

## Making motherhood work

Article (Unspecified)

Thomson, Rachel (2011) Making motherhood work. *Studies in the Maternal*, 3 (2).

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Rachel Thomson

*Making motherhood work?*<sup>i</sup>

### **Work and social change**

Ever increasing levels of female employment, including mothers with dependent children, has been a distinctive feature of post-war British society, paralleled by an overall improvement in living standards yet a rise in inequality. The 'family wage' that was consolidated during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century began to unravel in the later decades of the 20<sup>th</sup>, giving way to a dual earner households and a slow and incomplete convergence in male and female pay (Ferri and Smith 2003). Much of the continuing disparity between the earnings of men and women can be explained by the 'motherhood penalty' which has been estimated to diminish women's average earning capacity by one fifth (Davies et al. 2000). In comparison to other developed economies the UK has high levels of female employment but low levels of subsidised childcare and a survey of seven industrialised countries found the UK had the highest motherhood pay penalty (Harkness and Waldfogel 1999). Mothers are far more likely than fathers to take time out from paid work, or to work part-time, in order to care for their children, with higher skilled women much more likely to return to work after the birth of a child and lower skilled women being more likely to stay at home (Crompton 2006: 46). The campaign organisation The Fawcett Society sums this up as follows: 'becoming a parent marks the start of the great divide between women's and men's pay. Motherhood has a direct and dramatic influence on women's pay and employment prospects, and typically this penalty lasts a lifetime' (Woodruffe 2009).

The cultural significance of these social changes have been characterised in terms of labour having become *feminised* (increasingly precarious and communication-based) and women having become *labourised* (considered as workers first and as mothers second) (Power 2009). Education and work are now ubiquitous features of the individualised female biography, with the acquisition of qualifications constituting new gender divisions between women. Young women are outperforming boys at school and university and taking up many of the new places created by the expansion of higher education. Consequently, the social divisions that matter for the young are increasingly those constituted around poverty and qualifications rather than around gender, sexuality or race. Angela McRobbie captures this

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*Studies in the Maternal*, 3(2), 2011, [www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk](http://www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk)

change through the idea of a post-feminist sexual contract, which celebrates educationally successful young women as the active and aspirational subjects of social change. Extended periods of education and work on an apparently level playing field delay motherhood for the majority. By the time these women encounter the motherhood penalty they may find themselves without the political and cultural resources of feminism. McRobbie argues that 'How successful the individual heterosexual woman might be in achieving equality in relation to domestic labour and childcare then becomes a private affair, or rather evidence that she has chosen well from the range of possible partners, her life-plan in this regard has worked to her advantage.' (McRobbie 2007: 18).

It is little surprise then that the contemporary politics of motherhood are fragmented and privatised, played out through a splitting of destinies on the grounds of consumption, age and choice. Academic debates over working parenthood are also caught up in this maelstrom. Attempts to guide policy according to women's 'preferences' for home or work (Hakim 2000), were criticised for failing to capture the political, economic and cultural contexts in which 'choices' are made (Gatrell 2005, Crompton 2006, Armstrong 2010). For those such as Adkins, mass female employment and the socialisation and commodification of childcare are a sign of the end of the patriarchal order as we knew it (2009) associated with a gendered division of labour within a private sphere. The divisions that should most matter now for feminists are between women.

### **Work in biographical perspective**

The women in this research approached motherhood at very different stages in their biographies. The youngest were still in secondary education and experienced pregnancy either as a disruption to that education and associated career plans or as a different pathway to maturity and responsibility than that promised by the extended forms of youth associated with further and higher education. For some, the experience of being pregnant had given them insight into new possibilities, encouraging an interest in midwifery and childcare as potential areas of training and work. Others like 16 year old Kim significantly downscaled their ambitions in the face of new motherhood, drawing on the support provided by a young mothers project to rework a dream of being a lawyer into a pragmatic plan to train as a florist. The oldest of our new mothers tended to be well established in their careers and in a position to privilege motherhood over work, or at least to control their work in such a way that they could exercise a high level of choice in regard to how they managed the relationship between

parenting and career. For 40 year old Pauline it meant having the confidence to ignore the disapproval of her sister and leave a job as a nursery manager, embarking on motherhood without work, and supported by benefits. Older mothers were more able than most to make their work fit around their mothering rather than vice versa. In the middle age group, women's attitudes towards combining work and motherhood were shaped in large part by the nature of their work, including how well they were paid, whether or not they understood themselves as being in a career and the extent to which it was possible to disrupt this career path.

Of the 62 women that we interviewed in late pregnancy 47 were in work, eight were students (4) and seven unemployed. Overall we classified 36 women as falling within a lower middle class category, 21 as working class and just five as upper middle class. The kinds of work that women were involved in was diverse, spanning public and private sectors as well as salaried and self employment. Occupation did not map neatly onto our judgement of social class positions, being complicated by factors including migration and the occupation and resources of partners and families. However it is our contention that the kind of paid work that women were involved in shaped their experience of motherhood significantly.

### **It doesn't have to hurt your business**



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Our interviews were generally conducted during later stages of the pregnancy, once women had begun their maternity leave from work. Conversations about work were prompted by an image taken from a national newspaper and gave rise to a range of reactions. Here we contrast 4 responses that illustrate something of the diversity of women's work situations as they approach motherhood. Emily, a 33 year old nursery teacher, had no intention of returning to teaching for several years, and she read the image as follows:

poor woman she should be sitting down having a cup of tea, or at home at that stage, not commuting in to work and putting the extra stress ... she's sat on a train, or stood up on a train cos no one will give her a seat, she's gone through pregnancy absolutely knackered and then she's feeling a bit guilty as well that the business is having to give her money and she's having to take time off work and... well no we need the next generation!

27 year old manager Alice interpreted the image as representing 'the business woman, being pregnant and still being at work.' In her view 'there should be more advertisements about it. I mean the magazines are fantastic, BUT...you don't read much about it in sort of recruitment papers or anything like that. And I still think it's a concern now, that if somebody is pregnant and they're walking into an interview, that there's 99% of them thinking, "I'm not gonna get the job because I'm pregnant."

A quite different response comes from 32 year old teacher Jessica, who had struggled with the decision to give up her work and to dedicate herself to home-making. She responds defensively to the image

'So she's actually at work is she? Yeah I mean, you know, I agree with that. I think, you know, again each to their own. I mean I – you know, I was working until three weeks ago... And um so yeah, I mean I – I suppose I'm still, like I said earlier, a bit old fashioned. I suppose once you've had the baby I think you should – I think you owe it – I think you – you owe it to yourself and to the baby to just at least give it some time'.

Unemployed 27 year old Anastasia's response captures the way in which working motherhood also signifies high status work and an imaginative alternative to motherhood.

'I would say this would have been me if I was working, for DEFINITE. But I don't work, (laughs) but the style is actually what I would wear definitely [...] How can I put it? – if I was working at the same company where I was working before, I wouldn't be here today pregnant'.

The way in which these four women respond to this image provides a sense of how women can be differently positioned in relation to work at the point of motherhood, and thus how difficult it can be to articulate a coherent politics of motherhood. Although paid work is a common experience among women it is also something that divides them, locating some

within a self-actualising trajectory of career and others in much more precarious and exploitative relations of employment. Pregnancy and motherhood change women's relationship to work but in a way that is particular to their circumstances and which is often experienced in isolation.

### **Pregnant at work**

Social policies around pregnancy and the workplace have been shaped by two competing impulses – a gender-neutral discourse that seeks to minimise the impact of pregnancy on performance and a discourse of gender difference that recognises the vulnerability of pregnant women and their need for protection, with pregnant employees 'struggling with the expectation of equality and fearing the consequences of difference' (Fredriksen et al. 2010: 179). The image discussed above asserts that pregnant bodies can be a normal part of the workplace, displaying yet underplaying the embodiment of pregnancy and lactation. The workplace is not neutral and the accounts that women gave us of being pregnant at work suggest a wide range of experiences depending on the character of the workplace. Twenty six year old Carly worked in a car showroom which she describes as 'a very male environment' demanding 'a certain persona' in order to survive. Being pregnant disrupted this, making her feel vulnerable, as colleagues and clients felt free to comment on her changing body size. Nadire, who worked as a manager, shared these sentiments, explaining how difficult it was to be read as female in her work environment:

I've had to go into meetings, I've had to be smart with suits and stuff, um and my team are all like, "Oh my God, you can really see your stomach." And it's sort of like, you know, I'm sort of like – a little – I'm a LITTLE bit embarrassed at times. 'Cos I'm sort of thinking, you know, this is me being a woman, and this is me having a baby'.

The physical impact of pregnancy varied for the women in the study, and changed over time. Many experienced exhaustion and nausea during the early pregnancy which could be very difficult to manage at work. In such circumstances the flexibility and safety of the working environment became incredibly important. Clara, a forty year old researcher describes how overwhelming nausea caused her 'ability to just juggle everything and do everything kind of started to fall apart at the seams'. She recalls one especially bad day where she had to sleep on the office floor, noting that 'sleeping on the floor of my office was not something that I'd been known to do before'. Louisa, 35 commented on how 'lucky' she was to have the option of working at home during her pregnancy in her husband's business, once faced with

debilitating nausea. In another environment she felt that she would have been forced to begin her maternity leave early, something she describes as 'every parent's nightmare'.

Whether or not women felt comfortable taking time off work 'sick' during pregnancy depended largely on the culture of their workplace (see also Cunningham-Burghley et al. 2005 and 2006, Fredriksen et al. 2010). Women distinguished between business-oriented working environments, and those which were 'supportive'. These did not simply map onto private and public sectors respectively. For example 32 year old nurse Hannah observed of the GP surgery in which she worked 'pregnant or not, get in here and work as hard as anyone else really, you know. I don't get any special treatment'. Women working in educational settings reported a mixed picture. For example, Faye (35) commented on the welcoming atmosphere of her primary school where 'everyone likes children and, you know, so it's really, really positive [...] I feel quite spoilt'. However, 31 year old Kate who worked as a nursery teacher experienced the physical demands of working with small children extremely challenging in the late stages of her pregnancy and sought the support of her union when required to accompany children on trips at the height of summer. Some of the specific challenges experienced by teachers are explored later in more detail.

Yet in general terms, those working in the public sector had a sense of some entitlement regarding their right to maternity leave. They were confident about drawing on the advice of unions to clarify their rights, and frequently did so, sometimes complaining as to the lack of clear and accurate information provided by employers. Women working in the private sector and in small companies communicated a much greater sense of personal responsibility for the disruption that their pregnancy caused the employer and colleagues. For example, 32 year old events manager Charlotte described work as being 'horrible' quoting her boss as saying 'How could you let this happen?', communicating the message that she was 'letting the side down'. He also complained about having to pay for her maternity leave, even though he 'gets to claim it back, I think, my maternity pay and stuff. ... it's a really tiny company, there's only nine of us, and the rest'

Even where they worked in ostensibly supportive environments women felt that pregnancy rendered them as 'bad colleagues' or 'unreliable workers'. For some women, like Charlotte, the realisation 'that my jobs not going to be the only thing in my life' was associated with a new assertiveness, which gave at least one women the courage to walk away from punishing or unrewarding work environments. The power of an informal and unspoken organisational culture is communicated by 39 year old Elaine who has worked her way up



slowly to the position of sales executive in a legal company where hardly any of the 'high fliers' have children. She describes her boss as '40, the MD, so he's quite young, and they've decided, him and his wife, she's a lawyer, that they're not having children'. He reacts to her pregnancy with shock, having 'just assumed we were on that same sort of thing'. For Elaine it was important that she did not take 'loads of time off' during the pregnancy as 'it would have just sort of re-emphasised that'. Her company are providing her with the 'basic minimum' maternity deal, and although she is aware of her rights to return to a job at the same level of pay, and on a part time basis, she is under no illusions as to how difficult this might be to pull off. She explains that she is looking into 'more flexible options' in the mean time such as work as a teaching assistant in the locality. Although she believes that she deserves her rights in her existing workplace after 17 years service, securing them in a company with neither senior women nor part-time workers is a daunting prospect that she cannot face alone.

### **A sense of choice?**

At the time of the initial fieldwork in 2005 the statutory entitlement for maternity leave was still only 6 months, although the policy change of extending this to a year was in discussion. Most women were eligible for maternity leave, although a couple had recently changed jobs and so lost out on their full entitlements. Many of the women that we interviewed were uncertain about their return to work, and several felt pressurised by the need to let their employers know how much time they would be taking off. How much maternity leave women were able to take was generally dictated by their financial situation and the generosity of their maternity package. Several were clear that their return to work after the 6 months was motivated purely by 'financial reasons'. Sofia for example, who was the main breadwinner in her family, felt that she had no choice but to go back to her work as a beauty therapist after just four months of maternity leave. Others explained their choice as involving a desire to work, associating employment with independence and good mothering. For example, 23 year old supermarket worker Farah looked to work as a source of independence. She could not countenance giving up her job and remaining at home with her unemployed husband and mother, asserting that 'no-one can stop me working' and that she would 'work for myself and for my child'. A similar account came from 21 year old chef Lorraine whose son lived for a period with his father in the Caribbean enabling her to work long hours, a pattern of parenting that had shaped her early life also (Reynolds 2006, Phoenix 2008). Some of the youngest mothers in our study, who had often been disaffected from school in advance of the



pregnancy, drew on their experiences to imagine a working future in areas such as midwifery, childcare or floristry (a course often provided in young mother support projects). For these young women a commitment to work is an integral element of a narrative of self improvement and economic independence that is promoted by service providers working with teenage mothers (Rudoe 2011, Ponsford 2011).

Others welcomed the prospect of escaping work for a period of time. Again this might be for a range of reasons – because they were unsatisfied with their work, wanted to change their priorities, or felt that they were sufficiently secure in their working lives to be able to ‘afford to take some time out’. A significant group of women had decided to take an extended period out of work, choosing to be stay-at-home-mothers. In general these women were in couples where it was financially viable to survive on a single wage, and where the calculation had been made that the financial and personal costs of childcare were greater than the loss of a salary. For 29 year old administrator Sharon ‘it all depends on money really, child minding fees don’t appear to be cheap and I think if I look into it, its got to be a case of well it’s worth it, because I would hate to pay to go to work just to pay child minding fees and just walk out with a couple of hundred pounds in my pocket.’ For others, the choice to stay at home was presented as part of a moral project of self and a self-conscious embrace of a child-centred model of parenting. Women’s deliberations depended largely on the overall economy of the household. For some the demand to pool resources was very challenging. Thirty three year old journalist Vickie talks about her panic on stopping work, having been financially independent since her teens, it was hard to re-conceptualise herself and her money as part of a ‘family’ or a ‘team’. However others such as Anastasia considered themselves to be unemployed rather than stay-at-home mothers, finding it impossible to afford the childcare that would allow them to return to work, and having no alternative but to stay at home.

Women’s accounts of being pregnant at work and planning around maternity leave do not simply reflect their different biographical situations. They also communicate something important about variability between and within workplaces in terms of how pregnant workers are treated. The most difficult experiences appear to be associated with small scale organisations and businesses and those dominated by gender-neutral discourses of the good worker. In these contexts the pregnant body may be unwelcome and disruptive and the pregnant worker may be constructed as demanding and disloyal. Women working in these kinds of organisations may see it as easier to withdraw rather than fight for their rights. Larger organisations with established traditions of human resource management, health and safety

standards and negotiations with unions, appear to provide a more promising environment for the negotiation of flexible working and quality part time work (Lyonette 2010). Whether women see motherhood and paid work as compatible or not depends in part on their circumstances, the extent to which they are invested in work and the kind of workplace, if any, that they would return to.

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The combination of work and motherhood is nothing new for many groups of working class, migrant and minority women, who far from perceiving tensions between motherhood and work, may assume work as an arena through which competence as a mother and a provider is demonstrated (Duncan et al. 2003, Reynolds 2005, Gillies 2006, Armstrong 2010). Yet for much of the white middle class, working motherhood constitutes an intergenerational rupture, especially where daughters are better educated than their mothers and becoming parents much later (Sharpe 1984). These patterns were reflected in our study, with middle class mothers and grandmothers having much more to say about work and about how work and education complicate their relationships. Where their own mothers had tended to marry early (compressing childbearing and rearing into their twenties, and returning to employment in their thirties), this generation of young women spent their twenties establishing themselves in careers and relationships (Crompton 2006). The way in which these grandmothers responded to this generational change varied. Most were delighted that their daughters had access to educational and professional opportunities that they had perhaps missed. Yet they also expressed concern about the double burden of working and mothering that their daughters faced, feeling that the tempo of mothering had become much more intensive. Sixty five year old Jean Woolfe acknowledged that she was relatively unusual to be 'born in the generation that enabled me to be a stay at home mother when my children were young, and at the same time to have the experience of being a professional person. That's ideal'. It is not something that is available to the young mothers that she works with in a university context for whom 'there's almost intolerable pressures on them to do both, it's impossible.'

Each new mother faces the challenge of negotiating work and care from the position of having been mothered herself, which means that she must engage in an intergenerational conversation about what the shape of the female biography (Lawler 2000). Women respond differently: some daughters of working mothers are keen to reproduce something like the model provided by their mother, while others embrace the possibility of being at home full time. Those whose mothers felt frustrated by their own lack of opportunities may find themselves involved in a kind of recuperation of thwarted ambition, while others are distraught by a sense that they are not providing their children with the 'hands on' parenting that they had enjoyed themselves.

The practical, moral and interpersonal complexities involved in this terrain are inadequately served by concepts such as work/life balance that dominate policy discussions and much of the academic literature (Everingham et al. 2007). A more promising approach is offered by those promoting a 'new sociology of work', who call for attention to be paid to the 'matrix' through which household labour and the market economy interact, including the interplay of processes of consumption and production, paid and unpaid 'work' (Pettinger et al. 2005). Others have adopted the metaphor of a 'caringscape' as a way of thinking about the interaction of work and care over time and space (McKie et al. 2002). Yet what still seems to be missing most from this debate is a sense of the kinds of emotional, psychic and creative work involved in being good enough as a parent and a worker. We would concur with feminist commentators such as Rosemary Crompton that it is worth looking closely at the divisions of labour that are struck within families, and the kinds of gender relations that these make possible and available (Crompton 2006). In her view certain responses to the challenge of parenthood (such as dividing work and care, or simply delegating care to the market) can create or confirm traditional gender roles, while other strategies (such as fully sharing the tasks of breadwinning and care) may unpick them. It is in the small but growing body of qualitative research on mothering that we find evidence of how individuals and families work through the limits and opportunities of their situations, demonstrating the local and contingent factors that shape ideas of good mothering (Duncan et al. 2003) and the everyday practices through which mothers combine, breach and separate the worlds of home and work (Cunningham-Burley et al. 2005).

Middle class women with careers had a great deal to say about combining work and motherhood within this research project. Unlike the working class working mothers who tended to understand motherhood and paid work as complementary (and as such had less elaborate accounts) middle class women experienced the two as competing projects. The following case study focuses on this hotspot within the class politics of motherhood. Informed by the spirit of the new sociology of work it brings together an analysis of paid and unpaid work, tracing the consequences of private deliberation over child care and the division of labour for the kinds of gender relations that arise. The case study benefits from a longitudinal perspective, including 2 interviews with the mother, before and a year after the birth and as well as an interview with the grandmother.

Twenty six year old Heather Chapman and her partner Andy were both teaching in inner city primary schools when they discovered that she was 19 weeks pregnant. The

pregnancy was unplanned and disrupted their well laid plans to work for three years in their current jobs in order to pay off their mortgage on a house 'back home' before returning to Australia to settle down and start a family. Despite her initial fears that the Head Teacher and senior management team would punish her for the pregnancy, the school had been extremely supportive, reassuring Heather that she was eligible for maternity leave and that they would support her return to work. She describes her colleagues as 'a family of people', which she valued enormously having no family of her own in the country. Heather recognised that financial necessity meant that she would have to return to work after her maternity leave, but that this was 'a shame' having always envisaged herself as a stay-at-home-mum. She had no sense how she would manage this return to work and was struggling to imagine how to balance the school timetable with childcare, while fantasising about the potential of creating a school based crèche that could support the seven babies under two that are currently 'on staff'.

We interviewed Heather again just over a year after the birth of her son Ben. At this time she was 'back home' living in a suburb of an Australian city – and missing the networks and sociability that characterised their former life in the inner city. When asked to recall the story of Ben's birth, Heather presents it ironically as fitting into her working timetable 'he was out at three thirty so it was a school day, nine to three thirty, the bell rang and he was there'. Her account of returning to work after her maternity leave suggests how integrated and entwined her working and parenting were at this stage. She explains that she would go to work with Ben in her arms at 6am. She had all the security codes and could let herself in and chat with the cleaners. After having his bottle Ben would sleep until seven am while she caught up on work. When he woke she would take him to the staff room where he was occupied until the start of school. At the classroom door she would pass Ben over to her childminder Karen until the end of the school day. If she had things to do in the afternoon she 'could give him to someone to have a bottle down in the staff room and then I'd come down'.

However, this integrated life did not last, and after two months Heather gave her notice and the family returned to Australia, where it became financially possible for her to stay home with Ben. She explains that she may feel more at ease about day care when he is two or three and has sufficient language to 'talk back to me', noting that her teaching experience has prepared her well for the moment of separation, when as a teacher you 'have to hang on to them and have them sob hysterically as mum walks away'. At the moment he is

'still too baby-baby and I want...him to be the age where he understands why I'm walking away'.

In this second interview Heather also explains that her previous passion for teaching is slipping. She is 'no where near as motivated or driven' and while being a teacher had been a huge part of her life, 'it doesn't matter any where near as much' now. In fact she draws on her teaching identity as a way of explaining that 'I'm really happy to go and do painting in the backyard and I'm really happy to sit in the sandpit for an hour, because that's what my teaching was - to do activities'. Heather also reveals some more difficult ways in which her professional training and expertise intrude on her mothering practice, as well as some of the ways in which her maternal experience encourage her to rethink familiar classroom scenarios. Knowledge of both home and classroom incite her to translate experiences of learning and mothering across this boundary. She explains that Andy her husband 'often says he hears my teacher voice coming out with Ben'. And although she feels happy about using her 'teaching strategies on Ben' she is much more circumspect with the children of family and friends who she does not want to judge but 'I'm like...oh I wouldn't have allowed that in my classroom'. In particular she struggles with the very different parenting styles of herself and her sister. Again she draws on her professional identity to remind herself 'these are my little nieces and they're beautiful, and they're at home in their environment and its okay'.

We asked Heather whether studying child development has an impact on how she thinks about what Ben should be doing and what's normal for him. She replies that this knowledge is a source of anxiety for her and that she almost wishes that she 'didn't know I think it would be so much better, maybe I wouldn't care so much', because 'its all well and good to have the knowledge and the background but the actually doing and putting in to practice of your own child' is a different matter. Seeing your own child through your teacher eyes can be challenging, exposing the contradictions between a disciplinary educational gaze and an unconditional maternal perspective. Heather shares a number of concerns about Ben's social development in the interview, describing her frustrated attempts to find friends for him of the same age and sex within a highly privatized suburban neighbourhood. The following extract shows how anxiety provoking professional knowledge can be, but also the partial and destructive impact of its mundane classifications:

'it had never occurred to me that Ben could be a child that could be isolated. I've taught in so many classes, and you walk in to the room and you can immediately pick the child that is the isolated, ostracized one in the room... I'd never considered, it wasn't until that night seeing Ben isolated that oh my goodness he

could be the one. ... Andy said don't be silly it takes all rounded parents to produce an all rounded child he'll be fine. And I said but if I was to go back to teaching now I would view it so differently, because somewhere there's a mother who every night might be feeling the way I am tonight, every night when she lays down in bed, I've only got one night of this feeling sad about Ben, being... isolated, just devastated me, I've never... and I always work hard with those kids and try and make them special and get them involved in a group you know. I make them, I give them a nick name, a cool name in the class, and try and get them involved. But I just thought, if I think back over those kids that were the isolated one and it just devastates me that there's a mother and a father seeing their child come home upset or knowing ... and that would change my teaching for ever, which I didn't understand before. Without a child I didn't get it.'

Heather's decision to step back from teaching during her children's early years needs to be understood in relation to the intensive reflexivity produced by the permeable boundary between working and maternal identities and practices. Moving between social fields can give rise to heightened awareness, which if unrecognised and unrewarded may turn inwards (Lovell 2000). She narrates her pre-mothering self as able to give unconditionally to her pupils, 'spending weekends planning and programming and putting effort in, above and beyond'. With motherhood this generosity can no longer be afforded. Although she 'still cared about the education of those children, it still mattered extremely to me but I did, I did what was required of me I didn't go beyond the call'.

As a profession teaching has a particular and complicated relationship with parenthood, a kind of 'mothering made conscious' centred on the professionalising of a particular middle class cultural form (Steedman 1985, Ailwood 2008). Mothers inevitably draw on their working techniques in their parenting practices. US commentators have argued that the middle classes draw on a range of professional techniques to access and organize activities for their children and to secure and defend privilege (Lareau 2003), findings that have been supported by UK studies of parenting (Vincent and Ball 2007). Yet occupational groups may produce specific cultures around parenting (Kohn 1963, Weininger and Lareau 2009), and we found that the teachers who became mothers while involved in our study certainly struggled to create boundaries between their own mothering and their working identities, despite drawing on aspects of their professional expertise in their mothering (Thomson and Kehily 2011). The juxtaposition of working and maternal identities can be productive of insight and reflexivity, yet it can also produce troubling feelings, defensive responses and the desire to flee other people's children.



An interview with Heather's mother Matty further enriched our perspective on the ways in which work and mothering are negotiated over the generations. Matty had also trained as a teacher, a job that had enabled her to escape a hard life of farming in rural Australia that had ruined her own mother's health. Her first marriage was unhappy and soon after the birth of her first daughter ended in divorce. Matty had relied on her teaching to support herself and her daughter, and had strong regrets about some of the childcare that she had to use during this period of survival. A second much happier marriage provided her with the financial security to give up work, and to become a full time mother to her second and final child – Heather. So not only can we understand Heather's example as revealing something of the particularity of working-mothering projects for an occupational group such as teachers as well as showing how these projects exist in conversation across and between generations within families. That the two sisters who experienced very different kinds of parenting from the same teacher/mother, are in turn adopting very different approaches to mothering is no coincidence, expressing the contradictions, possibilities and limits of the female biography in differently constituted situations.

### **Work, maternity and solidarity**

This case study provides a taste of one distinctive professional cultures, showing how a workplace can contribute to the definition of women's situations at the point of pregnancy. In the study we found a proliferation of local work based cultures, noticing that within the same organization women workers may experience very different working conditions and norms. Not only does motherhood have an impact on the kinds of workers that women are, but that work influences the ways in which women mother, not simply in terms of their presence or absence, but through the transposition of skills and values between fields of work and home. The extent to which motherhood influences the workplace *itself* is much more limited, although the example of Heather Chapman suggests that it might be possible to imagine ways in which such interpenetrations might be possible. For most middle class women at least, work and mothering continue to be constituted as conflicting projects that must be 'balanced' – most often with work being fitted around children or less often with children fitted around work (Everingham et al. 2007). Moving beyond this involves a radicalising of the couple relationship and inspecting the centrality of work to ideas of success and well-being – perhaps both features of a working class habitus (Stacey 1998). The relationship that a woman strikes in relation to work appears to be highly consequential in the

kind of mothering project that she subsequently embarks on, including how she orients to expert advice, consumption and childcare.

Exploring motherhood through the lens of work involves looking at the ways in which work comes between mothers as well as providing a source of common interest and solidarity. By reviewing women's experiences of pregnancy at work it is evident that many women are ill informed and unprepared in terms of understanding their rights and entitlements as pregnant workers and subsequently as parents. For many the 'motherhood penalty' is a shock faced in relative isolation. Although the rights of pregnant workers could and should be a site of solidarity in the politics of motherhood, too often it is something that women negotiate when feeling vulnerable and exposed. Informal working cultures play an important part in shaping norms of what appears to be reasonable and fair behaviour, even when this departs from statutory obligations. The examples explored here point to the ways that different kinds of workplaces vary in terms of the kinds of maternity packages on offer to employees and flexible working patterns available. Women tend to meet other mothers outside of the world of work, through antenatal groups and in neighbourhood settings. Although they provide social connections they can also expose differences and insecurities. Women's initial attempts to seek out work based support for pregnancy and childcare, generally turn into local and individual solutions involving family, partners and the market.

One of the shocks associated with pregnancy is being made to feel female at work. The dominance of a gender neutral discourse within workplaces, typified by the advertisement 'It doesn't have to hurt your business' creates a bifurcated world where questions of embodiment, care and reproduction are constituted as private matters that do not belong in the workplace yet are implicitly assumed through a reliance on an increasingly female workforce. This is the post feminist contract conceptualised by McRobbie, where the right to assert sexual difference is traded for the right to be treated as the genderless worker. Yet sexual difference continues to exist in workplaces and our case studies illustrate the kind of work that can go into making this work invisible, or at least untroubling for colleagues and employers. Despite appearances, working and mothering are entangled and entwined, creating insights that are both exciting and intolerable. The findings of this study support the thesis that women are increasingly labourised, constituted first and foremost as workers rather than mothers and expected to make things fit in their own time and space. If labour is increasingly feminised, it is feminised in a particular way that does not include or involve the fertile female body, nor the lactating nursing subject. Understood in terms of the new sociology of work,

we can say that there are asymmetries in the matrix that brings together the forms of work involved in mothering. Traffic moves in certain directions and not in others. While it is possible for women to transpose working skills into mothering projects, to take their work home and to turn their mothering into a business or to consume the products created by others, it is much less possible to bring mothering into the workplace and into the versions of publicness constituted through paid work.

One reason for this may be the divisions that motherhood asserts between women and between genderless workers. In forging private solutions to public problems women provide solutions to each other as childminders, formal and informal carers. Again women are drawn into holding tensions between exploitation and solidarity and between instrumental and intrinsic forms of care (Maher et al. 2010). As Rosemary Crompton argues, there is no inevitable correlation between female employment and the evaporation of traditional gender relations. The micro-politics through which domestic labour and child care are shared, delegated and entrusted to others is important moral terrain in the contemporary politics of motherhood. Thinking about mothers as workers forces us to recognise the politics of class and qualifications and chains of care that may connect families (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003, Chavkin and Maher 2010). By capturing women at the same biographical moment (maternity) we also capture the fragmentation of women's biographies along class lines, and the difficulties for forging solidaristic relations between women. Unfortunately in motherhood women are isolated from each other, even from those who are most like them.

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<sup>i</sup> This article is an edited version of Chapter 6 'Work' of Thomson et al. (2011) *Making modern mothers*, Bristol: Policy Press. It is reproduced here with permission of the publishers. For more information see <http://www.policypress.co.uk/display.asp?K=9781847426048>.