



MOTHERS RETURNING TO PAID EMPLOYMENT REWARDING NATIONAL SERVICE?

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Abstract

It might appear in the early 21st Century, as if the employment needs of mothers returning to paid work are simply overlooked by policy makers. State employment policies occur within a 'hands off' framework, which apparently leaves major hiring and firing decisions to employers. What state intervention does occur is enacted within a rhetoric of choice, equality and fairness at work.

However, the state has played, and arguably continues to play, a decisive role in terms of who gets access to what work, and under what terms and conditions. At some points in history this is more obvious than at others. Wartime recruitment and demobilisation practices highlight some key aspects of gendered employment policies and the 'sexual contract' which are present but less obvious at other times.

This paper contrasts the treatment of a male-dominated group of workers in New Zealand in the period after World War II, ex-services personnel, with that currently experienced by parents (mainly mothers) returning to paid employment after time spent raising children.

Introduction

"Society needs babies or we have no future, and so far, only women can bear those babies. But that biological fact-of-life shouldn't be used as a weapon against women; shouldn't be used as an excuse for not giving them jobs, not promoting them, not taking them seriously in spheres outside the home. I think we should begin to think about having babies as a kind of National Service...think of the analogy of war-time service. Then we had no great conceptual or practical difficulty in safeguarding the jobs and positions of men who were fighting overseas. When they came back we retrained them, counted their war service for promotion purposes, gave them cheap loans for housing, settled them on the land. The men who fought overseas were not to be disadvantaged vis a vis men who didn't, and I would argue that those who bear babies shouldn't be disadvantaged over those who don't. No man has ever had to make a decision between having a family and having a job. They can have both. I would argue that women should be able to have both too if they want to, and society should work out ways to make that possible". (Tizard, 1986: 96-7) (1)

This paper explores and contrasts the experience of men returning to work in civilian life after the second World

War with that of mothers in the early 21st century wishing to return to paid work after taking time out to care for children.

Mothers who have been out of the paid work force caring for children and men who have been away fighting for their country face a similar situation when returning to employment (Crittenden, 2001). Both have taken time out of their paid work or training, may as a result have outdated skills and are potentially disadvantaged compared with men and women whose careers have not been interrupted.

However, as this paper will show, parents returning to the labour force have a different relationship with the state, and this mediates their experience when returning to employment.

Despite changes that have occurred in the 6 decades between the close of World War II and the present time, this study provides an opportunity to compare the treatment given to two groups of 'returners' to the paid work force: one predominantly male and one mainly female (2).

Ex services personnel

In wartime, mass mobilisation of personnel was effected by the state in New Zealand and Britain. Men were taken into the armed forces, women into war work, the women's auxiliary services and voluntary work. At the end of the second World War, men and women were 'demobilised' back into peace time work.

Considerable care was taken after both World Wars not to make returning ex-servicemen feel disadvantaged compared with men who had not served in the armed forces. At the end of World War 1 soldiers returning to New Zealand were given parcels of land. The Discharged Soldiers Settlement Act, 1915 covered "...all people who fought in the H.M. forces and had been honourably discharged and those who did not see action but were under military discipline and could have seen action had the occasion demanded" (Kizito, 1969: 47).

At the end of World War II New Zealand policy makers expressed concern to avoid offending ex-service personnel or damaging their careers compared with workers who had not taken time out from their careers (Thomson, 1983:9). Policy makers were keen to make returning soldiers feel that they had a vital place in the post war world. As Walter Nash put it:

"The claims and needs of returned servicemen will always receive the full and effective attention of government (Hansard NZPD 1941 p.285).

The role of the Rehabilitation Board was to overcome any disadvantage to ex-servicemen in the civilian world and to give them "the best the country could afford" (Thomson, 1983:45 and 53). The chair of the Rehabilitation Board argued that men were likely to have lost their confidence as a result of their time out of civilian employment:

... A man who's been in uniform for any length of time gets so used to being mothered, that he's bound to lose his self-confidence when he's demobilised (NZ Listener 1943 Vol.9 No 231 Nov. 26: 8).

There was also a concern lest the ex services personnel become isolated, and so the objective of government departments was to "...get in direct contact with the men, and keep in contact (Listener, 1943: 8).

Under the Returned Soldiers' Rehabilitation Act 1941, ex-soldiers were entitled to a range of benefits to reward their national service. These included low interest loans. In addition the state apportioned 1/2 of all "newly-completed or vacant state rental houses and flats" to ex-servicemen (Malcolmson, 1947: 5).

Education and Training

Returning ex-servicemen were retrained in the building trades and some were given post-graduate bursaries to study abroad and financial aid to start their own business as well as "...special manufacturing and import licenses and the receiving of special allocations of restricted goods." (Malcolmson 1947: 5). Farm courses were provided at Massey Agricultural College, and course fees, books and board were paid for and 4 pounds per week allowance was provided; plus loans to buy farmland (New Zealand Listener, August 18 1944 Vol 11 No.269).

The cost of such schemes was estimated at 150,000,000 pounds. There was meticulous planning done by staff from the State Dept. with advice from all sectors of the community.

Employment

The provisions of the Reinstatement in Civil Employment Bill stated that "men and women in the forces are to get their old jobs at the old rates of pay or else receive compensation." However, long service employees could not be replaced in order to reinstate a returned serviceman. If the old job was no longer available, they would be reinstated in the "most favourable alternative job practicable". (Ward,1944: 9).

Gender and Rehabilitation Policy

The vast majority of the returning ex-services personnel were men. Some ex service women were entitled to some "rehabilitation" but those who were manpowered or on women's war auxiliary services were not (May, 1988:97). In fact,

very few ex-service women were granted loans, none received land, and even those who received vocational training were given lower rates of subsistence than the men (Thomson, 1983: 343).

Policy makers' view was that women's role was to nurture the men and children (May, 1988: 97) (3). After the war the government depended mostly on societal values to ensure that women returned to being wives and mothers. Even the media minimized the contribution of women by using cartoons to ridicule the images of women in male jobs as either unfeminine or frivolous.

In short, women were expected to be:

patriotic but not militaristic, to represent peace and normalcy even in the context of rapid social change and to contribute to public life and national production while remaining essentially home-loving, child-centered and private. Women were expected to replace men, but not displace them. (Montgomerie, 2001: 18).

The outcome was that by 1946 Rehabilitation Board statistics (cited in Montgomerie, 2001: 179-180) showed that one third of ex-servicewomen were married and had left paid work and most of the others were employed. By and large they had achieved this with less assistance than the ex-servicemen had received.

Gender, Work and Social Policy

Throughout the post war period there was an expectation built into social policy that wives and mothers would remain out of the paid work force, at the very least while the children were young, and be supported by the men for whom they had made way. Despite increased labour force participation by partnered mothers, wives continue to be usually ineligible for state benefits and childcare assistance and are not normally counted as unemployed when seeking paid work.

Only unmarried mothers and wives with husbands incapable of supporting them have been expected or given any assistance to support themselves and their children through paid work (although widows have been given a greater degree of choice).

During the 1970s and 1980s there was, temporarily, treatment of lone parent families in the English speaking world as the responsibility of the state, which allowed them to remain at home on a state benefit while the children were young. This had the effect of reinforcing the 'male breadwinner' model, with the state taking the role of the missing husband. Since the 1990s, however, state support for sole parent families has been significantly cut back in the USA, Britain and New Zealand. As a result, lone mothers have come under increasing pressure to be the main financial support for the family.

In recent decades, partnered mothers have also come under pressure to return to paid work sooner. This has come about not as a direct result of social policy but through economic demands, as the value of the male wage has declined in real terms, and through shifting societal expectations.

The Current Situation: the experience of policy

This part of the paper is based on interviews by Ee Kheng as part of her research. The information comes from focus groups and from individual interviews.

The Participants

The focus group contained three solo and three partnered mothers, whereas all the participants in the individual interviews were partnered.

The participants in the focus group were between the ages of 45 and 51. They had 1-4 children each. The ages of the youngest children range from 10 years to 15 years. All the participants had been in paid work (a minimum of 6 years and maximum of 19.5 years) prior to leaving paid work and taking on childcare responsibilities. Two women had work experiences in the sciences (veterinary and technical laboratory) while the others had worked in teaching and healthcare areas. All had tertiary level education, with two at post-graduate levels. All participants were from overseas countries, namely U.K., U.S.A., France and Malaysia.

The nine participants in the individual interviews had been out of the workforce for over ten years to become full time mothers and housewives. All women had previous employment as teachers, nurses, clerical assistants and town planner.

In a sense the interviewees' families were atypical, as they were likely to have higher than average incomes. Two partners were engineers with their own businesses, one a dentist, one an accountant and two were farmers. Another woman's husband was a scientist who had been made redundant and was retraining for another career. Of the two remaining spouses, one had retired from the air force and the other a technician. They did not mention their economic dependence as a problem for them. Most felt privileged to have spouses who could earn enough to provide adequately for the family.

Timing the return to paid work

All the participants in the focus group had returned to paid work. Of the women in the individual interviews, only two were not in paid work. They had all timed their return to coincide with their youngest child starting school. Interestingly, even partnered mothers felt that they were under pressure to be 'working' especially once their youngest turned five, and an expectation that a two parent family should have both parents working. Mothers said they were continually being asked by friends, neighbours and acquaintances when they would be returning to paid work. There was an implication that they had wasted their education and experience if they did not get a paid job.

Pay and seniority

Downward occupational mobility was an issue for all the participants. Only one participant was employed full time and even she was very aware of downward mobility. Two others were having to retrain. One participant has had unsuccessful attempts to return to the paid work force because of her refusal to take less pay than she deems suitable for her experience and expertise. The other participants had accepted the terms and conditions on offer and so had experienced loss of pay and seniority compared with their pre-child rearing days.. They stated that returning to jobs of a lower status was common; as a woman said of a friend:

“... She has a science degree and with probably 2 years work experience, and when she went back to work she found she was in lower position (lower than a new graduate) and lesser pay.”

It was pointed out that women ‘returners’ often have to reduce their expectations to the extent that they are often grateful for the poor pay and conditions which employers are willing to give them because it is difficult to get the hours that they would like or the pay that would reflect their qualifications and experience. As one participant put it:

It’s just like when they offer you a few hours here and there and you say thank you instead of excuse me!

Part time work

All the participants who had returned to the work force part time (the vast majority) had experienced reduced pay, status and conditions. This was especially true of mothers who had returned to the workforce in new occupations.

Participants who were working part-time felt that “employers got very good value for money”. One said:

Where I work the place is geared to part-time work which usually means married women with children because our job is largely made up of women like that. And we all put in such huge effort into our work with all these experiences.

A chorus of agreement followed a further comment of, “...employers take advantage of that.”

All participants wanted to return part-time so as to be able to be with the children after school and during school holidays. In this regard, participants did not see work conditions and job security as major concerns. In fact in the pursuit of a flexible work timetable, pay was often traded for being able to work hours that suited with childcare responsibilities. Thus the majority of participants were willing to take on casual jobs.

Many of the women interviewed, especially those whose partners were either not in employment, retired or in a lower pay job, felt that they were ‘underemployed’. That is, they wanted to have more hours of paid work and more job security. More than one participant recounted the frustration of being ‘exploitable’ in that her skills, while being acknowledged to be adequate (or she wouldn’t have got the job) were not valued. Her quest to become permanent and full time was deflected by short-term contracts.

Skills and qualifications

On the whole the participants were well qualified. Only two had not gained tertiary or other post-school based qualifications before having children. Nevertheless, participants found returning to paid work after child rearing, at an older age and qualifications seen as having become dated, to be a very difficult task.

The communications revolution had occurred during these women’s time out of paid work. Most of the participants therefore felt they needed to improve their technical skills, especially in computing. Some considered the possibility of getting work in areas for which they had no previous experience or training. This would entail a lot of training and studying both of which involve cost and time so it was not seen as a realistic option. However, even to get into work of a similar nature to their previous employment, many would have to retrain – for example by doing a short term course in teaching, nursing and computing skills.

It is likely that some of the core skills and qualifications which these women had were still relevant, and indeed may have been enhanced by their experience of raising children. Indeed, some of the women felt that their mothering work had enhanced their skills in paid work. However, the skills these women had gained through mothering work were not necessarily valued by employers. Again, the women had adjusted their expectations, and were mentally prepared for some kind of retraining.

Education and training to assist people to return to the paid work force is either restricted to people on benefits or very costly to the student. One mother had to fight to gain access to a ‘work ready’ program at the time of the interview. She was able to do so only because she was registered as unemployed. Most mothers do not register as unemployed when they are attempting to return to work or work-related training, and are not encouraged to do so. Partnered mothers tend not register because they generally do not qualify for a benefit. But not registering can debar them from what may be the only affordable form of work-related training.

However, mothers were not prepared for the financial outlay that would be needed to retrain for the workforce. They had not had the opportunity to plan for this. At the time when they took time out of paid work, tertiary education was still provided free. The thought of having to take out a loan of several thousand dollars in order to retrain for a job was deterring the participants from returning to education or training. Whereas some solo mothers would be able to access the Training Incentive Allowance to assist them with the cost of education or training so that they could avoid taking out a loan, the alternative for partnered women was to ask their spouses to pay, which was likely to affect the dynamics of their relationship (4).

Finding suitable childcare that they felt they could afford and trust was a major difficulty for all participants. Having no relations to call on in emergencies and after school or holiday periods were a particular problem for participants. Child care difficulties were a significant influence on the length of time that they had taken out of paid work.

Child care costs were a major barrier. These can significantly add to the costs of education and training. Whilst solo mothers and families on very low incomes (for example if the mother's partner is unemployed) can access an income-related child care subsidy to help them improve their work-related skills and move off state benefits, such help is not available to mothers whose partners pre tax incomes are above \$621 per week. Even the maximum subsidy will not cover the full costs of child care. In addition, smaller communities often lack child care facilities for preschoolers.

Women therefore tended to work part time and to rely on assistance from spouses, friends and close relatives, especially parents, but this created a sense of obligation.

At times of labour shortage, such as wartime, the state has expanded the provision of subsidised or funded child care. However, at times of high unemployment, governments claim to have no direct role providing or funding child care. Policy makers suggest that the issue is one of lifestyle and individual choice, and that if parents wish to go out to work, they must make their own arrangements or meet the costs themselves (Brannen, and Moss; 1991: 30).

Multiple Roles

Even after their children were older and they were able to engage in paid work, participants found that the stress of juggling two or three jobs was enormous. The women felt torn between spending time in paid work and taking time away from their children, who they saw as still their prime responsibility. One woman who returned to teaching felt that although her hours of paid work coincided with those when her children were at school, she felt stretched with the

“...the killing long hours – teach and then coming home to cooking, chasing after children and their homework, washing and all the other household chores.”

Juggling multiple roles and adhering to employers' expectations of their output was a major issue. Participants felt that employers were often unsympathetic and exploitative.

Despite having made a conscious choice to take time out of the paid work force to raise children, some participants felt that their self-esteem and confidence had fallen during their time out of paid work, and that compounded their problems in getting a good job afterwards. They felt that societal attitudes and government policy had undermined their status.

As well as the hard work of parenting, many of the participants had experience of voluntary work in their communities, which had included serving on school trustee boards and working as play centre coordinators. One participant was sole charge of an \$80 000 building project. Yet none felt that the skills obtained from such work was seen as valuable when returning to the workforce.

Without exception, all participants mentioned the low status of mothers in New Zealand society. For instance, one woman regards the work of mothering as:

...undervalued and unappreciated. I feel very strongly about this. I think the government should take some initiative to look at and value the job of parenting.

Some participants felt that other women who had not taken time out of paid work also undermined mothers' confidence on occasions. Some participants' confidence and self-esteem had been badly shaken at times when they admitted to staying at home and looking after the children, and “conversation turns quiet and they (other women) look away or into space”. One participant stated:

Sometimes the women are worst. I respect women who go out to work because they can't stand being at home with the children all day. But I expect to be respected for choosing to be a full time parent as well. And it's not happening.

Participants did not expect the government to greatly assist their efforts to return to paid work. However, while being aware of the cost to government of providing childcare services and subsidized training for partnered mothers, many expressed the need for the government to acknowledge the value of mothers. Some of the suggested ways the government could help was to increase child-credit payments to value the work of parenting, subsidized childcare when a mother has to be in paid work, a financial assistance towards retraining costs and longer annual leaves so that a mother could take some of the leaves in times of sickness or school holidays.

Interviews with policy makers reinforced participants' views of the present government's neglect of the needs of mothers returning to work. The silence on the subject of mothers returning to work was deafening.

The penalties for taking time out

The lack of financial reward in caring work was noted in comments such as, "...staying home looking after children and spouses meant you didn't have any money" and "...huge sacrifices financially..." Being able to earn one's own money was seen as 'the light at the end of the tunnel'.

The women were aware of the loss of income and lifestyle that resulted from the time taken out of paid work. One woman commented,

"I look at other people the same age as us, similar jobs and they went back to work pretty much straight away or they hadn't had children so their standard of living is so much higher than mine..."

There was also a general consensus that loss of career or at least continuity of a career path and of often having to start again with less pay, status and security was the price that was paid for becoming a mother.

It would appear that the penalties for taking time out of the paid work force to do unpaid parenting are very significant. This is not only because of the isolation, loss of confidence and lack of pay during the 'time out' but also because of the disadvantage that follows the return to paid work. Unlike the ex-services personnel whose situation was described earlier, these women's needs were not considered by policy makers. They received no compensation or assistance in their return to paid work, and as a result had lost pay and seniority compared with people who had not taken time out to do parenting.

Discussion

Feminists have critiqued the way in which the work of mothers 'counts for nothing' (Waring 1988). However, less attention has been given to the fact that mothers returning to paid work are also disadvantaged.

In contrast with the treatment of ex-services personnel, parents returning to paid work (unless they are on a benefit) are neglected by the state. This neglect is not simply an accidental oversight. The experience of the mobilisation and demobilisation of personnel during and after major wars illustrates how far the state can intervene when it is deemed appropriate. Planning and care went into avoiding a situation where ex-services personnel would suffer loss of status or economic well being as a result of making their contribution to the nation. Following from Pateman (1992) we argue that the social contract between individuals and the state is so deeply gendered that it should more properly be called a sexual contract. There seems to have been a different kind of understandings and expectations with fighting men compared with women returning to paid work after bearing and raising children. The effects of this are to

contribute to the feminisation of poverty and reduce women's status, confidence and expectations whilst in relative terms raising men's. Indeed, while Ee Kheng's participants expected that they would have to help themselves find a job or training, demobilised postwar soldiers expected the government to provide help to them as a right not privilege (Kizito, 1969).

Both mothers and servicemen are prepared to make sacrifices. But it appears that the men receive compensation in terms of policies to ease their re-entry to a satisfactory position in civilian employment whereas the women do not. It may be argued that society is exploiting mothers by not offering similar rewards for essential services to the nation, and that there should be proper recognition and resourcing of mothers in work and family policy (Crittenden, 2001).

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Endnotes

1. Similarly, Anne Crittenden (2001:5) deplors the fact that mothers are penalised for having taken time out of the paid workforce.
2. It did not seem feasible to compare the situations of mothers and soldiers in New Zealand in the present day because soldiers going to active service are

career members of the armed forces, who later return to their base in the armed forces in New Zealand, not to civilian life. We were wanting to compare men and women who were returning to civilian employment after an absence of some years.

3. In Britain in 1919 women received the vote and access to the professions (from which they had previously been barred) as a reward for their wartime efforts. However, state legislation from 1922 ensured that married women (which included most mothers) were sacked from virtually all public sector employment and many private sector jobs. This effectively prevented most mothers from returning to paid employment (Briar 1997). Apart from a brief period after the war, when both ex servicemen and former munitions workers were entitled to an unemployment benefit, married women were also ineligible for state benefits. Thus, the majority wives and mothers who had been actively involved in the war effort received no reward and were returned to a position of economic dependence.
4. Only people on the Emergency Maintenance Allowance, Domestic Purposes Benefit, Widows or Invalid Benefit are entitled to receive the Training Incentive Allowance.