when conducting a study guided by IPA, it is more important to assume quality over quantity and a small number of participants can be reflective of a perspective rather than the wider population (Smith et al., 2011). Likewise, as qualitative data is more detailed, a large sample size is not required if nothing new is emerging from the research study (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Furthermore, it is argued that 'saturation' may be the dominant concept for qualitative research. A research study reaches data saturation once there is sufficient information for the study to be replicated and new information is no longer emerging from the data (Fusch & Ness, 2015). However, this concept is mainly linked with grounded theory, therefore Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora (2015), proposed 'information power' as an alternative concept. This concept suggests that a lower sample number is sufficient as long as the data provides considerable information to be analysed and this is dependent on the study aim, sample specificity, using recognised theory, a quality discussion, and the analytical procedure.

Consequently, I decided to recruit fifteen participants and although I recognised that this number would not be representative of the wider population, it would serve to

represent their individual experiences and make a valuable contribution in this field. Furthermore, as previously discussed, research conducted within the interpretive paradigm can be perceived to lack transferability when it comes to policy making (Berliner, 2002). However, with regard to sample size, for use in qualitative data, the concept of transferability provides evidence that the findings of this study *may* be applicable to other contexts and situations. Thus, the onus was upon me as the researcher, to only provide evidence that it *could* be applicable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Additionally, a sample size of fifteen would also provide enough data for my analysis and was suitable when considering the timeframe of the proposed research project.

The selection criteria for this study were as follows:

1. Participants must be female.
2. Participants must live in the UK as the focus is on UK government policy.
3. Participants must have been employed either full or part-time before maternity leave.
4. Participants who were self-employed before maternity leave were excluded.
5. Participants must have returned or attempted to return to work following maternity leave in the last five years (to keep the study in line with current policies).

### **3.3.2 Recruitment**

Before I discuss my recruitment strategies, it is important to note that I had a false start with my research. My original research proposal intended to recruit participants from the third sector organisation I was employed by. However, I was unable to continue with this as my contract was not renewed after childbirth and my role was terminated during maternity leave. Subsequently, I had to slightly reevaluate my proposal and

decided to redirect my research and take a broader approach to exploring mothers' experiences of returning to work after childbirth by recruiting women who fitted the eligibility criteria, as described in section 3.3.1, rather than from just one organisation. When considering how to recruit, I decided that social media would be a useful tool in reaching out to a large number of potential participants as social media has become a major way of expressing opinions and communicating with others (Branthwaite & Patterson, 2011). Social media is growing as a tool for recruitment, however there is currently little regulatory guidance around ethical issues that may arise. Therefore, it is important that this method is ethically approved beforehand (Gelinis et al., 2017). Subsequently, participant recruitment took place via social media (Appendix 4).

I placed an enquiry in three different online parenting groups and national support networks. I was already aware of the presence of these groups as a long-standing member of each one. The recruitment process was purposive, which is widely used in qualitative research (Palinkas et al., 2015), to ensure that participants met the eligibility criteria. Snowball sampling was unintentionally employed, when details of the study were passed to other women, who contacted me directly, and who were either not on social media or not part of the chosen groups. Snowball sampling is a common method used in qualitative research despite it being criticised for lack of diversity (Kircherr & Charles, 2018), it can be suited to sensitive studies (Naderifa, Goli & Ghaljaei, 2017), such as mine. Thus, I decided to continue with this method as I believed that it would locate potential participants through the natural interaction of women sharing their stories and knowledge with each other.

The networks used for recruitment were made up of women from differing socio-economic backgrounds and were chosen due to the diversity of their members. Although some members may have shared a similar parenting ethos, for example



attachment parenting which is baby-led, and authoritative parenting which is parent-led (NCT, 2019), I wanted to reach out to as many women as possible to maintain diversity.

**Red Tent**, a support group solely for women, part of the Red Tent movement. The movement has connected women for thousands of years. The only prerequisite for becoming part of the movement is being a woman, with or without children. This made the group an ideal place to advertise for potential participants without the risk of limiting the selection to only those with a specific parenting philosophy and it was selected due to the high number of members.

**Attachment Parenting**, members share a similar, baby-led, parenting style, focusing on empathy and responsive parenting, and gentle practices. I considered that sharing a similar parenting style may be a limitation to the research findings due to lack of diversity within the group, however I believed it was important to reach out to mothers who may not be part of mainstream parenting groups, to foster their experiences. I included this specific parenting group due to the large number of members nationwide, as opposed to other style-specific parent groups, and it allowed me the opportunity to engage with women who I may not have otherwise been able to reach in groups that did not advocate a specific parenting style.

**Netmums** is a large parenting forum with a dedicated section for research opportunities, chosen due to the sheer volume and diversity of members rather than their preferred parenting style.

After advertising for participants in each group, I received an email from a woman asking me if my request could be shared by an organisation called *Pregnant then Screwed* who are a campaign group offering a legal advice phone line and a mentor

scheme to support women taking legal action against employers. She believed that I could potentially make a connection with women who would be interested in sharing their experiences, therefore, I agreed for my request to be published on their Facebook page which had over six thousand followers. However, I appreciated that by agreeing to advertise through this medium I was potentially limiting my research, due to the nature and ethos of the organisation. Any responses received would more than likely be because they had had a negative experience, yet I felt that this was justifiable as the aim of the research was to gather both positive and negative experiences.

Following my advertising, I received forty-one responses via email; four from Red Tent, two from Attachment Parenting, five from Netmums, twelve from Pregnant then Screwed, and a further eighteen of these email enquiries occurred through *snowballing*, three of whom became part of the sample. Everyone who expressed an interest in becoming involved was sent a participant information sheet (Appendix 2) via email, along with a consent form (Appendix 3), should they wish to participate. The information sheet provided the aims and objectives of the study, what their role would be in the research and whether there were any benefits and/or risks to them. Once a participant decided to proceed, they sent me their completed consent form electronically, due to distance, and I removed any identifiable data to ensure anonymity. The forms were then stored in a password protected folder on my laptop. Each participant was fully aware of their right to withdraw from the study up until the point I began to transcribe. A total of ten women immediately consented to being interviewed, and an interview time and date was set. The remaining thirty-two women were contacted after one week, as I was still aiming to interview a total of fifteen, however they either declined as they did not want to commit to interviews or did not reply.

Of the ten women who did consent, I had very little information about them apart from their eligibility status of being a mother who had returned to work after having children. I did not prior assess their suitability for the study, nor did I select participants to fit within a specific theory that may have been seen to be promoting my own agenda.

Following the initial recruitment, and interviews with the ten women, it became clear that there were repetitive themes emerging, and although the technique applied to recruiting participants in accordance with the selection criteria was homogeneous, which is a type of purposive sampling, the participants had distinct similarities to each other with regards to their socio-economic background, being middle to higher earners, and academic level. To promote diversity in the sample, a more selective approach was taken to ensure that women from other socio-economic backgrounds were included. Such women earning lower salaries may require their income to be subsidised by TC or UC, including financial support for childcare, and I wanted to explore their experience of returning in contrast to women with middle or high incomes.

In order to recruit the additional five participants, I re-advertised within the original social media groups used in the first phase of recruitment. However, similar to last time, I agreed for my recruitment advert to be shared in another group, Tots to Ten, which has 5,800 members. Following the second phase of recruitment I received a further seventeen replies. I sent all seventeen women a participant information sheet and consent form, seven of whom replied agreeing to be interviewed.

Only four then went on to be interviewed, as three ceased communicating. This proposed a dilemma as I had previously made an informed decision to recruit fifteen women, yet I was having difficulty in recruiting one more participant. However, when I reflected on the interviews already conducted and the experiences collated, I believed

that having one fewer person would not be detrimental to my study, as I had potentially already reached saturation point and there did not appear to be anything new emerging. Consequently, I decided to continue with the fourteen participants.

A summary of the number of respondents and how many went on to be interviewed from each group can be seen in **Table 1**:

**Table 1:** Number of respondents and how many were interviewed from each group.

	<b>Responded</b>	<b>Interviewed</b>
<b>Netmums</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Red Tent</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Attachment Parenting</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Tots to Ten</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Pregnant then Screwed</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Snowballing</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>3</b>

The following section presents the analytical framework for this study, including IPA and the methods used in this approach towards analysing my data.

### 3.3.3 Collecting data

When carrying out qualitative research, there are several compatible methods of data collection such as observation, which may be more suited to a longitudinal study or ethnographic study; focus groups, that often lack direct interaction (Willig, 2001); and interviews, which produce results that have to be accepted as they appear at face value (Potter & Hepburn, 2005). Furthermore, interviews can be structured, semi-structured, or unstructured. Qualitative data is usually produced by using semi-structured or unstructured interviews, where there is little input from the interviewer and the participant is able to express themselves freely without limitations, whereas quantitative data is often produced from structured interviews (Kim, 2016).

Considering my epistemological position as being that of interpretative phenomenology, semi-structured interviews fitted within the IPA approach as they created an opportunity to have an in-depth discussion where the participant was free to express themselves and give the researcher a deep insight into their experiences, and the findings of the interview would be presented as perceptions of experience as opposed to a single objective truth (Smith et al., 2011).

Furthermore, I chose this style of interview due to its flexible nature allowing the participants the freedom to talk openly with minimal interruption. However, there are epistemological implications to using this method. A participant could offer unclear responses to questions, resulting in there being different ways to interpret their meaning. Thus, further clarification may have been needed to confirm whether these ambiguities were due to miscommunication in the interview, or a reflection of their life situation and genuine inconsistencies (Kvale, 2007).

### **3.3.4 Constructing the interview schedule**

Before semi-structured interviews can commence, it is important to construct an interview schedule (Appendix 5) for direction and to ensure that the key discussions take place throughout the interview. This schedule was created through the knowledge gained when conducting my literature review and the key themes that emerged.

The purpose of the interview schedule (Appendix 5) developed for this study was to offer the researcher guidance before the interview, in terms of considering what the interview may cover and what, if any, difficulties might arise. During the interview it served to keep the interview on topic, ideally with little prompting. It also allowed me as the researcher to listen intently and merely guide the conversation if necessary, to ensure that the research objectives were met whilst enabling me to reflect on the participants' experiences and interpret their meaning, by realising my own subjective consciousness.

I intended to open each interview with the simple phrase 'tell me about your experiences of returning to work following maternity leave'. If the researcher is asking too many questions, it could imply that the respondent is not fully engaged (Smith et al., 2011) and to rectify this would require the researcher to push for answers, which is not fully engaging with the ethos of IPA hence the need for an interview schedule that is carefully planned to avoid this. However, I accepted that there may be instances where my input was required to maintain the flow of conversation, thus, to ensure this I intended to use the interview schedule as a tool to ensure all important areas were addressed, by providing prompts such as 'tell me about your experience of childcare'. This was an open-ended question allowing the participant to consider how childcare fitted into their lives, for example did they use formal or informal childcare; was it cost

effective and/or affordable; the provision of childcare in their area and their overall experiences, without me asking each of these as a direct question. I constructed my schedule with this in mind and had specific areas of interest that needed to be addressed, thus by opening with the above phrase I was confident that many of the areas would be spoken about freely without prompting.

### **3.3.5 Interviewing**

Semi-structured interviews can take a long time, often in excess of an hour, so proceeding without interruption is necessary. It is essential to put the respondent at ease to start with, as this will aid with gaining their experiences freely. I adopted this approach with each interview I conducted, starting with informal introductions and pleasantries followed by a brief outline of my motivation behind the study, which I believe served to make me relatable to the participant. Before each interview began, I explained how I intended the interview to progress and I encouraged them to talk openly and honestly with minimal interruption from me, unless it was to guide them as per the topic guide. I also asked them if they had read the guide beforehand, so they were familiar with it. Each interview took place in a private room using headphones to ensure there were no disruptions and each one lasted on average forty minutes, with the longest one being sixty-two minutes and the shortest being twenty-five minutes.

When a participant is relaying their story during an interview, they may discover new meaning to their experiences that they had not realised earlier (Kvale, 2007), and it is here that the researcher can take an active role in dissecting this new information (Ahmed & Ahmed, 2014). Consequently, the researcher and participant are both part of a learning process during the interview and it is through this two-way interaction that knowledge is created within this specific situation. If another researcher were to re-

enact the interview using the same interview schedule it is possible, they would present a different interpretation of the themes, based on their own subjective experiences (Kvale, 2007). Ultimately, my role here was to create data with the participant during the interview by helping them to make sense of their experiences, and for me as the researcher using an IPA approach, to dissect their experiences and construct knowledge from their meaning, by harnessing my own subjective consciousness (Scotland, 2012).

### **3.3.6 Recording**

Recording the interviews was necessary to ensure the whole conversation was captured and nothing was missed. All interviews were recorded, via Skype, due to the participants' locations and to fit around their busy lives, and permission was sought and granted to record our conversation. As I was recruiting nationally, for method-testing purposes I conducted one pilot interview to ensure my equipment was working correctly and to confirm that using Skype would work efficiently. My decision to use Skype was based on being able to widen my search for participants without having to meet face-to-face if they lived a considerable distance away. I balanced this with the potential ethical issues as discussed by Iacono, Symonds & Brown (2016), whose research found that although Skype can achieve the same results as a face-to-face interaction it can lack elements of personal connection, e.g. one would be unable to offer a drink before starting. However, being in their own home could ensure they were at ease and in a comfortable environment. I discovered that this method of recording interviews worked well, and participants had the added option of turning off their video so only their voice was captured, although only one participant opted to do this.



Each interview was saved on the Skype server for thirty days which reduced the risk of accidental deletion. The pilot interview also served to ensure that my topic guide was sufficient. I decided to use Skype for conducting interviews as this took away the need for both of us to travel, allowed us to be somewhere comfortable of our choosing whilst the interview took place, and our conversation could still be recorded.

### **3.3.7 Transcription**

Transcription is the first stage of analysis and IPA guidelines suggest that it is not necessary to transcribe verbatim, yet significant pauses, laughs and false starts will add meaning to the content of the transcript. Before starting each transcription, I listened to each recording at least twice to familiarise myself with the content and as I had used Skype as my medium, which is video recorded, I was also able to assess body language and facial expressions in addition to the words spoken. Following each interview, I downloaded the audio file to the password protected folder and saved it using a pseudonym ready for transcription.

Before data analysis can be performed, it is necessary to transcribe the audio recorded interviews. However, there are several ways that this can be achieved (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For instance, in narrative analysis, a more detailed transcription is necessary which requires close concentration to ensure that the transcribed data is produced with exactly the same words that were originally used, including non-verbal sounds such as coughs or pauses (Riessman, 1993). However, in IPA, it is acceptable to leave out non-verbal utterances and focus on verbal content including false starts, e.g. significant pauses, laughs (Smith et al., 2011). For example:

*Kerry: They didn't, um, but they are known for being difficult, so... [Laughs]*

In this conversation, I decided to leave the *[Laughs]* in situ as it came across as a nervous laugh, as if the participant was resigned to the fact that their employer was difficult and accepted it as the norm, which I believed added another dimension to their experience.

### **3.4 Analytical Framework**

Drawing on guidance from Smith and colleagues (2011), IPA was employed for the data analysis which aligned with my epistemological position and the interpretivist paradigm.

This approach is derived from three areas of the philosophy of knowledge: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith et al., 2011). The founding principle of phenomenology suggests that researchers should examine experience in the way it happens, and by its own terms, using reflection (Husserl, 1982), which fitted within my epistemological position. Furthermore, the analytical process of IPA, does not specify just one way of working with data; instead, the emphasis is placed upon directing the *analytical focus* of the researcher towards the participant and their experiences, with the intention of making sense of them and creating new knowledge through interpretation (Smith et al., 2011).

There is no prescribed method to conduct an analysis using IPA, and it is open to interpretation by the researcher, yet there are a set of recommended steps that I followed as per guidance from Smith and colleagues (2011). However, although the theoretical steps of IPA were helpful in guiding me through the analytical process, there must be a high level of interpretation in the analysis to avoid being broadly descriptive which is more conducive to a thematic analysis (Smith, 2010).

**Reading and re-reading:** following transcription, I began to read each transcript one at a time to become familiar with the content. In doing this, I was able to gain a 'holistic sense' of the participants' experiences by immersing myself in the data (Sullivan et al., 2012), which was vital for deep insight (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I also listened to the interviews again at least once when reading the transcription, to hear the participants voice, particularly their tone and non-verbal utterances. In doing this, I was able to re-live the interview and extract deeper meaning from their words. I made notes on the transcript at this point to document my interpretation. For example, in the transcript of the interview with Ffion, she said:

*“My manager has referred to me as a ‘part timer’ before and this was on a conference call to a care provider” (Ffion)*

The words here are without emotion, it is only when hearing them spoken in the interview that I was able to empathise how this made her feel. Her tone changed when uttering the words part-timer, as if being described in this way devalues her role, and I heard an underlying disappointment that she was referred in this way, to a colleague.

During this initial reading stage, the whole transcript is considered relevant data, and nothing is omitted; also re-reading each transcript, and listening to the interviews, is recommended as new meaning may become apparent (Smith et al., 2011). Likewise, a different perspective may be presented when exploring the phenomenon (Potter & Hepburn, 2005).

**Initial noting:** from reading the transcriptions I was able to understand the meaning of each interview by making notes on each one. My focus here was to read, and absorb the information, enabling me to familiarise myself with the participant and begin to interpret their experiences as consistent with IPA (Smith et al., 2011). However, I went

beyond being familiar with the participants, and I began to feel like I knew them, and understood their experiences. This manifested itself in being aghast when they had discriminatory experiences and feeling saddened by their situations. The initial notes made on one particular participant's experience (Alice) were descriptive of her experiences, and her feelings. Yet Alice's story resonated with me on some level, as she had worked for an organisation for many years. She was an esteemed colleague of many and had invested in the role both personally and professionally, for it to be taken away from her simply because she requested to work part-time temporarily. From here she switched careers to a lesser paid role that meant she had to rely on welfare benefits to supplement her income. By considering the language she used within the context of her lived world, I was able to understand why her experiences were important to her and develop a more contextualised understanding of her experiences, that I interpreted as her feeling despondent over being highly qualified, yet having to give up her flourishing career due to lack of flexibility from her employer, and instead work solely to meet her financial obligations.

**Developing emergent themes:** The next step was to reduce the amount of detail whilst maintaining the depth and complexity of the notes, whilst being loyal to the original transcript. I began to record emergent themes from my initial noting, such as FWR being denied, and the high cost of childcare, forcing the women to reduce their full-time hours to part-time. However, whilst this felt like I was fragmenting their experiences into smaller instances, I recognised that this was part of the IPA cycle and their full experiences would come together as a whole in the findings chapter (Smith et al., 2011).

**Searching for connections across emergent themes:** once I had read and re-read each transcript enough times, to ensure that I had extracted all relevant meaning and

identified emergent themes, I then began to connect the themes together. I organised and connected the themes by identifying patterns, for example there was a pattern emerging of women submitting FWR that were denied, which led to employment tribunals, NDA's, and losing their jobs which caused further impact on their career progression, and earnings potential. The connections I identified appeared to be consequences of the original FWR which formed a structure of the most important elements of each participant's experience. Furthermore, as I was considering the emergent themes, and cross-connections, I ensured that they were relevant in order to meet my original aims and objectives and re-evaluated the themes that did not meet the aims and objectives (Smith et al., 2011). It is important to mention that no data was fully disregarded, as it may have been necessary to revisit information during the write up that had previously been thought of as less relevant. Likewise, themes, and connections may also only become apparent during the write-up.

**Moving to the next case:** I analysed each transcript, one at a time, and I was careful to view each one on its own terms to preserve their individuality. Once I had followed the guidelines for one transcription, I moved on to the next one and followed the same pattern of analysis. Furthermore, it was inevitable that I would be influenced by the findings of the previous case (Smith et al., 2011), however by following the process of IPA, I developed the important skill of allowing new themes to emerge from each interview.

**Looking for patterns across cases:** once each interview had been transcribed and a set of themes had emerged from each one and been documented, the next phase was to look for connections between the themes for each case. I used the software NVIVO to aid my analysis through the use of coding and created 'nodes' for each of the emerging themes. This phase was an important part of the analytical procedure

and was guided by the interpretative element of IPA, as it served to not only reflect the participants' words but also my interpretation (Smith et al., 2011). Furthermore, IPA does more than organise the data into themes, it uses interpretation when discussing themes (Boyatzis, 1998). Moreover, to provide a robust phenomenological study there needs to be fidelity between the research question and the chosen methodology and paradigm, and the researcher is required to be deeply engaged with the data through reading, reflection, re-reading, writing, and re-writing (Neubauer, Witkop & Varpio, 2019). Finally, once all fourteen interviews had been transcribed and the major themes identified, I moved on to the next step of presenting and discussing my findings, in

## **Chapter 4**

### **3.5 Ethics**

Full ethical approval from the University of Salford was required and approval was received (Appendix 1).

The key ethical issues considered were informed consent, confidentiality and data protection. I addressed these in a few ways; each participant was sent a consent form with the information pack, which was to be signed before proceeding; I protected the identity of the participants, ensuring confidentiality, by using a pseudonym instead of their true name; furthermore, following each interview, I stored the audio files in a password protected folder that only I had access to. Once each interview had been transcribed, I deleted the interview recordings from my laptop, and they were automatically deleted by Skype after thirty days. Concerns have been raised over the use of technology such as Skype, which is owned by third parties, and although recordings are encrypted it would be difficult to know how these calls were monitored.

What we do know is that certain keywords, for example those linked to terrorism, would trigger such monitoring in the interest of protecting the public (Iacono, Symonds & Brown, 2016).

Another ethical issue I considered was that by sharing their experiences, a participant may become distressed due to the emotive nature of the topic. I addressed this in advance and provided an information sheet (Appendix 2), with contact details of relevant support agencies, and the Social Policy Guidelines on Research Ethics (2009). Should this have occurred I would have ceased with the interview and offered to withdraw them from the study. If they had chosen to withdraw, I would have immediately destroyed any recording and their information. However, this did not occur. Support was offered after the interview if required, and each participant had my email address should they wish to discuss anything further. It was important to address these potential issues to ensure that participants were protected from harm and the study remained ethical.

### **3.6 Reflexivity**

A researcher's position in qualitative research is an important methodological consideration and according to Holstein and Gubrium (2003), the researcher is encouraged to be involved with the participant to aid the transmission of knowledge. Likewise, an interview is a conversation where knowledge is socially constructed between both parties, thus it is important to recognise the role of the researcher in producing a credible qualitative research study (Unluer, 2012). Furthermore, a researcher's values and beliefs may influence the analytical process and how they interpret the collected data, which may then influence the research findings and overall conclusion of the study (Berger, 2015).

From the outset of this research study, it was clear there would be an element of researcher bias due to my own lived experiences and this is supported by Heidegger's philosophy that researchers are unable to disregard their own preconceptions and rather they form part of the phenomena (Langdrige, 2007). This would be realised throughout, particularly during the interview and subsequent analysis. My chosen paradigm of interpretative phenomenology allowed me to draw upon my own experiences and be empathic with my participants. Apart from the obvious shared characteristic of being a woman, I had also returned to work after maternity leave had ended, a total of six times, and my experiences were different each time, some positive, some negative, and I had also submitted FWR.

The main driving force behind this study was my experience of working part-time, for the NHS as a health advisor, and the distinct lack of career progression in my field, despite having significant skills and experience. I was overlooked simply because of the hours I worked, and the restrictions imposed on the days and times I could work from using formal childcare. Thus I developed a personal interest in this area and found that many other women had also found these to be standard and unfair practices. I was however keen to hear about success stories, positive experiences of working part-time, balancing work and home life, and childcare.

My role as a researcher in this study has been one of personal enlightenment; my experiences are real and valid which I believe resonated with all the women I contacted, as they could sense my passion and determination to hear their stories and project them through this study. However, to remain in line with ethics, and to maintain professional boundaries, it was important that I refrained from coaxing the participants during the interview process and steering them towards a particular viewpoint that may



have aligned with mine, as this may have resulted in inaccurate data. I achieved this by listening to the participant without interruption and resisted from sharing personal experiences so as not to influence their thought process.

IPA values the researcher's prejudices and is essential to interpretation itself as the process requires active participation from the researcher, not just throughout the stages of data collection, but also when analysing the data. By reflecting upon their own preconceptions, along with the participants' experiences, the findings are presented more meaningfully, and knowledge is created between the researcher and participant alike (Davidsen, 2013). With this in mind, when analysing the data, it felt natural to be fully engaged with the findings. I was not simply finding connective themes between the each of the participants experiences, I found myself reflecting on my own similar experiences, to that of the participants, which I then connected to their lived experiences to form new meaning. For example: hearing women's experiences of working part-time, and finding that there was little room for progression, was significant to my experiences within the NHS. I was experienced, and skilled in the job I had been doing for many years, and like the women I interviewed, we wanted to progress and earn higher salaries. However, the women and I found this was only possible if we were willing to work full-time, and finding alternative part-time employment was not an option due to most part-time work being lower paid. I believe that we were undervalued, simply because of our commitments at home, and if we were to seek employment elsewhere, we could possibly be overqualified. This traps women into low paid roles, with minimal scope for progression, unless we are willing to sacrifice our WLB. Reflecting on my own experiences continued throughout the data analysis. I found myself drawing on the similarities, between mine and some of the women's experiences, which undoubtedly affected my interpretation of the data and

was then reflected in my findings. My interpretation of the data, by realising my own experiences, fully engages with the IPA approach, and when writing up the findings I was able to capture my own experiences whilst citing the participants lived experiences.

### **3.7 Conclusion**

This chapter has provided a detailed discussion of the methods employed in this research study. I have presented the methodological framework and determined my ontological and epistemological position as phenomenology. Phenomenology was the most appropriate method based on my aim of exploring the lived experiences of women returning to work after childbirth and by adopting a phenomenological approach I was able to explore their experiences in a deeper and more meaningful way. Furthermore, the interpretivist paradigm was selected as this allowed me, as the researcher, to help each participant make sense of their experiences. As I had determined it would be challenging to bracket my own personal experiences and prejudices, the IPA approach empowered me to become immersed in the study and through the concept of co-constitutionality I was able to interpret the participants' experiences based on my frame of reference and acknowledge this as an integral part of the methodology.

IPA informed my approach to sampling strategies, by purposive selection which selected participants based on the study objectives; and data collection through the use of semi-structured interviews which allowed the participant to talk freely about their experiences, with the researcher using a topic guide to ensure specific objectives were addressed yet required little prompting. From here, I moved on to a discussion of the methods employed in data analysis and justified my use of IPA, which aligned with my

epistemological position. I followed the guidelines of IPA throughout my analysis and as I was reflecting upon the participants' experiences when reading the transcripts, I extracted the key emerging themes from the data, and by realising my own subjective consciousness I was able to interpret their meaning and create knowledge. Following this, I considered the ethical concerns of the study, which were data protection and confidentiality. I addressed these concerns by seeking guidance from the Social Policy Guidelines on Research Ethics and put their recommendations in place. I created pseudonyms to protect participants' identities and removed all identifiable information from the data collected. I also provided an information sheet for any participants who, by sharing their experiences, may have triggered an emotive response. The final section on reflexivity was an opportunity to share my own personal reflection and recognise the influence I had on the study and in the creation of knowledge. This is an important exercise when producing a credible research study.

In conclusion, this study had a strong epistemological focus, and the experiences shared were each unique. Although the findings are argued to have limited transferability, due to the use of interpretivism, this study focused upon the findings being legitimate and trustworthy, which are required for the study to be justified and to be replicated by another researcher. The framework used and discussed in this chapter demonstrate that strong methodological rigour has been applied to this study and that this was essential to draw credible conclusions from the findings.

## Chapter Four: Findings: mothers' experiences of returning to work after maternity leave.

### 4.1 Introduction

The IPA approach, adopted for this study, is justified in the introduction and methods chapter, and applied throughout this chapter. My role in the findings was to present the lived experiences of women and interpret them by harnessing my own subjective consciousness.

This chapter firstly displays the sample characteristics before presenting the findings from the interviews with mothers returning to work and seeks to understand their perspectives on these experiences and provides a platform to share my interpretation of their experiences. The findings are presented under four major themes: ***gender roles***, which explores the division of labour at home and how women balance their paid and unpaid work, and how gender roles are perceived in the workplace; ***flexible working and discriminatory practices***, focuses on the return to work after maternity leave and the challenges or barriers facing women, including facing discrimination; ***childcare***, looks at the costs and provision of care and how this can impact on working mothers; and ***career progression***, this final theme explores the far-reaching consequences of flexible working in relation to current and future progression in the workplace.

### 4.2 Sample Characteristics

The following page presents **Table 2** and represents the participant demographics that are relevant for this study:

	Social media group recruited from	Number of children	Full or Part-time before maternity and employment sector	Standard occupational classification before maternity leave	Flexible working request	Tribunal	Non-disclosure agreement	Full or part-time after maternity and employment sector	Standard occupational classification after maternity leave	Childcare arrangements	Eligible for tax credits or Universal Credit.
<b>Alice</b>	Snowballing	1	FT public	2	Yes	Yes	No	PT self-employed	7	Family	Yes
<b>Bea</b>	Pregnant then Screwed	2	FT private	1	No	Yes	Yes	FT self-employed	1	Nursery	Yes
<b>Claire</b>	Snowballing	1	FT private	2	Yes	No	No	FT private	2	Family	No
<b>Dee</b>	Pregnant then Screwed	1	FT private	2	Yes	No	No	FT private	2	Nursery	No
<b>Elle</b>	Pregnant then Screwed	2	FT private	4	No	No	No	PT public	7	Nursery	No
<b>Ffion</b>	Attachment Parenting	2	FT public	2	Yes	No	No	PT public	2	Nursery	No
<b>Grace</b>	Pregnant then Screwed	1	FT public	2	Yes	Yes	No	FT private	2	Nursery	No
<b>Helen</b>	Pregnant then Screwed	3	FT public	2	Yes	Yes	Yes	FT public	1	Nursery	No
<b>Isla</b>	Red Tent	1	FT public	1	No	No	No	FT private	1	Nursery	No
<b>Jo</b>	Attachment Parenting	1	FT public	2	Yes	No	No	FT public	2	Nursery	No
<b>Kerry</b>	Netmums	2	FT private	4	Yes	No	No	PT private	4	Family	No
<b>Lara</b>	Netmums	6	PT private	7	No	No	No	PT private	7	Family	Yes
<b>Mia</b>	Tots to Ten	2	FT private	1	No	No	No	FT private	1	Nursery	No
<b>Nina</b>	Tots to Ten	2	FT private	1	Yes	No	No	PT private	1	Nursery	No

The column that represents the participants' Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) is coded as per guidelines from the Office for National Statistics (ONS), who publish data on the SOC, which classifies jobs by their skill level and content (ONS, 2010).

1. Managers, Directors and Senior Officials
2. Professional occupation
3. Associate professional and technical occupations
4. Administrative and secretarial occupations
5. Skilled trades occupations
6. Caring, leisure, and other service occupations
7. Sales and customer service occupations
8. Process, plant and machine operatives
9. Elementary occupations

**Table 3** shows a breakdown of the demographics by theme. Once all fourteen participants had been selected and consent forms were received, I collated their personal information and created pseudonyms. Out of the fourteen women interviewed, eleven returned to the same workplace following maternity leave, out of the remaining three, two became self-employed, and one changed job. Just one was working part-time before maternity leave, and thirteen were working full-time. Out of the thirteen working full-time, only eight had remained full-time following a return from maternity leave, with five having returned part-time. Nine women submitted an FWR, three of which were granted, three were denied then later overruled, and the final three were denied which resulted in them challenging their employer's response at an employment tribunal. A total of two women signed NDA's. Furthermore, ten women used formal childcare, as opposed to family, yet only three were eligible for assistance from TC or UC, meaning the full cost was met by themselves.

**Table 3:** Participant demographics by theme

Full-time Before	Part-time Before	Full-time After	Part-time After	Nursery	Family	TC/UC	Flexible working request	Tribunal	Non-disclosure agreement
13	1	7	7	10	4	3	11	4	2

### 4.3 Gender roles

The first, and most prominent, theme relates to the gendered division of labour; at home, and in the workplace. This encompassed how they balanced their work and home life, and any challenges they faced.

#### 4.3.1 Gender roles at home

The majority of women interviewed had a partner-in-parenting, however, a small number of participants were single mothers who took full responsibility for their homelife and balanced this with their paid work without any additional support, as Bea describes:

*“I don’t have a partner; all the financial pressure is on me and I don’t have someone else that can do the school pick up and drop off” (Bea).*

Each woman shared their own story and experiences on how they manage family life with paid work, and whether they identified with pre-defined gender roles. As my research is focused on working mothers, none of the participants identified within the ‘traditional’ ideology of the man going out to work and being the breadwinner and the woman staying at home to raise their children. In contrast, a small minority of women had previously taken on the role of being the main breadwinner. Indeed, one of the women interviewed was the chief earner in their household and felt they had little

choice but to return to work full-time and for her husband to take more responsibility for their family:

*“My husband is a writer and takes care of my little boy. I am the breadwinner so had to go back full-time” (Claire).*

For the others who had previously been the main breadwinners, this situation changed after childbirth. Kerry worked full time up until she had her first child and earned more than her husband, a situation which worked well for them both, as she loved her job and often took on extra work, and overtime. However, after having children, their roles reversed, and Kerry stated that even if she was still working full-time, her husband would now be earning twice as much as she would be as his career has progressed beyond hers. Kerry made the sacrifice to work part-time so she can be there for her children, yet, interestingly, she said that there was little choice in the decision to work part-time and although she described how the arrangement works well for her family and her husband is a good dad, she said she believes that her role is to be there for the children and his is to provide for the family. Furthermore, Kerry’s husband likes this arrangement, as he is also taken care of, and does not have to worry about the housework:

*“When I was on jury service for two weeks full-time, he said, I can’t wait until you’re back on your normal job as the house is a mess, my tea’s not ready. He likes the fact that I work part-time, and the kids and the house are looked after” (Kerry).*

Lara was also the main breadwinner for many years as her husband was self-employed and did not have a guaranteed wage, so he took care of the children whilst Lara worked full-time. However, when Lara and her husband had their fifth child ten years ago, their roles switched and her husband took on the full-time role and Lara



worked part-time two days a week on his days off, which like Kerry and her husband, works well for Lara and her family:

*“I’ve got my home life that I have to concentrate on and it can be quite stressful, also I’m not a very ambitious person. I’m just a mum, that works, and that’s all I want to be, if you know what I mean” (Lara).*

Kerry and Lara’s urge to be with their children and for their paid work to be secondary to their home life is understandable, yet this could be seen as overlooking the considerable unpaid work they do. Combining the two roles often results in working hours in excess of the average full-time paid job, whilst Kerry and Lara are still making a valuable contribution to their family:

*“They never stop needing you, your kids. Even when they get older and they’re in college and stuff. That’s more important to me than work” (Lara).*

However, although Kerry and Lara said they feel that they divide their family responsibilities with their partner in a balanced and fair way that suits their family dynamic, it appears that they both assume greater responsibility for the unpaid work.

Thus, the idea of being progressive and sharing the family roles in equal measure is often at odds with a woman’s lived reality and some women felt they were involuntarily returning to traditional gender roles despite working outside the home:

*“My husband’s job, as much as my job, is to chip in with the kids and do all that stuff, yet it feels like at every turn you’re forced into these nineteen fifties style roles. It’s just forcing things backwards instead of forwards” (Elle).*

However, in contrast to the majority of experiences, one woman said she feels that her family responsibilities are shared equally with her husband and, although they don’t know anyone else who divides their responsibilities in this way, they feel

privileged to be able to do this as they both earn similar salaries, which is the not the case for many of the other women:

*“I’m fortunate that I work four days and my husband also works four days and he loves it, both of us doing it works really well” (Dee).*

This gendered division of labour, similar to Elle, Kerry and Lara was common amongst the research participants, who mostly shared their family responsibilities, albeit not equally like Dee. Thus, having a partner, regardless of whether they take on an equal share, may ease the pressure on working mums and be a source of emotional support for women balancing their work and homelife. However, there are still many gendered assumptions bestowed upon women, such as they are a natural caregiver and should therefore shoulder the main responsibility for their children and that their career is less important. In turn, whilst it is now expected that most women will work away from the home, some women feel that they have to prove they are able to be successful in all that they do, and in comparison, to men, to be seen as worthy.

*“This phrase of ‘having it all’, it’s always used about women isn’t it, you know. We can’t have it all, whereas men manage to” (Elle).*

How a family divides their responsibility for their homelife is determined by different factors. However, many of the women interviewed felt it was clearly a personal choice and they should not be pre-disposed to defined roles based on their gender:

*“You can pick and choose what parts of your life you want to focus on, and not actually be shoe-horned into the bits of things because you’re a man or a woman, or you’ve dared to use your reproductive choice to have a child” (Helen).*

### 4.3.2 Gender roles in the workplace

The data indicated that it can be particularly challenging at work for women when they are faced with archaic views over gender roles. A few women felt their employer lacked empathy towards women in the workplace especially those who were mothers. Although Claire's manager was a father, he was unable, or unwilling, to acknowledge what she had to deal with when combining her work with her family life. Her role within a media agency was expected to incorporate a significant amount of socialising away from the office which often took place out of work hours. Socialising became part of the culture and was required to raise employees' social profile, yet, Claire's family responsibilities were paramount to the lifestyle expected of her to maintain her role. Claire was unable to socialise as much as her colleagues which left her feeling isolated at times, particularly when other colleagues would discuss her situation, which would then highlight their differences:

*“Out of work socialising is part of the culture but It's hard to keep up with my younger colleagues. I saw the conversations around me not taking part, it wasn't a big problem, but it did highlight the difference between my lifestyle and my colleagues” (Claire).*

Claire's experience of her employer not acknowledging her combined responsibilities leads us to the main focus of this sub-theme which centres around maternity and paternity leave. This subject was touched upon by many of the women, however, some expressed their dissatisfaction over it in more detail and felt that paternity leave was not for long enough, unless they used some of their annual leave entitlement in addition to paternity leave, and should be extended, and many felt it was unaffordable for their families to take it particularly as many of the women's partners-in-parenting earned higher salaries than themselves:

*“Paternity leave is a joke! Only two weeks and statutory pay, which is a lot less than usual earnings” (Jo).*

*“We couldn’t afford for my partner to take the full paternity leave; he only took a week” (Nina).*

Some of the women felt that employers and workplaces in general offered very little support to new fathers, expressing their thoughts that the reasoning behind this is down to gender role stereotypes of it being the women’s place to care for their child and the father’s role is secondary:

*“I don’t feel that it’s very common for employers to support dads as much as they support mums” (Grace).*

When discussing paternity leave in more depth, the women’s dissatisfaction extended further than the length of leave and the financial implications and had greater concerns around the emotional impact on fathers returning to work after paternity leave, often due to financial pressures. Many of the women expressed that their partner felt like they were missing out and were not able to ease the pressure on the mother by taking a more active role in the early weeks and months:

*“My partner goes to work, and he hated having to go because he felt like he was missing out, but also he felt bad for me, having to do everything and by the time he got home from work he was tired as well” (Nina).*

Likewise, there was also a significant emotional impact on many of the women when their partners returned to work. A small number of women experienced a traumatic birth, some resulting in a caesarean section, which meant they had a longer period of recovery following the birth and at the end of the two weeks paternity leave they felt anxious at the thought of their partner returning to work. Grace told me how she became distressed at the thought of her husband returning to work after just two weeks

leave, particularly as she was still recovering and needed physical and emotional support:

*“It was literally two weeks after I had the baby, and my husband was due back to work and I could barely even walk up the stairs by that point and we were having breastfeeding difficulties. I can remember sobbing, proper sobbing at my husband” (Grace).*

Thankfully, there was a workable solution for this family, in the form of an informal arrangement with their employer who was understanding of their situation, yet, this may not be the case, or an available option, for everyone:

*“I almost had a panic attack about the fact he was leaving, and I was here on my own and I just didn’t even know how to handle it. I just felt so alone, and I begged him and begged him and in the end he rang his boss and asked if he could work from home and his boss was fine, he’s got three children so he didn’t actually have a problem with it but I really feel for anyone who doesn’t have access to that” (Grace).*

Evolving from the topic of paternity leave came a discussion of SPL which many of the women welcomed as revolutionary in reforming maternity and paternity policies. However, the general consensus from most of the women was that the take up of SPL was relatively low for similar reasons as to why they were dissatisfied with paternity leave – the financial implications. Many women felt that as their partners were earning more, it was even more unaffordable to take shared paternity leave, as it was for paternity leave, particularly as a father could share up to fifty weeks of parental leave with the mother:

*“The take up of it is dreadful, because of the way it’s set out and I don’t think it’s paying parents enough, especially the men when you’re trying to look at how much they’re going to be getting. If we’re looking at standard male-female heterosexual relationships it’s normally a man that’s earning more, and then the money you’re getting, a hundred and thirty two pounds is it a week? It’s not enough!” (Helen).*

Other women believed the low take-up was also due to employers not encouraging, or opening up a dialogue around, SPL with employees to promote and normalise it, suggesting that by taking it they would be at odds with their defined gender role:

*“I think if you’d said shared parental leave where I used to work you would have been met with blank stares. Then they published the gender pay gap information and it was, painfully obvious that no man had ever taken this” (Grace).*

Similarly, some women believed that the knowledge around women’s maternity leave and the obvious financial struggles experienced by them during this time impacted on fathers who may be considering taking SPL:

*“Why would any man want to take it when the woman’s experience was so shitty? You know, why would a man then want to take it?” (Grace).*

This scenario creates a vicious circle for working women as they may want to share their maternity leave but are conscious that their partners will not view it positively. Furthermore, although some of the women felt that SPL was a good idea in theory, some thought that it could be extended further by facilitating the leave in such a way that enables fathers to spend time with their newborn in the early weeks and to not have the financial pressures. The majority of women were clear that SPL was also important for the emotional well-being of fathers and for them to spend more time with their child:

*“I know they offer the split maternity/paternity, so you can take six months off each, but it’s not fair that just the mum gets the time at the beginning. The father should get more time as well and not have to worry about financial pressures. There should be more support for the fathers” (Nina).*

A few of the women expressed their thoughts over how SPL could be improved in practice and suggested that instead of a father sharing the mother's leave they should be entitled to their own extended paternity leave to coincide with the mothers leave:

*"We had a really shitty six months with our daughter because she was sick. It would have been nice if we both could have taken both our leave at the same time and had 6 months+ each"* (Helen).

Furthermore, Helen believed that care in general is undervalued in society, and overlooked by government, and as such there is little incentive to fund maternity and paternity leave better, particularly as caring responsibilities usually fall to the woman.

*"We don't value care as a society because it falls to women, if it was better thought out, better funded, and actually equal, we would transform the way we look at care in our society. Many women feel politically homeless as no party is addressing things like childcare, shared parental leave, women's health issues. They seem to come as an add-on"* (Helen).

However, many of the women believed that men want to take on more responsibility at home and play a bigger role in their children's lives, yet, by defining these roles based on a person's gender it can be damaging and make it difficult for men to achieve their aim. Thus, the focus should be on working towards equality for everyone:

*"We seem to be looking at defined roles in care. It's very binary. When we believe that equality for all is going to better everybody. We can make things actually equal"* (Helen).

### **4.3.3 Theme 1 Summary**

A small number of the women that I interviewed shared their experiences of being, or previously being, the breadwinner, which as a consequence meant that their partners took, or had taken, greater responsibility for the unpaid work at home, such as-

childcare. The majority of women shared their caring responsibilities with their partner-in-parenting in such a way that suited their families, although often unequally. However, achieving equality, as in Dee's experience, and taking responsibility for caring roles in equal measures may be seen as a rebellious move towards challenging the status quo of pre-defined gender roles, yet some of the women interviewed believed that although we talk about women's equality, the aim is really equality for all. They believed that this could be achieved by redirecting the focus of family-based policies, that are commonly aimed at women, to both men and women and for them to be *gender-blind* which would potentially remove any gender-bias and for employers to recognise that both men and women have equal responsibility for their home responsibilities.

Furthermore, it appears that some employers may see the responsibility for taking care of a child as the woman's and are unconcerned with the challenges that may arise. Yet, it was interesting to hear one woman's experience of her partner's employer being accommodating at the end of paternity leave and allowed him to work from home. This informal arrangement, whilst not commonplace, could be facilitated by other employers should they wish to support their employees in supporting their families. It was clear that the majority of women felt that SPL was an important step forward in encouraging shared care but could work more effectively if the father was able to take their leave in the early weeks and at the same time as the mother, without the financial pressures. Furthermore, when organisations look at employees, they look at the burden of cost, which is then generally put on women as they are the ones taking the time off and still receiving a salary, yet, for organisations to openly recognise the worth of a father's role is a step towards equality, which could be achieved by



sharing the burden of cost, and if everyone becomes the burden, equality is more likely.

#### **4.4 Flexible working and discriminatory practices.**

Emerging from the data as a significantly major theme was the topic of flexible working. The majority of women who participated in this study had submitted a request to their employer to work flexibly upon their return to work at the end of maternity leave. Each experience was unique to the participant, with some commonalities, and there was a mix of informal and formal requests, some granted with ease, yet, many were not, which resulted in challenges for the woman to overcome. Therefore, this theme has been disaggregated into smaller sub-themes to explore this further.

##### **4.4.1 Formal flexible working requests**

The majority of women submitted a formal FWR, yet they each had considerably different experiences. A small number of these women shared their positive experiences of returning to work, following a formal FWR. They generally found the process easy and were confident in its acceptance as previous employees had been successful. Each woman negotiated a flexible return to work, yet just one was a manager and despite other colleagues in a manager's role previously being denied their FWR to work part-time due to the requirements of the role, she was successful:

*"I put a request in that showed it would work still as a part time manager, so I was lucky enough that they agreed to it" (Nina).*

Most of the women's experiences, when submitting a formal FWR, were not so positive. Claire initially submitted a request to reduce her working week from five days to three and to work the other two days home, yet this was refused and she was offered

just one day to work from home on a Friday which was disappointing as this was usually a less productive day so she felt this day was offered as it would have very little impact on the company. Claire had already previously expressed to me that her male employer lacked empathy with her situation, and she was unaware of her right to appeal the decision, nor did she want to appear difficult. In addition to the FWR, Claire was also excluded from a pay review, despite being promoted before maternity leave, as her employers felt she had not contributed due to her leave. In hindsight, Claire said she believes she should have requested part-time hours and fought the outcome if it was rejected. Instead, she has been looking for alternative employment with a more flexible approach to working hours:

*“The only thing I could do was to challenge it through a tribunal which I felt would be difficult as I wanted to work there and not rock the boat, I needed to improve my situation but rather than fight it, I chose to look elsewhere” (Claire).*

Another woman had already considered submitting a request for part-time hours before she went on maternity leave but was concerned that it may not be well received. However, she was surprised when visiting her employer during maternity leave when told that flexible working was an option and to let her manager know what hours she would prefer to work, which was then confirmed by email. However, three months before her return to work, she submitted the formal request and was instantly rejected. Following this, advice was sought from Citizens Advice, and she appealed the decision, which was then overruled by the head of service, after a three month, unpaid, wait. Since returning to work she has felt the fall-out from her decision to challenge the rejected FWR and is often referred to as a part-timer by her manager, with negative connotations, and is no longer given larger pieces of work to do or invited to certain meetings as her employer does not feel it is beneficial if she is only there half the week.

A job share was discussed, yet this too was met with reservations by the employer as they could not envisage anyone being suitable in the part-time role:

*“I wanted to go down to two and a half days a week, and for them to recruit someone to fill the rest of the hours. They were like ‘oh there won’t be anybody out there that’s suitable’ and that really offended me, because if I saw that job advertised, I would jump at it” (Ffion).*

Ffion and Claire’s situations were mirrored by another participant, Jo, who also submitted a formal FWR to work three days instead of five which was rejected without giving specific reasons other than it being inconvenient and that the role was fulltime. Jo contacted her union for advice who agreed with Jo that her employer had ignored the guidelines and flouted the company’s flexible working policy. The decision was challenged, with union support, and overturned. Jo’s original request to swap working hours with a colleague who wanted full-time was authorised and she returned to work part-time. However, Jo found herself in similar circumstances to Claire and became overlooked as a part-time employee, thus, she sought alternative employment:

*“My manager never gave a valid reason for refusing my request, just said the service needed someone Monday to Friday, when I pointed out the other woman and how we could do a straight swap, we’re the same band, my manager just said, ‘it doesn’t work like that” (Jo).*

Whilst Claire, Ffion, and Jo had their initial FWR rejected then later accepted, other women were forced to challenge their employer further in an employment tribunal when their FWR was rejected, believing they had grounds for an appeal. Some women submitted their request in-line with their childcare responsibilities and although they had previously worked full-time, they requested to work part-time.

One woman was oblivious to her employer’s reluctance to consider a flexible return to work and wrongly believed it would be a relatively simple process to exercise her right

to submit a formal FWR. Grace had worked for her employer for a very long time and had witnessed many colleagues have children and as such had no reason to think she would be unfairly treated, instead, she presumed that she would go on maternity leave, colleagues would keep in touch with her and she would return to work with little disruption and her FWR would be granted without any issues, however, Grace's experience was unexpected:

*“As far as I was concerned from my outsider's perspective, i.e. not being a man, it was all going to go swimmingly. I'd go off, I'd have the baby, I'd come back, and it would be like stepping right back in as if nothing had ever happened. Unfortunately, my experience was completely different to that” (Grace).*

When Grace's baby was six months old, she contacted her employer and asked for a meeting to discuss her impending return. Grace shared with her manager her intention to ask for flexible working and described her manager's reaction as 'the shutters coming down'. Grace's manager did everything she could to dissuade her from putting in the request and told her, off the record, that the managing director of the company had informed all managers that they no longer offered part-time or flexible working:

*“It felt as if she knew that's what I was going to ask for and she had already decided I wasn't going to get it. She did everything to discourage me including telling me, and this was later denied but then later confirmed by a very senior member of staff... but including telling me that all of the directors and senior heads had been given a directive by the M.D. of the company to get rid of flexible working and part-time working” (Grace).*

Following the meeting, Grace submitted her FWR, and in the intervening period between submitting it and meeting with her employers to discuss it, she visited her workplace to see colleagues and was pulled to one side by her manager and told not to get her hopes up as her FWR was more than likely going to be rejected. Grace's request was to have a phased return to work that took into account her breastfeeding needs and, in the long term, decrease the standard working day from seven hours and

twenty-four minutes to just seven, both of these requests were denied. Therefore, Grace lodged an appeal, which took many months to be heard and the date for returning after maternity leave had passed which meant she lost three months of pay whilst awaiting a decision. Grace's employers questioned her quite intrusively over her decision to continue breastfeeding and were dismissive about her need to take prescribed medication to help with low milk supply, which meant that she needed to frequently feed her baby otherwise she was at an increased risk of developing mastitis. It was clear that her employers did not support her right to breastfeed when they asked why she did not just simply put her child onto formula:

*"They questioned every element: what are the drugs? Why are you on them? What would actually happen? It was really intrusive; I had given them the information and shouldn't have to justify why I'm on a prescription drug. I tried to explain it and I just felt like I was talking to a brick wall, you know, as to why that might be a health and safety issue for me and why they might want to take my plan into consideration" (Grace).*

With support to appeal the decision made, Grace was eventually allowed to have a phased return to work by using her annual leave. With regards to reducing her day by twenty-four minutes, the company's initial refusal was overturned by the director who heard her appeal who agreed that what she was asking for was not unreasonable. He was also supportive of her breastfeeding:

*"I was really lucky that the director who heard my appeal, his wife breastfed both of their children, so when it landed on his desk he said, I'm not sure why I'm even seeing this because what you've asked for isn't unreasonable" (Grace).*

As a single mother, Alice shared her personal difficulties with her employer who advised her to apply to reduce her hours and they would consider it. Feeling hopeful, Alice submitted the request, and whilst she awaited the outcome, she used her accrued annual leave. However, constant delays through lost paperwork resulted in

her using all of her annual leave before a decision was made that rejected her first request to work three days then a subsequent request to work four days. Alice felt she had little option but to leave the job she had trained for and had worked in for in excess of ten years as she was unable to afford childcare if she was not earning:

*“Work was aware of my personal situation, I felt like they left me hung up basically. The new governor didn’t like part-time staff, so she rejected every single application based on part-time hours rather looking at them case by case” (Alice).*

With support from her union, Alice went to the employment tribunal armed with evidence as to why she wanted to work part-time and won her case when her employer dropped out the day before it went to court and offered her a financial settlement and the opportunity to work part-time. However, the victory was fraught with disappointment, after studying for a degree then a masters, Alice loved her career that she now felt was over. All she had wanted was to work part-time, temporarily, until her child received nursery funding and although she had won at the tribunal, she did not feel able to return to her job as she believed her employer would find another way to terminate her employment contract. Alice found the tribunal gruelling as her employer was adamant that part-time working was not justifiable for the role and was insistent that the only reason Alice wanted part-time was to fit her role around a self-employed side-line venture she partnered in with a friend. This was despite the business not making a profit which, with a child to raise, would not be financially viable. Alice’s employer backed down when emails came to light that stated a four-day working week was viable, despite their formal refusal:

*“There were emails where the top bit (stating to whom the emails were addressed to) was missing saying I couldn’t do 3 days logistically, but I could do 4 days, so as soon as that came out, my employer decided to settle. There is no gag order, but they do say they don’t admit responsibility for me leaving, they won’t accept they did anything wrong” (Alice).*

Another participant was also discriminated against during her maternity leave and forced out of her role when she expressed her desire to continue working the same, previously agreed, hours she had done before maternity leave. Before Helen had her own children, she was caring for her two stepchildren and was responsible for childcare. To enable her to do this, an informal FWR was in place that allowed Helen to start approximately one hour early which meant she could finish one hour early, in time to collect her stepchildren from after-school care. Following the birth of Helen's biological child, she submitted a formal FWR asking to continue working the hours she had done for the past eighteen months, to make the arrangement official, yet the application was rejected on the grounds that it was not possible to carry out the role in that way. Like Alice, Helen challenged this at an employment tribunal:

*"I couldn't return on any terms that didn't allow me to do flexible hours around childcare pick up. So, then I had to go because they refused to give me the flexibility that they had given me before"* (Helen).

Helen described her experience of being in emotional turmoil whilst waiting for her case to go to trial, which took nine months, the time she should have been enjoying with her new baby during maternity leave. However, Helen's employer made an out of court settlement the day before it was due to go to trial, which was accepted. Helen also agreed to sign a NDA, effectively a gagging order that prevented her from talking about her experience, particularly naming her employer:

*"After having to battle with them for so long on my own, I just wanted it done. So, when they offered me that sum, I was like, 'actually yeah, I'll go away and I'll be quiet now'"* (Helen).

On reflection, Helen believed she should have gone to trial as planned, as she would have won, yet, at the time she was concerned about her mental health and just wanted it all to be over so she could move on with her life:

*“I would have won my case, why didn’t I just go through with it? But for my mental health at that point, I couldn’t..... because we were set for a four-day hearing. I think I would have crumbled” (Helen).*

#### **4.4.2 Informal flexible working arrangements**

In contrast to the women who submitted a formal FWR, a minority of the women interviewed had negotiated an informal flexible working arrangement. Just one woman returned to work full-time, without any difficulties, and as she had annual leave to use, her employer allowed her to take one day per week to temporarily reduce her working week from five to four days, from this, she had not ruled out the possibility of submitting a formal FWR in the near future and believes her employer would be in support of this based on their flexible working policies and the success of others applying:

*“I am using it as a trial run, to weigh up whether to go part time or drop a day maybe. I want to be spending quality time with my kids. And that’s the thing that I’m trying to weigh up” (Mia).*

Another woman who encountered minimal difficulties when returning to work had worked there for in excess of twenty years and their employer was very accommodating for a highly valued employee. An official FWR was not submitted, yet her employer was happy to arrange personalised flexible hours:

*“I wrote a letter to say that I was going back to work, the date that I was due to go back to work and put in “I would like to do these days and these hours” (Lara).*

Lara’s informal FWR was granted with ease and she believes this was largely due to her long-standing commitment to the company. If Lara had submitted a formal FWR, she would have been beholden to specific hours with no room for manoeuvre if



required, yet an informal FWR meant she could adjust her hours with minimal fuss. This worked well for Lara; however, she was under no illusion that the informal option is personalised for her and the arrangement would unlikely be available to other employees, particularly new ones:

*“I’ve worked for the same company for so long, they’ve adapted with my circumstances. Whereas if I’d applied for the same job now, and I stated the hours I was able to work, I wouldn’t even get an interview, they just wouldn’t entertain that” (Lara).*

Isla also returned to her previous role of working compressed hours over a nine-day fortnight which she had already been doing prior to maternity leave and found her employers to be very supportive of her new role as a mother and actively engaged with her over her return to work and how they, as a company, could ease her transition:

*“Now’s the time for you to work out what it means for you to be a working mum and I want to support you on that journey but it’s your individual journey so tell me what you need. Be totally blunt. I’ve got work that I can hand to you. Tell me if I’m handing it too quickly, too slowly, let’s work it out between us” (Isla).*

Furthermore, five months after her return, Isla’s line manager moved to an alternative role and Isla was promoted to her position. This provided further evidence that Isla’s employers were confident in her abilities to combine both roles and be a successful working mother. However, with Isla’s new role, came a new line manager who had different ideas on how her role should be undertaken, which involved being present in London three days a week. Isla disagreed with this and felt that as her role was global, which often meant communicating via skype, it was not necessary to be in London in person:

*“She was quite old school in the sense of presentism and wasn’t necessarily a digital kind of person and wanted to see me, like physically see me, to see what I was doing” (Isla).*

Isla challenged her manager and had an open and honest conversation with her around the London issue and questioned why the company appointed her when she lived in the North West, yet then expected her to be present in London three days a week. Isla said she believed her line manager simply wanted her to be in London so she could pop by her desk and have a conversation rather than organise it in a planned way:

*“She wasn’t planned and basically what I was asking her was to become more planned with how she spoke to me. I was like, I can Skype you, I can talk to you every single day if you want, I can keep a particular window free for you every day between a certain time so that you can, digitally, pop by my desk but she wasn’t really receptive to it” (Isla).*

Consequently, Isla said she felt she had little choice but to leave the role, rather than submit a formal FWR, and find employment elsewhere. This was disappointing as she had worked hard to secure the job and felt she had proved her worth and commitment to the role:

*“On reflection my story’s really positive, from how I came out of maternity leave, how I got promoted straight after maternity leave, but it’s negative in the aspect that because from a certain line manager’s perspective, they were unwilling and unable to do things differently” (Isla).*

#### **4.4.3 Discrimination**

This sub-theme was particularly important to highlight discriminatory practices, and how some women, although a minority in this study, did not even have the opportunity to submit an FWR. One woman was essentially removed from her senior management role when she contacted her employer to discuss her impending return. They assumed

she would not want to go back to work after maternity leave, and if she did, she would be unable to work at the same level and would need to down-skill to a junior position

*“They assumed I wouldn’t be going back so gave my job to somebody else, then said that having had a baby I obviously wouldn’t be able to work at that same level anyway, so they started looking at putting me down to a much more junior position that paid a lot less” (Bea).*

In Bea’s situation, the employer has seemingly decided that their female employee was no longer capable of fulfilling the requirements of their employment role due to their new, additional role, as a mother, and rather than open a dialogue with their employee, they, instead, hired somebody new to undertake the position without discussion. For women returning to work, believing they are protected under *The Equality Act 2010*, which states it is unlawful to treat a woman unfavourably on the grounds of pregnancy or maternity leave, this sort of practice by employers is surprising in a contemporary society where working mothers have become a relative norm. Yet, Bea’s discriminatory experience is unfortunately not an isolated incident. Her experience is pulsating with archaic presumptions of a woman’s role, and their value, in the workplace once they become a mother:

*“It was all middle-aged middle-class white men in suits who are very traditional, kind of wife stays at home and, and makes the tea and man goes out to work and makes the money. At that point, I kind of said, hang on you’re not allowed to do that. So, we obviously then got into what effectively became an employment tribunal claim” (Bea).*

Before her case was heard by the employment tribunal, her employer made an offer of a financial settlement. However, along with the settlement came a condition that she signed a NDA, similar to Alice, which Bea felt she had no option other than to accept it because she had a new baby and financial responsibilities. Furthermore, even if she had refused the settlement and attended the tribunal hearing, it was clear

from the judge that she would not get her job back as there was now someone else in the role and they had a contract so could not be removed from the position:

*“The company then offered a financial settlement. Anecdotally, talking to other people, it sounds as though it happens quite a bit where they’ll settle, because if it goes through tribunal that it’s then a matter of public record” (Bea).*

With regards to the NDA, signing it has had an ongoing impact on Bea and being able to find similar employment with the high salary that she previously earned as she is not permitted to talk about her experience:

*“This non-disclosure order is still having an ongoing impact because I am not allowed to talk to any of the professional contacts I made through the years” (Bea).*

Elle’s experience was not dissimilar to Bea’s in that she too was forced out of her role, albeit, in a more subtle way. She was told explicitly, even before she was pregnant, that employees at a certain high level would not have the option of flexible working. Following some structural changes to the organisation, Elle broached the subject of flexible working during her maternity leave and was told not to even bother making an FWR as it would not be considered, as they did not want to set a precedent for others then applying for flexible working. This posed a dilemma for Elle as she knew that to continue her role, she would need flexible hours:

*“They wouldn’t entertain any conversations about any working from home or different shifts of hours or anything like that. It was quite difficult deciding what to do. It was weighing up the job that I did like, but when you’ve got a family coming along, you know there’s only so many hours that you’ve got in the day” (Elle).*

Whilst this was going on, redundancies were also being made in the organisation and Elle managed to get caught up in the process. However, when deciding a final settlement, her employers added an additional amount into the redundancy package,

which Elle said is because they knew that she had a strong case to take to an employment tribunal and wanted to silence her:

*“They’re not really allowed to have a policy to not give you the opportunity to request flexible working. Well, it’s illegal isn’t it. They knew I had a pretty strong case if I took it to a tribunal. So, I ended leaving with quite a lot of money. But it wasn’t a particularly nice situation really” (Elle).*

#### **4.4.4 Theme two Summary**

This theme has demonstrated the complexities of flexible working and how some employers can be accommodating of their employee’s needs, whilst others actively refute the requests made even when it is clear they do not have a valid reason in which to do so. It also highlighted the difficulties that some women experienced with informal flexible working arrangements, despite these arrangements being more flexible than a formal request in one case. Furthermore, whilst a minority of the women had a positive and straightforward experience, the majority did not and had to challenge their employer, which caused undue emotional and financial distress, and some were forced to take their request to an employment tribunal, which, although they won and received an out of court settlement, was on condition that they signed an NDA that then had far-reaching consequences. It appears that many women experienced discrimination from their employers who held little value for employees who required their working hours to deviate from the norm, as they said this would be counter-productive to their business objectives.

## 4.5 Childcare

The theme of childcare emerged from the discussion over flexible working and was cited as a key reason for submitting an FWR by many of the women. There were differing reasons for using childcare, and different types of care used. Thus, this theme was broken down into smaller sub-themes to discuss the challenges facing working mothers when considering whether to use family, or formal childcare.

### 4.5.1 Family care

A small number of women relied on family to care for their children, due to the expense of paying for formal childcare, and as some were single mothers, this responsibility was taken on solely by the mother:

*“I couldn’t afford nursery, and at that time my son did not have unsupervised contact with his dad so I couldn’t rely on him for childcare” (Alice).*

For the women who did have a partner-in-parenting, their childcare support was through a mix of their partner and their families taking on the responsibility:

*“I haven’t had to use childcare yet, as my husband stays at home to look after her” (Claire).*

However, the use of family care was often due to necessity rather than choice as the costs of paying for formal childcare was unaffordable for many with some stating that a full-time place for a child costs as much as it does to rent a two-bedroom house and would mean losing a considerable amount of their family income to pay for it. One woman had to decide between staying in full-time work and losing half of her income to pay for childcare or working three days and losing a similar amount in earnings. She decided on the latter and for her family to care for her children whilst she was working

three days. Either way, she was sacrificing her earnings to ensure that her children were taken care of, which was a common scenario for many women who participated in the study:

*"I decided to lose five hundred pounds a month, by me looking after them for the two days that I was off and then family look after them the other three"* (Kerry).

Furthermore, regardless of the cost, some women preferred to use family care, as a personal choice, as they felt it was their responsibility to be there for their children in the early years, and arrange their paid work around this, sharing the responsibility. The financial sacrifice was worth it for their children to be cared for by both of their parents:

*"We just struggled financially over the years, yet, if we'd have gone down the childcare route it would have took one of our full wages up. What is the point in going to work to pay all your money out for somebody else to do a job that you could do?"* (Lara).

Even if some women had needed to use childcare at a young age, they would have used family rather than formal childcare:

*"I have always said I wanted my child to be with one of us until they are 1.5 – 2-year-old before they go to a nursery. If I had have really needed childcare at a young age, I would have used family"* (Claire).

#### **4.5.2 Formal childcare**

The majority of women, however, had little choice but to use formal childcare; either a nursery or childminder, and described them as expensive, and there being limited access to fiscal support for those earning above the threshold to be eligible for TC or UC. There appears to be an assumption that, although women can and should work, it is fair for them to sacrifice a considerable amount of their salary to pay for childcare,

effectively working for less than the minimum wage. Yet, if they were eligible for financial support to pay for childcare, they would keep more of their salary:

*“Having that financial return from working seems to drop right out of the equation when we talk about women and mothers working. It seems to almost be a given that we’re happy to go to work without earning any money. If childcare had been subsidised, that would have been a very different thing” (Elle).*

The cost of formal childcare can be quite considerable and even for high earners this cost can impact on a family’s finances and can often be as much, if not more than, their mortgage payments. These costs can also impact on a family’s decision to have another child as the payments will increase significantly:

*“We pay around eighteen hundred pounds a month and considering I earn £50k a year, and so does my husband, it’s not like we’re low earners in any sense. But that is still a chunk of our money that goes out every month. It’s like nearly, well it’s more than double my mortgage payments that go out. It’s mad, for childcare” (Helen).*

*“It’s about nine hundred and fourteen pounds a month. I can’t afford another child because I can’t afford our childcare costs” (Isla).*

### **4.5.3 Childcare provision**

Following on from the discussion over the cost of using formal childcare, came the topic of childcare provision. Just one woman spoke about her disappointment over not being eligible for her child to receive the free fifteen hours of childcare funding for two-year olds as this was predominantly only for non-working parents, or those with a very low income in receipt of certain qualifying benefits such as income support, or working tax credit with a household income below £16,190, and for children who were disabled or had additional needs:



*“People who work should get free childcare, not the people who don’t work. There should be some incentive for working parents. I don’t want to be like on the dole or whatever like, I’m not like that, I like the fact I go out to work and earn my own money and that but I, I just think it’s unfair on working parents” (Kerry).*

None of the women interviewed were eligible for the two-year funding, yet most of the women, once their child reached the age of three, would be eligible for thirty-hours a week free childcare which consequently then creates a considerable saving for the parents. However, there are pitfalls to receiving the free hours which many of the women spoke about, such as it only being available during term-time which, unless you are a teacher, still means there is a cost involved during the school holidays:

*“The 30 hours free is term-time only, not sure why as not everyone is a teacher! So, we still have to pay for some childcare but there will be a £350 a month saving which is good!” (Jo).*

Furthermore, the funding received by the nurseries from the government is less than the cost of a childcare place, thus, some nurseries and childminders do not offer the thirty-hours free places which reduces the provision in some areas as they are not subsidised enough:

*“The problem is that the rates they can charge are less than what they are in other parts of the country because we do have high areas of deprivation. So, a lot of the providers around here are struggling because what they get compared to what they can charge doesn’t add up for them. You’re really lucky around here if you find a provider who does do the thirty hours free childcare” (Grace).*

The majority of the women said they believed that the funding available from the age of three should be increased and the age in which a child is eligible should be lowered to when their maternity leave ends, that is, at the age of one. All of the women were in agreement that there was a significant gap between the age of one and three where women and their families found themselves struggling to meet the rising costs of

childcare and could not understand why they had to wait, particularly when they are most financially vulnerable following maternity leave as they have already been living off a reduced income of statutory maternity pay. Therefore, most of the women would have welcomed the funding to be available much earlier to help bring the costs down and make it more affordable to go out to work:

*“It’s always struck me as strange..... you know, you have a baby and there’s issues with maternity pay, because that’s not exactly a lot to live off either. Then there isn’t any childcare between the age of nought to whenever you go back to work. There’s no support for three years, so, to expect families to go for that stretch of time with all their outlays, it’s really difficult” (Elle).*

*“It feels backwards, having to pay all that money out when you are still recovering financially from maternity leave, after the third year you’re almost used to it, then you become eligible for funding. It’s needed at the start!” (Jo).*

For one participant, having the cost of childcare subsidised, from the end of maternity leave onwards, would have made a difference to her when deciding who would care for her child; family, or a nursery/childminder:

*“I agree that there should be subsidised nursery places ready from the end of maternity leave. I needed that help when I went back to work and didn’t want to have to rely on my parents” (Alice).*

Although there is an issue over the lack of childcare funding, and the cost of childcare being unaffordable, many of the women discussed, and were exasperated by, the wider impact of reducing their hours to lower their childcare costs, on getting back into work and felt it could force women into lower paid part-time work and for them to lose their skills:

*“It’s actually prohibiting women from getting back into the workforce. You’re pushing them out for three years and de-skilling them, so when they then do try to enter back into the workplace, they’re going in on lower wages, on part time work. It doesn’t work” (Helen).*

Once a child reaches school age, it is assumed that the issue and costs of childcare become easier, however, for some women this creates a different set of problems. Whereas nurseries and childminders operate from around 7am until 6pm, school is open from just 9am until 3.30pm which means wraparound care is required before and after school. However, not all areas and schools offer this service which leaves some parents without the childcare they need to continue working:

*“For the years that they were at nursery I had half a fighting chance of working a normal day. Primary school doors open at nine o’clock, doors shut at three o’clock. Where I live and where I work there is no wrap around care and I know, I know some schools where you can drop them off for breakfast club at eight o’clock or pick them up at five o’clock after homework club or something. There’s nothing like that where I am. So, everyone sort of says it’ll be easier once they’re at school. It’s not” (Bea).*

#### **4.5.4 Theme three Summary**

In summary, whilst some women relied on their partner or their family to help with childcare, to either save money or because they felt it was in their child’s best interest to be cared for by relatives, the majority of women used formal childcare. Some women had sacrificed their salary, by reducing their hours, to pay for it which, in turn, considerably lowered their take-home pay each month and impacted their family finances. The costs are unaffordable and can cost as much as it does to pay rent or a mortgage. Furthermore, many of the women welcomed the three-year funding that offers thirty hours of free childcare during term-time. However, most of the women expressed their concerns over the costs incurred during school holidays, and free childcare not being offered early enough. On this latter point, they argued that it should be made available to coincide with the end of maternity leave, as this is when most parents need the support, and it would enable more women to return to work without

detriment to their skills. Likewise, the issue of wraparound care once children reach school age is an area of concern for some who cannot access the provision in their area.

#### **4.6 Career progression**

This theme emerged from the discussions that were had around the impact of having an FWR granted and the women who had then moved from fulltime to part-time work, or adjusted their working hours, and for those who had experienced discrimination and as such, had to find alternative employment. Thus, the theme of career progression was relevant for all the women interviewed. Many of the women shared with me how they felt that by working flexibly, their priorities had changed, and their main focus was now as a mother:

*“I was happy, but my priorities changed when I had my son” (Alice).*

Yet, many of the women still had desires to progress in their careers whilst maintaining their focus on their children:

*“My priorities have changed, at this point in time I have to focus on my children. But I still would like to progress later” (Nina).*

##### **4.6.1 Penalties and inequities**

A small number of women who left their employment at the end of maternity leave, following discriminatory practices, had significant difficulties in finding an alternative position with the same level of salary, and employment status. One woman was previously earning a six-figure salary in a senior management role, plus bonuses and a company car. Yet, when she was forced out of her position during her maternity

leave, she was unable to secure a similar role that attracted the same salary due to her needing to work flexibly, which many of the employers she approached would not accommodate. She found herself in a situation of being unable to find a position she was qualified for that fit around her children, and the ones that did, were low level and minimum wage that she was told she was overqualified for. She eventually found a role that was more than minimum wage but still less than her previous role which meant she now had her salary topped up the government in the form of TC, a contentious issue with her as she felt that she should be contributing to the welfare state rather than taking from it:

*“I’m probably now, five years down the line, bringing in somewhere between a fifth and a quarter of what I used to earn, we can get by but it does mean I have to look at tax credits and things which in my head, I absolutely shouldn’t have to” (Bea).*

Bea said she felt frustrated with this situation as she should still be a high-rate taxpayer, as she still has the same skills and abilities as before. She believes there are a considerable number of women in society who are working in a role they are over-qualified for and are not using their skills due to employers being unaccommodating of flexible working:

*“Women are not being allowed to provide their capabilities because it doesn’t fit everyone’s standard old-fashioned view of nine to five, Monday to Friday, in the office. It doesn’t fit with school, it doesn’t fit with, you know, six weeks summer holidays, what the hell do you do?” (Bea).*

Thus, there is a sense of losing one’s purpose, of not being able to earn enough money to have financial security:

*“I felt I lost my purpose; I don’t have the money anymore. I don’t have the same financial security. I have a mortgage and because I’m on my own it’s in my name only, I had my pay, my pension, now it’s gone (Alice).*

For some, they had to seek new employment and start again, at the bottom of the salary scale, yet, they had accepted this as a worthwhile sacrifice to spend more time with their children. They also could not see the point in working full-time to only take home a few hundred pounds each month after childcare costs. However, they were optimistic that their salary range will increase and were still aiming to apply for higher grade jobs at some point:

*“I think the salary range does go higher, so after a few years it will increase. But I am obviously then hoping that I can get promoted into the higher-grade jobs quite quickly, hopefully. But I don’t know how long” (Elle).*

However, even for the women who returned to their role, many of them still felt the impact of them returning on a flexible basis. Subsequently, they had resigned themselves to foregoing the opportunity to progress within the workplace, and for them to potentially lose the skills they had developed over the years. One participant told me how she felt penalised for being part-time, as a colleague with less service was being put forward for training courses as a priority. Consequently, she felt overlooked, and this was one of the reasons for her seeking alternative employment:

*“She did more days than me and seemed to be more of a priority. I had been there two years longer than her, but she was now working two more days than me. It was horrendous coming back to work, but things got better when I found a new job” (Jo).*

Another woman was actively seeking alternative, part-time, employment as there was little room for progression within her workplace. However, the majority of the roles she saw advertised in her industry were for full-time hours and alternative, part-time, roles only offer the minimum wage up to a maximum of nine pounds per hour which meant she would have had to work more hours to earn the same wage. A frustrating situation, that left her feeling trapped with her current employer:

*“It’s frustrating because I’ve always been one of these people who was wanting to do well and I’ve always tried to work my way up, but I had to make that decision you know, what comes first my career or, or the kids, and being at home with them. Working part-time has made it an easier decision knowing there’s no career progression there, but it is frustrating going into work doing the same thing over and over again thinking I can do much more than this, I’m smarter than this” (Kerry).*

Kerry resigned herself to staying with her employer simply for the wage she earned and to put her family first. She had aspirations to aim for a higher paid role and continue to work part-time, yet, believed that this may be striving for the impossible, which is a thought shared by many of the women interviewed; part-time work equals a low wage:

*“I suppose I’m a delusional mum. I’m just going to have to go to work, get it over with and come home and then nothing, that’s it. It all comes down to money at the end of the day. At the minute it works better for me working part-time which is annoying because I don’t want to be stuck in a dead-end job all my life” (Kerry).*

Many of the women empathised with this train of thought and just wanted to achieve a healthy balance between their work and home life by working part-time, yet, still being able to reach their potential:

*“I would like to work part time, but also have a fulfilling career but it’s hard when you know that there’s this idea that if you can’t do it five days a week then that’s just not good enough” (Elle).*

#### **4.6.2 Perceptions of worthiness**

Following on from the previous section, a few of the women felt they were deluded in thinking they may be able to find part-time work that is also well paid. However, some participants said they believed that women, in general, sabotaged their own progression by being too emotionally intelligent, self-aware, and focussed on what

they cannot do rather than what they can. Whereas they said that a man would think differently and focus on what they can do:

*“Women would read a role profile and think ‘I can do eighty per cent of that but I haven’t got the twenty per cent that they are looking for so they wouldn’t necessarily apply. Whereas a man would go, I can do thirty per cent of that off I go. I’ll just chuck my hat in the ring” (Isla).*

The idea of women underselling themselves is about perception. Some of the women said they felt tied to an employer, or a job, simply because there is a fear of the unknown. Thus, there was a reluctance from some to put themselves forward for opportunities due to how they believe they would be perceived, particularly when requesting to work on a flexible basis:

*“The situation we’ve got at the moment tying women to a certain employer because of the fear of the unknown is really difficult. I think if we were in a world where you just get a job, just on your own merit and what you can bring to the role, rather than these perceptions that are out there” (Ffion).*

In contrast, one woman rebuffed the idea of underselling herself and said she was confident in interviewing prospective employers as much as they were interviewing her and if they would not consider flexible working at the outset then she would not work for them:

*“So, there came a point in my career where I was like I’m quite specialised and niche in what I do, and I realised that, and I don’t necessarily see that people interview me. If they don’t give me flexibility as an option, I will not work for them. I interview you as well, I choose you and you choose me” (Isla).*

#### **4.6.3 Progression offers**

A minority of women shared with me their positive experiences of career progression and feelings that it was not marred by working flexibly. One woman, who worked flexible hours around her family, who’s contract was due to be renewed, was told by



her employer that as part of their reassessment they will be looking at what she can be promoted to:

*“They seem to be quite forward thinking in allowing that balance with family life and career progression” (Helen).*

Likewise, another woman was put forward for a promotion, yet, she declined as she felt she could not do the job justice when working four days a week and was not ready to increase this to five days. Furthermore, when the advert for the job went to print, it was stated that the role was over five days, however, when she challenged this as they were willing for her to do the role in four days, her employers changed the advert with the intention of attracting candidates who were seeking flexible working. Her experience is positive in one way, yet there is an underlying negativity in that maybe she was not confident in speaking to management about redesigning the role in line with her contracted hours of four days per week:

*“I would recently have got a promotion if I’d applied for it, and they wanted me to. But I knew I couldn’t do that job in four days a week, so I didn’t apply for it. It’s partly my own choice. I could have done that role” (Dee).*

Both women generally had a positive experience and found that their employers were quite progressive and open to the idea of continuing progression when working flexibly, yet, as the previous sections of this theme demonstrate, this was not commonplace.

#### **4.6.4 Theme four Summary**

In summary, many of the women expressed their desire to work part-time, or flexibly, and was either a choice or through necessity, yet they still wanted a fulfilling career that utilised their skillset and capabilities. It was felt by many that they are hindered by some employers being less than receptive towards flexible working. Therefore, some

women seek alternative employment at a lower pay grade, that they are overqualified for, and as such are not using their skills nor developing them further. However, employers have not made it easy for employees and potential employees by believing that work needs to be completed within defined hours to be productive. Furthermore, there are structural issues which had made it difficult for women with young children to work or return to work, yet this is often based on the perception that if a woman takes some time out, they will lose their skills and as such many women felt they are less likely to be sought for, or a worthy of, progression by their employers.

#### **4.7 Conclusion**

In conclusion, this chapter has presented the major themes as identified from the participant interviews and has shared the women's lived experiences. The majority of women had a partner-in-parenting and share their family responsibilities with them, although not always equally. There were assumptions made in the family and in the workplace that women are the main caregivers and as such should take on the greater share of responsibility. Attempts have been made by the government to redress this balance and the gendered division of labour by introducing SPL, yet, for many of the women interviewed this is unaffordable and they believe it has a low take up for this reason.

The majority of women experienced difficulties when returning to work after maternity leave and were compelled to either appeal the decision made to refuse their FWR or challenge their employers at an employment tribunal. However, a small number of women experienced direct discrimination and never had the opportunity to return to work. It appeared that employers were reluctant to consider FWR as they believed that by working anything different to the organisation's core hours was detrimental to

the business and less productive. Still, many of the women made a FWR due to the cost or provision of childcare and in the interest of balancing their work and family life. They still attained the same skills and experience as before; they just wanted their employer to recognise this and fairly adjust their working pattern to help them balance both roles. Instead of being supportive and adaptable. Many women told me that their employers were not only resistant to their FWR, they also no longer saw them as suitable candidates for progression due to them now working flexibly. Many of the women had accepted this, and believed that finding alternative, part-time, employment would not be the best use of their skills, and were predominantly lower paid, which left them feeling trapped. Ultimately, the women in this study were expected to work outside the home, maintain chief responsibility for childcare, and sacrifice their career if they decide to work flexibly.

## **Chapter Five: Discussion**

### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents a discussion on each identified theme by binding together the literature review, methodology, and findings to form an overall conclusion over working mothers and their experiences of balancing their home and work life. These discussions will assert how this research study contributes to knowledge, taking into account the strengths and limitations of the research. Following this, there will be recommendations made for policy, and practice, and suggestions for future research, before finishing the chapter with a section on reflexivity.

### **5.2 Gender roles**

The traditional ideology, as identified by Hochschild (1989), of men being the breadwinner and women being the homemaker, was not relevant to this study as all the women who participated worked outside of the home. However, this study found traditional gender roles did continue to some extent following women's return to work after childbirth, and although some of the women felt they identified with the egalitarian ideology and shared the responsibility equally with their partner-in-parenting, their lived experience demonstrated that they actually took on the greater share. This is consistent with the literature which shows feminist writers Pascall (2012) and Young (2018) argue that pre-defined gender roles still exist at home and at work. Furthermore, whilst there has been a shift in the gendered division of labour, women are expected to manage their home life and paid work by taking on the greater share of household responsibilities compared to men, and for their career to be of lesser importance to that of their husband or partners (Fagan & Norman, 2012). However,

my findings, along with the wider literature, show that the feminist movement, throughout history, has challenged gender roles and stereotypes and been successful in securing changes to legislation that support women's right to equal pay and to not be discriminated against on account of their sex (Cochrane, 2013). Likewise, the literature shows that social attitudes towards traditional roles have significantly changed, particularly as there has been a decline in the number of people who hold the view that men are the breadwinner and women the homemaker, and social attitudes towards working mothers have become much more positive over time (BSA, 2017).

My findings offer an insight into how gender roles are maintained, albeit in modified form, despite the change in social attitudes. Government policies and employer practices mean that many women have modified their expectations around gender roles at home so that even those who were previously the main breadwinners or operated under what Hochschild (1989) referred to as an egalitarian ideology now fell under the transitional ideology of the man being the main breadwinner. Rather than being purely defined by their gender role ideology, this tended to be a pragmatic decision based on structural constraints beyond the control of the participants such as childcare availability and cost. This perspective can be supported by Young (2018) who suggests that a couple's perceived ideology over gender roles and structures is often at odds with the women's lived reality. Thus, transitional ideology appears to be a common theme within this study, as the majority of women identified with it, and although they found the division of labour to be unequal, each family shared their responsibilities in practical ways, which was commonly the mother taking on their greater share. Thus, women's gender roles in the home are shaped by their gender

roles in the workplace, and this cyclical relationship shows the complex range of obstacles that women returning to work after childbirth face.

### **5.2.1 Changing gender roles**

Although we can see how gender roles and the division of labour have evolved in a generally positive way, women in this study were faced with archaic views over gender roles in the workplace and find that their employer lacked empathy towards their change in situation following maternity leave with now having to balance their paid and unpaid work. Likewise, many felt that employers saw a father's role as secondary to that of a mother, which made it challenging for them to take on an egalitarian approach to their family responsibilities. Many of the women believed that striving for equality for all was the way forward, by removing gender-bias from family-based policies. In the context of maternity and paternity leave, there is a government commitment towards improving this by offering SPP and SPL, (Maternity Action, 2019a). However, many of the women believed this could be further improved upon if it was offered in addition to the women's leave rather than sharing it. This concept would facilitate both parents to take leave to be with their child and would safeguard the mother's entitlement to maintain her own maternity leave and for it to be used as it was originally intended; to recover, initiate and continue breastfeeding, should she wish, and to bond with her baby.

The literature supports the view that a mother should not have to sacrifice her own maternity leave and share it with her partner-in-parenting whilst recognising that a father's role in raising children is invaluable (Ndzi, 2019). Furthermore, although the emphasis of maternity leave is for a woman to recover emotionally and physically from

childbirth, it is acknowledged that a father should have a similar opportunity to bond with their child and develop their parenting skills in the post-natal period (Ndzi, 2019). Thus, ShPL and SPP lays the foundations for what could be an effective and workable policy for families and as the longer length of maternity leave, compared to paternity leave, was seen to be perpetuating the myth that this is solely a woman's issue, this policy change was welcomed (Aitken et al., 2015). However, this could be implemented differently, and rather than focus on SPL, the emphasis should be on offering paternity leave for fathers in addition to the mother's existing entitlement, so her emotional and physical recovery is not hampered or reduced, and the mother-child breastfeeding relationship is not jeopardised by an early return to work, alongside offering fathers an entitlement to leave in their own right. However, whilst this has been subject to media debate, there has been very little in the way of academic research at this point.

### **5.2.2 Flexible working and discriminatory practices**

The majority of women in this study submitted a FWR, yet, over half had to appeal for it to be then overturned, or challenge it at a tribunal, and a subsequent small number then signed an NDA in order to receive financial compensation. It appears that employers are reluctant to see past the standard Monday to Friday 9am-5pm office hours, and employers are flouting the law, and policy, but are not held accountable. In fact, they can hide their discriminatory practices by offering a hefty financial settlement in return for a signed NDA (Harris, 2019). Thus, the assumption made in (Bea's) experience, is akin to the attitudes prior to the introduction of the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 and the Employment Protection Act 1975, whereby it was safe to assume, and indeed likely, that a woman would not return to work (Martin & Roberts, 1987).

The issue of NDA's needs to be addressed at Government level, to ensure that employers are held accountable for their discriminatory behaviour, without detriment to employees.

As the previous theme discussed, women participating in this study generally identified with the *transitional* gender role ideology: working outside the home, supported by their partner, and took responsibility for balancing her work and home life. The lived reality of this goes beyond a discussion of gender roles at home, and is brought into the workplace, in the context of WLB, and how this can be achieved in real terms. One way this can be considered, is for a woman to exercise her right to request flexible working by making a statutory application detailing their request. Flexible working can take many forms that include: compressed hours, working part-time, working from home, job share, annualised hours, and staggered hours (Gov, 2019). FWR are open to everyone, not just parents and carers, and businesses have a legal obligation to consider their employees requests fairly, without prejudice, and should they not deal with a request in a reasonable manner, the employee has the right to challenge this through an employment tribunal (Gov, 2019). In addition to the right to submit an FWR, women also have the right to return to the same position or, should this no longer be possible, a similar alternative with the same terms and conditions of employment should be offered (Zabel, 2009). However, as mentioned previously, employment tribunals are in place to challenge discriminatory practices and whilst there is a route to challenge an FWR being denied, this must be lodged within three months of the incident (EHRC, 2020) and it is important to consider that this may mean it has to be done during maternity leave, where a woman should be simply enjoying the time with their baby and should not have to worry about their employment, let alone unfair treatment.



The data suggests that employers are sceptical of flexible working and how it can fit within their organisation without detriment to their business. This is supported in the literature from research undertaken by Lewis & Humbert (2010) who believed that employers structure their organisational operations around the availability of their male employees who are seen to be the ideal employee due to their ability to work in-line with the organisation and is argued to be the main reason why FWR are denied for women, as they are unable to commit to the *male* model of working (Cooper & Baird, 2015). Similarly, feminist critiques argue that despite government policies on flexible working being introduced to support women in managing their WLB, they in fact, reinforce the gendered division of labour and the view that men's role in the workplace is of more importance (Lewis, 2001). However, many of the women interviewed in this study said that they believed productive work does not just occur within the 9am to 5pm sphere, instead, they argued that productivity increases when employees are given the opportunity to work flexibly, and although there is an element of trust.

### **5.2.3 Career progression and income**

The data identifies many women who expressed their desire to work part-time, or flexibly, and this was either a choice or through necessity, yet, they still wanted a fulfilling career that utilised their skillset and capabilities. Many of the women said they were hindered by employers being less than receptive towards flexible working. Therefore, some women said they believed that they had little option but to leave their careers to seek alternative employment at a lower pay grade, that they are overqualified for, and as such, are not using their skills, nor developing them further. Many of the participants felt that employers are not making it easy for employees and potential employees by believing that work needs to be completed within defined hours to be productive. Furthermore, there are structural issues which make it difficult for

women with young children to work or return to work, yet, this is often based on the perception that if a woman takes some time out, they will lose their skills and will be unlikely to return to a similar level. Meyer (2013) found that women are overlooked for promotion often due to their employer's refusal to consider that the role could be undertaken part-time, or flexibly. Schuller (2018) argues that many women are working below their level of competence and that this will not change until more men work part-time, as men who work full-time are what shapes our understanding of career progression. The employment choices that women make are an underappreciated, public concern. Whilst it may be enough to believe that women are making the best decisions for their family, with regards to employment, this may well ignore the external forces that shape these decisions. The state investment of women's human capital, through education and training are inherently wasted if a woman does not return to work after childbirth (Duncan, et al., 2001).

For the large number of women who have suffered the *motherhood penalty*, which describes women who are working below their capabilities in lower paid jobs, they believed that they would have been protected by the welfare state and may have been eligible for an increase in TC, if already claiming, or are able to make a new claim for UC to top-up their income. However, due to the punitive sanctions imposed by UC and the system being less generous than TC (Brewer et al., 2011), a small number of women found themselves trapped in low paid work with little incentive to upskill unless they can find high enough paid work to take themselves out of the UC earnings eligibility. Likewise, it may be more financially beneficial to reduce their hours further to then be entitled to more welfare benefits. Ultimately, all these options do is further entrench women within a culture of undertaking low paid, and undervalued work. The answer may lie in re-visiting the growth of flexible working, and finding viable economic

ways for women to stay, or move into, higher paid roles that align with their skills and experience rather than forcing them into roles that are lower than their capabilities. It is of course important to mention that some women may actively prefer to stay in lower paid roles to give them more time with their families, yet this should be an option not something that they are forced into due to policy, or lack thereof in practice.

#### **5.2.4 Childcare**

Whilst some women relied on their partner or their family to help with childcare, to either save money or because they felt it was in their child's best interest to be cared for by relatives, the majority of women in this study used formal childcare. Some women had sacrificed their salary, by reducing their hours, to pay for it which, in turn, considerably lowered their take-home pay each month which then impacted on their family finances and contributes to the gender pay gap. The costs for these women, at times equivalent to paying rent or a mortgage, were unaffordable. Furthermore, many of the women welcomed the three-year funding that offers thirty hours of free childcare during term-time. However, most of the women expressed their concerns over the costs incurred during school holidays, it not being offered early enough and how it should be made available to coincide with when maternity leave ends instead as this is when most parents need the support and would enable more women to return to work without detriment to their skills.

Similarly, the issue of wraparound care once children reach school age was an area of concern for some who cannot access the provision in their area. Furthermore, the majority of the women in this study were not eligible for government support through TC or UC so they had to pay for childcare themselves. The costs of childcare were recognised, by many of the women, as a barrier to full-time work as they would be

effectively working to pay for childcare or would have very little disposable income. Thus, it makes more financial sense to work part-time or reduced hours. However, the majority of the women believed that the funding available from the age of three would be welcome at the end of the maternity period, instead, there was a significant gap between the two periods where families are forced to make financial sacrifices. Whereas, if funding was available earlier and the childcare barrier removed, women would have more available options when considering their return to work (Oppenheim, 2019; Brearley, 2020).

Currie & Thomas (1995) suggest that quality childcare is beneficial to children's development and as such should be utilised and not be withheld due to parents being ineligible for financial support. The landscape needs to change for women, and the barriers to childcare need to be removed. One way this could occur is by subsidising childcare at the point maternity leave ends, rather than from when a child is three years old. Likewise, the government also needs to increase the funding to childcare providers in order for them to be able to offer the *free* childcare places and not be out of pocket, otherwise the gap in funding will be passed to the parents paying for the childcare (Ferguson, 2018).

### **5.3 Research strengths and contribution to knowledge**

A key strength of this qualitative research study is its originality, in that, in contrast to previous studies, it considers women's lived experiences collectively, rather than as separate spheres, in returning to work after childbirth. This is demonstrable by how the findings emerged inductively from the stories told by the participants and all aspects of their home and work lives were explored throughout the study. This is significantly different to the similar studies identified in the literature review, who mostly focused on one area rather than women's collective experiences.

A further key strength of this study was the use of IPA, as this allowed the researcher to harness their own experiences, when interpreting the data, which resulted in a deeper exploration of the participants' experiences. This also made the study unique, and was significantly different to existing literature, not least by the role I played in the creation of data.

This study contributes to knowledge in such a way that if the focus had been just on one aspect, such as gender roles, there would have been missed opportunities to explore how these roles contributed to a woman's career progression, and future earnings potential. When interviewing the women, using the topic guide, each of the conversations naturally flowed towards the different themes, as they all interlinked. From their perceived gender roles, how they divided their family responsibilities, and how this then impacted on their careers. From here, many of the women spoke about their experiences as an employee, and gave their thoughts on employer practices, and what challenges they faced when returning to work. They spoke candidly, and often emotionally, about these experiences, and were keen to tell their whole story, not just

fragmented parts. As a researcher, if I had only focused on one aspect, these women would not have their voices heard, the data would have been edited to a point where their experiences could be misunderstood, and not seen as a cultural issue that effects all woman. The group of women who participated in this research represent many women, as they were not selected by anything other than their gender, and their experience of returning to work. This further strengthened my study as the women were not a targeted group.

Thus, by taking a holistic approach, and using IPA, this study holds rigour and achieves its aims and objectives.

#### **5.4 Research limitations**

A limitation to this research study is the time frame in which to complete my research. This impacted on the number of women I was able to recruit, and as such, the aim of fifteen women was the maximum number I was able to yield sufficient data from during the time frame allowed. However, over a longer time period, I believe there would have been a deeper exploration of key areas which were only touched upon during the interviews, for example, TC and UC. Only two women were eligible to claim in-work benefits due to low income, the majority of women were from middle to higher income families which was also a limitation of the study as women from low-income families were underrepresented.

Another limitation to the study relates to my methodological framework and adopting an interpretivist approach. This approach allows me to impose my own subjective interpretations and from this, I recognise that participants have limited control over

how their experiences are presented and the direction of the study (Danby & Farrell, 2004). However, individual meanings can often become buried within broader generalisations, thus, the interpretivist paradigm is justified as appropriate for this study, due to hidden social forces and structures being brought into consciousness through the interaction between participants and I, and our ideologies being accepted as opposed to questioned (Creswell, 2009).

## **5.5 Reflection**

It is important to reflect on the journey that this thesis has taken me on. My first planned study was to focus on one organisation, my employer at the time, however, I found myself pregnant, and my contract ended during maternity leave which meant I was not only unemployed, but I was no longer able to access the company for participants. This meant, that I had to revise my ethical approval submission due to a change in direction. From here, whilst managing my own home life with four young children, and a new baby, I had to start this research afresh, whilst looking for new employment. I believe that my first-hand experience helped me to make sense of the processes that the participants have experienced.

A significant challenge I had to overcome was my relationship with methodology. This took me many months as I struggled to understand research methods, and how to apply it to my study. However, with support from my supervisors, and determination, I was able to break it down, and form an understanding of how research is conducted, and how to justify the chosen methods. As a researcher, I believe that my skills lie in IPA as I naturally become involved in the experiences of whom I am interviewing, and form my own interpretation, rather than closing my mind. I can empathise with the women in this study, on a personal level, and their shared experiences resonate with

me, and I believe mine will to them when they read the final thesis. Some of the women became quite emotional when telling their stories, and although they were generally happy in life, some held resentment that they had to make sacrifices in their career and would have made different choices if possible. The women I spoke to who had signed NDA's, particularly resented the on-going impact this had on their career decisions, and although they did abide by the terms of their court orders, I believe they found some closure by being able to talk about their experiences in a relatively formal setting without fear of repercussions. The women who signed NDAs said they would like to see the coercive signing of NDAs be outlawed and employers, instead, held accountable for any discriminatory practices.

Once I had interviewed the women, the whole basis of my thesis became clear, along with my new understanding of research paradigms, I was able to revisit my literature review that I had not worked on since before my employment ended. I was now able to see clearly how the literature linked with my own data and could see an outline of how this study would progress and what findings would be made. However, further challenges arose with balancing my own paid work, home-life, and writing this thesis and although one of my strengths is time management, I did find that I was severely lacking in enough free time to dedicate to working on this and as such, was granted extensions that took into account managing life with a demanding toddler, and the imposition of Covid-19. I worked on my research as often as I could, and the progress made at times was good, but then I found myself unable to focus time on it for a period of time, so I worked on this in fits and starts. This reinforced my belief that there is a need for a holistic approach, as there are so many unseen challenges that may not be recognised or appreciated if the focus is just on one aspect.



However, I have always been determined to finish this, not only for myself but for the women who gave up their precious time, whilst managing their own family and paid work, to share their invaluable experiences, that ultimately shape this thesis. I wanted their voices to be heard, and for their experiences to be read by others as a small way to question and challenge cultural practices about gender roles, and women's experiences of balancing motherhood and work. For change to happen there needs to be a deeper understanding of women and the challenges they face.

## **Chapter 6. Conclusion**

This chapter will conclude this thesis by summarising the main points before presenting an overall conclusion of the research study.

### **6.1 Summary of the thesis**

The research aim of this study was to apply an IPA approach to exploring the role of women in the home and within the labour market and to gather their personal, lived experiences of returning to work after childbirth. The four key objectives to the study were to consider gender roles and the division of labour in the home, when both partners work outside the home; to consider why women choose to work full or part-time when returning to work after maternity leave, and the subsequent impact on their income and career progression, and how the cost and provision of childcare impacts on family decisions. I adopted an IPA approach as my methodological framework that enabled me to present a rich exploration of women's lived experiences of returning to work after childbirth.

### **6.2 Conclusion**

Women are no longer concerned with whether they have a choice to work or not, in fact, it is now assumed that women can, and therefore should, work, and the focus is redirected to ensuring family life is harmonious with the workplace, and gender equity. The significant policy changes that have evolved around maternity and paternity leave support a new generation of working families that further redefine traditional and historical gender roles into a more egalitarian or transitional model. However, family friendly policies, whilst welcome, may further impact on the widening gender pay gap

due to their perceived gender-bias and them being aimed more at woman, who are disproportionately making career sacrifices, dubbed the *motherhood penalty*, and who take greater responsibility for the division of family labour (Landivar, 2015).

Many of the participants in this study chose to work part-time and submitted FWR in order to facilitate the reduction in working hours. The literature supports this and found that women often wanted to work part-time in order to work around their children and childcare responsibilities and to balance their work and homelife more effectively. However, this was often met with challenges from their employees who refused to consider their requests fairly, and in some cases, resulted in the decision being challenged in an employment tribunal. Although, those who fought their employers at a tribunal were made to sign an NDA which meant they were not permitted to discuss the details of the case with anyone, which then created an opportunity for the employers in question to be free from judgement, and for them not to be made accountable for their discriminatory actions.

For those women who made career sacrifices, and worked in lower paid jobs, often part-time with little opportunity for progression, some may be eligible to claim UC, and although they were working part-time in order to balance their work and home life, they were caught in a benefits trap that has ensnared them due to the nature of low paid work along with limited advancement whilst they are unable, or choose not, to work full-time. Government policies offer women the support to maintain their WLB, yet, in practice there are far reaching consequences to be considered in relation to the penalties they face as a working mother, that are not necessarily counteracted by receiving in-work welfare benefits.

Allen (2016) suggests that better childcare support is needed to tackle the motherhood pay penalty and this view is supported by the majority of the women who took part in this study. Many of the women were not eligible to claim TC or UC, and were responsible for paying their own childcare costs, which was often more than they earned, hence why they worked part-time instead, and suffered the financial loss of earnings by being in a lower paid job and future career progression by not utilising their skills.

### **6.3 Suggestions for future research**

Future research needs to focus on flexible working practices, particularly around employer practices, how they should be regulated, and held accountable for discriminatory practices without detriment to those discriminated against. This may go somewhere towards the suggestion made, by some participants, that the only way to truly achieve equality for all is to remove the perceived gender-bias from policies and for them to be aimed at both men and women.

Another suggestion is around childcare, and to consider the financial impact for families who are not eligible for government support. The idea that the three-year-funding should be reduced to age one could be explored to potentially close the gap between the end of maternity leave and when the entitlement to the funding begins and offer more options for women when considering work based choices, without the current childcare financial constraints.

Other researchers should build upon the holistic approach as presented in this study.

## **6.4 Dissemination plan**

On two occasions during participant interviews, I was asked if I would be interested in speaking at their place of employment. One being within a Human Resources department, and one at a University. This is something I intend to pursue once my research is complete. Furthermore, following completion of this thesis, I aim to contact the organisation 'Pregnant then Screwed' where some of my participants were recruited from. The organization already has a *Flex4all* campaign, in collaboration with the Fawcett Society and the Young Women's Trust. I plan to share my findings with the founders of the campaign in the hope of contributing to their work. Finally, I will pursue the relevant avenues to assist me in submitting a paper based on the research findings to a journal such as *Gender, Work & Organisation*, or *Work, Organisation & Society*, with a view to it being published and to be a credible source for future researchers. An electronic copy of this thesis will also be available on the University of Salford Institutional Repository.

## **6.5 Recommendations for Government policy**

- 1.** Reduce the age of entitlement for 30 hours free childcare from age 3 to age 1. This would enable more women to return to work on a full-time basis, should they wish, and would remove the financial barrier to working for many women who are not eligible to have up to 85% of their childcare costs reimbursed through TC or UC.
- 2.** Furthermore, increase the number of weeks entitlement from 39 weeks to 48 weeks, thus, allowing the statutory entitlement of 4 weeks annual leave to cover the period of no childcare.

**3.** Government to enforce that employers advertise new positions as being 'Flexible'.

This would encourage applicants who may be seeking a particular work pattern, such as condensed hours, part-time, job-share, to apply for roles that they previously would have disregarded as them not being suitable for on account of their caring responsibilities. For this to be successful, an independent audit of the recruitment processes each year would ensure employers are putting policy into practice and would enforce transparency.

**4.** Change the shared aspect of ShPL to standard paternity leave, albeit with the same length of leave attached. The key element to this would be to safeguard women's full maternity leave for its original purpose, and to offer fathers their own entitlement to extended paternity leave of up to 50 weeks. This would offer fathers the opportunity to take on a more active role from the start, and there would be no gender-bias in the uptake of maternity/paternity leave. However, this would have a financial impact on the state, which requires further exploration to determine its affordability.

**5.** Increase the length of time, women on maternity leave have, to take their employer to an employment tribunal from three months to 12 months. This would give women additional time to deal with any issues, reducing the emotional turmoil whilst recovering from childbirth. Furthermore, NDA's to be abolished where they may be detrimental to a woman's future career prospects, or for when they are used to shield employers' discriminatory practices so they cannot be held accountable.

## **6.6 Recommendations for practice**

Government policy requires effective implementation, thus, there is a need for employers to have organisational policies and strategies to operationalise the policy recommendations. More specifically, there is a need for employers to:

- 1.** Offer additional financial support for childcare – for employees not eligible for government support. This could be in the form of workplace nurseries, if appropriate, or through employee tax breaks that allow childcare costs to be deducted from their salary before tax and national insurance contributions are deducted. This would allow a considerable saving, particularly for those on higher incomes.
- 2.** Redesign roles so that all employees at any level can work flexibly, and for employers to seek input from their employees at all levels in the interest of transparency and fairness.
- 3.** Give full and fair consideration to FWR. This could take the form of an independent panel, where the applicant remains anonymous, to remove any potential bias, and for the decision to be justified.
- 4.** Make full and frank disclosure of any tribunal cases brought against the employer and for current codes of conduct to be updated accordingly.

In conclusion of this thesis, I have fulfilled the original aims and objectives by presenting a coherent and rigorous research study on the experiences of women who return to work after maternity leave, supported by an extensive literature review, to

present justifiable recommendations for policy and practice and suggestions for future research.



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## APPENDICIES

### Appendix 1: Ethical Approval

**Research, Enterprise and  
Engagement Ethical  
Approval Panel**

Doctoral & Research  
Support Research and  
Knowledge Exchange,  
Room 827, Maxwell  
Building,  
University of Salford,  
Manchester  
M5 4WT  
T +44(0)161 295 2280  
[www.salford.ac.uk](http://www.salford.ac.uk)

10 December 2018

Dear Claire,

**RE: ETHICS APPLICATION–HSR1819-024 –‘Returning to work after child-birth: An  
exploration of mothers’ experiences.’**

Based on the information that you have provided, I am pleased to inform you that ethics application HSR1819-024 has been approved.

If there are any changes to the project and/or its methodology, then please inform the Panel as soon as possible by contacting [Health-ResearchEthics@salford.ac.uk](mailto:Health-ResearchEthics@salford.ac.uk)

Yours sincerely,

Professor Sue McAndrew

Chair of the Research Ethics Panel

## **Appendix 2: Participant Information Sheet**

### **Study Title**

#### **Returning to work after child-birth: An exploration of mothers' experiences'**

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether to take part, you need to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Ask questions if anything you read is not clear or would like more information. Take time to decide whether to take part.

### **What is the purpose of the study?**

This research study aims to explore mothers' experiences of returning to work after having children, and how this may impact on their income, career progression, and overall work-life balance. I am conducting this research study to fulfill the requirements of the MSc by research in Social Policy.

### **Why have I been invited to take part?**

You have been selected as a suitable participant due to being an employed female who has given birth in the last five years, and because you are a member of a women's social media network. There will be approximately ten to fifteen women interviewed.

### **Do I have to take part?**

Participating in this research is entirely voluntary. Please take the time to read through this information pack, and topic guide. If you wish to go ahead then I will ask you to sign a consent form to show that you agree to take part. You are free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason. However, if you choose to withdraw, then this would need to be done within fourteen days of the interview taking place.

### **What will happen to me if I take part?**

Interviews will take place at a mutually agreed time and place, or via skype if unable to travel. You will be interviewed by me and the interviews are expected to last approximately 60 to 90 minutes. The interview will be recorded on a dictaphone and will be transcribed and anonymised after the interview and stored on a password protected computer at the university. If the interviews take place by skype, I will book a quiet room at the university library for confidentiality/anonymity. Your consent form can be signed and returned via email or returned via post to (Claire Carey, c/o Dr Mark Wilding, C503 Allerton Building, University of Salford, Manchester, M6 6PU). Please note no interviews will take place before signed consent forms have been returned. When accessing the data from another location it will be via a password protected computer and each participant will only be recognised by a code word known only to the researcher. A consent form will be required to be signed before commencing the interview.

### **Expenses and payments?**

There will be no reimbursements and/or incentives offered to any participants.

### **What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

It is important to recognise that this topic may be emotive and invoke unexpected reactions. This will be handled with the utmost understanding and, where necessary, you will be signposted to appropriate services, a list of which can be found at the bottom of this information sheet.

### **What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

I cannot promise the study will help you but the information received from the study will help to increase the understanding of mother's experiences in the workplace. This may encourage further research into the topic and may encourage employers to advertise vacancies that will be suitable for women represented by this study.

### **What if there is a problem?**

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, you can speak to the researcher who will do their best to answer your questions.

Claire Carey – [c.carey@edu.salford.ac.uk](mailto:c.carey@edu.salford.ac.uk)

If you wish to speak to someone else, then you can contact the supervisors:

Dr Mark Wilding – [m.a.wilding@salford.ac.uk](mailto:m.a.wilding@salford.ac.uk) Dr Joy Probyn - [j.e.probyn@salford.ac.uk](mailto:j.e.probyn@salford.ac.uk)

### **Making a complaint**

If you wish to make a complaint about the research you can contact:

Professor Susan McAndrew, Chair of the Health Research Ethics Panel, Room MS1.91, Mary Seacole Building, Frederick Road Campus, University of Salford, Salford, M6 6PU. Tel: 0161 295 2778. E: [s.mcandrew@salford.ac.uk](mailto:s.mcandrew@salford.ac.uk)

### **Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?**

All information collected, will be anonymized, including details about your employer. All information will be stored on a password protected computer at the University of Salford and will have your name and address removed so that you cannot be recognized. Only myself and my supervisors will be able to access the data. This will be kept for up to three years and only used for academic research purposes

Please be aware that if you reveal anything related to criminal activity and/or something that is harmful to self or other, the researcher must share that information with the appropriate authorities.

### **What will happen if I decide that I don't want to carry on with the study?**

All participants will be given the option to withdraw up to 14 days after participating, without giving reason for doing so. If you withdraw from the study, we will destroy all the information you have given and remove your name from the research file.

### **What will happen to the results of the research study?**

The anonymised results of the study will form part of a post graduate research dissertation, which will be available through the University of Salford repository, and will be used in conference presentations. Confidentiality and anonymity will be protected at all times.

### **Who is organising or sponsoring the research?**

The research is organised by the researcher and supervisors at the University of Salford. The research is not sponsored or funded by any third party.

### **Further information and contact details:**

[If you would like further information about this research study, please contact:](#)  
[c.carey@edu.salford.ac.uk](mailto:c.carey@edu.salford.ac.uk) or 07729 189726

For those who may have been distressed during the interview and/or raised issues they need further support with the following organisations might be useful.

Samaritans – 116 123

<https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/>

<http://www.nationaldomesticviolencehelpline.org.uk/>

<http://www.manchesterwomensaid.org/>

<http://www.acas.org.uk/index.aspx?articleid=1362>

<http://www.ier.org.uk/blog/womens-workplace-rights-opportunities-and-threats>

<https://www.unison.org.uk/about/what-we-do/fairness-equality/women/>

**Appendix 3: Consent Form**

**Returning to work after child-birth: An exploration of mothers' experiences'**

**Ethics Ref No: TBC**

**Name of Researcher: Claire Carey**

*(Delete as*

*appropriate)*

❖ I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the above study (version 3- 10/12/2018) and what my contribution will be.

❖ Yes	❖ No

❖ I have been given the opportunity to ask questions (face to face, via telephone and e-mail)

❖ Yes	❖ No

❖ I agree to take part in the interview and for it to be tape recorded

❖ Yes	❖ No	❖ NA

❖ I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the research at any time **without giving any reason**. I understand I can withdraw from the study up to 14 days after being interviewed and my data will be destroyed and not used in the research.

❖ Yes	❖ No

❖ I understand how the researcher will use my responses, who will see them and how the data will be stored.

❖ Yes	❖ No

❖ I agree to take part in the above study

❖ Yes	❖ No
❖ Yes	❖ No

❖ I understand that my participation will be kept confidential. However, I also understand if I disclose criminal activity or the intent to harm self or others the researcher will have to report this to the appropriate people

--	--

Name of participant

.....

Signature

.....

Date

.....

Name of researcher taking consent

.....

Researcher's e-mail address

.....



# Participants Wanted

## Returning to work after child-birth: An exploration of mothers' experiences'



### Aims and Objectives

This project will explore women's' experiences of returning to work after having children: focusing on their work-life balance, income, and career progression.

I aim to recruit and interview approximately ten to fifteen women, who have given birth in the last five years and are employed.

A consent form and participation information pack will be provided before the interview to provide you with further information about the study.

For more information please contact Claire Carey [c.carey@edu.salford.ac.uk](mailto:c.carey@edu.salford.ac.uk)



## **Appendix 5: Interview Topic Guide**

These topics are a general guide to be used to direct the flow of the conversation without being leading. Your thoughts, experiences, and perceptions are what is important for this research.

- Explore the reasons for working part-time: choice or necessity.
- The gender pay gap and whether you feel it is relevant to you.
- Achieving a work-life balance.
- Career progression.
- Participants experience of equalities/employment legislation.
- In-work benefits; Tax credits, Universal Credit.
- The provision of nursery and pre-school childcare, before and after school care.
- Policy changes the participant would like to see.
- Personal changes the participant intends to make.