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Equal Opportunities Commission

Mothers and the modern family

In Britain today, well over half of mothers (55 per cent) with pre-school age children and two thirds of all mothers with dependent children are in paid work.¹ This represents a substantial change in family and employment patterns over the last 30 years. 71 per cent of mothers with a partner and 53 per cent of single mothers now work outside the family home.

A powerful combination of trends in aspirations, family structure, gender relations, the wider economy and public policy have driven this profound change. However, the shift away from the norm of mothers staying at home continues to provoke passionate debate about what this means for women, men and children.

To shed new light on these vital and contentious questions, the Equal Opportunities Commission commissioned analysis of the latest longitudinal data on work and family life in Britain, covering 2000-2004.

As well as confirming the changing roles of women and men, we have uncovered a major divide between 'have' and 'have not' families which poses significant challenges for policy makers and society as a whole.

Key findings

- Having a mother who works is not associated with any negative impacts on early child development. Nor is use of formal childcare. If anything, the opposite seems to be true.
- Low or unskilled mothers are the least likely to be in paid work around the time of their child's birth. Prolonged worklessness is associated with negative outcomes for both women and children.
- Professional women are the most likely to be in work during pregnancy, take maternity leave and then return to work. This is a pattern associated with benefits for both women and children.
- Low or unskilled mothers who are in paid work have less access to longer, paid maternity leave and fewer options for working flexibly.
- Working mothers tend to have better mental health than non-working mothers, with positive effects on their children's development. Maternal depression is most prevalent amongst workless mothers and has very negative effects on both women and their children.

These findings demonstrate that the debate about how families combine working and caring in the modern world is more complex than often presented. Helping families to earn enough to live free from poverty, whilst giving children the best start in life and helping women to realise their aspirations, is a tough but crucial ambition.

Overall, this evidence demonstrates that many families – particularly the most disadvantaged – face an uphill struggle. Poor, low-skilled women have greater difficulty keeping a job after having children, and working flexibly – with negative outcomes for themselves, their children and society as a whole.

The data used in this study relate to a period prior to significant changes to maternity and paternity rights, first in 2003 and then subsequently in 2007. These include extensions to maternity leave and pay, the introduction of 2 weeks paid paternity leave (for employed fathers) and the right for parents of children under 6 to request flexible working. Additionally, in 2004, the government launched its ten-year childcare strategy with a number of measures to improve the quality, affordability and accessibility of childcare services, especially in deprived communities. These welcome changes are helping to ease the burden but further changes are needed to ensure all working mothers with young children have access to the range of flexible options and services they need.

The full report, *Parental care and employment in early childhood – Working Paper Series No 57* by Shirley Dex and Kelly Ward, Institute of Education, can be downloaded from the Equal Opportunities Commission website at:

http://www.eoc.org.uk/PDF/WP57_parental_care.pdf

These data are taken from the Millennium Cohort Survey (MCS), a longitudinal study following a national representative sample of babies born between September 2000 and December 2001. MCS covers all four countries in the UK, but this analysis focuses only on England, Scotland and Wales. The first data sweep was carried out when the baby was 9-10 months old in 2000-2001 and included 16,588 mothers and 11,935 fathers. The second sweep, undertaken in 2003-04 at age three, includes follow-up information on 14,048 mothers and 9,747 fathers.

Mums – their work and their children

Contrary to some popular myths, this study suggests that having a mother who works is actually associated with a range of positive benefits for women and children. These include a reduced chance of living in poverty, a warmer mother child relationship, stronger early child development and better maternal mental health.

The worst outcomes for women and children were found in families whose mothers had never worked. Low or unskilled mothers are the least likely to be in work at all, either during pregnancy or after their child's birth. This is associated with both poorer mental health for women, lower family income and a widening income gap in society.

Higher skilled and professional mothers were much more likely to have a 'continuous' pattern of employment: working before their child is born, then taking maternity leave, before returning to work.

- 85 per cent of mothers working in managerial and professional occupations worked during pregnancy, compared to 60 per cent in skilled manual and 53 per cent in semi and unskilled occupations.
- 33 per cent of mothers – the largest category – were employed during pregnancy, went on maternity leave, and then returned to work within 9 to 10

months of childbirth (defined as ‘continuous employment’). Over 70 per cent of mothers with this employment pattern were in the highest skilled occupational groups and over half had a degree-level qualification.

- 7 out of 10 mothers with a degree-level qualification were in employment when their child was aged 3, as opposed to just under a quarter of mothers with no qualifications.
- 29 per cent of mothers were employed intermittently between their child being 9 or 10 months and 3 years old.

Being in continuous employment was associated with the warmest form of relationships between mothers and their children.

- The vast majority of mothers felt they had a warm relationship with their 3 year old child. Those in employment were slightly more likely to feel this than those not in work – 97 per cent compared to 94 per cent.
- There was a more marked difference when considering mothers’ work record during the first three years of their child’s life. 15 per cent of mothers who had never worked and 6 per cent of those who had mostly not been working felt they didn’t have a warm relationship with their child. Just 3 per cent of ‘continuously employed’ mothers reported this same worry.

But mothers working full-time were far more likely to feel they didn't spend enough time with their child than non-working mothers.

- 59 per cent of mothers working full-time felt they did not spend enough time with their 9 or 10 month old child, compared with 17 per cent of mothers working part-time and just 4 per cent who were not employed.

There is no evidence of a link between maternal employment and poor outcomes for young children. In fact, the opposite seems to be true.

- There is no evidence of an association between early child development problems at age 3 and having a mother who works or has worked. In fact, mothers with higher level qualifications and higher-status occupations were least likely to have children with such problems.
- If anything, *not* working – especially never working – was associated with early developmental difficulties. However, having little or no employment is closely associated with low income, teenage motherhood or having few or no educational qualifications, which were also related to worse child outcomes.
- 16 per cent of mothers reported that their 3 year old child had a longstanding health condition. More mothers out of work (18 per cent) than mothers working full-time (13 per cent) reported such issues, with no significant differences between occupational groups.

Being in employment is associated with a lower likelihood of maternal depression, a significantly positive indicator of healthy child development.

- Mothers who were employed when their child was 9-10 months old were slightly less likely to report a high depression score than mothers who were not working. 15 per cent of non-working mothers reported suffering from

depression, compared to 12 per cent of those working full-time and 11 per cent working part-time.

- Having a depressed mother when the child was 9 or 10 months old increased the likelihood of that child having a developmental problem at age 3.
- Mothers' general level of health when their child was 9 or 10 months old was related to their occupational group. 42 per cent of professional and managerial mothers reported excellent health compared to just 23 per cent of semi and unskilled working mothers.

Partnership breakdowns were few in number overall, but highest among couples where no-one was working and couples where only the mother was employed.

- Amongst couples where neither parent was working when the child was 9 or 10 months, 22 per cent had become lone parent families by the time their child was 3. Just 4 per cent of couple families where both parents were working full-time when their child was 9 or 10 months old had gone on to become lone parent families by the time their child was 3.
- Of lone parents who were employed when their child was 9 or 10 months old, almost a quarter had moved into a couple family by the time their child was 3. Amongst non-employed lone parents, around one fifth made a similar transition in the early years of their child's life.
- Despite partnering and re-partnering in the early years of children's lives, the overall proportion of couple families stayed relatively stable (around 85 per cent) between children being 9 or 10 months and 3 years old.
- Mothers reported that non-resident fathers varied in the extent of their interest with their young child, and this was related to how friendly the parents remained with each other. Where the father had more interest and more contact, he was far more likely to pay child maintenance. Other research has shown that regular maintenance payments increase opportunities for lone mothers to work.^{2 3}

Working mums – how they work and how they care

The divide between the 'have' and 'have not' mothers is not just about whether they work or not. *How* mothers work and care for their children are critically important too. Those low or unskilled mothers who *did* work around the birth of their child tended to return quickest and this was linked to access to maternity pay. However, recent changes to maternity entitlements are changing the picture. Whereas only 24 per cent of mothers in the MCS took more than 6 months maternity leave, this had risen to 41 per cent in 2005⁴ following the introduction of six months' paid statutory maternity leave from 2003.

This study also suggests that the ability of mothers to achieve a good balance between their work and home is strongly related to their qualification levels and occupational status. Mothers in high skilled and professional occupations had greater access to flexible working options. But when low or unskilled working mothers were offered the chance to work flexibly, take up was high.⁵

A self-reinforcing 'double bind' is evident for many women and their children. Low or unskilled women are less likely to work overall, but, even those who do, have fewer opportunities to balance this successfully with family life. Part-time working, which was the most commonly used option for low or unskilled working mothers, is often a positive choice but tends to be associated with low pay and poor prospects. Other research analysing the MCS surveys shows how factors such as these contribute to a widening gap between rich and poor – at age 3 children from disadvantaged families are already lagging a year behind their middle class contemporaries in social and educational development.⁶

Low skilled mothers in non-professional occupations returned to work the soonest after the birth of their child.

- Nearly half of mothers in skilled manual, semi or unskilled jobs who returned to work did so within 3 months of giving birth, compared to less than 3 in 10 mothers returning to work by 3 months in professional or managerial positions.⁷
- Mothers with a partner who worked in a lower skilled occupation were more likely to return to work in the first 3 months, compared to those whose partner was employed in a managerial or professional job who were most likely to return between 4 and 6 months after giving birth.
- Nearly half of lone parents returning to work did so within 3 months (48 per cent), compared to less than a third of mothers who were married (31 per cent) and 42 per cent of cohabiting parents.

Low-skilled mothers were less likely to receive maternity pay.

- Between 10 and 13 per cent of mothers in non-professional, semi or unskilled jobs reported receiving no maternity pay at all, compared to only 4 per cent of mothers employed in higher skilled or professional jobs.⁸
- Additionally, while two-thirds of mothers employed in professional or higher skilled jobs received discretionary top-up maternity pay from their employers (in addition to statutory maternity pay), only 30 to 41 per cent benefited from this extra support amongst mothers in non-professional, semi or unskilled jobs.

Mothers in higher skilled occupations were more likely to report having opportunities to work flexibly.

- With the exception of part-time work and special shifts, flexible working options such as job-sharing, flexible working hours, working from home and term-time contracts were more likely to be available to mothers in professional and higher skilled jobs compared with mothers in non-professional, semi or unskilled jobs.
- For example, 40 per cent of mothers in managerial and professional occupations had the option of working from home when their baby was 9 or 10 months old, compared with just 3 per cent of mothers in semi or unskilled work.
- Mothers in lower skilled, lower paid occupations who had the chance to work flexibly were equally as likely – and in some cases more likely – to take

advantage of such options as mothers in higher skilled occupations. They were particularly likely to use part-time working, special shifts, 9 day fortnights/4.5 day working weeks and school term-time contracts, when available.

- In contrast, mothers in managerial and professional roles were *less* likely to use part-time work (63 per cent) than mothers in all other occupations (around 86 percent of those in personal and sales, semi and unskilled occupations) – perhaps reflecting a workplace culture that views staff employed part-time as being less career-minded and committed than their full-time counterparts.⁹

Take up of flexible work is highest amongst mothers of babies.

- Over three quarters (77 per cent) of working mothers who had access to part-time work chose to work part-time when their child was aged 9 or 10 months, declining to 65 per cent by the time the child was aged 3.
- Over half of working mothers (52 per cent) who had the opportunity to work from home occasionally chose to do so when their baby was 9-10 months old, but this option was taken up by only 13 per cent of mothers of 3 year olds.
- New research¹⁰ by the EOC shows that almost half of mothers of children aged under 16 who work part-time would like to work more hours. This figure rises to 59 per cent who would work more hours if they had flexible work options. Over half (57 per cent) of mothers working part-time cannot find full-time work that gives them the flexibility they need.

Mothers in higher skilled occupations used formal childcare the most.

- Children who were attending formal childcare¹¹ aged 9 -10 months were less likely to show early developmental problems than those who were not.
- 65 per cent of mothers employed in professional occupations reported using formal childcare, compared to just 7 per cent of mothers in semi or unskilled jobs.
- Mothers employed in skilled manual jobs were the most likely to use grandparent care (54 per cent). This compares to 34 per cent of mothers working in professional and managerial occupations.

So what are the lessons for policy makers?

Listen to some popular commentary about the state of modern families and you might think that any mother who goes out to work is irreparably damaging their children's future. Work helps children escape poverty and staying attached to a job reduces the financial penalty women can face after giving birth.

But *how* mothers work, their hours and occupations, is crucial too.

This survey shows that the debate about how mums and dads combine working and caring is complex, with a strong streak of inequality running throughout. Earning enough to get by, while giving children the best start in life is a tough balancing act that millions of families are trying to negotiate every day. There is not a choice to be

made between working and caring: in the modern world strong and successful families need to do both.

These findings suggest a major and worrying divide between the 'have' and 'have not' mothers in Britain today. Some women – especially those with high skills and professional jobs – have significant opportunities to balance work and family life in ways that are good for them and their children. However, a significant proportion of mothers – often those with lower skills and a patchy work record – are being left behind, to the detriment of them, their children and society more widely.

Considerable progress has been made since these surveys were undertaken to extend maternity rights and flexible work options to all working women, but these welcome developments need to be sustained and extended. Too many still face an unenviable choice between opting out of work or holding a job which places a real strain on family life. Evidence suggests this is having negative consequences for them, their children and wider society too.

The job of government and policy makers is to help mothers and children gain the benefits of work – which are not just financial – in ways that strengthen family relationships and emotional well-being. Of course what fathers do, at home and at work, is crucial here too – looking after the baby is not a woman-only role. In the interests of women and children – as well as our society and economy as a whole – this reality is a call to action.

Policy recommendations

Balancing work and family

⇒ ***Paid leave***

Mothers' entitlements to statutory paid maternity leave have increased from 18 weeks in 2000 to 39 weeks in April 2007, but the low level of statutory pay may be a barrier to using all this entitlement, particularly for those on low incomes. At present couples have no choice about who takes extended leave. We want to see:

- Rapid implementation of the Government's proposals to extend paid maternity leave to one year.
- At the same time, implementation of the Government's proposals for additional paternity leave so that mothers and fathers can choose who takes leave to care for the baby between 6 and 12 months.
- Greater financial support so as to enable low paid mothers to take their full paid entitlement to maternity leave.
- All mothers-to-be actively informed about their employment rights – including maternity leave and pay, paid holidays and the right to request flexible working. The new leaflet for mothers attending ante-natal care plays a vital role here.

⇒ ***Flexible working***

Since these surveys were undertaken mothers (and fathers) with a child aged under 6 have gained the statutory right to request flexible working. But staff working flexibly risk being considered by managers to be less career-minded and committed,¹² and

those in lower skilled work have less access to, and a narrower range of, flexible work options. We want to see:

- Extension of the right to request flexible working to everyone – helping to provoke a fundamental shift in British working culture across the labour market.
- A high profile campaign by Government promoting the benefits of a variety of flexible working options for staff, and the link with better business and a stronger economy.
- An unambiguous declaration in law that unfair treatment on grounds of caring responsibilities is unlawful discrimination and contrary to equality law in the proposed new Single Equality Bill. As a first step, we are calling for caring status to be included within an integrated public sector equality duty.

⇒ **Employment and skills**

Prolonged worklessness is associated with a range of negative outcomes for women and children and can perpetuate disadvantage over the lifecycle. We want to see:

- Educational and childcare support for teenage mothers to continue their education during pregnancy and after childbirth.
- Effective schemes to improve the employability and skills of mothers who have never worked, incorporating skills training, childcare and other personal and social support as part of the support package.
- Assistance with job search for both partners in an unemployed couple, backed by childcare support and wider availability of flexible work to enhance their earnings potential.

⇒ **Access to services**

Mothers' well-being affects child outcomes – prolonged worklessness increases the risks of maternal depression and child development problems. Mothers' employment and patterns of work are closely connected to the quality, availability and affordability of childcare. We want to see:

- Improved access to high quality, affordable childcare – so that children of low income families can benefit from high quality services and their parents who choose are able to work and progress at work.
- Continuing roll-out of Sure Start schemes and Children's Centres, designed to give access to high quality childcare and parental support, especially in poorer areas.
- Early diagnosis and treatment for mothers with depression because maternal depression can have a negative impact upon children's development.
- Recognition by health, education and childcare services that both mothers and fathers are responsible and need to be involved and consulted about matters relating to the development and well-being of their child.

⇒ **Lone mothers**

Good relationships between non-resident parents contributes to closer relationships between the non-resident parent (usually the father) and child. It also increases the likelihood of child support being paid, which in turn increases options for lone mothers to work. We want to see:

- Access to relationship support (whether or not mothers and fathers are living together) to improve relationships between the parents and contribute to mothers' and children's longer term emotional and economic well-being.

➡ **Research**

This research shows interesting connections between mothers' employment, leave-taking behaviour and use of childcare on children's well-being. We want to see:

- More research to enlarge our understanding across Great Britain of those factors which impact on children's life chances and on longer-term social cohesion.
- Follow up research and policy development by the CEHR, using this important quantitative longitudinal database, to explore a range of equality factors on the developing life chances for the 2000 cohort of children.

The EOC acknowledges the contribution of Graeme Cooke and Lauren Edwards to this text.

¹ EOC (2006) Facts about women and men in Britain. Manchester: Equal Opportunities Commission.

² Marsh, A. and Vegeris, S. (2004) *The British lone parent cohort and their children 1991 to 2001*. DWP Research Report No. 209. London: Department for Work and Pensions.

³ Evans, M., Harkness, S. and Ortiz, R. (2004) *Lone parents cycling between work and benefits*. DWP Report 217. London: Department for Work and Pensions.

⁴ Smeaton, D and Marsh, A (2006) *Maternity and paternity rights and benefits: survey of parents 2005*. Employment Relations Research Series. London: Department of Trade and Industry.

⁵ The data on access to, and take up of, flexible options by occupational group is complex – a more detailed analysis is contained in the full report, Dex, S. and Ward, K. (2007) *Parental care and employment in early childhood*. Manchester: Equal Opportunities Commission.

⁶ Hansen, K. and Joshi, H. (2007) *Millennium Cohort Study second survey: a user's guide to initial findings*. Institute of Education, University of London.

⁷ This study took place at a time when statutory maternity pay was only available for 18 weeks. In 2003 this was extended to six months, before increasing further to nine months from April 2007.

⁸ A woman's legal entitlement to Statutory Maternity Pay is dependent on fulfilling certain work criteria.

⁹ EOC (2007) *Enter the timelords: transforming work to meet the future*. Manchester: Equal Opportunities Commission

¹⁰ Holmes, K., Ivins, C., Yaxley, D., Hansom, J. and Smeaton, D.(2007) *The future of work: individuals and workplace transformation*. Manchester: Equal Opportunities Commission

¹¹ Formal childcare refers to childminders, nannies/au pairs, nurseries and out of school services which are registered with Ofsted.

¹² See endnote 9 above.

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