

## **VALUING MOTHERHOOD? 'RETURNERS' AND EMPLOYMENT EQUITY**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

This paper focuses on the factors affecting the incomes and careers of New Zealand women who have returned to the paid labour force after having taken various lengths of time away as full time mothers. This group we refer to as 'returners'. The paper draws upon interviews conducted with employers and mothers in 2001-3. We examine some of the pay and employment equity issues facing solo and partnered mothers returning to paid work.

Most New Zealand women now become mothers at some point, since the trend towards smaller families has also, paradoxically, been accompanied by most families having at least one child (McPherson, 2003: 73). Internationally it is well known already that the lifetime costs to women of having children are extremely high (Joshi, 1992). After a break for having children, mothers have commonly returned to the labour force into lower paid and lower status positions than they occupied previously (Dex and Shaw, 1986). In addition, women earn less than men in all countries, but motherhood incurs an additional 'wage penalty': that is, mothers earn significantly less than women without children, and the gap increases with each additional child (Waldfogel, 1997; Avellar and Smock, 2003; Budig and England 2001).

The lower pay of returners contributes to the pay gap between men and women, and will continue to do so unless additional strategies to improve the economic position of mothers are successfully pursued.

According to the literature from other English-speaking nations, part-time and temporary employment are major reasons for returners' lower incomes and status. Throughout the English-speaking world, mothers are more likely than women without children to be employed part time (Budig and England, 2001; Miller, 1993: 91). In the UK, for

example, it has been estimated that two thirds of mothers who have taken a break for child bearing subsequently return to paid work part time (Dex, Walters and Alden, 1993:164). In addition these jobs tend to be at the bottom of the wage scale, and frequently part timers receive a lower rate of pay than full timers in the same job.

In New Zealand and in other industrialised nations, there has been a shift in the job market from full time permanent jobs to part time and temporary service sector work. This has also affected public sector employment, which in the 1980s had a greater commitment to equal employment opportunities for women than the private sector. However, since the late 1980s cuts in state spending and consequent pressure on resources have led to the greater use of part time and contract staff (Conley, 2003). A majority of workers with these less favourable working conditions are women.

Internationally women have been found to experience discrimination in employment on the grounds of ethnicity, age, disability, sexuality and socio-economic status as well as pregnancy and motherhood (Gregory, 2003:6; Hansard Society, 1990; Warren, 2003; Vianello, 2004; Wright, Baxter and Birkelund, 1995). For example, differences in the likelihood of working part time according to class have been found in the UK. The cost of child care out of a low income may prove too large a barrier to full time employment, especially in occupations where there are few opportunities for advancement. Consequently, working class wives may only work part time when their children are small, during times when partners and other family members are available to help. Mothers with tertiary qualifications (in practice predominantly middle class women) have been found to return sooner to full time paid work because their somewhat better pay makes the cost of child care more affordable. In addition their better career prospects make child care costs a better investment for the future. (Glover and Arber 1995: 166).

In New Zealand as elsewhere, returners, even those with tertiary qualifications, also appear to suffer discrimination as older workers, (Evetts, 1994: 69). It has been noted that that women are regarded by employers as older workers at a younger age than men are (Jones and Proctor-Thomson, 2003:177; McGregor and Grey, 2001; Handy and Davy,

2004). The term 'older workers' as applied to men tends to be used when they approach the usual age for retirement - that is, late 50s onwards - but to mothers it can be from their 30s onwards (Briar, 1997). Employers appear to believe that both younger workers and childless older women will give more commitment to the company than mothers will (Evetts, 1994).

## **THE STUDY**

The New Zealand literature on returners has focussed upon solo mothers leaving welfare and returning to paid employment. There is a shortage of New Zealand information about returners who have been dependent on a partner. The main purpose of this research was to explore the factors in New Zealand which affect the pay and status of partnered and solo mothers returning to paid work after a 'career break' for having children.

The study consisted of a national mail survey of employers and interviews with employers and with mothers who had returned to paid work. Five face to face interviews were conducted with employers. They included three school principals, a bank manager and one state sector manager. The national mail survey of employers selected participants at random from the New Zealand *Who's Who*, 2002, the 2004 AA Accommodation Directory and the New Zealand Telephone Directory, 2003. This survey of employers returned 142 useable questionnaires out of 700 sent out. Employers selected were in the areas of banking tourism, education, retail and services.

The research included twelve in-depth one-to-one interviews with mothers, and a focus group that included 6 mothers and which met twice. The sample of mothers consisted of women who replied to newspaper advertisements placed in *The Manawatu Evening Standard*, *The Tribune* and *The Horowhenua Mail*, and by word of mouth. Participants for the focus group were mothers contacted through a snowballing technique.

The individual mothers interviewed had a range of qualifications, whereas the focus group consisted entirely of mothers with tertiary qualifications. The mothers without qualifications also tended to be older. The majority of women participants in this sample,

before they had children, had been employed as teachers, nurses, midwives, shop assistants and clerical workers. The sample also included a former town planner, a veterinarian, a laboratory assistant, a school principal, and an international consultant in development studies. Most had been employed in female-dominated areas of employment, but at the higher end of the range

The ages of participants ranged from thirty- five years to over fifty years. Most had been out of paid work for over ten years before returning to the paid work force, though younger participants had taken a shorter time out of paid work (3-5 years).

### **THE FINDINGS FROM THE STUDY**

Most of the returners interviewed had been successful in obtaining paid work. However, upon their return to paid work, all had been initially obliged to accept insecure part-time work, although some were later able to obtain more permanent and full time positions. Every one of the women had lower pay and status after returning from their 'career break'. A number of well-qualified women worked as cleaners when they returned to the workforce. The international consultant was cleaning laboratories when she first returned to paid work after her 'career break'. At the time of the interviews some participants had still not regained their previous position even after ten years back in the paid workforce.

At the start of the research all of the employed mothers had returned into part time jobs, although two years later some of those with tertiary qualifications had been able to move into full time jobs. Obviously, the sooner women return to full time work the greater their chances of improving their career prospects and incomes and thus reducing the gender pay gap in lifetime earnings.

The employers surveyed in this study overwhelmingly believed that offering flexible part time and casual work was the best way to assist mothers to return to paid work. Ninety one per cent of employers (N=128) agreed or strongly agreed with the proposition that the best way to encourage mothers to return to paid work was to offer flexible hours. A less striking but still significant 80 percent (N=114) agreed or strongly agreed with the

statement that offering casual work that fitted with childcare was the best way to encourage mothers to return to paid work.

The employers who were interviewed face to face claimed that they believed in equal treatment, and that every potential employee would be selected according to the same criteria - that they were able to carry out the required tasks - and no one discriminated against. However, it seems unlikely that they would have offered fathers part time and casual work. It was also stated that their policy was to take on employees who best fitted into their company culture. It appears that company cultures fostered a belief that fathers were breadwinners and mothers secondary earners.

Nevertheless, the mothers did not share the view that casual work was in their best interests. All the women in the study whose jobs were not permanent wanted greater job security. In addition, those women whose partners were not in well paid work wanted to have more hours of paid work. One participant recounted how after working part-time and being re-hired on contracts asked her employer for a permanent contract but at the time of the interview had not been successful. She said:

"It leaves me feeling: if you need me this year and your roll is going up what's the hassle making me permanent? It leaves the worker vulnerable to what will happen next. Do I prepare for next year? How much do I allow myself to be involved in the other school activities in view of the lack of certainty?"

Some of the mothers in this study also felt that they experienced discrimination on the grounds of age as well as sex and motherhood. The 'returners' in this study ranged in age from late 30s to early 50s: ages at which men were still advancing career-wise. It appears as though discrimination on the grounds of motherhood, age and gender intersect in such a way that mothers are regarded as 'older workers' at a younger age. Several of the mothers in this study felt this acutely. Some women resort to 'age proofing' strategies as a result (Jones and Proctor-Thompson, 2003). An example was given of a mother who

dyed her hair in order to look younger for a job interview. She was adamant that getting rid of her grey hair was a key factor in her getting the job.

Mothers in this study also felt that their skills gained while out of the paid work force were not valued. As one put it: “being a mother at home means you almost become a nonentity”. It is not only unpaid work in the home that fails to count. Motherhood-related voluntary work in the community such as serving on the school's trustees' board or working as a play centre coordinator, may carry considerable responsibility and adds to a mother's work experience. For instance, one participant had been in sole charge of an \$80,000 building project. Yet none of the participants felt that the skills obtained from such work was valued by employers.

The women the focus group all had tertiary qualifications, yet understood that their qualifications would be regarded as dated and that if they wanted a full time career they would have to retrain. Some mothers were discouraged from applying for jobs for which they were suitably qualified. One former midwife who had been at the top of her career before having children of her own, was advised by a gatekeeper not to apply for a nursing position on the grounds that ‘things have changed since she was last in the workforce’.

For all workers, male and female and irrespective of family status there are financial costs associated with returning to paid work. However, in addition to earning less than other women, and much less than men, returners also incur additional costs, including training and education fees, work clothes and child care expenses. The costs of retraining can be extremely high. They can mean incurring a large debt, with no certainty of obtaining a sufficiently good job (or indeed any job) with which to pay back the loan. Only those mothers who had been qualified teachers and nurses before they took time out of the workforce had been eligible to access government retraining schemes where the tuition fees were paid. Many participants felt that there was an assumption made by the government that their partners would absorb any cost toward finding a job, which could have put a huge strain on their relationship even if the partners had been willing and able.

Some of these mothers had therefore taken on loans to finance retraining. Repayments reduced their disposable incomes and added to their financial worries.

On top of retraining costs, mothers mentioned the need to acquire new clothes suitable for the workforce. Some employers' representatives emphasise the importance that employers attach to appearance saying; "Some employers will even judge you on the shine of your shoe". It takes time and money to assemble the necessary wardrobe. The participants saw this cost as quite a major outlay, especially given their low income or financial dependence their partners. All the mothers who had taken substantial career breaks were aware that while staying at home, spending on personal attire had been drastically cut.

Child care costs and the expense of after school care were also cited as a barrier to full time employment, especially for mothers with more than one child. The main forms of childcare appeared to be partners and close relatives, especially grandmothers, mainly because this was free. Often part-time work was taken because of the costs of childcare.

Mothers were willing to sacrifice pay and work conditions for work that fitted in with affordable child-care and school hours. Some participants were able to negotiate to be off work during school holidays. Participants were aware that their pay did not fully reflect their qualifications or the experience gained from their work as mothers and community workers. However, they saw it as an exchange for flexibility. However, in the long term it is a trade that benefits employers, through salary savings, and from which women carry the cost in terms of lower pay and shortened careers.

## **DISCUSSION**

It appears that although returners are managing to find paid work, this is, on average, on poorer terms than not only men and women without children and also compared with their own previous positions. Returners' downward occupational mobility was identified in the 1980s (Dex and Shaw, 1986) and appears to be continuing. There is some debate as

to why this is the case, and in particular whether mothers experience additional discrimination from employers.

Opponents of the view that employers' policies are a main reason for returners' truncated careers have argued that mothers' earnings and status are lower because they have less time and energy to devote to their paid jobs than fathers or women without children (Becker, 1985). It is claimed, simply, that mothers choose to put their families first. The lower average pay and status of mothers is often explained in the language of lifestyle choice, and argued that mothers choose to be part of the secondary labour market so as to spend more time with their children (Hakim, 1996: 81). In this study, employers clearly regarded their policies as a way of giving returners what they were assumed to want: a way of managing to maintain their domestic and care giving responsibilities whilst being secondary earners in their households.

However, both in the study and the literature it is possible to detect attitudes and practices of employers that affect the pay and status of mothers returning to paid work. These include assumptions that mothers were only suitable for part time work and that women's formal qualifications and skills had lost value, failure to value the skills women had obtained in their time out of the paid work force and age discrimination. Research from the US and UK suggests that mothers' lower pay is not entirely explained by differences between the labour market experience of mothers and childless women (Waldfogel, 1997, Joshi and Newell, 1989).

Some feminists have suggested that employers create positions with a certain kind of employee in mind. According to this argument 'a job' is not a gender-neutral category (Adkins, 1995: 43; Pateman, 1988: 131; Evetts: 1994), because employers regard men and women as quite different sorts of workers. Jobs are therefore seen as 'gendered'. According to feminist theorist Carole Pateman (1988), the work contract presupposes the marriage contract, or sexual contract. Similarly, Christine Delphy (1984) regards marriage as a work contract, under which a man has the first call on his wife's services. The 'normal' full time working day is built around the premise that the 'typical' worker

does not have to leave their paid work in time to collect children from school and shop and cook the evening meal for a family. They can be available for long hours in their paid work (Jones and Causer, 1995:51). However, women workers, especially mothers, are not free to sell their labour in the same way as a man, because they are providing the domestic work that frees men to sell their labour full time (Delphy, 1984). Most employed mothers also do most of the domestic and emotional work in the home (Hochschild, 1997). This situation continues beyond marriage, since divorced and separated wives usually provide the care of children. (Delphy, 1984).

The vast majority of the jobs that pay sufficient to maintain a family and with career structures are thus designed for people who do not have care giving responsibilities. Full time employment is longer than school hours, and in the English-speaking nations the hours of paid work of primary workers have grown steadily in recent years. Research indicates that organisations with career structures expect a degree of commitment in their senior positions which is incompatible with running a home and caring for children (Liff and Ward, 2001: 30-31; Gregory, 2003: 97-106, Gatfield, 1996,). By contrast, fathers are employed for longer hours than childless men are, and dominate the 'career' workforce.

During their time out of the paid workforce, mothers gain or improve many skills that are relevant to feminised professions such as teaching and nursing and are relevant to jobs which involve working with or dealing with people. However, one of the reasons for women's lower pay is that the skills obtained in the course of unpaid work are often not seen by employers as sufficiently relevant or useful to justify increments. Housework and childcare are not valued by society, as evidenced by the complete lack of pay for looking after one's own children. This lack of value attached to the unpaid work performed by housewives and mothers reflects the undervaluing of women (Waring;1988; Crittenden, 2001; Gavron, 1966; Woods, 1993; Mason, 2000; Oakley, 1995).

Returners may in fact have the same skills and paper qualifications as other applicants, but employers often assume that those human capital attributes are out of date. Most of the participants had had in-house retraining provided by employers. However, part time

employees tend to receive only basic and short training. Some teachers and nurses had been able to obtain refresher courses. In general, however, research indicates that employers are more likely to train younger employees than older ones (Loughlin, 1999).

Even women who are committed to combining child care and a career and take only a short time out of the paid work force may be disadvantaged upon their return to their job. There appears to be an expectation on the part of employers that mothers will put their families first. Organisations such as banks still tend to treat mothers who put their career first as aberrant (Liff and Ward, 2001: 30-31).

As in other research (Boswell and Jenkins, 1994), the great majority of the employers in this study appeared to be blind to the patriarchal structures that result in the domestic division of labour and discrimination at work. Most did not question the gender division of child care responsibilities, or see as problematic their own roles in reinforcing the male-chief-breadwinner and female-chief care-giver model of family life.

### **POLICIES TO IMPROVE MOTHERS' POSITION**

As we have seen, recent returners are mainly recruited into low paid part time casual jobs. They also commonly bear expenses such as retraining costs and child-care which further reduce their disposable incomes. Few returners have full economic independence, and this can make it difficult for them to leave unhappy or abusive family relationships. New Zealand employers assume that it is helpful to returners to provide employment which fits around their family responsibilities, but appear unconcerned that mothers are not earning a family wage.

The current New Zealand government policy is still to allow employers a high degree of freedom in setting the employment conditions of mothers returning to paid work. During the 1980s and 1990s, the New Zealand labour market underwent considerable deregulation. While the 1991 Employment Contracts Act was in force, pay inequities and unequal opportunities were less open to scrutiny than previously, and cases of employer discrimination became more difficult to identify. Although the Employment Relations

Act (2000) has made it unlawful to keep workers on temporary contracts without good reason, employers are still nevertheless able to keep mothers in the lowest paid, lowest status and most insecure positions. New Zealand government policies could potentially do far more to assist all returners, single or partnered, and ensure that they do not fall behind in terms of pay, opportunities and job security.

Pay equity is an important goal for New Zealand women. However, experience from Australia and Britain shows that even with legislation for equal pay for work of equal value the gender pay gap has proven to be stubbornly wide (Whitehouse, Zetlin and Earnshaw, 2002). If successful, pay equity will close the gender pay gap in hourly earnings to some extent. However, if there continues to be an earnings gap between mothers and non-mothers, this will continue to depress women's average incomes. As well as pay equity, an increase in the minimum wage would improve the incomes of women who are working in low paid jobs (see Hyman article in this issue). Restoring the universal family benefit for main caregivers (and raising the level of payment) would partially compensate women for their work and responsibility as mothers.

Paid parental leave is a way of acknowledging that new mothers cannot compete in the paid work force and require an income. At present New Zealand offers the minimum paid parental leave (14 weeks) set out by the International Labour Organisation (ILO). The level of payment is also very low by OECD standards and could be improved. The time allowed could be extended, and also supplemented by a statutory entitlement to paid parental leave at times of children's sickness, as in Sweden.

One of the reasons for returners' poor earnings is the prevalence of part time employment. As well as having lower pay due to shorter hours, part timers often complain of being employed under less favourable terms and conditions than full time employees (Davidson and Bray, 1994). In the UK, under the Part-time Workers (Prevention of Less Favourable Treatment) Regulations 2000, which resulted from an European Union ruling, employers must provide equal pay and conditions to part time workers on a pro rata basis.

In addition, a government policy of reducing the hours of full time workers would allow more mothers to work full time. It would also make fathers more available to assist with child-care and other domestic work and make shared parenting more feasible than it is for most working families at present. New Zealand could follow the lead of Australia and sign and ratify ILO convention 157 on Workers with Family Responsibilities.

Current New Zealand government policies place a certain amount of pressure upon solo mother beneficiaries to become 'independent' through paid employment. This can be quite invasive (see the paper by McIvor in this volume). However, some assistance has been given to solo mothers returning to paid work in the form of subsidised child care and the Training Incentive Allowance (TIA). By contrast, governments have never required partnered mothers to be financially self-supporting, but neither have mothers with employed partners been assisted with the costs of retraining or of childcare. This could be extended to all women who have taken over a year out of paid work for child bearing and rearing.

High child-care costs, especially for small children, are a significant factor in keeping women out of the paid work force than they would otherwise choose. The announcement of free early childhood education in the 2004 budget was welcomed, although to be of assistance to employed mothers in the 2004 budget could be further extended. Increased subsidies for preschool care plus assistance with the costs of after school care, would also be helpful. Financial assistance should be available to partnered mothers as well as solo mothers, and would assist all mothers who wish to return to the paid work force.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Despite a well publicised growth in labour force participation by mothers, and their earlier return to paid employment in recent decades, returners are re entering the workforce into jobs that are lower paid, are seen as requiring less skill and with fewer prospects. . This has implications for women's ability to plan their lives, be economically independent, purchase a home and avoid poverty in old age.

It appears from this survey that employers' assumptions about what mothers want (or ought to want) are in a large measure responsible for returners' lowly position in the paid workforce. Mothers in this study expressed different preferences about the kind of employment they wanted. This links with twenty years of research which demonstrates that both women and men prefer work that is well paid, secure, interesting and with opportunities for advancement (Bryson 1996).

Having children is not a lifestyle choice. Society needs children, and at present only women can give birth and breastfeed. In practice it is also predominantly women who continue to take on the main responsibility for child care. Allowing employers to provide inferior terms and conditions of work to mothers is a form of hidden sex discrimination. Global economic trends are putting pressure on employers in both the state and private sectors to casualise their work forces, and women, especially mothers are the workers most severely affected. Nonetheless, governments can make a difference. Only the state has the power and mandate to provide assistance to working families and legislate for equitable treatment of women and men, parents and those without children.

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