WOMEN, EMPLOYMENT & SKILLS

21st March 1996

Skills Focus **National Conference: Half Our Future**
(Policy Studies Institute)

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Introduction

There is a degree of invisibility about women's skills. Such works as *International Comparisons of Vocational Education* and *Training for Intermediate Skills* (Ryan, 1991), *Keyworks* (Brown, Evans, Blackman and Germon, 1994), *Future Skill Demand and Supply* Metcalf (ed) (1995); *Skills, Qualifications and Utilization* (Pearson and Marshall, 1996) and many others, do not index, 'women', 'gender' or 'girls'. Skills are believed to be embodied in the jobs people do, rather than in the attributes people bring with them into jobs. Jobs are differentiated to a large extent by gender, which reflects in part the skills men and women have. But the focus on jobs rather than people does disguise very wide differentiation between men and women in the skills they possess, regardless of occupation. The relationship between skills, the labour market and occupation is complex, with skills operating at the interface between what people have and what they acquire through work. But the marked differences in these relationships between men and women is often masked by analyses which overlook the gender variable. Women are, of course, not homogeneous as a group: their labour market history is affected by personal characteristics, including the educational qualifications they have obtained and their experience of having children. Another focus of interest is the way such differentiation affects further the acquisition of skills and accentuates further the gender gap.

In this paper we will examine a number of features of gender in skills development. First we examine the different relationship of men and women to the labour market, especially the effect that having children has on exit from and re-entry to it, and how this also impacts on the occupations women enter. Next we examine how the possession of skills affects these relationships - initially the basic skills of literacy and numeracy, and subsequently the more directly work related skills. The focus then moves to the way in which the possession or absence of basic skills affects both the occupations entered and the work related training men and women get, which is also affected by their labour market history. We then turn to the more directly work related skills: how they are affected by presence or absence of the basic skills and training . Next we consider the extent to which women's skills are under-utilised in the occupations they enter and the way those who have children handle the balance between work and the family.

Finally some conclusions are drawn about women's skills and employment in more general terms. To what extent has the labour market been impoverished by the failure to recognise the untapped value of women's skills?

The main data source we draw on for the answers to these questions is the National Child Development Study (NCDS) - one of the three British Birth Cohort Studies, encompassing all births in a single week in 1946, 1958 and 1970 (Ekinsmyth et al., 1994). NCDS comprises a follow-up of 17,500 individuals born in a single week in March, 1958, with data collection at birth, 7, 11, 16, 23, and 33. For the purposes of this paper we draw mainly on the 33 years sweep, which recorded employment histories back to 16 (Bynner, and Fogelmann; Ferri, 1993). The NCDS dataset is of particular value for our purposes, because in the 33 year survey, alongside much detailed information collected about education, training and employment , data were also collected about perceived competence with the basic skills of numeracy and literacy and for a number of more directly related work-related skills. Funding for this part of the work has come from the Basic Skills Agency whose interest in NCDS data began with the 1981 23 year sweep, which also collected basic skills data. (ALBSU, 1987). The NCDS survey itself was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and a consortium of nine Government Departments and agencies

Previous studies using NCDS data have demonstrated consistent differences between men and women in their relation to the labour market and the skills they possess; women are disadvantaged relative to men, with respect to he kind of work they do and the training they get (Bynner, 1994, 1996). An overriding aim of the analysis reported here is to try to identify whether it is women's situation, especially in relation to child rearing, that disadvantages them or whether there is discrimination over and above the penalty that mixing family and work places upon them.

Women in the Labour market

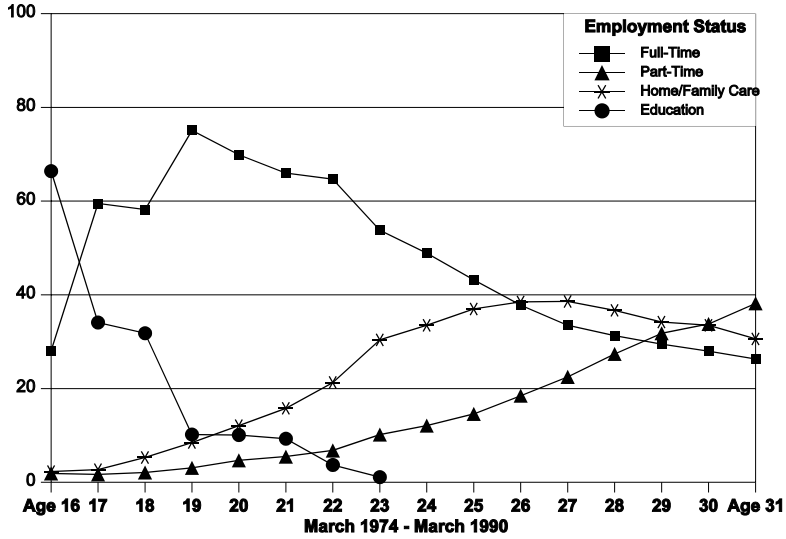
While men's levels of employment and unemployment are affected crucially by the strength of the local economy, women's appear to be more directly affected by the stage they have reached in the life cycle. Unlike men, women who are not working tend to define themselves as being "at home" rather than "unemployed". This is often, but by no means always, because of domestic responsibilities in connection with children. For those with children, it probably also reflects the restrictive definition of "available for work" as put forward by Benefit or Employment Agencies. Work in this context is confined to economically active (paid) employment; thus women looking after children are not *available* for work. Using NCDS data collected from cohort members at age 33 (NCDS5), we can analyse these effects more precisely for women looking at their employment histories cross-sectionally from age 16 to the end of their 31st year (1974 to 1990).

Figures l and 2 show the different employment statuses of women, full-time employment, part-time employment, home/family care, and education over this period analysed by whether they had ever had a child by age 33[1]. Figure 2 also contains the full-time employment pattern for men. (The small proportion of women falling into the "other category", ie. out of the labour force - temporary sick, unemployed, unable to state clearly whether in full-time or part-time employment, etc, are not shown here. This is because this group, never exceeds 10% in any individual year.) For women with children (Figure 1) it is noticeable that full-time employment peaks at the end of the teens, and then steadily declines, while part-time work and home and family care replace it. During their 31st year, 38% of such women were in part-time employment, 31% were engaged in home or family care and just 26% in full-time employment. Women without children (Figure 2) consistently had over 85% in full-time employment, once the great majority had finished with full-time education at age 22. Minimal proportions (approximately 5%) were either in part-time employment, or had primary home/family care responsibilities. Their full-time employment pattern mirrors that of men, but does remain slightly lower throughout this age period. This is the first indication of a persistent theme throughout this

[1]Given employment status can differ within an individual year, the employment status accorded to an individual was decided by the highest number of months spent in one employment category during any one year (ie. If 3 months were spent at home and 9 months in full-time employment, a full-time employment status was awarded).

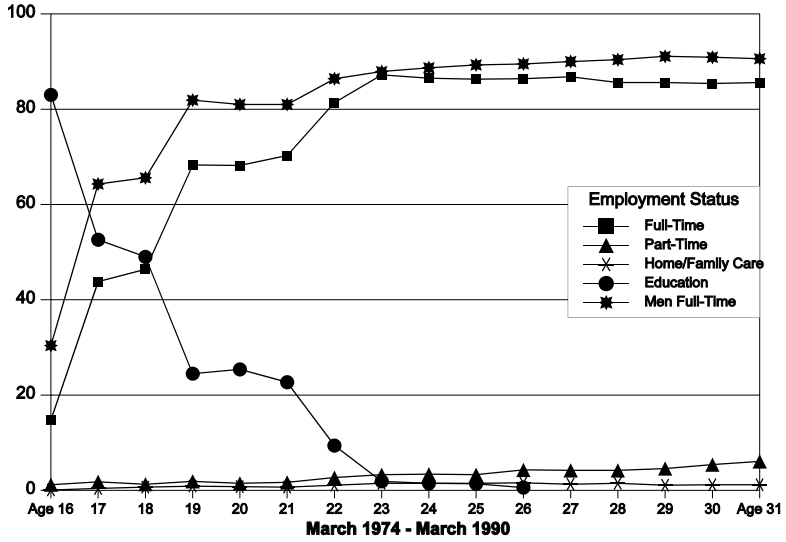
paper - the employment experience and employment attributes of women without children are similar to, but lag behind, men; those of women with children are radically different.

Figure 1
Employment Status of Women between Age 16 to 31
If Ever Had Children



(N ≃ 3733)

Figure 2
Employment Status of Women between Age 16 to 31
If Never Had Children



Women **(N ≃ 1291); Men (N ≃ 5129)**

Another way of looking at this labour market experience is in terms of the total number of years in full-time employment. Considering just the men and women who left full-time education at age 16, a maximum of 16 years could have been spent in full-time employment to the end of their 31st year. As Table 1 shows, 71% of men had experienced at least 15 years in full-time employment, in comparison with 64% of women who were without children and just 10% of women with children. The mean number of years worked was 14.1 for men, 13.4 for women without children and 8.4 for women with children

Table 1
Total Number of Years Spent in Full-Time Employment
for Men and Women who Left Full-Time Education at age 16

	Total Years Spent in Full-time Employment...							
	None	1-5	6-10	11-14	15+	Mean	S.D.	Base: 100%
Men (m)	7%	3%	6%	12%	72%	14.1yrs*	4.9	(2928)
Women: no Children (w)	6%	6%	9%	15%	64%	13.4yrs*	5.2	(489)
Women: w/ Children(wc)	10%	27%	37%	16%	10%	8.5yrs*	4.8	(2274)

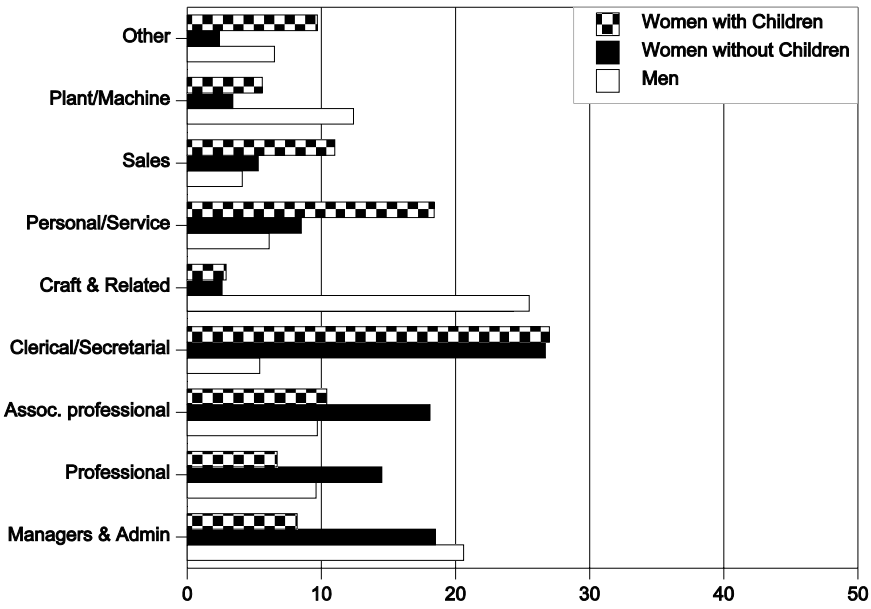
* For *m/w, m/wc, w/wc* $P < 0.01$.[2]

To what extent do these very different labour market experiences relate to the kinds of occupations women have? Figure 3 compares the percentages of women who had ever had children, women who had never had children and men in each of the nine major occupational groups (Registrar General's Standard Occupational Classification, 1991). The occupational differentiation of men and women is evident, with men tending to predominate in the management and administrative grades and craft related occupations, while women were more often to be found in the clerical/secretarial occupations, (personal) service and, to a lesser extent, the professional and associated professional occupations. However, of most interest here are

[2]We assess statistical significance by the probability of the difference having arisen by chance. $P < 0.01$ means that the odds against the difference having arisen by chance are 99 to 1; $P < 0.001$, 999 to 1. The bottom line for significance has been set at $P < 0.05$, ie. odds of 19 to 1 against a chance result.

the significant differences across occupational groups depending on whether women had ever had children or not ($P < 0.001$). In the management and administrative grades, only women without children approached the levels in the occupation that men had reached. Women who had children tended to be more frequently found in the personal services area (this includes hairdressing, house cleaning and other kinds of catering and cleaning jobs) sales and "other occupations". They also had relatively high proportions in clerical/secretarial occupations - the one occupational group in which they reached the same level as women without children. In the professional and associated professional areas (which include teaching and nursing), women without children had significantly higher proportions than men holding such positions ($P < 0.001$); women with children were well below them.

Figure 3
Occupational Status at Age 33.
Effect of Ever having children on Female Occupational Status at Age 33.
Comparisons with Male Occupational Status.



These figures suggest that women who don't have children, tend either to enter the same occupations at the same level as men or even to surpass them in the case of certain kinds of professional and associated professional jobs. There is some evidence to suggest that those who have had children, frequently re-enter the labour market at lower levels of occupation (Joshi and

Hinde, 1993). By age 33 the predominant experience of women who have had children is of lower grade work.

Perhaps not surprisingly, women with children who are in low status occupations at age 33 have tended to make earlier exits from the labour market to have children. Figures 4a - 4d show this effect in four contrasting occupational groups: managers & administrators, clerical & secretarial, sales and personal/services. Although significantly fewer women with children were in full-time employment at every age from their early twenties in all four of the occupational categories, differences in comparison with men were lowest for those who held a management & administrative position at age 33. Over 60% of women with children in this occupational group always maintained a full-time employment status from age 19 (men over 80%, 90% from age 22). More women in clerical/secretarial positions at age 33 had exited the labour market at an earlier age, with the gap between them and men increasing substantially over time. By age 31 only 28% were in full-time employment compared with over 85% of men and women without children. Women with children in personal/service or sales occupations at age 33 rapidly began to exit the labour market at age 19, with just one-fifth (12% in sales) being in full-time employment at age 31 in comparison to over four-fifths of men.

Notably, although full-time employment among women without children follows much the same pattern as for men in management or clerical positions , when looking at women without children in the lower status sales or personal/service occupations, noticeably less full-time employment is experienced when compared with men from age 23 (approximately 80% to 90%). Periods of either part-time work and unemployment began to feature more prominently in the employment histories of these women in comparison to men from this time.

Figure 4a
Men & Women in Management/Administrative Occupations at age 33
Proportions in Full-time Employment between Age 16- 31

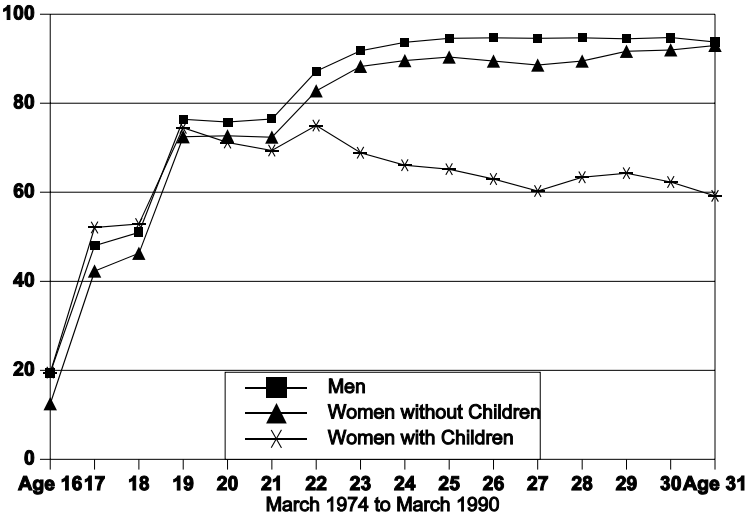


Figure 4b
Men & Women in Clerical/Secretarial Occupations at age 33
Proportions in Full-time Employment between Age 16- 31

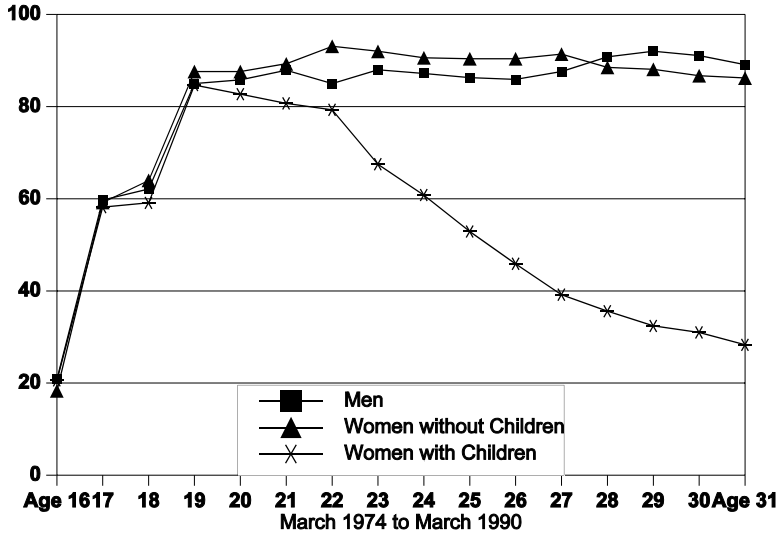


Figure 4c
Men & Women in Personal/Service Occupations at age 33
Proportions in Full-time Employment between Age 16- 31

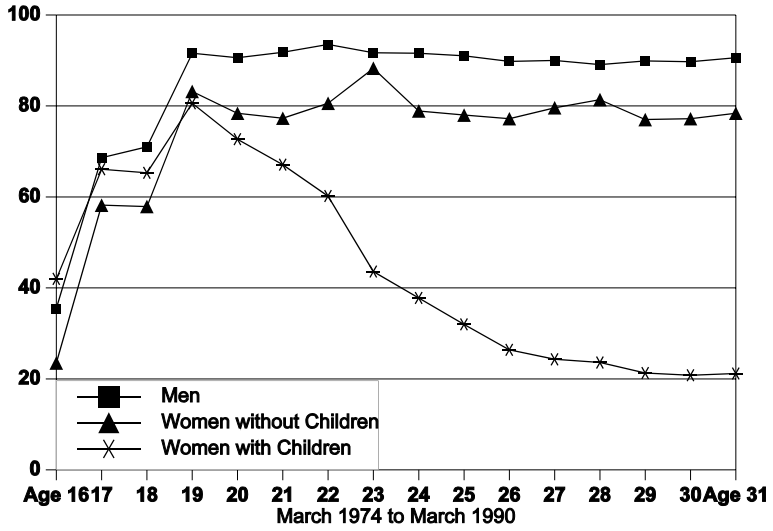
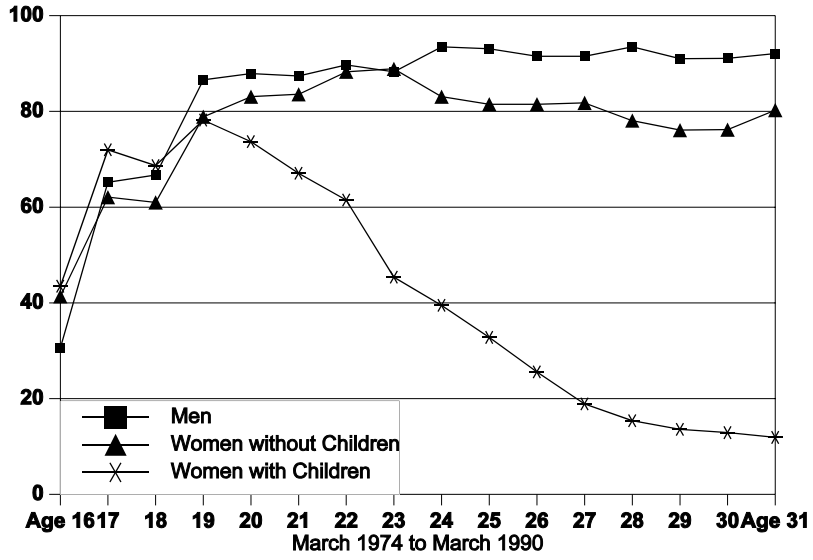


Figure 4d
Men & Women in Sales Occupations at age 33
Proportions in Full-time Employment between Age 16- 31



Finally we eliminate the possible confounding effects of length of time spent in full-time employment on the occupational statuses of men and women, by restricting the comparison to those who left education at *age 16*, but had accumulated *15 years* full-time work experience. It was notable that despite the equating of their length of employment experience, far more women with children were in the lower grade occupational categories. However, with respect to the proportions holding either a management, professional or associated professional occupation, no differences were detected between men and women with children. Interestingly, by age 33 *more* of the women *without* children than men were in a management, professional or associated professional occupation. The effects of children on male employment and occupation status are not as clear cut. For those men who were fathers, the vast majority had not exited from the labour market to take on full-time child care responsibilities. Any 'effects' of children on male employment or occupation do not therefore arise from time away from the labour market, and are thus minimal when compared with the effects on women.

Basic Skills and the Labour Market

Proficiency in the basic skills is defined by The Basic Skills Agency (BSA) as *"the ability to read, write and speak English and use mathematics at a level necessary to function and progress at work and in society in general."* The BSA estimates that around 15% of people have significant difficulties with literacy. (This does not include those for whom English is a Second Language.) Of these probably only a tiny percentage are illiterate as such, but the rest are unlikely to have reached a level which equips them very well for either work or everyday life. Most will fall below Level 1 of the Basic Skills Standards developed by the BSA. This is the level that employers report needing, in order to be able to fulfill the requirements of the work place at the lower two-thirds of the labour market (Atkinson and Spilsbury, 1993). This means that they will find it difficult to read and understand a short feature in a newspaper or magazine, use reference material such as Yellow Pages, or fill in much more than their own name and address on a form.

The need for numeracy in work is rather more difficult to define. It varies significantly depending on the particular job that people do. Many employers say that their employees need no numeracy skills at all, although the same employers have frequently introduced a cashless pay

system and presented information in complex graphical formats. Any surveys which have tested the adult population on their numeracy skills have found 20% with very low skills ability. This 20% would, for example, have difficulty calculating anything other than the most simple bill, find the practical application of a timetable beyond them, and be unable to work out the area of a rectangle shape. It is clear, however, that numeracy difficulties cause people less anxiety than literacy difficulties, and bear less relationship to access to and hold on the labour market, even though poor numeracy is more widespread (Ekinsmyth and Bynner, 1994).

In the NCDS 33 year survey, basic skills difficulties were assessed subjectively, through a question which asked cohort members whether since leaving school they had any problems with reading, number work, or writing/spelling. 12% reported difficulties overall, with the largest group being those who reported difficulties with writing/spelling - 9%. Reading difficulties were reported by 5% of the sample and number work difficulties by 4%.

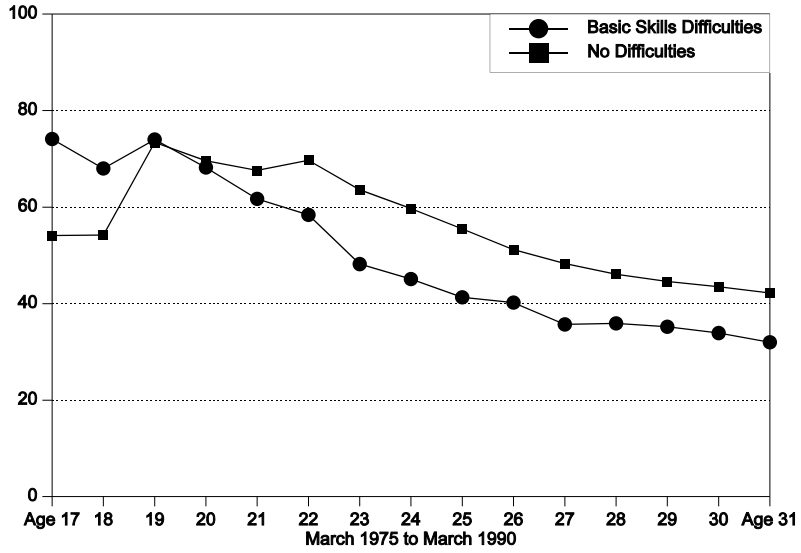
Basic skills deficits occur early in life (Bynner and Steedman, 1995), and set off a train of accumulating difficulties which retard attainment throughout the school years, culminating in poor qualifications. Literacy and numeracy may be seen as representing the foundations of "human capital" because without them an educational career is likely to be irredeemably stunted and the prospects of gaining any more than the most elementary qualifications virtually nil. Far more women with poor basic skills become parents at an earlier age. In another study, one in five women with poor literacy skills (as objectively measured by a test) had two or more children by age 21, compared with one in twenty of the sample as a whole (Ekinsmyth & Bynner 1994).

The impact of basic skill difficulties on labour market experiences, occupation held at age 33, and work-related training received, are now considered. It was found that not only did higher proportions on men and women who reported basic skill difficulties leave education at age 16, but higher proportions of this group also left without attaining any O'Level (Grade A-C) or C.S.E grade 1 passes (88% compared with 69% of women without difficulties; 85% compared with 72% of men without difficulties). Basic skill difficulties can therefore be associated with a longer exposure to full-time employment and lower skilled occupations.

Figures 5a and 5b show, for women and men separately, the percentages of those reporting any

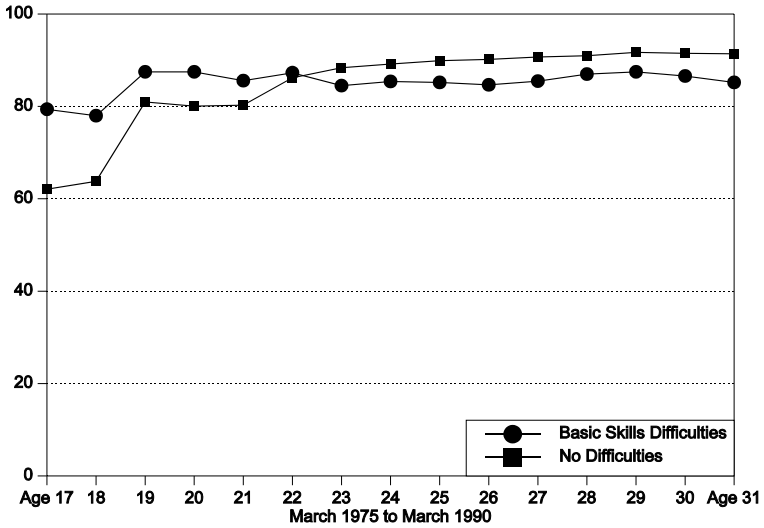
kind of basic skills difficulty, compared with those not reporting difficulties, who were in full-time employment at every age since 17 to the end of their 31st year. It is notable that for women the gap between the two groups expanded from the late teens onwards and then remained fairly steady through the twenties, with smaller proportions of women in the basic skills problem group in employment. However, by their 31st year, the gap reduced slightly, suggesting that some of these women had now obtained employment. For men the onset of the small gap was delayed until 21, reflecting the larger numbers of men in this cohort staying on in higher education. From then on the gap persisted, but was consistently smaller than for women .

Figure 5a
Women in Full-Time Employment Between Age 17 - 31
Differences by Reported Basic Skill Difficulties (age 33)



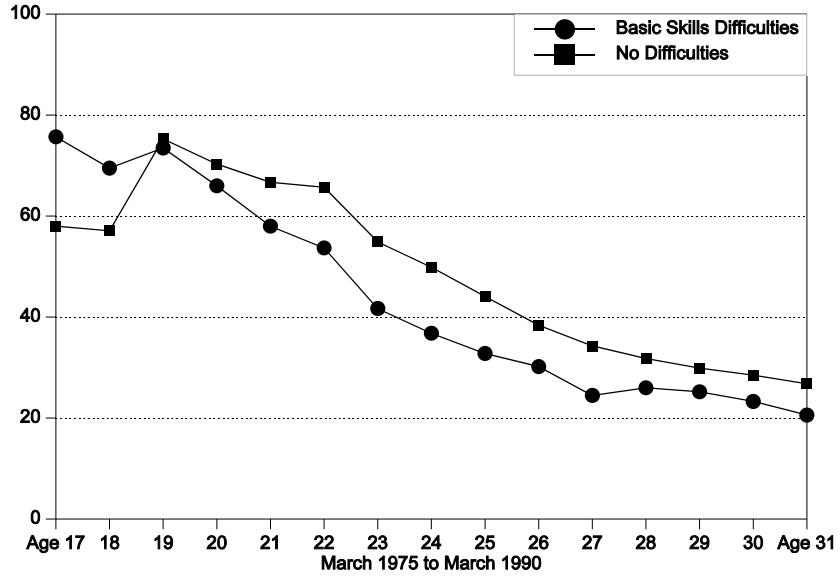
Basic Skill Difficulties N ≃ 392; No Difficulties N ≃ 4631

Figure 5b
Men in Full-Time Employment between Age 17 - 31
Differences by Reported Basic Skill Difficulties (age 33)



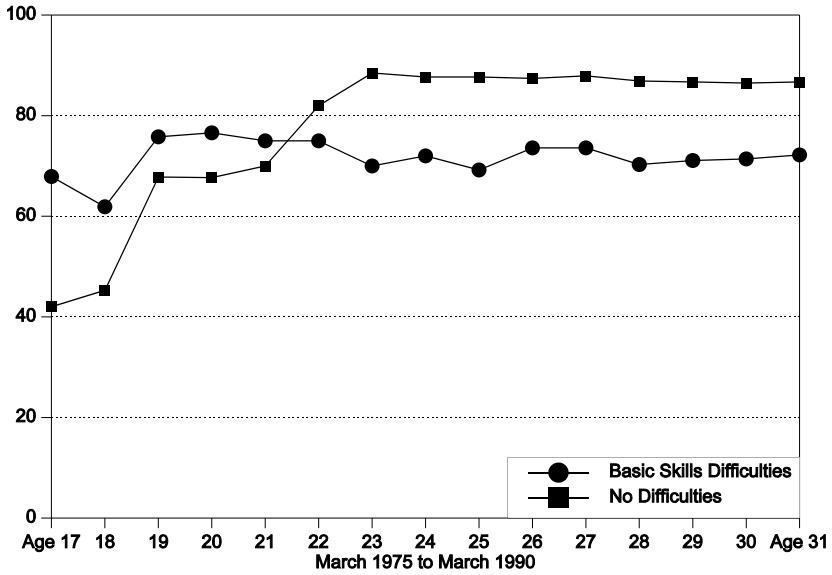
Figures 6a and 6b take the analysis further, examining the extent to which experience of having children overrides the basic skills problem in relation to employment. It is notable that the gap occurred among both women with children and women without children, but was larger for those who had *never* had a child. A basic skills problem was a major obstacle to getting work, regardless of whether a woman had children. However, whereas women who had children 'left' full-time employment earlier and moved into part-time or home care roles to accommodate better the demands of parenthood, women who had never had children had no such demands to consider. The *displacement* of women without children from the labour market is, therefore, a clearer reflection of the negative effect basic skill difficulties have on securing full-time employment.

Figure 6a
Women & Employment, Age 17 - 31
Proportions in Full-Time Work if Ever Had a Child
Differences by Reported Basic Skill Difficulties (age 33)



Basic Skill Difficulties N≃301; No Difficulties N≃3433

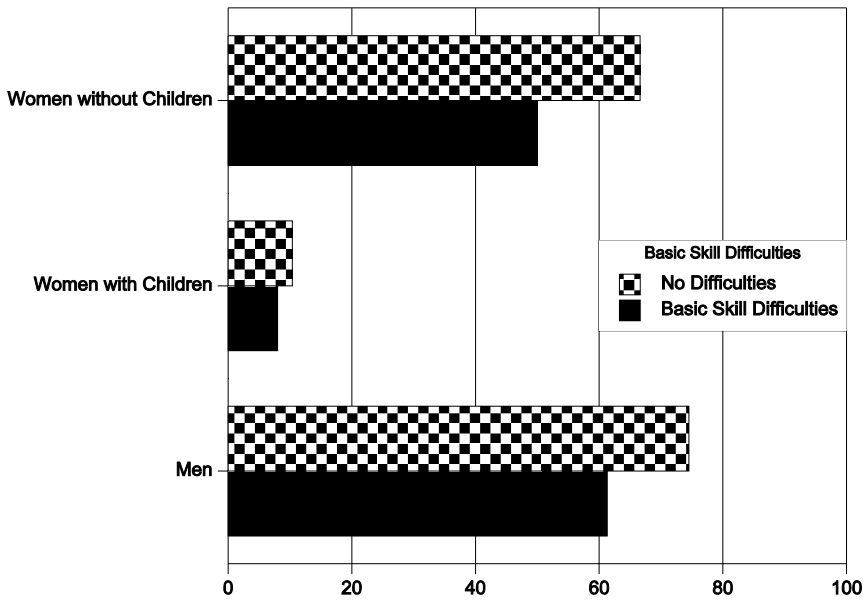
Figure 6b
Women & Employment, Age 17 - 31
Proportions in Full-Time Work if Never Had a Child
Differences by Reported Basic Skill Difficulties (age 33)



Basic Skill Difficulties N≃ 93; No Difficulties N ≃ 1198

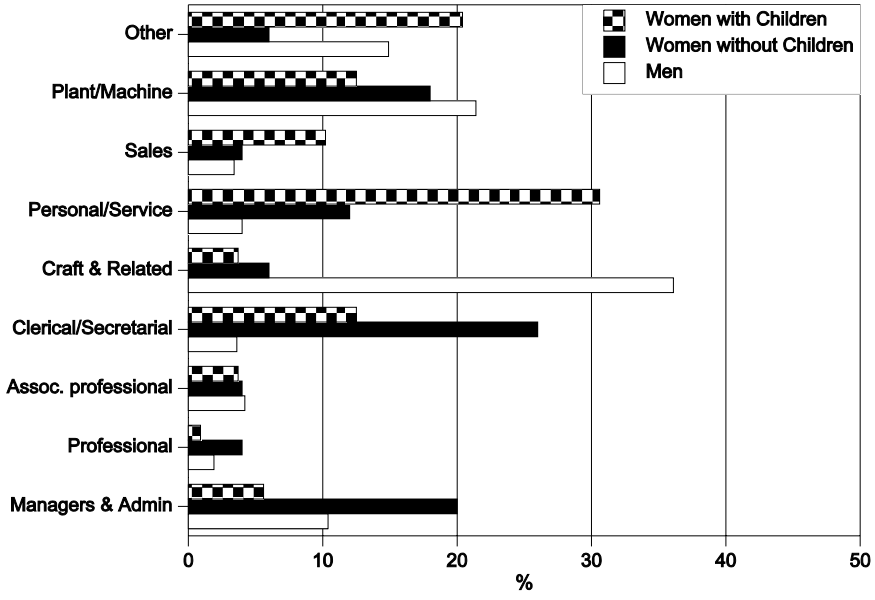
Figure 7 shows these results, in a different way by comparing men and women, with and without basic skills difficulties, who had accrued fifteen years in full-time employment from age 16. Even though for both sexes, basic skills difficulties were associated with a reduction in the *total* time spent in full-time employment, among women without children, a basic skills problem could be seen as a bigger obstacle to building a stable employment record than it was for men. We can speculate that even though traditional male *'blue collar'* occupations are gradually disappearing, women still tend more than men to seek *'white collar'* occupations, which require competence in literacy. Absence of these skills effectively blocks off access to such full-time female employment. It has less effect on women with children, many of whom opt for, or are forced into, relatively un-skilled part-time employment instead. Child-care responsibilities, or rather a lack of viable alternatives, leave this group of women unable to build comparable employment histories to those of the women without children. Very few women with children, and without skill difficulties (just 10%), had managed to accrue fifteen years in full-time employment, so any effect of basic skills difficulties was less apparent for them.

Figure 7
Proportion of Men & Women with at least 15 years in Full-Time Employment
Differences by Basic Skill Status at Age 33



Turning now to occupation at age 33, basic skill difficulties significantly increases the proportions of both men and women in the low status occupations, even when only looking at those who left education at 16 ($P < 0.05$ in all groups). As Figure 8 shows, over 70% of men and women with children who left education at age 16 and reported basic skill difficulties fall into just three occupational categories (compared with 60% of men and 57% of women without difficulties). For men these categories are craft, plant/machine or other, and for women with children the occupations are personal/service, plant/machine and other. Although women without children experienced a similar displacement to low skilled occupations (36% to 21% without difficulties in the three occupations detailed), higher proportions of women without children still had clerical or management/administrative positions, despite their basic skill difficulties.

Figure 8
Basic Skills & Occupational Status at 33 (if left Education at 16).
Effect of *ever having* Children on Female Occupational Status.
Comparisons with Male Occupational Status.



Women with Children N = 216; Women without Children N = 50; Men N = 471

Work Related Training

One of the main means by which occupationally related skills are acquired is through work related training. This is affected by the amount of time people spend in employment, age at entering the labour market, the types of work they are involved in, and their ability to benefit from training, i.e. having acquired the basic skills. It is well established that women receive far less work-related training than men (eg. Bynner, 1994). The important issue is whether this is related to the fact that they are women, or because of their absence from the labour market looking after children. By training we mean work-based courses lasting three days or more. In relation to the number of years spent in full-time employment, women with children had lower proportions who received training, but women without children actually had higher proportions who received training than men in every experience group (1 to 5 years; 6 to 10 years; 11 to 14 years; 15 plus years). However, women without children are a relatively small group and not educationally or occupationally comparable to *all* men. Table 2 shows that when we restrict analysis to cohort members who had left full-time education at age 16, the traditional picture of men having received more work-related training reasserts itself. Differences between men and women were particularly notable when 1 to 5 years in full-time employment had been accrued (37% men, 15% women with children, 20% women without children) . Work related training appears to be somewhat 'delayed' for women. Once 15 or more years full-time employment had been accrued, women with children had equal proportions with training when compared to men (49%). Proportionately more women without children (59%) had actually received significantly training than men (P<.002).

Table 2
Men & Women who Left Education at Age 16 and received Work-Related Training, By Number of Years in Full-Time Employment

	1 - 5 years	6 - 10 years	11 - 14 Years	15+ years
% received work-related training between age 23-33....				
Men	37% (151)*	29% (529)	40% (1110)	49% (2640)
Women with Children	15% (988)	25% (1466)	33% (691)	49% (334)
Women without Children	20% (76)	24% (231)	34% (365)	59% (496)

* Parentheses indicate Base number in each group.

More striking evidence of the effect of having children is shown in Figures 9a and 9b. These show the proportions of men and women, with and without children, who had work related training, analysed by the age at which they left full-time education. 62% of men (N=2919) and 55% of women (N=2503) had left education at age 16 or before.

Figure 9a
Women & Work-Related Training
Attendance on Training Courses by Age Left Education and Parent Status

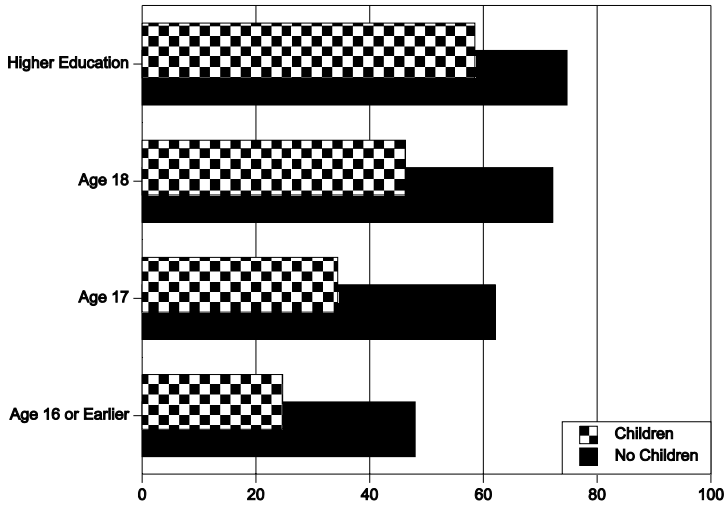
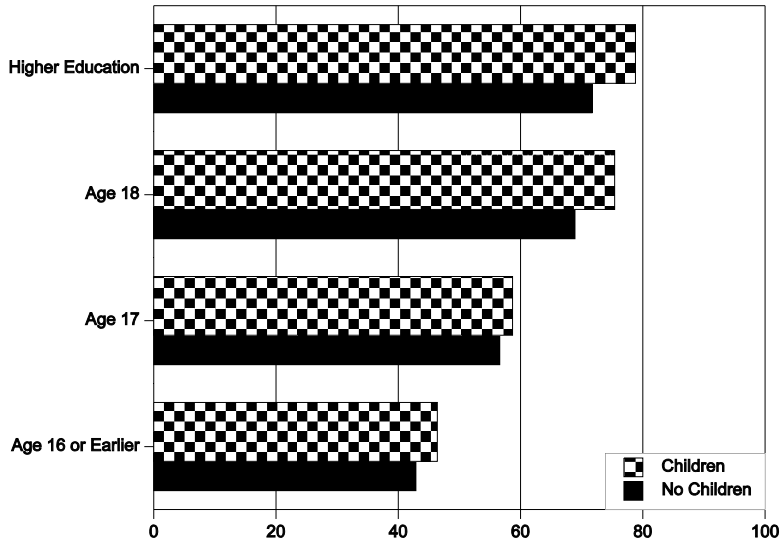


Figure 9b
Men & Work-Related Training
Attendance on Training Courses by Age Left Education and Parent Status



The training experiences of men were separated by their parent status at age 33 to show one example of the somewhat contradictory *'effects'* of children on the employment experiences of men and women. Having children bore little relation to the amount of training received for men - if anything having children seemed to *improve* the chances of them getting training[3] (Figure 9a). The dominant factor in the amount of training received, was the age at which they left full-time education. There is a clear linear trend: the earlier the leaving age the *lower* the proportion getting training. Yet paradoxically those who had left the education system earliest had spent the *most* time in employment, which should have given them *more* opportunities for training. For women the linear trend is also evident, but a marked difference was apparent between those with children and those without children (Figure 9b). Consistently, more women *without* children, had attended training courses than those with children.

Figures 10a and 10b examine the proportions of women without children, women with children and men who had work related training in each of the major occupational groups. Figure 10a shows the relationship for all women, and Figure 10b (for a more restricted range of occupations) for women who had a minimum of eleven years in full-time employment. These figures support earlier conclusions, that it is only in the professional and managerial occupations, where getting training is equalised for men and women. We can also see that the presence of children affects receipt of training differentially across the occupational groups. Thus for the management and professional occupations, *more* women without children than men had received training ($P < 0.01$). In the associated professional occupations no significant differences between men and women without children were found, but women with children only received comparable training at the same level as men when 11 years full-time work experience had been accrued (Figure10b). In the lower status occupational groups, where women with children were concentrated, regardless of the amount of time spent in employment, having children was consistently associated with the lowest levels of training (Figure 10b). Having children appeared to depress the proportions of women who received training, even after labour market participation and occupation group had been taken into account, although differences in proportions with training between the three groups do narrow slightly across all occupations

[3]This slight 'positive' influence of children for men was not found when looking at other aspects of employment ie. occupational status.

when at least11 years had been spent in full-time employment. However, it is only in the management and professional occupations that the advantage of men with respect to training is removed.

Figure 10a
Gender Occupation & Work-Related Training
Effects of Children on Work-related Training for Women

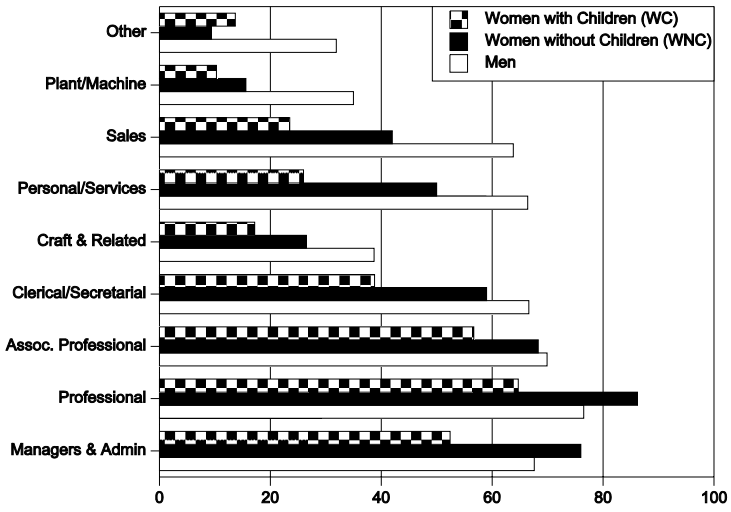
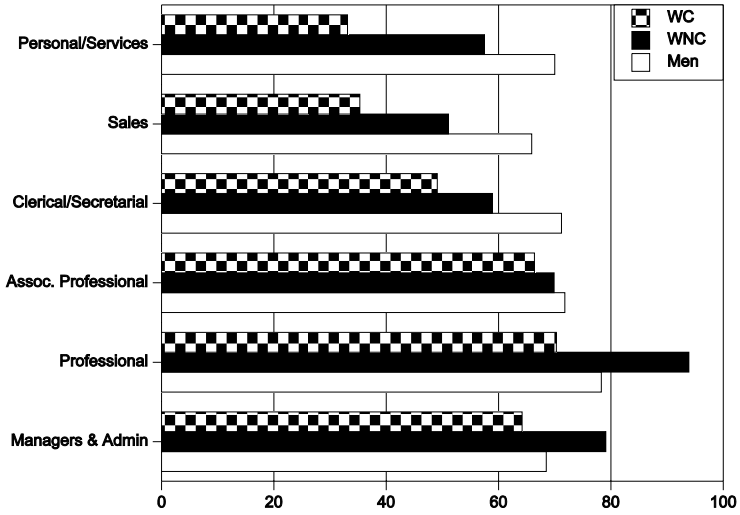


Figure 10b
Effects of Children on Receiving Work-Related Training
Men & Women with a Minimum of 11 years in Full-Time Employment



Not only did proportionately fewer women who had ever had children receive *any* work-related training, but those that had some kind of training had also been on *fewer* 3-Day courses. Table 3 shows that women who had not had children had been on a near identical number of 3-Day training courses to men. Women with children were found to have been on significantly fewer training courses, unless 15 or more years had been spent in full-time employment. At this point the differences continued in the same direction, but were not statistically significant.

Table 3
Number of 3-Day Training Courses Attended

	Overall	Left Education at Age 16	Left Education at Age 16, with 15+ years in Full-Time Work
Mean Number of 3-Day Training Courses attended between age 23 - 33...			
Men	4.3 *(2413)*	3.7 *(1041)*	3.9 *(814)*
Women no Children	4.1 *(636)*	3.5 *(173)*	3.8 *(135)*
Women with Children	2.7* *(1021)*	2.3* *(395)*	3.3 *(84)*

* $P < 0.001$ women with children compared with men and women without children.

Finally we return to basic skills difficulties. As Table 4 shows, when controlling for both length of time spent in full-time employment and age at leaving full-time education, proportionately fewer women who reported basic skill difficulties had received work-related training than their female counterparts not reporting difficulties ($P < 0.01$). The slightly higher proportion of women reporting skill difficulties who received work-related training, when 11-14 years in full-time employment had been accrued (38% compared with 33%), can be put down to chance. For men the differences were in the same direction but not statistically significant. In other words the basic skill difficulty did not get in the way of them receiving training, but again this may have been because of the kinds of manual work which most of the men with basic skills difficulties entered.

Basic skill difficulties were found to reduce the 'gender gap'. These were significant differences in the proportions of men and women in the basic skills difficulties group who had received

training only when between 1-10 years employment experience had been accrued ($P < 0.01$). At higher levels of employment experience the differences disappeared. For men and women in the no difficulties groups, significant differences were obtained at all levels of employment experience ($P < 0.01$). Notably, for women exceeding 15 years employment experience the direction of the difference reversed: 56% of women had received training in comparison with 50% of men. The vast majority of these women were without children (see Table 2).

Table 4
Men & Women who left Education at age 16 with Work-Related Training
By length of time in Full-time Employment and Basic Skill Difficulties

		1 - 10 years*	11 - 14 Years	15+ years
% received work-related training between age 23-33....				
Men	No Difficulties	33% (588)**	42% (996)	50% (2290)
	Basic Skills Difficulties	27% (92)	36% (114)	46% (349)
Women	No Difficulties	22% (2518)	33% (1007)	56% (768)
	Basic Skills Difficulties	14% (243)	38% (49)	47% (62)

* Small numbers dictated merging the 1-5 and 6-10 year experience groups.
** N = 100%

Work Related Skills

The NCDS5 interview included an inventory of fifteen work related skills, drawn up in consultation with Department of Employment officials. For each question respondents were asked to indicate how good they were at the skill on a scale of 'good', 'fair', 'poor', 'don't have the skill'. They were also asked to indicate whether they used the skill at work or somewhere else, and also whether the skill had improved in the last ten years In this section we examine a number of indicators of the origins of these work related skills and also how they differ between men and women.

Table 5 shows the percentages of men and women with and without basic skills problems reporting possession of each of the work-related skills. First, strong gender differentiation

between the self reported skills is apparent: women claimed writing skills, verbal skills, caring skills, advisory skills, teaching skills and keyboard skills more than men; men claimed tool using skills, constructing skills, computation skills, organising skills and finance skills more than women. Notably in the case of selling skills, supervising skills and computing skills, there was little difference between men and women; though keyboard skills were claimed by twice the proportion of women to men.

The second point to note about Table 5 is the strong relationship between basic skills difficulties and possession of the more directly work-related skills. For men, basic skills difficulties consistently worked against possession of most work-related skills, with the largest differences (9% or more) being either for the skills most closely related to the basics skills - writing and speaking - or for those skills which men overall said they were good at: reading plans, calculating, finance, organising The exception was using tools and , to a lesser extent, constructing things where the relationship was in the opposite direction: more men with the basic skills difficulty claimed to be good at these skills. Only selling skills did not yield significant differences between groups. For women, those reporting basic skill difficulties had generally even lower proportions claiming possession of the work-related skills, especially those skills such as writing, teaching, supervising and advising, which overall more women than men said they were good at. The exceptions were tool use, construction and, once again, selling products, where no differences were detected ($P < 0.001$ for all other skills). The only skill which more women with basic skill difficulties than the others said they were good at was *caring*. Essentially therefore, men and women reporting basic skills difficulties, had seemed to have had more difficulty in acquiring many of the work-related skills than those without basic skills difficulties.

Table 5
Proportion of Men & Women Reporting 'Good' Work-Related Skills Differences by Basic Skill Difficulties at Age 33

Specific skill...	**Men**		**Women**	
	No Difficulties	Basic Skills	No Difficulties	Basic Skills
Write clearly	**42**	**16**	**63**	**31**
Speak clearly	**49**	**38**	**60**	**44**
Use tools correctly	55	65	29	29
Reading plans	**54**	**43**	**24**	**10**
Construct/build things	47	53	14	15
Type/keyboard	15	8	**30**	**12**
Computing	**21**	**11**	**18**	**7**
Providing care	17	21	**54**	**59**
Advice/Support	41	34	**53**	**44**
Teaching	33	26	**44**	**29**
Supervising others	45	40	**38**	**28**
Math calculations	**37**	**23**	**20**	**6**
Selling products	23	20	20	18
Finance/accounting	**26**	**16**	**23**	**9**
Running a group/firm	**31**	**22**	21	14
N (100%)	*4511*	*664*	*4999*	*433*

Table 6 takes this analysis a step further by examining the extent to which this possession of skills was affected by the employment status of women at age 33, for women both with and without basic skill difficulties. For women in the no difficulties group, full-time employed women possessed more work-related skills than their counterparts in part-time employment or with home responsibilities. Only tool use and construction skills did not yield significant differences. For women reporting basic skill difficulties, far fewer significant differences were observed between employment statuses. Only computing and supervisory skills were claimed by more women in full-time employment, compared to women in part-time employment, or with

home responsibilities. Significantly more women in full-time employment reporting basic skill difficulties, than those not reporting difficulties, possessed tool using skills and construction skills ($P < 0.02$) - reflecting the *lower* status occupations held by many women with basic skill difficulties. Good caring skills were claimed by far more women who were at home looking after their families, or interestingly, women in part-time work than those who were in full-time work. Differences were particularly striking between the groups of women who also reported basic skill difficulties ($P < 0.001$). Thus 73% of women at home with basic skills difficulties claimed to be good at caring compared to 47% in full-time employment, and 54% in part-time employment.

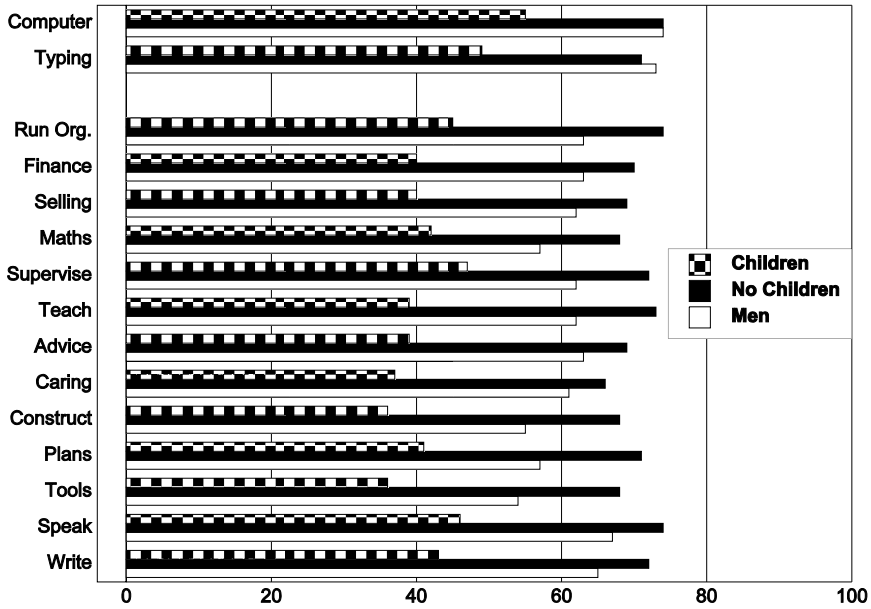
Table 6
Proportion of Women reporting 'good' Work Related Skills by Employment Status & Basic Skill Difficulties at Age 33

Specific skill...	**Full-Time**		**Part-Time**		**Home/Family**	
	No Difficulties	Basic Skills	No Difficult's	Basic Skills	No Difficult's	Basic Skills
Write clearly	**66**	**38**	**59**	**29**	**67**	**27**
Speak clearly	**64**	**50**	**58**	**40**	**62**	**36**
Use tools correctly	31	38	30	27	31	30
Reading plans	**30**	**13**	**20**	**9**	**29**	**9**
Construct/build things	15	21	13	15	17	18
Type/keyboard	**36**	**17**	**27**	**9**	25	21
Computing	**28**	**13**	**14**	**4**	18	15
Providing care	45	47	57	54	54	73
Advice/Support	**60**	**50**	**49**	**40**	**56**	**41**
Teaching	**49**	**36**	**40**	**28**	**44**	**16**
Supervising others	**53**	**40**	32	28	**38**	**22**
Math calculations	**25**	**8**	**18**	**6**	**18**	**6**
Selling products	24	21	20	23	**18**	**6**
Finance/accounting	**27**	**14**	**23**	**6**	**19**	**3**
Running a group/firm	**30**	**21**	16	13	**23**	**16**
N (100%)	*(1870)*	*(116)*	*(1610)*	*(156)*	*(1334)*	*(136)*

To what extent does having children affect the kinds of skills people claim to possess? For men there were barely any differences, but for women significant differences in the possession of work-related skills were obtained for all skills except teaching, selling, construction and tool use ($P < 0.001$). The skills that women without children were most likely to claim, above women with children (differences in excess of 9%), were keyboard, computing, reading plans, supervisory skills and running an organisation/group. The only skill that women with children claimed to have in much larger numbers was providing care (59% with children compared to 40% without children).

This result carried over to the effect of work-related training on the skills. Figure 11 shows the proportion of men, women with children and women without children, who reported having good skills that had improved over the last 10 years, and had also received work-related training. With the exception of computer and typing skills, more women without children than men reported receiving training. Far fewer women with children reported work-related training than either of these two groups. Women with children tend to acquire their skills more from other activities than training at work. This may be why their skills tend to be less regarded - by both themselves and others. Women without children are most likely to report improved skills if they have been on a training course, perhaps suggesting that such a course provides them with what they see as external endorsement of improvement in this skill. Conceivably, men feel less need for such validation. They are also more likely to gain most skills improvement through the work they do, rather than training courses, a reflection of the closer links generally between skills and work among men than among women, as we shall see (Bynner 1994).

Figure 11
Men, Women (with and without Children) who report 'Good' skills, and *Improved* these Work-Related Skills between Age 23 to 33. Proportion attending Training Courses



Are these kinds of skills genuinely work related, i.e. associated with the occupations people were in? The most notable finding was that the higher up the occupational status scale the person was the more skills they would claim to possess. Surprisingly, although there were some clear connections between particular skills and particular occupations - eg. using tools associated with craft occupations, caring skills associated with the associated professions - in most occupations below the managerial and administrative levels, gender differences were observed to over-ride the occupational ones. In other words, women and men saw themselves as bringing different kinds of skills to the occupations they entered rather than acquiring them through their work.

Finally, to what extent are these skills actually used in the workplace? There was little difference between men and women without children in the proportions exercising skills at work. Significant differences were only obtained for the utilisation of construction and plan reading skills. In contrast, for every skill except caring, significantly fewer women with children used the skills in a work environment when compared with both women without children and

men ($P < 0.001$) - obviously reflecting the longer time spent out of the workforce and lower skilled occupations these women were in. Figure 12 shows that even when both groups of women and men had spent at least 15 years in full-time employment, women who had children still had lowest proportions utilising the vast majority of their skills in the workplace, although differences had narrowed. Women with children only used caring skills more than men, and construction skills more than women without children($P < 0.03$). This is arguably a reflection of the lower-skilled employment and lack of work-related training that epitomises the working environment of women who had ever had children - even when the 'disruption' to their working life had obviously been kept to a minimum.

Figure 12 Men, Women & Work-Related Skills
Effect of Children on the Utilisation of 'Good' Skills in the Work-Place by Women with at least 15 Years of Full-Time Work Experience

As we saw earlier, far lower proportions of both men and women who reported a basic skills difficulty also claimed to have <u>good</u> work-related skills. Of those who did have good work related skills, fewer of those with basic skill difficulties were using them at work. Basic skills difficulties were found to impinge on the exercising of the majority of these skills in the work-place, particularly for men. Differences were significant for all skills except: reading plans, maths and selling skills. ($P < 0.02$). Although substantial percentage differences emerged in skill

utilisation between women who reported basic skill difficulties and women with no difficulties, small numbers prevented their reaching statistical significance.

Conclusions

The figures presented here relating to women's skills at age 33 have a number of implications for employment policy. First it is clear that women's relationship to the labour market is more complex, and the involvement more intermittent, than men's. Those who have children withdraw for periods from employment into 'home and family' care, and even those without children tend to see themselves in this status rather than as unemployed. They are also to be found in much larger numbers in the 'half-way' or 'patchwork' category of part-time work, which enables them more easily to combine employment with home and family care. As Paci and Joshi (1996) have shown, this kind of employment may impose disadvantages on them, especially if it is the only work their qualifications and situation allow them to get. Men, on the other hand, tend either to be in the labour market or out of it unemployed, and compared with women, relatively few, even now, are engaged in part time work. Their involvement in employment is more related to the state of the local economy, women' s more to the life cycle. Women without children, tend to have employment experiences which are not hugely dissimilar from men's, though the kind of occupations they enter are different.

The effect of women's more ambiguous relationship with the labour market is to bring them back into employment, after having children, often at lower levels of the occupational hierarchy, typically through part-time jobs. The effect of this is to restrict their access to work-related training, which is already at a lower level than that of men. In contrast, those without children in high status occupations actually get more training than men, although the small number of women that this actually represents should not be overlooked. At lower levels of the occupational structure, women persistently appear in larger numbers than men, and with respect to such benefits as work-related training appear to be significantly disadvantaged. Even in occupations which are dominated by women such as secretarial and clerical men get more training than women - with or without children. This conclusion holds even when the length of labour market experience is taken into account. The impression is gained that, except in management and professional jobs, employers invest less in women than men, regardless of

whether the women have any intention of leaving the labour market, and regardless of how much time they have spent in it. The success of women without children, in comparison to women with children, in getting training across occupational groups can only feasibly be explained by their non-child (and mainly unmarried) status, although personal motivation must play a part. There may also be a degree of specialisation (with different levels of training attached) within the broad occupational groupings - with women doing the keyboard work in secretarial and clerical occupations, for example, and men doing more of the administrative tasks. This whole area would repay further investigation.

Whether women get training is further affected by the presence of basic skill difficulties, which add another factor to their weak positions in work. These problems restrict access to training even further, and crucially, appear to inhibit the development of the more directly work-related skills of the kind on which much modern employment depends. The more training women get the more they report improvement in their skills. Only caring skills are claimed by greater numbers of women with poor basic skills and no training, presumably because these women have spent more time out of the labour market looking after children.

There is strong evidence to suggest that for every work related skill that women say they are good at, those with children are less likely to be using them in employment than men, regardless of whether they have had children and regardless of whether they have basic skills difficulties. There are also signs of under-utilisation of the skills women do have, given that so many women enter part-time low skilled employment after having children, or remain out of the labour market looking after their homes and families. This might be seen as impoverishing employment, because large numbers of women with skills are either out of a job or are in jobs where their skills fail to be recognised or exploited. Recognition of the considerable untapped skills pool among women and the way to take best advantage of it in modern employment is a challenge that needs to be met.

In conclusion, the findings reported here enable us to refine our picture of the well-established gender gap in employment opportunities. First the gap is not evenly distributed across women. Those with the lowest levels of human capital, as reflected in poor basic skills and lack of qualifications, and who leave the labour market early to have children are exceptionally disadvantaged; women with higher levels of human capital far less so. The former are to be

found concentrated in low status jobs, where they gain less training than men, and and are paid less. So we see superimposed on the gender gap, a polarising process at work among women, in which those established in the upper levels of employment lag only a little behind men, while those at the lower levels fall much further behind. It may be in the interest of employers to have at their disposal this pool of women, willing to work part-time doing casual unskilled work. The policy issues to address are first whether this is a satisfactory basis for the employment of women or men , and secondly whether it is not a waste of the actual and potential human capital vested in women's skills.

At the beginning of the paper we noted the "invisibility" of women's skill. Men's qualifications, training and skills seem to be in tune more with the jobs they occupy more than women's. Women acquire many of their skills informally through the experiences gained outside work, especially in bringing up children. Employers appear either to overlook the particular qualities women bring to work or discount them as of little immediate value. It would seem that a fundamental attitude shift is required to accommodate fully and effectively the contributions women can make to employment , and when in work to give them the same opportunities that are given to men.

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