THE FEMALE LEAD

UNENTITLED MINDSET

Women at Work:
Breaking Free of The 'Unentitled Mindset'

Full Report

Research by Dr Terri Apter for The Female Lead

Close The #EntitlementGap

The Female Lead

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Terri Apter

Executive Summary

The Female Lead's *Women at Work* report explores the following questions:

> Why, after decades of legislation, gender equality in education, control over fertility and massive shifts of gender norms, have women not achieved equality in the workplace?
>
> Why do the trajectories of men's careers show a steady increase during mid-stage career, while women's trajectories flatten?
> Remedying this inequality is essential to the UK's long-term economic recovery. Evidence shows that companies with a higher proportion of senior women are more profitable and competitive.

There is sufficient statistical data to show that women's careers tend to stall at the mid-stage point, but insufficient qualitative data to interpret the statistics and point the way forward. The *Women at Work* project explores the living experiences of 66 women as they pursue their goals, test their abilities and navigate their careers through the crucial period between, roughly, 27 and 42. The qualitative data

provides detail and context beyond that available via surveys and questionnaires. It offers privileged insight into what constrains and what enables an individual woman's career, revealing links between individual experience and larger trends, links that are otherwise difficult to identify. Using data from similarly designed (and, at the time, groundbreaking) studies of 25 years ago, the *Women at Work* Report highlights changes that have occurred over the past quarter of a century, thereby offering a unique perspective on points of significant improvement and points where progress has stalled. We can then see where (and what kind of) action is most needed for innovative support, protection and stimulus for equality.

1. The *Women at Work* Report outlines clear points of progress, particularly in the women's attitudes towards themselves. In 1994 Terri Apter reported in her work *Working Women Don't Have Wives* that women were often conflicted about ambition, competition, career identity and independence. The Female Lead's *Women at Work* project found that women embraced their ambition and their drive. Only one woman in the study referred to others' possible negative response to female ambition, and this did not prevent her from proudly describing herself as ambitious. They valued independence, both personal and financial, and their careers were very important to their identity and sense of purpose.

2. All the women who participated in the 1994 study struggled with male cultures in the workplace. The *Women at Work* project found that even where significant numbers of women seemed to thrive, biases were not uncommon. The biases are identified in this report as naïve, overt, implicit, internalised and expectation bias. Overt bias – particularly if any bullying was involved – had negative and long-lasting effects. Implicit bias refers to behaviour and speech that reveal demeaning attitudes or stereotypes (that may be unconscious). This leads to behaviour and assumptions and decisions that may appear minor but which, cumulatively, constitute an abuse of individual talent. The Report's analysis of so-called internalised bias challenges the notion that its source lies within women themselves, but rather that it lies within their environment.

3. The *Women at Work* participants made a distinction between a predominately male work place and a biased one. A predominantly male workplace could nonetheless provide encouragement and opportunity and support. Participants reported many positive experiences with male co-workers and bosses. Nevertheless, bias was common, and the interviews reveal a range of methods for managing bias. Participants' experiences suggest that we are at an exciting time, when firms (generally) have a genuine desire to embrace diversity, and when there is no longer a "pack mentality" that magnifies sporadic individual biases.

4. Internalised bias (that is, upheld by women in the form of self-doubt) emerged within a discriminatory environment. The women resisted internalised bias through determination and belief in personal capability. Twenty-six percent of the participants described a time when they experienced imposter syndrome – one form of so-called internalised bias. They were, however, not deterred by imposter syndrome; instead, they worked through it by taking up the challenge to learn new skills. This suggests that mentors, coaches and employers could support women by focusing on a capability mindset and highlighting pathways to confidence.

5. One highly specific internalised bias, however, did impede the women's progress. Many described a reluctance to negotiate pay increases and promotion, stemming from an 'unentitled mindset', whereby they felt unsure of their entitlement to promotion, to more family friendly conditions and to increased pay. While confident in their ability to negotiate generally, and to negotiate pay increases on others' behalf, the participating women expended a great deal of energy considering whether their own case was watertight. Employers' responses, when they did try to negotiate, were confusing and sometimes punitive. 'Unentitled mindset' occurred in a specific context – a context that stirred some sleeping dogs of bias, when women spoke for their own benefit and where they were unsure of the rules of negotiation or the parameters of success. Organisations require training to clarify procedures in which promotion and pay raise are discussed. The solution to internalised bias lies in changing the environment rather than the women.

6. While overall bias against women (as essentially inferior in ability) was, in most workplaces, on the ebb, expectation bias towards women returning from maternity leave persisted and impacted negatively on career progression. The women reported that *both women and men displayed expectation bias*. Expectation bias involved lower expectations of a woman's contributions to the firm, doubt as to her commitment and ability to take on new responsibilities and challenges. In short, the participants – both those who had experienced this bias themselves and those who did not have children but observed other women's treatment – saw this as a significant impediment to career progress.

7. Women did not have to experience bias directly to be adversely affected by it. Witnessing bias against other women (the most common instance was expectation bias against women returning from maternity leave) discouraged some women from seeking promotion when they were considering having a family, confirmed their belief that they could not rise in this career and have children, or prompted them to think about changing their jobs. Conversely, women who witnessed more senior women thriving in the firm, without suffering bias, inspired them to seek promotion.

8. The participating women reported that most firms understood the importance of gender equality and wanted to champion it. However, many described firms in a state of transition – still awkward or uncertain about precisely how to change. Firms had many helpful policies in place, but these were not sufficient to address the full range of inequalities, particularly those arising from a firm's tendency to "own" the employee as a person. Suggestions arising from our participants included regular discussions between HR and other employees to explore what was needed to be both a contributor to the firm and have some kind of work/life balance. The *Women at Work* Report shows how the positive efforts and intentions of firms can be harnessed more effectively.

9. Women spoke about the importance of cheerleaders or champions. The cheerleaders included but extended beyond formal mentors. They were sometimes parents (either a mother or a father), sometimes a group of girlfriends, sometimes a partner, and sometimes a co-worker or boss (either a man or a woman) who "believed in them" or encouraged them to apply for a more demanding position or who provided a sounding board for career queries, doubts and dissatisfaction. Many of the women participating in the *Women at Work* project reflected on the impact cheerleaders had had on their careers, and wanted to fill that role for other women.

10. Changing jobs, from one firm to another, or from employee to entrepreneur, was always daunting, but the women's willingness to make such changes and take such chances was an important step in securing satisfying work conditions. Satisfaction in a job was generally linked to finding it challenging, feeling comfortable in the workplace culture and providing opportunities to make a positive impact and to grow. The feeling that they had contributed as much as they could was a reason for moving on. Another motive for career change was to seek a work environment in which they could be themselves. Money itself was rarely a reason to move on, but moving to a position of more responsibility and seniority (which was often accompanied by a salary increase) was. Cheerleaders played a key role in boosting confidence to change jobs.

11. There was high satisfaction among the women who started their own companies. Becoming an entrepreneur was a brave but exciting step. The women who did this said that they valued what they learned from the corporate world, but they believed that the corporate world could learn a lot about agility and responsiveness from the new companies they founded. As entrepreneurs the women could work flexibly without penalty. They usually had a team where each person was willing to step in to cover for another as necessary, and they had a good knowledge of each person's skill. Being an entrepreneur also yielded excitement and motivation; they felt responsible for the success or failure of the enterprise.

12. Money has, to most people, meaning beyond its practical value. When women considered the symbolic value money had for them, they emphasised independence first, then freedom, then status in the sense of what was fair in their workplace – though, as discussed under point 5, they struggled in making requests for an increase in salary.

13. Earning power relative to a partner was an important issue, just as it was in the 1994 study. Some women explained that, in earning less than a partner, they felt it was reasonable to make more time available to their partner by doing more domestic tasks themselves. The majority of women were determined to earn at least as much as a partner.

14. In the 1994 study, depression was a common issue for the participating women. In the *Women at Work* project, some women spoke about episodes of mental illness, but the proportion was no greater than that found in the general population. What was notable was the connection between work satisfaction and mental wellbeing. Some firms provided access to a confidential 24-hour mental help line, and this had been found very helpful.

15. Parental leave provision and equality legislation played a crucial role in supporting the careers of women who had children, but combining a successful, satisfactory career and motherhood remained a challenge. Women who took advantage of job flexibility, or who had taken a career break when their children were very young, were hit by a long term penalty, whereby it could take up to 6 years to return to the level they had been at before the career break. It was only in firms where flexibility was the norm, and where very senior men also worked flexibly, that there was no flexibility penalty. The Women at Work Report makes strong recommendations to address this.

16. Whether or not women were mothers, they remarked that the women more senior to them often did not have children. Speaking to some women who were pregnant at the time of the interview was touching and enlightening. These highly organised, focused young women struggled to envision the details of their lives as working mothers. The *Women at Work* project recommends a significant change in assessing what people contribute to firms, so that careers can continue to progress throughout the intensive stages of parenting.

17. Partners of women participating in the *Women at Work* project contributed significantly to child care, but inequality persisted from *the mental load* – the administration and organisation of childcare, with school preparation, medical care, and oversight of schedules for pick-up and delivery. This additional burden contributed to the common theme of "exhaustion" that

was not so much a need for more sleep as for the opportunity to "breathe" and reflect. Several women believed that if a partner worked at home for at least one day a week, their burden would be eased. They also believed that such a shift would guide a partner's focus on the amount of work required in childcare organisation.

18. Procedures beyond current dignity at work and discrimination & diversity policies are needed to foster equality. These policies sometimes lead to organisational defensiveness or box ticking or training that is seen as an end in itself. There is evidence that diversity training programmes do not reduce bias in hiring assessment or performance ratings. The *Women at Work* project shows that a paradigm shift is needed in regard to the question, "What do good jobs look like?" and, "How does someone demonstrate their positive impact?" and "How can we construct flexible jobs that enable career progression?" Reciprocal work, with both organisation and employee, needs to be imaginative around new more inclusive job design.

19. The interviews were held during the pandemic crisis, and the women saw opportunities in the game-changing situation in which both women and men worked remotely. While most contemporaneous discussions focus on the risks remote working poses to women, the *Women at Work* participants spoke of the benefits. If remote work were normalised, the "myth" that someone who works from home (or on flexible hours) is less efficient and less committed and a less likely leader would be "busted."

20. The key recommendations come in two parts:

    i. **Design high-value jobs, with high-value people.**

    Familiar templates of a good career and a valuable worker need to be reconsidered. As we plan for economic recovery after the pandemic, more care is needed in optimising all talent available to organisations. Reciprocal discussions between bosses, managers and employees are needed, prospectively and proactively, to design good jobs to protect both the careers of those who require flexibility and the organisation's investment in high-potential talent. The disruption of the Covid-19 crisis presents an opportunity for a paradigm shift in regard to the question, "How does someone demonstrate their positive impact?" and "What do firms expect employees to be, as people?" An important question every organisation should ask is, "Are we setting a good example of talent stewardship throughout the organisation?".

ii. **Re-focus gender diversity efforts away from myths to the real sticking points.**

There has been tremendous progress in correcting biases about women's abilities, goals and needs, yet often this progress is ignored. Many reports that note the persistence of bias try to address all forms of bias, as though starting from square one. Efforts to avoid abuse of women's talent would be far more efficient if they focused on correcting those specific remaining biases. At each stage of promotion and bonus allocation, questions should be asked about who is being awarded what, and why. "How are the women doing?" is a question that requires fine-tuning, and should include consideration of parental status and ethnicity. This is not to allocate more to anyone just because they are a certain gender, race or creed. This is to challenge scales of merit that may not be as objective as supposed. The deficit of objectivity occurs not because anyone is a hypocrite but because assumptions about who is and who is not "entitled" are often embedded in supposedly objective assessment.

These two broad recommendations can harness the goodwill most organisations have in efforts to avoid waste and abuse of female talent. Instead of the directive to "lean in", directed either at women or at organisations, economic recovery requires a dynamic collaboration.

The Female Lead

Women at Work: Breaking Free of The Entitled Mindset

Terri Apter

1.

Context: The Problem and the Puzzle

Why, after decades of legislation, equality in education, significant control over fertility and massive shifts of gender norms, have women not achieved equal senior representation in the workplace in the UK?[i] The Female Lead's *Women at Work* project focuses on the puzzle of unequal progression in the workplace, exploring the varied forces that stall the upward trajectory of women's careers at mid-level, a time when men's career trajectories continue to rise.[ii] Remedying this inequality is essential both to the UK's standing as a country that provides equal opportunity and to the UK's long-term economic recovery, since evidence shows that companies with a higher proportion of senior women are more productive and competitive and less likely to fail.[iii]

Lisa Wilcox. 2020. Women Count 2020. The Pipeline. p.16. Uploaded 12/01/2021.

The focus of previous research and initiatives has been on increasing numbers of women at entry level or at the very senior level of organisations. The crucial mid-stage phase of women's careers has been ignored, yet this is precisely the phase at which firms tend to lose female talent. The *Women at Work* project fills this knowledge gap. It explores the living experiences of 66 women as they pursue their goals, test their abilities and navigate their careers through the crucial period of mid-stage career. 60 participants were between, roughly, 27 and 42 years of age, and 6, who reflected back on their early and mid-stage careers, were between 50 and 60-years.

This qualitative data provides detail and context beyond that available via surveys and questionnaires. It offers privileged insight into what constrains and what enables individual women's careers. It reveals links between individual experience and larger trends, links that are otherwise difficult to identify. Using data from similarly designed (and, at the time, groundbreaking) studies of 25 years ago[iv], the *Women at Work* project highlights changes that have occurred over the past quarter century, thereby gaining a unique perspective on points of significant improvement and points where progress has stalled. We can then see where (and what kind of) action is needed to provide the innovative support, protection and stimulus necessary to achieve equality.

I begin with a review of explanations that have been used to explain gender inequality in the workplace. Explanations of the snail's pace of progress generally come in three forms – bias against women, market forces and women's own preferences.

1.1 Bias

Bias, the underpinning force of discrimination, can be overt or implicit.[v] An example of overt bias is the argument that women are not sufficiently smart or robust or reliable to take on significant responsibilities. Implicit bias is often (but not always) unconscious. It refers to behaviour and speech that reveal demeaning attitudes or stereotypes, embedded in arguments, beliefs and practices that are thought to be acceptable. Implicit bias can be seen in apparently inconsequential or superficial remarks, expectations or decisions that, cumulatively, have a large effect on individual morale and career progress. While cultural changes have eradicated many overt biases against women (for example, that they lack logic, consistency or professionalism), implicit bias continues to shape assessments by both women and men of women's performance, potential and contribution. "Equal pay for equal work" and, "Equal opportunity to advance," are laudable slogans, but they are rendered useless if work done by women continues to be viewed as less valuable than work done by men.

Implicit bias can limit women's careers at very early stages of life. For example, in school, when girls are making choices about which subjects to take, they may be guided towards subjects traditionally associated with girls and women, subjects that may not make them attractive to employers. If girls and women themselves internalise biases – by accepting beliefs about "women's abilities" and "jobs appropriate for women" – then their choices will be shaped accordingly. Through educational choices they limit their career horizons and their attractiveness to employers.

Implicit bias can also limit women's personal goals. An example that has been touted is the Cinderella Complex[vi], whereby even women who initially embark on an independent career, soon reveal their expectation and desire to be protected from the stresses and challenges of the "outside world" and looked after by someone else. They seek to be "rescued" from their life of independence.

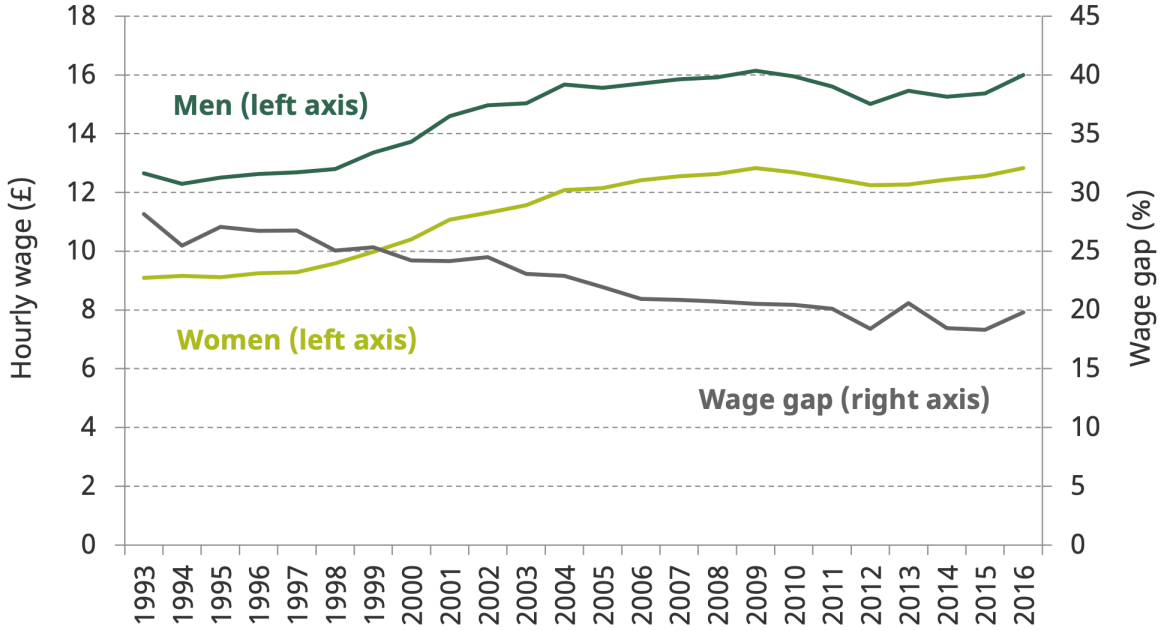
1.2 Market forces

The second type of explanation for women's stalled career trajectory focuses on market demands and incentives. Suppose the market demands that a worker make a commitment to an employer that precludes significant family responsibilities (requiring time and limiting availability). In that case, an employee, who at certain stages of her career is also the parent who has primary responsibility for young children, is less valuable to an employer than someone who is free of daily family responsibilities. The other person may have a family, but the daily hours of care and organisation are discharged by someone else (by a wife, for example), thereby maintaining the employee's value to the employer.

There is evidence that restricting availability for full-time work (as conceived by any employer) has a long-term impact on career progression. Claudia Goldin's excellent work on the "part-time penalty" shows that going less than full throttle at *any* point in a career has a long-lasting effect. The issue is not that women earn less simply because they work fewer hours; they continue to earn less, per hour, than men.[vii] A woman's pro rata contribution is seen as less valuable simply when she is not (what is largely considered as) a full-time employee for life.

This then presents an economic incentive for the old-style breadwinner and homemaker model. If women's work is paid less than men's work, then a "rational" family allocates more workplace hours to a man, while the woman's hours are used in the home to free up the more highly paid male working hours. Though a woman then foregoes some income, the overall family income is maximised through this "traditional" division of labour.[viii]

Figure 1. Average real hourly wages of men and women over time



Note: The graph shows real (CPI-deflated) hourly wages in January 2016 prices. Individuals in the bottom two and top one percentiles of the gender- and year-specific hourly wage distributions are excluded.

Source: LFS 1993–2016.

Monica Costa Dias, Robert Joyce, Francesca Parodi. 2018. Wage progression and the gender wage gap: the causal impact of hours of work.
The Institute for Fiscal Studies. p.6. Uploaded 04/02/2021

1.3. Women's preferences and constraints

The third explanation of women's stalled trajectory focuses on women's psychology. Instead of looking at biases against women, it argues that women's own preferences limit their ambition and drive.

According to this explanation, differential pay and unequal progression arise from women's free choices. All people make choices that impact on their work and their personal lives. Some people prefer to give all their time and energy to work; these people are likely to rise further in their careers and be paid more. Others choose to spend more time on non-remunerated aspects of life, such as travel, sport, various hobbies or having children. Someone who chooses to spend less time and energy on paid work will not earn as much or rise as far. Career commitment, it is argued, is a personal choice and the rewards therefore will be different, not because of market forces or cultural bias but because of personal preference.[ix] According to this argument, caring for children is a personal preference, like any other. The fact that more women than men exhibit this preference does not mean the impact shows gender bias – or so this argument goes.

This gloss over why being a parent continues to have a long-lasting impact on *women's* careers ignores systematic biased assumptions about work and value. To frame "having and raising children" as a choice or preference alongside hobbies, is absurd. Having children, tending and raising children is a "preference" built in our bodies and minds by evolution, generating overpowering attachments and urgent responsibilities. Treating this fundamental engagement as a preference alongside mountain climbing, for example, seems like a manoeuvre to disguise bias.

Moreover, preferences are shaped and enacted within a context in which constraints are felt, either explicitly or implicitly. These constraints include childcare costs, the input (if any) provided by a partner, and job design (what a job with adequate pay looks like). When good jobs are all consuming, then preferences shift. The familiar model of breadwinner versus carer comes into effect. Claudia Goldin explains: "To maximize the family's income but still keep the children alive, it's logical for one parent to take an intensive job and the other to take a less demanding one…It just so happens that in most couples, if there's a woman and a man, the woman takes the back seat."[x] Women's preferences can only be understood in the context in which they face constraints.

1.4. Interlocking impediments

Each of these three explanations of women's stalled career progression has some truth. None offers a full explanation because the full explanation can only be found in how bias, market forces and preferences interact. If women do not progress because of bias, then their economic power is reduced. Earning less in the workplace may reduce their power within the home, making gender parity in family and domestic work less likely. The family has more incentive to use the lower paid woman's hours for unpaid domestic and family duties. When she does so, she becomes even less attractive to employers. Even if, initially, a girl is impervious to fairytales of female dependency, the woman's experience in the workplace makes economic dependence her best option. And with dependence, comes compliance. Her self-effacing style, through which she seems less like a leader and less competent and robust, goes far deeper than her skin. It shapes her self-image and her goals.

I developed this model of interlocking structures under the guidance of Elizabeth Garnsey[xi] and it formed the basis of research I did in the closing decades of the 20th Century[xii]. Since then, educators, parents, policy makers, employers, and women themselves have been doing their utmost to address

this three-clawed problem. There has been significant progress, but there remains a frustrating and puzzling lag, particularly for women in the mid-stage of their career.[xiii]

To address the question, "Why?" and "What can be done?" The Female Lead invited me to join them in their *Women at Work* project. The objectives are to deepen our understanding of the intricate ways in which women negotiate their goals and to explore which, if any, of the three most common explanatory frameworks for gender inequality in the workplace (bias, market forces, women's own preferences) fit with their experiences. In identifying changes that have occurred over the past quarter century, we gain a unique perspective on areas of significant improvement and areas where progress has stalled. This provides focus on where action is most needed.

1.5. Conclusion

There is strong statistical evidence that women's career trajectory stalls in mid-stage. This is sometimes referred to as a "broken rung"[xiv] in the ladder of women's progress. There is an increased risk to women of "sticking to the floor" of a lower paid job, while men are more likely to find that such a job acts as a springboard to higher paid jobs.[xv]

How are we to explain the statistical evidence? It is easy enough to guess at possible explanations, but such guesses have been going on for decades, giving rise to many well-intentioned policies, some of which are expensive and unpopular to implement. Some of these policies persist, yet there is no evidence they are effective.[xvi] Why does the problem persist in spite of so many initiatives to mitigate career disadvantage?

The *Women at Work* project is determined to answer this question. With fresh *qualitative* data this research explores the experiences of women as they pursue their goals, test their abilities and navigate their careers through the crucial period between, roughly, 27 and 42, the life phase during which men's progress shows a steady upward career trajectory while the trajectory of women's careers flattens.[xvii]

The *Women at Work* project uncovers the influences, both overt and subtle, both general and individual, both positive and negative that shape woman's career progression. It provides evidence-based recommendations to expedite progress for the current and coming generations of women. The recommendations are drawn directly from the women who participated in this project, from their personal experience and their observations of others like them. Their stories present shrewd observations of positive and negative

work cultures. They express appreciation and gratitude for mentors, co-workers, bosses, both male and female, and give specific, contextual accounts of how and why advocates have helped their careers. They also provide imaginative visions of working structures and norms that will allow both women and men to thrive, equally.

2.

The Women at Work project: The Research

2.1 Methodology

We interviewed 60 women in mid-stage career (in their late 20s through to early 40s), a crucial transitional phase where the trajectory of pay and progression becomes higher for men and stalls for women. We also interviewed six women between the ages of 50 and 60. The participants came from diverse geographical (within the UK), ethnic (11% BAME) and socio-economic backgrounds. All had strong career histories and evident capability. Income across the participants varied from less than £25K to over £150K. The participants were drawn from both the public and private sectors. Some were engineers, some were entrepreneurs, some were artists, some were editors, some were writers, some were lawyers, some worked in finance, accounting, HR, charitable organisations, data collection and global development. Among the group of mid-stage career women, 38.5% had children.

We asked the participants about their approaches to promotion, their standing and influence in the organisation, the security or precarity of their balance of interests and needs, their current life satisfaction and their hopes or fears for the future.

We also interviewed six women between the ages of 51 and 65 and asked them to reflect on their early and mid-career experiences and explore their views on their young female colleagues' outlook and expectations. This provided a generational bridge between the women I interviewed in the 1980's and 1990's and the mid-stage career women participating in the Women at Work project. We also spoke to an employment lawyer with a strong record in defending women against gender injustice in the workplace.

We then interviewed four men, also mid-stage career, using the same interview template we used for the participating women. Many of the themes raised by the women – the importance of work to personal identity, the need for challenge and the search for balance – also emerged in the interviews with men. These similarities, however, need to be set in the context of the larger data sets showing that these shared concerns do not impede men's career trajectory in the way they impede women's. The number of participating men does not yield general conclusions about men's experiences and choices versus, or aligned with, women's. Nonetheless, these additional interviews provide a fascinating view of minor (but possibly high impact) approaches to issues of confidence and personal balance. This additional data also provided evidence that the changes in working norms that women sought would benefit men as well.

All participants volunteered their time and their data.

Veryan Dexter and I conducted the (approximately) hour-long interviews. A huge amount of work selecting participants and setting up the interviews themselves was done by The Female Lead Team, particularly Becky Small, and the majority of interviews were transcribed by Luc Jones.

Many of the interviews took place during the Covid-19 pandemic, in periods of lockdown and social distancing. This meant that the interviews, which we originally planned to hold in person, were via phone. Both Veryan and I were surprised and delighted by the depth and immediacy of the conversations. It may be that the special conditions of the pandemic removed barriers. It may be that working from home provided a special environment that facilitated self-disclosure. Or it may be that women are eager to engage in genuine, probing reflections about issues that they reflect on every day, but often alone, or in passing. We were astounded by the rich, revelatory material.

2.2 The power of qualitative analysis

Qualitative researchers work on the assumption that people make decisions in highly specific contexts. The best way to learn which details matter, where pressure points arise and where resolution might be found, is to ensure participants have scope to reflect and to use their own words, and the researcher listens carefully as they talk about their own experiences. Strict use of questionnaires, with a set menu of responses, is avoided. Participants are encouraged to bring forward their own issues, their own memories, their own experiences and interests.

The data this approach yielded was fabulous. The participants reached deep to reflect on our questions and articulate their responses. Our participants,

like most people, engage in meaning making as they talk about their lives. These meanings are connected to their sense of (different aspects of the) self, their experiences (both past and present), their expectations, hopes and disappointments, and their current and future plans.

Five pillars of life assessment – self (their own needs and satisfactions), society (how they perceive their status and level of respect), work (their place in an organisation, their level of fulfillment), money (its motivation, its meanings) and relationships (with partner, children and friends) – mark the different contexts in which they live and which shape their decisions.

The interviews clarify the individuality of each woman, but also reveal common patterns across groups of women, echoing themes I had found a quarter of a century ago, but also diverging in significant ways. The comparison of these two cohorts – the one from 1994 and 2020 – illuminates both points of progress and sticking points. This provides focus on where (and what kind of) action is most needed to provide innovative support, protection and stimulus for this and the coming generations of women.

3.

The Findings Part One: Progress

The qualitative data offered privileged insight into what constrains and what enables women's careers. In this section I discuss clear points of progress across all five pillars of life satisfaction – self, society, work, money and relationships. Participants' self-assessments and reflections also showed how closely related and integrated these different aspects of life satisfaction are. Highlighted here are

- the new acceptable face of female ambition,
- the desire for personal and financial independence, and
- the importance of work to personal identity.

3.1 Strong signs of progress

Three decades ago, in *Working Women Don't Have Wives*[xviii], I reported that many women felt uncomfortable with ambition and with competition. Some felt so uncomfortable earning more than a male partner that, to compensate, they would take on more domestic/family work as a way of showing

deference to their partner's higher status.

The women who participated in the research project of 1994 wanted to secure their identity as a career woman, but this was a struggle both at work and with their families. Their attempts to "do it all" and be a "superwoman" were efforts to protect both partner and children from the consequences of their professional goals.

On these issues, there has been significant improvement.

Among the participants in The Female Lead's *Women at Work* project, there was no sign of these anxieties and conflicts over ambition or career identity.

3.2 Ambitious and proud of it (Self and work)

There was no ambivalence about ambition among the participants in the *Women at Work* project. Ambition was seen as something to embrace with pride. Only one woman in the study made a reference to others' negative views of female ambition, and this did not prevent her from proudly describing herself as ambitious. For these women, ambition meant seeking out and pursuing opportunities, taking on challenges, making things work and having their contributions valued. While a woman's personal ambition, in the 1994 study, was often a source of tension between her and her parents or a partner, the vast majority of participants in the *Women at Work* project felt their parents, whatever their background (and many were the first person in their family to have higher education) would be proud of their achievement. When her ambition caused tension between a woman and her partner, she was likely to decide to leave the relationship. Only one woman struggled with the family experiences common in the 1994 group – the experience of being sidelined by a brother who was more valued as male, and by parents who cared more about her appearance than her personal potential.

3.3 Fiercely independent (Self and money)

The participants put a very high value on independence. This emerged strongly when they spoke about money. When asked what symbolic meaning money had, the most common answer was, "It provides independence." That financial independence also represented personal power, the power to claim equality in a relationship, and the power to leave an uncomfortable relationship. However, they valued job satisfaction more than increased income, and job satisfaction included two things: the ability to grow in a job

and the sense of being effective or useful. These values were held across a range of careers, from police officers to sales analysts. As one woman said, "Don't chase the pay, chase the passion." However, as I show later in this report, pay equity was a significant issue and many participants struggled with the challenge of requesting fairer pay for themselves – but not for others.

3.4 Career and identity (Self, work and society)

No longer did the women's identity rest primarily on family and relationships. The participants in the *Women at Work* report often said their work was "too consuming" or "too important" but they did not otherwise indicate anxiety or conflict. This was in sharp contrast to my 1994 study, when working women's career identity seemed fragile; they worried greatly about being mistaken for – or becoming – a "mere housewife." For the 1994 cohort, traditional female roles were the default position, against which they had to be vigilant. The *Women at Work* cohort were confident of their broader sense of self.

3.5 The importance of cheerleaders (Work and Relationships)

Many participants described times when they would not have applied for a position or promotion without someone close to them (family or co-worker, male or female) insisting, "You should do this." They described the boost provided by co-workers and bosses (female and male) who believed they could do something when they themselves were uncertain. Sometimes a group of friends provided support, advice and pep talks. Seeing how they themselves had benefitted from cheerleaders, many thought of ways they could support other women.

3.6 What the women said

Ambition

"I was always ambitious. I don't remember being any other way."
Senior Vice President, Entertainment Company, age 40.

"I didn't have a set career planned but I knew that I was ambitious. I knew that I wanted to do something creative and strategic and global. I wanted to work with different types of cultures and people. I was able to

find these opportunities through my education, and from that point on, I had a hunger and an appetite for progressing in business." *Senior Marketing Manager, age 37.*

"I was always quite ambitious and I always wanted to achieve something in life but obviously when you grow up in a small village, with only a few houses, it is difficult to understand what you can achieve in life without looking and having a lot of role models...But I just wanted to do more and took it step by step." *Entrepreneur, age 40.*

Negative views of ambitious women were resisted: "You know that classic attitude: 'She's not ambitious, she's calculated.' There are certain adjectives thrown my way and I'm very proud of it and they are key pillars of my identity which I'm very happy with." *Marketing Manager, age 34.*

When ambition did not suit a relationship, the relationship ended: "In the past, my job and being ambitious and driven, has been given by others as a reason why my relationships haven't worked out. Finally, in my mid 30s I met a man who wasn't threatened by my ambition and independence and whom I am marrying next year." *Company Founder, age 42.*

Ambition was distinguished from cut-throat competition: "I was told, 'You have to be more competitive. To show the business that you're ready for the next big top job, you need to take out your competition. You need to take out the other women and show you are better than them.' I remember thinking, 'No way, absolutely no way, is that me.' And I, and women like me, are the next layer of leadership. We are much more value grounded, and much more understanding of diversity and inclusion and value people." *Senior HR, age 44.*

Independence

"Yeah, [money means] independence. That's being independent as a female, not having to rely on someone else. But it is also independence, so you won't be stuck in bad situations. I can decide to leave a relationship." *Brand/Corporate Director, age 40.*

"[Money] means independence for me because I've always wanted to be self-sufficient I don't want to rely on anybody else and never have done really." *Audit Manager, age 33.*

"I do not want to be dependent on anybody else. I never have wanted to be. I sort of was a bit when I was earning less, with young children, but even though it's harder work for me, I want my own money. I know what that independence means. My parents had a terrible divorce so that's very real to me and that's partly propelled me." *VP, Global Media Company, age 41.*

"At the very start it's about financial independence because it wasn't that long ago that women were dependent on men for finances, and because of my background, I feel this could be me. I could have been forced to get married and lose certain freedoms... so I don't take the privilege of being able to establish my financial independence lightly."
Head of Data Governance, age 35.

Career and identity

All participants replied to the question, "To what extent does your career contribute to your sense of self?" with some version of, " A lot." In fact, "massively," was the most common word, used by 9 women.

"Massively. In fact, probably a slightly unhealthy amount. The thought of not doing my job is awful to me...I would be so depressed without that part of my identity." *Journalist, age 29.*

"Pretty much entirely." *Graphic Designer, age 30.*

"Entirely. It gives me drive and a sense of accomplishment. Coming back from maternity leave has made me realise just how crucial it is to my identity." *Advertising Producer, age 32.*

"A little too much probably, I think. I kind of identify myself by my job. I've done this for a really long time, and I think I need to do less of that." *Director of Policy, Technology Conglomerate, age 35.*

"I think a lot and I think probably sometimes the weighting of it is unbalanced." *Art Administrator, age 43.*

"I think it's kind of everything! It's like really inextricable from everything about who I am." *Artist, age 30.*

"I would say kind of crucial, personally for me too much so...I have had periods in the past where it hasn't been going so well and it definitely has a massive impact [on my sense of self]." *Client Director, age 34.*

"I'm one of those that live to work rather than work to live, so I give my all into work." *Digital Group Leader, age 30.*

"I wouldn't say work is always and forever my number one priority, but it's a big part of who I am and certainly the thing that helps me move forward and it's really important to me to strive at work." *Senior Marketing Manager, age 30.*

Cheerleaders

The participants often spoke about people who had cheered or championed them in their career. Sometimes these cheerleaders were friends, sometimes family, and sometimes people in their workplace.

"Yeah that last question has started me thinking of something, like the role of mentorship in women's careers. I am curious about how much women have helped other women, but I think the role of your female friends is really interesting too, and how they can kind of hold you up and support you, or bring you down, I suppose, especially if you're in a group of other professional women. My friends turn to each other for career advice all the time, and it's so meaningful to me. They have cheered me along the way. They're my cheerleaders." *Director of Partnership, age 35.*

"I was terrified [when I stepped into this new position]. I felt completely out of my comfort zone, but it was a good experience to go through. It teaches you a lesson – that you can work outside your comfort zone, even when you don't think you can. Feeling the confidence [a senior colleague] has in you, even if you don't have it in yourself at the time, I think that really does help you take that step, and you probably work ten times harder and that's how you probably end up achieving what you do." *Finance Director, age 37.*

"If it wasn't for a really big cheerleader of mine – he was a partner where I worked – I wouldn't have had these opportunities early on. I wanted to do well, and I worked hard, but I was young, and a woman of colour, and a child of immigrants, and I didn't think some opportunities were for me. But the opportunities he gave me were a real turning point in my career." *Head of Data Governance, age 35.*

"As a child of an immigrant and also a woman of colour, and also just as a woman, I think we just find the whole thing gross – you know, talking about pay, we don't like to sell ourselves, we don't like to big ourselves up in terms of promotion. So, it was so helpful to have been cheered on by some really supportive white men. You know, the support was

> particularly valuable because it came from them, and they would say, this is how a white man would approach request for promotion, you should too." *Head of Delivery, Financial Sector, age 37.*

Several women described the lingering negative impact of a bully in the workplace, and how these experiences highlighted the importance of colleagues who took the role of cheerleader:

> "When I had a tough time with the boss [who was bullying me] it gave my confidence an enormous hit...And it took me a long while to realise that is what happened. That hit manifests itself in a lot of ways. My confidence had gone. That's what was hit the most. But I have always had a good strong friendship group, and a supportive family, and a significant personal mentor at every step of my career. With people cheering me on in that way, people who want to see me succeed, I regained the confidence. At first the glimmer comes back, and they encourage you more, and then you're back on your way." *Director of Policy, Technology Conglomerate, age 35.*

Sometimes the experience of being bullied inspired a woman to become a cheerleader for others:

> "On my first day I was physically sick multiple times and seemed to get a real sense that something wasn't right. I ended up joining the business, working for a woman who was a bully – not only to me. It was so bad that someone in the team tried to take their own life. I thought I could tolerate it, but then realised there is a difference between what you can and what you should tolerate, and now I refuse to tolerate this behaviour. It set me back for a few years, because I left that business and felt so unsure of myself that I accepted the first job offered. The good thing is that now my values are set in stone, and I have empathy with co-workers going through a hard time. So that's hard on me now, with Covid redundancy, but I always stand up for others." *Head of Leadership, age 29.*

4.

Findings Part Two

Points of moderate progress, requiring a further push forward

4.1 The shrinking of macho cultures.

All the women who contributed to the 1994 study struggled with male cultures in the workplace. Inappropriate compliments on their appearance (which drew attention away from their professional contributions) were common, as was overt bias ("This isn't a job for a woman,") or exclusion (when decisions were made in areas which women could not enter, such as clubs or "the men's room"). The women I spoke to for the 1994 study believed that only by fighting their corner would they receive anything approximating to fair pay. They believed that fair promotion, for a woman, was exceptional.

In the Women at Work project, participants made a clear distinction between a predominantly male workplace and a work culture that was either macho or in other ways unfriendly to women. Many worked in a predominately male environment but that in itself did not give rise to experiences of bias. The vast majority of participants had some male co-workers who had a positive effect on their career. Some (4) participants said that being a woman had had no impact on their career, and that they did not think of their career or their past career experiences in terms of their gender. Nevertheless, experiences of bias were common. They came in different forms, each with a different impact. These different types of bias can be described broadly as naïve, overt, implicit and internalised.

4.2 Naïve Bias

Naïve bias stems from lack of experience in working with a woman, and uncertainty as to whether "women are different."

An engineer in her early 40s describes one version of naïve bias:

> "His introduction to me was, 'Great to have you on the team, we've never had a women before, I've no idea how to work with women, so I'm going to treat you like you're one of the men and see how it goes.' I actually loved

> working in that team, it was really good. He did definitely treat me as one of the men, but you know it was nice and I think that proved a point to them that actually we don't need special treatment, we are still engineers the same at the end of the day. But he was definitely nervous about having me in his team because he genuinely didn't know how he was going to work with me, and I think it was a positive experience in that he actually he could manage the situation so to speak."

A technology architect in her 40s describes a case of naïve bias with a less happy outcome. The naïve view that men should treat women in a certain way, led to an assumption about how a woman should behave:

> "I was bubbling over with enthusiasm. I would speak in a much more animated way when I wanted to get my point across. My tone would be more forceful, and certain people, particularly older men, objected to that. They wanted to be paternal, and you weren't letting them be paternal, and they got annoyed with you about that. They didn't know what to do with you."

4.3 Overt Bias

Overt bias, frequently described by the women as "old school" or "old style", consists of intentional and blatant acts (including speech acts) against someone on the basis of sex. For example, one participant had agreed with her boss that her title would be changed to "Director" to reflect the work she was actually doing in the company. However, this agreement was rescinded when an older man in the company, also a Director, did not want a younger woman to have the same title." *Head of Event Management, age 29*.

Several women reported that being young, or looking young, triggered overt bias. Men wanted to be paternal, and felt put out if a young woman demonstrated confidence and expertise, signaling that she had no need of their patronage. Being young (especially being young and blonde) lowered others' expectations, so a woman who was young and blonde and clearly able and ambitious disconcerted others.

> "Being quite young in the room, being female, being blonde and maybe a little bit ditzy looking, it got quite a few eyebrows raised. 'Okay, who's she kidding?' was the message I got. I never really left this behind. It was always something in my mind." *Police Inspector, age 30*.

> "Travelling with my male colleague sometimes, quite often people will just speak to him rather than me. People go automatically to him because he is male which can be frustrating. Sometimes they ask if he is my boyfriend which I think is crazy because we've come here in a work capacity. It's just a silly question, but it's very annoying." Antiquities Specialist, age 29.

Some men (more often a client than a co-worker) saw a young woman as "fair game." This participant continued:

> "I'm young and I don't think I am bad looking, so sometimes clients will be inappropriate. It can be uncomfortable, but I just laugh it off. And sometimes that makes me feel I am a bad feminist, as though I am kind of going along with it, when I should stick up for myself and say, 'Hey, that was inappropriate! You know you shouldn't make remarks like that.' Laughing it off is easier, but I feel bad." Antiquities Specialist, age 29.

Another participant used a different technique:

> "I'll ask, 'Can you just clarify what you mean?' If the smile fades from their face, I know they know they've done something wrong, and I've won my point." Senior Auditor, age 30.

But if being young minimises one's professional aura, so does being "past it."

> "In some environments I have, even recently, looked too young to be taken seriously. Now [I am in my forties and working in the technology sector] I look too old to be taken seriously. I've had the pleasure of working with another woman who is 15 years younger than me and from a different ethnic background and has a completely different approach to her work. But we have both experienced the exact same prejudices. This is a kind of solace. When someone tells her she needs to speak up more and be more assertive and they tell me I need to be less assertive and speak up less, you wonder, 'Is that really a thing, or are you just not really comfortable with women?'" *Internet Architect, age 45*.

Overt bias is intensified and amplified when it intersects with bias toward race, ethnicity or religion.

> "I know racism goes on all the time, but it is too painful, too traumatic, to constantly think about. On a daily basis I am really struggling with this stuff." *Clinical Psychologist, age 36*.[xix]

Women of colour describe how bias persists, but changes its shape according to context. One moment gender bias is salient, and in the next moment, racial bias is salient:

> "I am in tech, where there aren't many women, so colleagues question my ability to do the job as a woman. But when the question is about my suitability to take on a certain client, being black is the issue.' *Directors, Tech and Analytics, age 39.*

While it is widely recognized that "BAME" contains diverse people, the different impacts of different signs and symbols of ethnicity are rarely addressed in policy reports. Whereas the data gathered for the *Women at Work* report cannot record all the differences within this varied group, the participants were eager to explain how very different biases emerged in different contexts:

> "The tough times in work and out of work have been because of my headscarf, not because I am brown. The assumptions people have about a woman walking into a meeting with a headscarf are unpalatable. Unfortunately in the UK, it is socially acceptable to be Islamaphobic and to be very open and abusive of the views of Muslims in general, so that is probably one of the reasons why I am one of the most senior in the organisation [that is, why there are no other women like me in senior positions] – not because the organisation is racist but because of things that we have to face throughout our career." *Head of Delivery, Financial Services, age 37.*

The micro-acts of bias erode morale, and undermine motivation. It is helpful, both practically and for morale, to name the dynamic, and very helpful to persuade men in the organisation to see it, too:

> "You're not necessarily going into the strategic roles because you know you've got to battle a lot harder to be heard, and you've got to battle a lot harder for your expertise to be taken seriously, and most of the time it is very, very subtle. You only notice it because it happens every time you walk in the room. People in the room wouldn't even notice they were doing it. You just notice that you have to say what you're going to say more than once if anyone is going to listen. But if it's a good workplace, you can take people aside and say, 'This is the dynamic in the room.' At first they'll be surprised or puzzled or in denial. But then they will see it." *Internet Architect, age 45.*

For women whose experience of bias is amplified because it intersects with other biases, the stress is even greater. Some women explain that micro-bias at work combines with the micro-bias they are subjected to day by day outside the workplace. Every experience of bias not only affects them; it also raises concerns about preparing their children to live in a biased environment. A Head of HR in a global corporation is now pondering the way forward:

> "The micro acts that happen each day, and the ones that are hard to call out, having work passed over to someone who 'would go down better with clients' and not speaking up because when you describe one of those small acts ("What does your hair feel like? Can I touch it?") it doesn't sound that compelling, except from the moment you get up in the morning and you get on the bus and someone moves, and you go into a shop and the security guard follows you around, and you have to teach your son what to do if he is stopped by the police, you experience things very differently. And maybe firms will have to decide not to work with clients who don't accept our values." *Head of HR, age 52.*

The way forward, one 41-year-old Director of Marketing, whose parents had come to Britain from India, explains, is to:

> "Get more women in the industry. If you get more women in, you will also, hopefully, have more women of colour. When more women, including women of colour are in senior positions, they and who they are will change the norms. And when you do that, more people can see the bias that is otherwise invisible."[xx]

The health of a workplace could be gauged, not by eradicating all bias (an unlikely situation), but by showing a positive response to being told, "This looks minor, but it is bias," or, 'This is the dynamic in the room.' Seeing others seeing the bias felt like a huge step forward.

Though overt bias creates problems for many women, most participants said co-workers and bosses are willing to reflect on and admit to their own biases. This is very different from the experience of the older women we spoke to for the *Women at Work* project. Here is a woman in her 50s, looking back to the overt bias she experienced as a young woman working in the telecoms industry:

> "I struggled all morning with a really difficult project. Then I'd go for lunch and come back and there would be a hammer through it, stuff like that. And you feel – well, it would be so demoralizing. Or you would go to look in your booklet and someone would have written something really horrible on it like 'slag' ...it was just awful when they were together. It was a real pack mentality. When you were by yourself with individuals it was fine...it is that pack mentality that everyone tries to look 'good' in front of other people, so they pick on somebody who was slightly unusual and that was my experience."

The younger participants in the *Women at Work* project, generally, confronted some individuals here and there who were overtly biased, but there were few reports of a "pack mentality" of bias. Instead of bias being magnified by others, it generally could be "called out" and then others would "see it."

However, it took only a few people in an organisation to tip the balance from a comfortable work environment to a dysfunctional one:

> "The company was run by three men. They were completely dysfunctional as a leadership team. And ultimately that trickles down into the company. What ends up happening is that the people who aren't necessarily bothered by it stay, but lots of people leave, [and those who stay] don't care that they leave because they can't necessarily see the problem." *Vice President, Human Resources, age 33.*

In the 1994 study of working women's experiences, most of the participants viewed overt bias as something they had to live with. The *Women at Work* project showed how women are now resisting overt bias, sometimes seeking legal redress:

> "People assume when you take an organisation to tribunal for discrimination that it's all about the money. But they offered me money in mediation, and I refused it because they were so dismissive of what I was saying to them. All I asked for was an apology and that things would change. They didn't believe me when I said, 'I don't want your money. I want things to change.' It's strange, because you'd think that the tribunal was a low point in my life, but it was really a high point, because I was able to show how important those things that other people said didn't really amount to much, really were. Even I worried at times that I was being oversensitive, but I won the case, and when a senior woman heard about it she came to me and said, 'Things are going to change,' and that was a high point, to see the effect on the organisation." *Senior Public Sector Employee, age 38.*

Clear, measurable evidence of bias could also be a strong motivator for personal success:

> "When I saw the numbers – that there were only 11 black partners, it lit a fire under me. I want to move up this company now. I wanted to do well before, but now I'm in a hurry, to add to the number of black partners." *Director of Tech and Analytics, age 39.*

4.4 Implicit Bias

Implicit bias is particularly difficult to "call out" and many participants refrained from doing so. They believed that each instance could be dismissed as minor, and that they could be accused of "making a mountain out of a mole hill", even though they knew repeated micro-acts were demoralising and stressful.

Implicit bias emerges from evaluations and assessments and practice that may seem fair, but which are shaped by underlying assumptions about what value and significance look like. Is, for example, a man's work, or a male style of work, more likely to be rewarded:

> "One of my [male] peers, who was also on the leadership programme but a year ahead of me, said, "You know, we both got the top rating [but] I got double the bonus that you did. You need to learn to negotiate harder.' We had a brother-sister relationship, so he said, 'It's the one that shouts the loudest [who gets more]' and obviously it frustrated me because I probably worked 10 times harder than he did [but] I don't really like to [shout about my value]. I work and do good work. That should show for itself more than shouting about it."

Implicit bias is often embedded in norms. Those who do not comply with these norms or expectations are under-valued and under-utilised. A 41-year-old company director describes an example of implicit bias:

> " [My co-worker] said, 'Let me just give you a bit of advice for your time here... you should probably wear a dark suit, wear no makeup, wear your hair up maybe wear your glasses and tone down the accessories.' Because I was so keen to be successful, there were two ways I could respond to this...I could comply or [say], 'Go fuck yourself,' as it were... [I decided] this is me and I'm going to do this my way and I'm going to prove [myself] to you...I don't want to compromise who I am in doing that and thankfully he was in a minority but it does make me laugh [that] these people exist."

Key here is her amazement that "these people exist." In this case, most of her male co-workers, both her peers and those at higher levels, did not succumb to what they saw as outdated assumptions about what success should look like. Many offered positive advice and encouragement: "I had some really amazing mentors – not him – but managers that really pushed me out of my comfort zone and really challenged me to think differently and strategically."

BAME participants (11%), however, were never surprised "that these people exist." They experience an environment in which they are constantly made to feel different. Even a friendly approach ("Can I touch your hair?") marks them as someone who does not really fit in. Race and gender join to produce a unicorn effect, where BAME women in a male work environment or male dominated sector may be subjected to additional scrutiny:

> "There aren't other people like me. So there's a lot of pressure to do well. I'm being watched, and assessed, and I won't be given a free pass." *Director, Tech and Analytics, age 39.*

Having a "unicorn" co-worker, however, could be very helpful to others who felt they did not fit in:

> "I am the most senior women that wears a headscarf in the organisation and as a senior person, you get a bit of profile. Your face becomes familiar. I get a lot of contact that's based specifically on ethnicity not just as a role model in my day job but also as a mentor, where colleagues from around the organisation will reach out to me to talk about their own experiences. They want help translating their experiences, where they have just been subjected to racism. I do get approached about being a woman, but I am approached far more to talk about racism. Women with a headscarf make a beeline for me. They want to know, 'How did you progress in your career?" *Head of Delivery, Financial Services, age 37.*

It could take many years for some women to articulate and then resist implicit bias:

> "I'm much more aware now of the absolute pressure for women to couch what they say in a certain tone and a certain way in order to be heard. At the start of my career, older women advised me on that approach and I didn't really take it on board. As I got older, I then did take it on board, but now, as I'm even older again, I don't agree with them. I think it's much more now about finding my own voice. But there's still this pressure to drop your tone and speak in this very soft-toned voice, to make sure you're not being threatening." *Chief Technology Architect, age 43.*

What is suggested here is that there is still pressure on women to change so that they fit in with organisational norms. At the same time, however, there was widespread recognition that organisations wanted to change:

> "But I think they are definitely trying not to discriminate and not make people feel like [they have to change to be accepted, rather that the organisation has to learn to accept different models of successful people]. So that's a slightly reassuring thing, because I think you know that as a business they are really keen to be more diverse and more kind of equal and all that kind of thing, so I think that [they are making an effort]."
> *Account Director, age 36.*

It was interesting that one BAME participant among the group of more senior women (age 55) said:

> "I was the odd one out in school, just by appearance, but I don't feel anything held me back in any way. If I am brutally honest I don't think I ever suffered any form of discrimination."

This may be a unique case, or it might indicate a familiar pattern whereby there is tolerance when only a few people from a minority enter an organisation, and less tolerance when ethnic minorities become increasingly visible. This raises the disturbing question as to whether ethnic bias has increased over the past two decades.

Some women described their sectors or workplaces undergoing "a period of transition", with genuine desire to change, but remaining "nervous" and unsure how to change a culture. The momentum of the Black Lives Matter movement further increased pressure on firms. One Senior HR participant described her organisation as undergoing a "race crisis" wherein they were trying to understand and remedy their inability to make the best use of BAME talent.

When participants believed that the organisation was working positively towards inclusivity and diversity, they were tolerant of some "old school habits", but they would leave organisations that they assessed as "rigid" or "uncomfortable." This exodus is likely to harm both women's careers and businesses.[xxi] The *Women at Work* recommendations (see Section 6) are intended to harness the positive intentions of most firms.

4.5 Internalised bias (so called)

It is painful enough to experience bias against you, but *internalised bias* gets into one's core, and one sees oneself through the eyes of the bigot. This involves an 'unentitled mindset' that stops you from demanding treatment that, objectively considered, would seem fair.

The term "entitled" has pejorative assumptions about what someone believes is owed to them, whether or not it is earned,[xxii] but feeling "unentitled" suggests that someone hesitates to seek or even accept benefits that they may in fact have earned. Among the *Women at Work* participants, the most common and damaging form of internalised bias – 'unentitled mindset' – emerged when asking for an increase in salary. The women described how they ruminated on questions such as, "Is now the right time?" and, "Is my case watertight?" A fog seemed to descend on normally decisive and confident women as they assessed their achievements and value. However strong their case seemed, they felt unsure whether their conclusions were sound. They shrewdly identified the problem, but self-awareness did not help them solve it:

> "I think inherently it's a different approach. You have to be 100% certain before you go for a hike in position or salary. You know whereas a lot of chaps just wing it and just take a punt at asking for a salary increase, yeah and I think that is sort of learnt behaviour." *Telecoms Manager, age 54.*

A 37-year-old high earning Director of Policy at a media firm, who fought to ensure her team were well paid, replied, when asked, "Are you comfortable negotiating your own pay?":

> "No, no, no! I have never been; I think I have tried once and just backed down immediately, yeah I just...I'm very awkward about the whole thing. I find it cringeworthy which is why I'm paid a lot less than I'm worth. I don't advise following my example!"

A 35-year-old woman Director of Data Management beautifully articulates the common problem of an 'unentitled mindset':

> "I was reading research that said women will only apply for a job if they can do 90% whereas a male might give it a go if they can do 30%. And I realised that's exactly how I approach asking for a pay rise. If I do ask, I'll ask for it six months too late because, first, it's taken me that long to believe I deserve it, and second, it takes me that long to gear myself up to have the conversation."

She continued by asking:

> "How do we support women? We need people who can train us and up-skill us in negotiating for ourselves. How can we just have a normal pay raise discussion and not low-ball ourselves? How can we go into these negotiations without feeling awkward about it, as though we were trying to find our way in the dark? You know this is a fundamental skill gap across all women and then probably even worse with someone like me, a woman of colour."

And she concluded with a wonderful description of the underlying emotions:

> "We emotionally work ourselves up because we don't like doing it, and we do it way too late, or not often enough, because we undervalue ourselves or we don't know how to call out our values. We also worry that we're being disruptive. We think we're putting our line manager potentially in an awkward position, so there is all this emotional analysis that goes into these conversations. As a result, we're leaving ourselves behind, whereas I think males feel automatically entitled to have those conversations whenever they like. I don't think we do."

Since 'unentitled mindset' is an example of internalised bias, the remedy for this is often focused on the individual's internal world. "Talk yourself up," or, "Tell yourself you're great," or, of course, "Lean in / Do your bit," are common advice to women who are reluctant to ask for more. In short, the message is that the problem

lies within the woman, and it is the woman who needs to be fixed.[xxiii] But it is important to remember that internalised bias does not arise in a vacuum or from innate psychology. It arises from experience. Asking for a raise, the women reported, was emotionally exhausting. The worry whether they seem to be "asking for too much" was confirmed by the much lower success rate of their requests, compared to those of men.[xxiv] Moreover, responses to their requests were often cool, or even punitive.[xxv] The processes itself was confusing, because managers sometimes simultaneously admitted and denied bias within the firm:

> "I was very uncomfortable about asking for a hike in pay. I kept thinking, 'Do I deserve this?' I made a list: I do x, y and z which demonstrates I'm at that higher level. There was no obvious distinction between me and two other people who were higher up. No distinction in terms of the tasks we do. My line manager kept saying to me, 'You are considered at that [higher] level. Everybody thinks of you at that level.' But I really had to push and threaten to leave before I got paid at that level. It took two years and my persistent requests and reminders of those requests before I finally got it." *Journalist, age 30.*

But it doesn't have to be that way, particularly if women had a "cheerleader" as a sounding board. A 41-year-old VP in an international communications firm explained:

> "I negotiated quite hard to come into the job and I made sure that I wasn't underselling myself and took some advice from people. I learnt one of those things that women don't often do, which is to be quite honest with some of my closest friends and colleagues about what I was earning and where I should be. Even though it's such a taboo topic, it really helped me. My sister works in HR which also helped but I felt like, even though I have been trained for many things in my job, I had to really search out advice on negotiation."

And a 37-year-old Head of Innovation and Delivery who was advised by her male mentor to ask herself, "What would a white man do?" said,

> "When I was offered [my current job] I kept telling myself, I am going to pretend I am a white middle class man. The way I handled the entire process was very different to how I normally would. I also had data. I told [my new employers], 'Here is my day rate, and multiply it by this many days, and that's what my salary should be. Take it or leave it.' And that's what I did. I did it not because I wanted the money, but I wanted to make a point about being valued and making sure I am not underselling myself as a woman. I also wanted to remind them that, without my saying that, I would have been underpaid."

Some women, however, baulked at the expectation that they should learn to comply with organisational norms (of "what a white male would do"):

> "You shouldn't have to behave like that in order for the system to recognise you. It's the system that needs to change to be more inclusive, to recognise more diverse characteristics, perspectives and backgrounds. That would support lots of different people, but certainly women who are a big minority group. The "lean in" message puts pressure on women to learn the ropes and change. But the system needs to be more thoughtful and more embracing of people and the value added by different people, and not make them push to be the same." *Head of Leadership, age 38.*

Indeed, "You shouldn't have to behave [according to familiar norms] for the system to recognize you." While diversity is, as we have seen, valued by organisations, and while many biases have receded, there are certain situations in which they (re)emerge, both in the person requesting better terms of employment and the person (or people) considering the request.

Asking for a pay raise is, stereotypically, a gendered situation, with men thought to do it well and women not, with men generally feeling more comfortable than women in making a demand on their own behalf. Such biases, in most contexts, are suppressed, but when there is ambiguity – how to perform the negotiation ("finding your way in the dark"), whom to involve, and the range of possible outcomes – then stereotypes are more likely to be activated.[xxvi] In this way we can see that an "internalised" bias is not a personal issue but emerges when 1) people engage in a process suggestive of discarded stereotypes and 2) when that process is also shrouded in mystery. People who are, or believe they are, "in the know" are comfortable asking for a pay increase, whether they are female or male. Through the valuable contributions of the men participating in this project, we can see that when men are mystified by the processes of pay negotiations, they too are affected by residual stereotypes (of the confident, go-getting male), in the same way as women. One 35-year-old man explained,

> "I found the process very difficult. It never felt like the right time. I always felt that in the reviews, those decisions had already been made. It felt like you had very little say in that process. I found that really difficult. I always find it hard to ask for money, which is weird as part of my job is negotiating. But when it comes to myself I find it difficult."

Mystique gives rise to self-doubt, and de-mystification – information about the procedure, the parameters and the process – yields confidence.

Clarifying a process promotes equal opportunity.[xxvii] Until organisations implement such clarity, however, the untitled mindset, along with the gender pay gap, will persist. Correcting this – which would be neither costly nor difficult – takes on a

special urgency in the wake of the pandemic, as recent data shows employees are more likely to harbour an 'unentitled mindset', believing they should be "grateful for having a job" and should be thankful rather than demanding.[xxviii]

Another common manifestation of what is thought to be internalised bias, primarily affecting women, is *imposter syndrome*, the uneasy idea that you lack the ability to fulfill the role you are in, and the concern that at any moment you will be exposed as an imposter. While it might seem like a more generalised version of the 'unentitled mindset', imposter syndrome had, among the participants, a very different impact, and that impact was largely positive. Whether or not imposter syndrome had a positive impact depended on the workplace environment and level of support.

26% (17) of the participants mentioned, unprompted (we did not ask a question about imposter syndrome or at any point initiate the use of this term), a time they had felt like an "imposter" and spoke about imposter syndrome. Research elsewhere shows that people who feel "they are not the sort of person who would succeed" are more likely to believe that their success is down to luck, or a fluke, that their ability is not up to standard and that they are not really the competent person other people see. The danger of imposter syndrome is that it undermines ambition and drive. It increases anxiety generally, and in the *Women at Work* project, some cases of imposter syndrome led to panic attacks or other phobias, such as fear of flying.

> "There were a lot of things that were holding me back. I remember very vividly some of the self-confidence issues I had. I wasn't really sure I should be where I was or that I deserved to be there...I had imposter syndrome throughout the first two years of being in sales. Being uncomfortable in that position as well just added to that. There was harassment and misogyny there that I have never encountered to that degree again." *Senior Marketing Manager age 30.*

Imposter syndrome could also be experienced in more positive work environments, and here women were able to make good use of it:

> "I'm in my third year now and I think the imposter syndrome is still there but hopefully lessening. I had it so strongly and my boss was incredibly supportive. He was a very kind and empathetic person, very much a caring person and very understanding. I felt so inadequate and he used to say to me, 'Why do you think I employed you if I don't think you're good enough?' He's like, 'Are you saying I don't know what I'm doing?" and I used to laugh, like, 'Yeah probably.' It's taken some time to really feel I deserve to be in this role and should be there." *Secondary School Assistant Principal, age 33.*

Sometimes in imposter syndrome there is a mismatch between a comfortable persona and what persona is effective at meetings, in presentations or in discussions.

> "I felt like an imposter not because of my ideas or ability but because of who I was. I felt small and strange. I had to re-think myself, not my work. So, how do I make myself heard, ensure I am effective, while also being comfortable with how I do it?" *Architect, age 43.*

More experience and the consequent opportunity for broader self-reflection occasionally led to surprising cases of late-onset imposter syndrome. Some women explained that in their 20s and early 30s they had "too much confidence" and did not experience imposter syndrome until they had established a reputation and felt the weight of others' expectations. The concern was, "Will I disappoint people who believe in me?" or, "Do people expect too much of me?"

> "I think it's sort of worked on two levels. I was naturally quite self-confident. I have always been quite eloquent. I grew up in a very feisty family. I could stand my ground. I was confident in that way. But underneath, which not everybody saw, I was incredibly hard on myself, and quite anxious about whether I was doing well enough. While that propelled me in my 20's, I have been plagued with imposter syndrome later on, wondering whether I am improving enough. I didn't have any sense of entitlement. I had to kind of graft to get where I did, and the more you're working in different working environments with very different people, the more I wondered, 'How much do I really know?' I was very smart on some levels and not smart on others and I knew this, and I've grappled with that for a lot of my life." *Senior VP, Global Media Firm, age 41.*

For many women, the pressure to demonstrate value and excellence increased along with their seniority, as a 38-year-old Lead of Brand explained:

> "Earlier on in my career I didn't really think about the barriers to women at all. I had a good education, and it hadn't come up much. But 10 years into my career – so about 10 years ago, I had this 'aha moment,' because you look at the numbers, and you see women being squeezed out. As you get more senior, things get harder and the stakes get higher. People drop out of the system or the system pushes them out. Women feel they need to do better, and worry they're not doing enough. They step up to it, and do really well, because that's the survival mechanism, but inside there's doubt and you wonder if you really belong."

This suggests that having women "squeezed out" at mid-stage puts pressure on their confidence. Sometimes the way forward was to move to a different organisation or to start a business of their own:

> "The most exciting career move I ever made...has defined who I am because, finally, I could be myself at work. It was a massive realisation that you could

> [be yourself at work]. Other organisations talk loads about brands and say that being yourself is being your best, but [in my own business], suddenly I realised what that meant, because I could totally be me at work." *Company Director, age 40.*

> "It's important to me that I am not in a position where there's something that makes me uncomfortable in a company I work for. When there is, I leave...I need to work in a company that allows me to work in the way I want to work." *Advertising Producer, age 32.*

Imposter syndrome is potentially – but not necessarily – destructive. The fear of being exposed as inadequate can prevent someone from taking on new challenges. What was distinctive in all cases of imposter syndrome in the Women at Work project is that the women worked through it; they did not shy away from new challenges. Instead, it motivated women to meet challenges, to recognise her own uneven abilities and work to develop skills she felt she lacked.[xxix] In the meantime, they refused to be limited by it. Several women shared the determination one 38-year-old Director of Innovation articulated:

> "I won't let it be an evil voice in my head...It won't keep me down."

Instead, women embraced a capability mindset, whereby they learned to work to their strengths and dedicated themselves to learning what they didn't yet know. This process of overcoming imposter syndrome could be lengthy and challenging, but all the participating women won out in the end:

> "My initial response was, 'Oh my God, they gave me this massive job, and I *sort of* know why they gave it to me, but even today I think there were people who would have been well more qualified than me. I was 30 and I'd just been made a director in a big organisation. I felt very proud, but at the same time had a huge dose of what you would call on paper 'imposter syndrome.' I kept waking up, wondering, 'Did they actually give me this, or did I have this dream, and I'm going to wake up.' I was as green as anything, I was learning like crazy, but I didn't deal well with it initially. There were lots of people I was managing and I was tiptoeing around them because I didn't allow myself to be a genuine leader. I had more than a year of being uncomfortable before saying to myself, 'You have the chance to be different. You don't have to carry this baggage.' I thought, 'I'm going to be your leader. I'm not going to be uncomfortable about this. And if you don't like it, it's going to be something you deal with not me.' Which doesn't mean I know everything, or never need help. But that was quite defining for me, and every job I go into, I actually make a very conscious choice of setting aside that baggage of self-doubt. I don't need to carry that with me, and that's been quite deliberate, so most days I kind of pinch myself and go, 'Wow, you know, I have this amazing job." *Chief People Officer, age 43.*

> "I have spent a lot of my time trying to think, 'Oh god I can't wait until I get better at this. I can't wait until I improve this. I can't wait until this happens.' But I don't want to spend my whole life not being able to wait for the next thing. I want to enjoy this bit. But if I say in my head, 'I can't wait until I'm more confident at line managing this department, or, 'I can't wait until I'm more confident at dealing with student behaviour,' I know, when I get more confident, there will be another challenge. I'll take on a new role, so there will never be a place that I'm thinking I'm now nailing it perfectly. I'm trying to enjoy the challenges, because being challenged is where I want to be." *School Assistant Principal, age 33.*

When accompanied by a capability mindset – the belief that ability is acquired and earned rather than fixed – imposter syndrome does not hold women back. The route through this "plague of self-doubt" as one woman described it, involves growing confidence through meeting and enjoying challenges.

Imposter syndrome is not restricted to women, and there is some debate as to whether more women experience it than men. Among the men I interviewed, being under-qualified for a position represented an opportunity rather than a threat. "It's an opportunity to show what I'm capable of," one 35-year-old man explained. Others described something similar to imposter syndrome, albeit with a somewhat different slant. A 35-year-old Creative Producer explained:

> It's so easy to not want to put yourself in risky or vulnerable situations. Teaching myself to do that, forcing myself to do it and know I can do it well, are challenges I am most proud of meeting. And I think the flip side of that is I have to admit that I've sometimes trapped myself in places where I just feel comfortable with work – or with relationships -because I don't like putting myself in vulnerable positions. There were times where I kind of restricted myself because I didn't want to put myself in situations where I might not be good at something."

The emphasis is not on being exposed as a fraud but as revealing oneself as vulnerable. This may go some way towards accounting for the (more commonly male) bravado style. Perhaps this subtle but significant difference results from different ways men and women are treated in the workplace when someone thought they were underperforming. One of our male participants described his observation of these differences, revealed to him when a female friend of his joined the firm:

> "She was complaining about some of our suppliers, saying they were rude and patronising. And I was so shocked as I thought these suppliers were great, and then I had a freelancer who said the same thing. I suddenly realised that these suppliers talked to these two women in a completely

different way. When I think of a gender imbalance I always think of it being men doing it to women, but I've realised it can be women to women as well."

Women experience more disrespect from senior people (in this case senior women), and learn that they are always vulnerable to being exposed as "not good enough." Everyday experiences teach them to enact their competence, nonetheless, so though imposter syndrome affects more women, it is possibly less damaging to women than to men.

4.6 Action points

The *Women at Work* project points to how mentors, HR personnel, coaches and informal support groups (either within an organisation or outside it) can effectively address the widespread issue of imposter syndrome. The most effective approach is to frame imposter syndrome as a common, even a normal stage in anyone's career, rather than an individual pathology or weakness. Support for imposter syndrome requires a capability mindset: "You don't have to know how to do the job before you start it. You can learn."

Here are additional action points that emerge from this section of the report:

- Cultures that are uncomfortable for women have a long-term negative impact on confidence, and women need resources and procedures for managing these conditions. It is essential to provide coaching for both women themselves and to empower organisations in their desire for change.

- It is important to measure what matters, and assess the effectiveness of diversity programmes and policies. Dignity at work and discrimination policies and diversity training are sometimes implemented defensively, with box ticking or training that is an end in itself. There is little evidence to suggest that such policies and training yield results.[xxx] Follow-on procedures are necessary to gather information to assess how people in an organisation experience the implementation of these policies, and to track impact or lack of impact.

- It is essential to make organisations aware of residual gender stereotypes that are likely to constrain both employer and employee in regard to promotion and pay issues. This report shows that many gender stereotypes are receding, but some rear up where there is ambiguity about a specific process, such as negotiating pay. Clarity about whom to ask, what to ask for, and what outcome is possible have been shown to improve fairness. In light of current research on women's and men's

different approaches to requesting increased pay for themselves,[xxxi] organisations need to clarify the process for such requests and monitor their processes for increasing women's pay and promoting women.

- It is essential to provide "job health" clinics to help women assess the costs and benefits of changing their jobs or starting their own business. These options, however important they are for individual women, should not be cited as reasons why an organisation does not need to change.

- It is essential to provide exercises and sounding boards for dealing with experiences of bias, and pathways for redress or complaint. In many workplaces this approach is most effective if appreciation is also shown for the general genuine acknowledgement of the value of women to the firm.

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Findings Part Three: Sticking points

There remains a conundrum that challenges job satisfaction, career identity and status. The emotional absorption, responsibility and commitment of motherhood remain sticking points in women's career progression. This was a concern for all the participants, whether or not they were mothers. Younger women who did not yet have children ruminated over the uncertain path ahead. They looked to some future when they would reach a safe or secure or sufficiently high place in the working world, where they could have children without making the career sacrifices that would be so difficult for them.

Securing a "safe high-level perch" in their career initially sounds realistic. However, after hearing the stories of the women who are mothers and the women who were pregnant at the time of the interviews, the imagined "high position, where [they could] breathe" contained elements of wishful thinking. These women register anxiety about how motherhood might impact their career:

> "You're always second-guessing yourself. After all, what if your brain does all of a sudden turn to dust? You don't know how you're going to react. You don't know how you are going to feel. You don't know, you might want to come back after two weeks. You might want to take a whole year off." *Senior Legal Counsel, age 37.*

Another woman who was pregnant at the time of the interview, had, throughout her career, "been forward looking, with a plan, maybe not always in the specifics but in terms of goals." Now her future career is hedged by questions:

> "I really don't know how I'm going to feel when I have to make a decision on going back to work and what I want to do. So I think that... it's really hard to say how I feel. I think that it's I sort of...I feel I don't... some of the conversations I have at the moment... I'm in a bit of a weird situation...what I think the plan would be if I wasn't going off on maternity leave, they would want me to run the department...But then at the same time, they are dealing with that fact... I'm not going to be here, so I don't know what will happen when I'm off and what anything will look like when I get back, because there aren't really any reassurances around that and I also think that it's quite difficult at the moment because businesses are going through such kind of massive changes, so you know I can't really understand the implications that it will have."

Potentially difficult choices and compromises cast a long shadow:

> "There are people I work with who have children and I am seeing them not faring particularly well in restructuring processes and redundancy processes. Even if people are trying very hard, the business moves quickly. If they are [on maternity leave for] the whole year, the business almost looks entirely different in that whole year and I just don't feel like they have had a fair shot...So when I think about taking maternity leave, I worry I won't know how to cope with that. I am excited by change, but if change plus maternity meant I was pushed down or out, I don't know how I'd cope with that. I sometimes see that happening, which is what I mean when I say they're not faring well. In my view they're not being given a fair chance." *Head of Talent, age 29.*

It helped to have senior women available to discuss strategic timing:

> "I was promoted after four years, but family – you know, I knew I wanted a family at some point. I got some really good advice from a female colleague which was about career progression and actually thinking about how will you fit in your personal timeline, your work timeline, and when is the right time. It was really good advice about when is the right time to start a family, when is it going to fit in." *Police Inspector, age 30.*

Accommodating motherhood and high goals and work ethic was always a challenge:

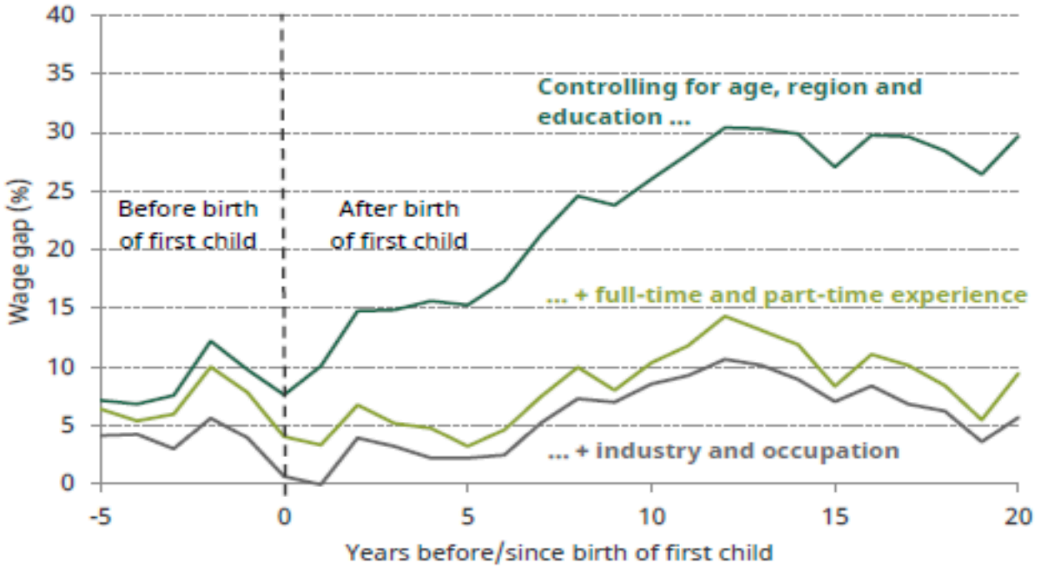
> "I have been encouraged on a number of occasions to say that I am full-time and working a four day week and doing 10 hour days as opposed to eight hour days. But, I'm not comfortable doing that because all of my other colleagues work 10 hour days and they still work a fifth day. I have made the personal decision that I'm not happy to do that. And I'd rather have the 20% pay cut even though I'm happy to take calls from clients on my days off. But I don't pick up everything, and it's important to me to have that clear space." *Senior Engineer, age 39.*

> "Earlier this year the institution asked me to become a Vice President and I turned them down. I just don't have time, and I can't accept anything else in my life right now." *Regional Director, age 39*

2.1.2 Parenthood leads to a rapid increase in the gender wage gap

Using the same data, Costa Dias et al. (2018) model gender differences in wage progression in years since the birth of the first child, including controls for industry and occupation and differences in full and part-time labour market experience (Figure 3). They find that a substantial wage gap exists before childbirth (about 10% overall and slightly less when industry and occupation are taken into account), but that the gap increases rapidly after the birth of a woman's first child.

Figure 3. Gender wage gap by time to/since birth of first child, controlling for association between wages and other characteristics



Source: BHPS 1991-2008 and Understanding Society 2009-15 presented in (Costa Dias et al., 2018)

Monica Costa Dias. 2019. Women's Progression in the Workplace. Institute for Fiscal Studies. p.15. Uploaded 12/01/2021.

Awareness of the challenging choices ahead delayed some women's decision

to have a child. As women sought career security and status, the delay sometimes impacted on fertility that declines throughout the 30s. Five women we spoke to reported that they had used IVF. One woman, currently in the process of IVF, is still facing significant personal challenges and grief.[xxxii]

Whatever their status or seniority, the priorities, demands and perspective of motherhood impacted on women's careers. Several decided that motherhood was not consistent with their careers:

> "I don't know how I would do it with children. I honestly don't know how I would make that work without having to give up another thing... I'm not really sure if I want children anyway... but if I did, if I really did, then I think it would bother me for sure. [The work I'm doing that I love] wouldn't have been possible, wouldn't be possible..." *Head of Partnerships, age 35.*

At the same time that some women conclude motherhood and career satisfaction and success are not fully compatible, they experience bias because they are *not* mothers:

> "I know when people look at someone like me, it's very easy to assume that she isn't married, she doesn't have kids, she is just focused on her career. And it actually isn't like that. It's not that. It's not by design. It's by default. So when I look at other people who seem to have it all, I know they might not have got to this point in their careers as quickly as I have. But perhaps they are not that far behind, and they have also married and had kids. For a while that made me quite anxious, but I have come to terms with it. Everyone has got their own path." *Director of Tech and Analytics, age 39.*

5.1 Expectation bias and the flexibility penalty

In this section I look at the hit women's careers take when they opt for flexible working. The term "flexible" however is an odd word to use in a context in which women see "military precision" (a term used by 5 women, and a sentiment expressed by many more) as necessary for organisational survival, and where "one thing going wrong will bring down the entire structure." In this context, flexible working simply means non-standard hours in the office. Sometimes this means working fewer hours, but for many participants in the *Women at Work* project, it means working full-time, with one or two days working from home, or working compressed hours (a full week's hours compressed into four days). Sometimes it simply means leaving the office at the designated end of hours, so not working

overtime.

In the previous section I described biases about how women should dress and speak, and whether they merited authority. These biases were displayed by some co-workers, but generally were not amplified by a "pack mentality", where others joined in. There are, however, still biases towards women that are widespread and, unfortunately, widely adopted.

As the women participating in the *Women at Work* project went on or returned from maternity leave, or as they looked at other women in the organisation returning from maternity leave, they reported what can be described as *expectation bias* – a bias, sometimes overt and sometimes implicit, about what to expect of someone returning from maternity leave.

On returning from maternity leave, women found that others had lower expectations of their value, and behaved accordingly. Their access to clients, accounts, and responsibilities were suddenly restricted. They were not given promotions or pay increases. As a 35-year-old Head of Policy at a technology firm said,

> "When men come back married and with children, they actually get promoted and people looked favourably on them. But when women go off to have children, there is a subtle difference in how they are kind of viewed. They lose their position in the pecking order."

Sometimes the shift is not at all subtle. The quote below provides a passionate articulation of the problem, how both women and men express the bias, and how attempts to draw attention to it are silenced:

> "I sat around the table at a finance leadership team meeting where we were discussing our talent review, where we assess people's potentials and think about making best use of their skills. There are two other women in the room of twenty people, but I'm the only working mum. Of course most of them have children, but most of them have got wives who don't work and look after the kids. I'm there, and we're talking about talent succession and planning and people moving around, and there's this exchange: 'Such and such is coming back. Somebody said could she do this role well.' And the retort is, 'Yeah, but she's coming back from maternity leave.' The tone was disgusting. I looked at my boss and he just looked at me almost to say, "Don't rise to it, don't rise to it." And I could feel my blood boiling. It's as if she just can't be in the running because she's returning from maternity leave. So what if she's returning from maternity leave? She'll probably be on fire because she will have learnt to manage priorities, and do things quicker and faster than anybody in this room, because that's what happens. Suddenly your organisation skills and your prioritisation skills, and your time management

> go way up. You don't need to go on a course because you've just been thrown into the deep end, and your skills are red-hot at that point. But that doesn't get recognised. Instead, it is deemed a weakness and a reason to not bring somebody in, someone who previously had been seen as star talent. Now suddenly she is not worthy even to be discussed. And I am sure that happens in a lot of the board rooms and leadership rooms and discussions." *Chief Operating Officer, age 44.*

Another participant described the sudden shift in status when she announced she would need maternity leave:

> "As soon as they knew I was going on maternity leave, they stopped having conversations about promotion. They told me, 'Now's not the time.' Instead, they would see how they could ease me back into work. I resisted. I insisted that I still wanted to progress, to be marketing director at some stage. But I know I will have to join another company to do that. Conversations about promotion for me are now a non-starter, because I've been on maternity leave." *Head of Innovation, Retail Company, age 33.*

Expectation bias strikes when a woman, going on or returning from maternity leave, shifts from being seen as a key player to a marginal one. Women who had children experienced this bias, but all women noticed and were affected by this bias. Younger women who did not yet have children experienced this bias towards others as a warning to them. Women who did not expect to have children assessed their choices in the context of this bias: "I never could do what I do if I had children." As a result, when younger women looked for role models, they reported a scarcity of senior women who had children:

> "I think probably the issue is there are quite a few senior women who don't have children, so that always kind of makes it seem that you're senior women but you're in that position because you don't have children, as opposed to having gone through that cycle of maternity leave and having children." *Financial Director, age 36.*

Expectation bias is sometimes presented as protectiveness ("Don't worry about promotion at this point. You have enough on your plate.") Sometimes it was used to test the commitment of a new mother, for example, by challenging her refusal to comply with last minute scheduling changes. On returning from maternity leave women were sometimes beset by challenges to test the extent of their availability, and availability at any time was seen as a proxy for commitment.

Single mothers are particularly vulnerable to unanticipated schedule changes. They are also hit more by the expense of childcare, particularly since free hours of childcare are not available until a child reaches the age of 3 years.

> "Being a single mother, there is obviously nobody else to pick up the slack so it can be difficult to try and climb the ladder when you don't have all the facilities to just focus on work." *Public Sector Worker, age 31.*

Many women felt uneasy about disclosing these stressors:

> "If you've got children, you're not supposed to speak about them. It's basically...you have to ignore the fact that you have children or not speak about them, and just live your life as though you don't have them, and yet actually, lots of women do have children, and a lot of men have children, as well." *Employment lawyer, age 55.*

There were several exceptions, and these should be highlighted because they indicate what is possible as long as an organisation acknowledges both the difficulty women face in returning from maternity leave, and their value to the organisation. Among our participants, such creative responsiveness was more common in (though not restricted to) the public sector, including local government and the police, and in other organisations that had a higher number of senior women who were mothers.

> "I was put forward for a high potential scheme twice, but didn't have the confidence to go for it. I had a tough time returning to work after maternity leave and then I had some personal circumstances where I ended up becoming a single parent to an 18-month-old child. I thought a promotion wasn't doable then, because we have to work shifts and I don't have childcare for evenings and weekends. But my supervisor really pushed me to go for it, and really pushed the organisation to honour its claim to have roles advertised for single parents, who don't have the same ability as others to work shifts. So I applied for promotion two minutes before the deadline and got offered the role I am in now, which is flexible. So it's a bit of a strange road, really. First I kept myself back because of low confidence, then my situation seemed to make promotion less likely, but then my (male) superior was rooting for me, pushing me to apply, and it's better than I could ever have hoped for." *Police Sergeant, age 36.*

Male cheerleaders were important, but what was inspirational was seeing senior women who appeared to thrive, and whom one respected.

> "A lot of our management team are women, and that inspires you to get promoted because you see people doing it and being really nice human beings and being kind and not having to be ruthless to get promoted, just being a good person and being good at your job. That's what I look for. The people that I respect are the people that always seem to be kind and nice people." *Senior Government Worker, age 40.*

5.2 Is legislation enough?

Since 2014, legislation has been in place that requires organisations to consider requests for flexible work,[xxxiii] and there has been a consultation process for revising and updating the legislation[xxxiv] to remove the condition that an employee serve for 26 consecutive weeks before an employer is required to consider a flexible work request. A common view is that this legislation protects women from being disadvantaged by flexible working. A 54-year-old Director of Communications said:

> "I was the first person [to ask for flexible working]. I knew – and to a certain extent when you go part-time you know this – my career path might be quite limited. That's just what happens, and I still felt it when I moved back to more full-time work. But what's changed is, there is less stigma associated with part-time or flexi-time, so people are asking for it without feeling compromised. I think that's the difference."

The 50-something participants described the career penalties they had experienced even though they worked full-time, as flexibility simply allowed them to work some of those full-time hours from home:

> "I was always leaving at whatever the time was I had to be back for my nanny. Magically, that's only the time when things happen. In their view, you're just 'not around' if you don't linger over time. If I ever raised the question about, 'Why have I not had it? Why have they?' I got, 'Well, perhaps because you weren't around'. People seem to constantly assume you're not around, if you are not there the entire time." *Lawyer, age 58.*

So even full-time work, when done flexibly, incurs a career penalty. And this penalty lasts longer than the maternal crunch decade – the 8 to 10 years of intensive parenting years.

> "It doesn't go away. It's very difficult. It's very, very difficult, I think, to recover from that. Obviously, you recover to some extent, but can't make up the ground completely, unless, I think, certainly in my sort of business, unless you are willing to just do nothing but put your foot to the gas and be everywhere at night and schmooze and do all that stuff, and I know I haven't. There was quite a long time where I had a go at it, and then in the end, I just gave up the fight. I mean, I have a child with additional needs as well, and it makes life quite complicated. I just thought, I don't have any energy for it." *Employment Lawyer, age 55.*

Have things improved? Did the mid-stage career women in the Women at Work project experience *sufficiently* less "stigma" than the older women from flexible working?

The employment lawyer who participated in the *Women at Work* project thinks not:

> "All the problems that happen at those pinch points, if a woman decides to leave work to have a baby, the negotiations about coming back and how that's supposed to work, I don't think have changed much at all, and women are still getting sacked the minute they fall pregnant, and/or been made redundant whilst they're on maternity leave. That's all still incredibly prevalent, even though we have legislation."

This penalty is incurred even when the so-called part-time are virtually full- time:

> "I tried to work 80%, and it was impossible. They didn't adjust my objectives or my targets or my responsibilities. So I was just drowning. But all I wanted [was] to spend a little time at home with the kids, like pick my kid up from school one afternoon a week. I decided as a compromise I'll do my 100% job but just don't email me after lunch on a Friday because I don't have childcare. It was completely unsustainable to work part-time, because they were sure I was dropping the ball just because of that. But the only difference is that I don't answer emails on a Friday afternoon." *Head of Leadership, age 38.*

Some workplaces, the women report, are positive about flexible working. One manager said, "You work four days a week but you offer full-time value." Another said, "Even if you're here only three days a week, it is your complete brain working on the project." Some workplaces take this line, particularly when they have a full complement of senior women who have been through that parental crunch time themselves. Yet "some" is not enough.

Managers still think in terms of full-time value, when what women need is the opportunity to contribute and progress, but not "just as though" they work five or six or seven days a week. As one 45-year-old VP said:

> "Working parents need this. It's not a perk. It's not some little extra. It's not a lovely luxury. It's to try and make our lives physically possible. But it's hard explaining that."

It is also difficult for women themselves to see how crucial this will be. Predicting the impact of motherhood is not easy:

> "Because, you know, I'd spent 24/7 with her when I carried her. I spent 24/7 with her for another nine months on maternity leave, and suddenly you're away from her. Nobody prepares you for that and also nobody recognises that emotional rollercoaster you're on. You're back in the office. You're back in that mode. Things have changed, and you're just expected to slot straight back in. I did have a supportive boss, but I totally underestimated that emotional rollercoaster when I went back." *Chief Operating Officer, age 45.*

The several references to a "supportive boss" reminded me of the references I often heard in the 1994 study, when women referred to a husband as "good" for doing some share of childcare and domestic organisation. When a partner was "good", a woman felt she was "lucky". Having a supportive boss is desirable, but it should not be a matter of mere luck. Women's career trajectories should not depend on the special occasional kindness of bosses alone. Bosses need support to be supportive. As the employment lawyer quoted earlier pointed out, they need time (and coaching and training) to understand the needs of their employees. They need support in identifying danger points, such as someone paid to work four days a week being required or expected to do work that can only be done in a five day working week.

An organisation is not required to grant flexible working; legislation only compels an organisation to consider a request for flexibility. In one medium sized technology company, an engineer, now age 40, requested permission to work four days a week on her return from maternity leave. The request was denied on the grounds that spending time with a child was comparable to any other out of work interest or hobby. Since employees asking for flexibility to go mountain climbing or biking would not be granted permission, an employee with a young child would not be granted permission either. The double whammy for this participant was that her husband was also denied permission by his employer to work four days a week. She explained:

> "They asked inappropriate and irrelevant questions when they were considering my request to work four days a week. They wanted to know how often my mother would be on childcare duty, and what emergency arrangements for childcare were. They wanted to make sure I would be available to clients pretty much all the time. When they denied my request, I applied to another firm, and I accepted less than I was worth because I was so grateful that they wanted me, even as a four day a week employee. So the treatment I got from one employer then impacted on how I approached negotiations with my new employer. There was both the short and longer term hit to my income."

In short, legislation does not offer sufficient protection to women's career progression, particularly as many organisations continue to be biased towards the full employment model. This experience can then trigger the 'unentitled mindset', whereby having a reasonable employer is "lucky" and she should not expect fair pay. An employment lawyer explained,"

> "When we try to factor [for example flexible working/maternity provision] in, and the difficulties... the response I get is, 'Well, there's legislation to protect against that. They're not going to have any difficulty...' to which I guffaw loudly. So yes, the legislation is to protect and level the playing field of people [with different needs] in the workplace. But we have to ask, and we have to assess, and we have to monitor the question, "Does it do that?"

Not often enough, according to the participants in the *Women at Work* project. The flexibility penalty has a long reach.

> "It's essentially six years since I took leave and I sometimes think, 'Gosh, is that the price I paid for having three kids?' My career took six years to get back to where it had been. It wouldn't be truthful to say that was only because of barriers put ahead of me, it was also barriers in my own confidence. Going back into the workplace with such young kids and my husband doing a demanding job – I went in at one level and then when I returned had to work my way up to where I want to be, where I was years ago." *Director of Fundraising, age 43.*

> "I feel like I am maybe five years behind [because of my flexible working]." *VP, Global Media Firm, age 41.*

> "After maternity leave you get reset, going almost back to the start in terms of your career experience. I had the courage to speak out, and I was sort of fobbed off. It didn't make me want to speak out again and I'm sure it didn't do my reputation any good." *Head of Leadership, age 37.*

Some organisations are working to correct this with proactive initiatives:

> "At the moment they have put me on a – well, they call it kangaroo coaching, which is like coaching for people to go on maternity leave, and to entice me back they have made that commitment to me. So I do think that I definitely will go back. Basically, I've had like coaching 1 to 1 with a coach helping me think, 'What do I need to do before I go off?' and, 'What's my ambition?' and, 'What do I want to do for my team?' and all of this kind of thing. And then you have another session before you come back, to coach you back into how you want to do it. That probably reassured me of being kind of valued in the organisation." *Head of Publicity, age 36.*

What is needed is a paradigm shift where flexible working is normalised and mainstreamed. As one 37-year-old company lawyer explained:

> "I sit on the women's committee in my firm. It's not about promoting women or men, it's about genuine equality. This requires a cultural change and that cultural change needs to start with men and women at organisations, and if we do that, the organisation will thrive. Now there are board members that work from home twice a week. One board member (a man) does a four day week. We have proved that flexible working is possible. So I'm not scared of having an awkward conversation for what I want from my career and how I see that working to combine my private life and my family and my career."

When flexible working is part of mainstream work, it will be possible to implement the next necessary change – conceiving roles that are not full-time, but that allow career growth. One 37-year-old strategist who has already worked to shape laws and policies explained:

> "At work there has to be a revolutionary attitude that goes beyond flexible working. Things like working from home, or working very differently, and being comfortable with that. Somebody might have a huge amount to give on a specific project but that doesn't mean they need to do everything. They might have a huge amount to give on strategy, but that doesn't mean they need to be involved in every type of strategy across the company. In a lot of companies, to do well, to get promoted to that next level, you need to be involved in a range of things. You need to fit some idea of "a company person." Many companies demand your whole self. There needs to be a kind of cultural switch, so that someone can be very, very valuable, but that doesn't mean you have to do everything. I think that's important if women who have children are able to avoid losing out, losing out for years, even decades, because they needed to adjust their lives during that 5 or 7 year time when their children are most demanding." *Head of Policy, age 35.*

The public sector was generally better at providing roles with responsibility and opportunity for growth that also accommodated the realities of personal life at mid-stage career, thereby providing examples of the ideal response to those crucial years.

> "Moving to the public sector I felt supported, not so much through maternity leave but the ability to get on despite not being 80 hours a week. It was the sort of environment where there were women who had primary school children, teenage children, grown-up children in university, who have been working parents, who could see you come back a year after maternity leave and perfectly capable of going for promotion at that point, if not more so, because you have been through the mill. And that kind of public sector environment is a really critical difference in those early years. I saw it with

> my friends who worked in the private sector, where they did have to take a step back in their careers. I knew here I could still be really valuable and still have quite a senior role without being physically present in the office, you know 24/7. This is really critical in the public sector and really critical at that career stage." *Chief Architect, age 45.*

The most positive experiences in the private sector were from women who worked alongside many other working mothers:

> "From talking to my peers in other places, it's clear this company is way ahead in terms of the effect maternity leave has on your career. My two direct bosses are both women and both have children, and then a lot of my peers on the same level have children. So the support system the company has for having a child is possibly one of the best that I've heard off within my field of work. It's just part of normal life, and doesn't hold you back." *Producer, age 32.*

Given the challenge, it would make sense for women to be less hard on themselves, as though a stalled career trajectory is their personal deficit. But the attitude expressed below, that "I am not quite enough" remains a common theme:

> "People can advance and still feel like they aren't as advanced as they should be. You think this yourself and you think other people think this of you. This is without really any consideration that maybe life gets in the way. You might get ill or your child might get ill or your mother might get dementia. There might be periods in your life where you have had to lean out, but you're ready to lean in now, and because you haven't reached those lofty ambitions at 45, it doesn't mean that you're somehow a failure. I'm feeling that quite keenly now, that kind of reaching that middle-stage part of my career, where I thought all the hard work would come home to roost. I feel like I'm trying to justify why I haven't achieved higher and more by this age, despite being a parent and despite having had two parents whom I had to look after, so that's kind of another struggle that I wasn't expecting to have at this stage. But it's the challenge of my work that keeps me going and I feel that kind of buzz in applying my intelligence to a technical problem." *Director of Fundraising, age 45.*

Another common theme was guilt:

> "I tend to feel guilty every single day for not being a good enough mum to my boy or not being fair on my husband. I feel guilty about spending so much time at work but then I feel guilty about not dedicating enough time to work. Yeah, I think everybody feels like that, don't they?" *Police Officer, age 40.*

However, as I will show later in the report, these challenges are not impediments to satisfaction. Guilt did not appear to have the career shaping force that is had for the women participating in my 1994 study.[xxxv]

5.3 Gender division of labour in the home

Why am I focusing on motherhood and career progression, when both women and men are parents? The answer is that, for all the change there has been, motherhood affects women in ways it does not affect men.

As one employment lawyer said:

> "Lots of women have children, and a lot of men have children, as well. It's quite interesting where I work. You wouldn't notice, really, particularly, that the men with children have additional responsibilities, but you can feel the anxiety among the women. These are quite well-regarded women who by hook or by crook are managing to achieve in quite a difficult environment."

Sharing the tasks of parenting, the hands-on care, the domestic organisation, the engagement with those who care for a child while parents are at work, was a huge issue in my 1994 study. Women were still doing most of it, and felt that they should be doing it all. They felt guilty when they didn't, and angry when they did. As mothers, they felt negatively judged by other women –by their children's friends' mothers, by their mothers-in-law, by neighbours, and sometimes by siblings. They spoke about being "lucky" if they had a "good" partner who "helped" them with the domestic duties, including childcare. Other research at that time also found that working women were highly conflicted about delegating childcare tasks, either because they felt their own role, and locus of social power (as mothers), would be diluted, or because they were anxious about "asking too much" from a partner.[xxxvi]

There has been significant progress since 1994 in men's contributions and in expectations of what partnership and fatherhood requires. Most of the women in the *Women at Work* project who had children or stepchildren, nonetheless, reported that more childcare tasks fell to them.

The women who participated in the *Women at Work* project were driven, ambitious and independent, and their careers formed a substantial part of their identity. It is then not surprising that they chose partners who contributed significantly to caring labour. But this contribution was not (with two exceptions) equal. Sometimes the balance was adjusted by the most common means of negotiation in marriage – arguments:

> "When I worked three days a week, I started massively suffering from anxiety – which was a first for me. I felt guilty. I felt like I had given 100% to my job before [my child] and when I was off on maternity leave I gave 100% to her, and then I expected myself to give both 100% to both. I felt like I was doing both really badly. It didn't help that when I was on maternity leave, I had been doing the lion's share of all the house stuff, as well as looking after [our baby]. It didn't help that I was the main breadwinner. I was the lead on everything – like the mortgage and everything, so everything just felt like it fell to me. I think that was probably the toughest year ever. I remember ringing my friend once on the way home from work and just thinking – well, plus you're sleep-deprived – and I remember calling my friend because my head and my heart were going to explode. And she was like, 'Yeah, well?'
>
> My husband is amazing but I just felt like his life was the same as before our baby was born. He got up, went to work, came home, cuddled the baby and went to bed. And then suddenly I was doing everything in between but I think that was definitely crunch time. There were a lot of arguments with him. Though I guess I helped him see – rather than made him see – we needed to do things more – we both needed to share that responsibility. And the juggle got better." *Company Director, age 40.*

Imbalance persisted, however, even when a fairer balance was achieved:

> "I'm quite lucky my husband has always been a kind of champion. It's ironic really because I wouldn't say we have this wonderful 50/50 balanced life, because he has a very demanding job and I slightly accepted over the last few years whilst the children have been small that he had a more demanding job than me and that was just the way it was at the moment and obviously there were all the usual frustrations with that.... I take the lead on the children but as I'm often saying to him I'm dealing with all the other the little things and it's sort of not particularly satisfying but that's how things run with all these little things being checked off, but they are endless, and so his answer to that is I need to be either more disciplined with my time or care less about some things, and I need to not procrastinate." *VP, Global Media Firm, age 41.*

The assumption that if only a woman is sufficiently organised and efficient, then motherhood and career success can be combined, persists.

The extra burden was not always about parental or domestic workload. It is sometimes about *mental load,* the responsibilities of admin and organisation around children. This is the case regardless of whether the woman is mother or stepmother, and regardless of whether the family is able to engage paid childcare support. Organisational space occupies women's minds:

> "I think really sharing the childcare and work bit is fairly easy to split, but it's all the little things I think that women who have children end up doing, so

> it's, you know, reading school emails. It's then, you know, like, I've got a list for everything – for this school sports day. 'Can you send in a yellow T-shirt?' Or, 'Can your child make this?' Or, 'Can she do this?' My husband would have no clue. I mean, he's amazing. He's so much better than 90% of the men out there, but he would have no idea about, 'Oh right, so she's doing that today.' I can't work out whether he would do it if he absolutely had to. And maybe there is a sense of me wanting to hold on to that control. I can't work it out because it frustrates me, and I'll be like, 'You didn't even know that she had to wear a special T-shirt today or whatever' ..." *Company Director, age 40.*
>
> "Things like that take up a lot of mental space and I think if I – I sometimes wish he were a little bit more interested in doing those admin things so I could just have a little bit more mental space. But on the flip side, his job is so flexible, he can usually drop the kids off at nursery, pick the kids up from nursery. The fact is that some of my working hours are 8:30 to 4:30, but it is mainly so I can get home to see the kids at night. Then I need to log on after [their bedtime]. When my husband is around and not travelling, it is helpful for him to be there. But for me, what's draining is the more mental stuff than sort of physical childcare, if that makes sense." *Company Lawyer, age 37.*

Single mothers face additional pressures:

> **"**Juggling it all is always a lot, doing everything alone is a lot. My Dad helps, but if he falls ill – and he's getting on, and has some underlying conditions – and that really shows your vulnerability. If he's not right, there is nobody else. It's all down to me." Senior Public Sector Worker, age 31.

Even women with a partner and strong support system feel the risk of having to modify their career goals because, with the status quo, senior positions are difficult to combine with motherhood:

> "I grew up with strong female role models, and I believed I could do whatever I wanted. When I did my MBA I was asked whether I'd want to be CEO of a big company, and I thought, 'Heck, yes! Why wouldn't I?' But there are realities – I have two young children – and even more modern progressive institutions like tech companies are dominated by white men, and they set the status quo. There are business imperatives to increase inclusion and diversity, but there is no incentive to do that. Suddenly we're getting pressure to change ourselves. I'm not really interested in changing myself to fit in, whereas when I was younger, I was like, 'Yes, I'll do this, and I'll lean in, and I'll ask for this and I'll do this and that training programme.' I'm no longer interested in changing myself to 'lean in.' Instead, I want to lobby for policy change so that firms are more adaptable to others – my particular interest is that they adapt to women's realities. But I know that is not going to help my career." *Brand Lead, Technology Firm, age 38.*

The data we have suggests that men, whether or not they are parents, also experience significant benefits from greater flexibility and control over a balanced life. However, women were the driving force behind normalising flexibility (before the Covid-19 crisis). When a 35-year-old creative director, was forced to accept a four day week position, he discovered the advantages of having time to spend with his nephews and have more control over his working life. The four day initiative, he explained:

> "...came from the top. The CEO is a working mum and has a husband who works and needed day five to suit her life. When she went to a four day week, she realized what a positive impact it had on her life and how amazing that was. She decided, even before Covid, that we actually could do this as a business."

5.4 Money and childcare: a cautionary note

There were three different responses to a woman's earning power, relative to her partner, and how that affects the division of family labour. In the small group of women in the age bracket 50-64 years, the view was that if they earned less than a partner, it was reasonable to make more work time available to their partner by taking on a greater share of domestic tasks.

> "That's an evolution, it's just happened slowly over time and part of it is when you go part-time you earn slightly less. It's not like an overt thing, and it's not [an argument or principle], but it's an unspoken thing that you have: you earn less so, therefore, you have more flexibility around not working so much. And it stemmed from that, really." *Editor, age 54.*

This follows the familiar family allocation of time principle[xxxvii] widely evident in my 1994 study. This is the principle according to which women who do not earn as much as a partner agree that their work time is less valuable than that of a higher earning partner, while their childcare time is more valuable, because it frees up the partner's work time, thereby maximizing the family income. Even where there was mutual respect between the partners and mutual support, issues of unequal pay rankled, and interfered with the division of childcare. As one 38-year-old self-employed writer and broadcaster reflected starkly:

> "If my work paid better and I earned equal with my husband then that would change everything."

Most of the *Women at Work* participants wanted to earn at least as much as a partner, partly to avoid the "rational allocation of time" principle. However, neither

earning as much as a partner nor earning more than a partner ensured a 50/50 division of caring labour once the mental load was factored in.

Are we then back to a 1950's model whereby women knowingly make a trade-off between paid work and unpaid family work? Do women progress at a slower rate than men because they work less? Or, do they offer an employer less value per hour?

To answer this, we turn to larger data sets. These show that women are paid less per hour and progress more slowly even when they work more efficiently.[xxxviii] As Costa Dies explains, "By the time the first-born child is 20, the difference in the hourly wages between men and women in about 30%. Of that gap, around one quarter already existed when the first child arrives. Of the remaining three-quarters around half is due to factors other than differences in rates of part-time and full-time paid employment after childbirth."[xxxix]

The larger data sets support the *Women at Work* project's findings that women with children are subject to expectation bias and that employers see flexible work as less valuable than standard hours work (whether or not the number of hours are the same). The conclusion is clear: improvement is necessary.

6.

The Findings: Part Four
Envisioning Improvement

At the close of each interview, we asked participants to imagine a ladder with 10 rungs, the lower one representing a disappointing life and the top one representing life "as good as it gets." We then asked them to indicate on which rung they would place themselves now. Then we asked where they hoped to be in five years time and what they would need in order to get there.[xl]

Most women reported they were currently on at least rung 6. To attain the greater satisfaction of rung 8 or 9 in five years time, as they wanted to do, they needed a job that gave them a sense of purpose, flexibility, control and balance.

> "I think more independence and flexibility in my career, while being successful, still, because being successful is important for my sense of self. So what I think I need is to carve out a career or role for myself where I am able to feel I have a lot of impact and my work is important and valued, but

I've also got a lot more time to actually live like a human, not just a member of the workforce, no matter how wonderful that is. So I can spend more time with people I like spending time with and doing the things that I like doing and then I'm able to give back more." *Head of Policy, age 35*.

The participants pointed to moderate changes that would help them move to that higher rung where they would have purpose, flexibility, control and balance.

1. Several women described moderate changes in a partner's schedule that would "make a huge difference" in reducing pressure and improving balance. Participants reported that when a partner did make such a change, the improvement was significant, partly because when a partner, too, was at the coalface of caring labour, they were more likely to see what needed to be done. (See also a discussion in the section below, The Lockdown Effect.) There were three exceptions to the rule of unequal gender balance in childcare. One woman said that the domestic/family/childcare tasks were divided 50/50, that they each worked four days a week, and had done so from their child's birth, and that this early arrangement was key to the shared parenting. Two women reported that their partner did more childcare than they did.

2. Some participants wondered why there were not more businesses that provided services normally expected of a wife who could be at home during the day. It was surprising that in this innovative service economy, "Uber-like services" to help with domestic organisation were unavailable. Companies that offered domestic services to working people should thrive, services that would admit a plumber into the home, explain the problem, and oversee the work, or be available to accept home deliveries, or deliver and collect laundry. But, as one participant reflected, "Only women see the need for this." Ultra-rich people had full-time personal assistants, but most of the participants did not need, and could not afford, a full-time assistant. They needed some hours of assistance every week, or from time to time. Here is a business opportunity to be developed.

3. Several women learned to set boundaries at work, ensuring that they could leave at a certain time without being overwhelmed by thoughts that others might be annoyed. They cut out the "chaff" of after hours socialising. They learned to decline, selectively, requests from a boss. They acknowledged, however, that there was a risk. There was still, many believed, a stigma of a *woman* saying, "I have to leave to do a pick-up..." They were careful, before they adhered to set hours and said "no" to some requests, to ensure that they did their jobs so well that no one could fault them in what they did. This approach was taken whether or not they were mothers.

4. Choices remained difficult for women in a way they were not for men. Yet it

was much easier, and less stressful, to set boundaries when they believed that short-term career stasis did not block future opportunities to progress. Saying 'No' was not easy, either because a project was interesting or because they did not want to let anyone down. But it was necessary to decline some opportunities in order to achieve balance, and when women felt they were advancing in their career, even though they might not be progressing at an accelerated rate, they were able to manage the ebb and flow of demands. Rather than expecting that a good woman will manage everything, it would be helpful to absorb the experience of the participants in the *Women at Work* project:

> "I'm not able to balance it all. Sometimes I get my professional life wrong and sometimes I get my home life wrong and neither sits very well with me. But sometimes you can't just do it all, and my work and my family still survive." *37-year-old Director in Financial Services.*

5. Not all imbalances come as a result of family responsibilities. Sometimes they come from a work culture that demands what one participant said constituted "93% of you as a person."

> "We need a different work culture, with different expectations of people, or maybe just fairer allocation of work, with a better measurement of what people actually do contribute. The pressure on me isn't because I don't have autonomy. I have control over my time, but there are expectations that exert pressure." *Director of Data and Technology, age 39.*

6. Reciprocal coaching, partly by pooling strategies, thinking through necessary choices with other women who had gone through similar challenges, could be enormously beneficial, as the same 37-year-old Director in Financial Services, explains:

> "After I returned from maternity leave I was put on a programme that my employer runs for women with high potential, helping them get promoted. It was all a bit contrived, but not useless because I met these four other amazing ladies. We all did very different things at work but the others were also mothers and they said, 'You need to take time out. You don't need to do all of this yourself. It's difficult to let go of control.' And there were just lots of simple practical things that they had done, that I could learn from. I realised they knew all the pitfalls and that was very helpful. They gave me all sorts of tips and tricks: 'I tried that it worked for me. I tried this it didn't work for me, but it might work for you.' It was just a great thing to have done, even though the actual course itself was absolutely useless."

7. Working in an environment where there were other mothers, particularly in senior positions, was particularly helpful. There was, in these workplaces, much more positive engagement in devising means of ensuring career progress and some kind of balance.

8. Sharing stories was also valuable:

> "If you are an ethnic or religious minority, or a woman, or you know a person with a disability, you are probably acutely aware of those micro-aggressions. I think it's really great if women share their stories and that's why I was so glad to be a part of what you guys are doing because it's more important for us to say, 'Well, how did you overcome that situation – for example, when you're confronted with a subordinate who's been difficult, purely because they take exception to your sex?' It's very difficult for you to go in like a bull in a china shop and call them out on it. And it takes time, I mean you need space and time to communicate your individual experience."
> *Construction Manager, age 38.*

6.2 Taking Charge: from employee to entrepreneur

One route to securing purpose, flexibility, control and balance was to shift from employee to entrepreneur. There was nothing simple about this process. Founding your own company does not solve all problems in balancing career and motherhood. It does, however, secure greater control over how to solve problems arising from the maternal crunch decade and, importantly, avoids the long-term flexibility penalty.

Most of the women who became entrepreneurs followed a common pattern:

1. Their careers began with positive working experiences and support from cheerleaders in early stage career.
2. These positive experiences were followed by struggles with an uncomfortable work culture that was too rigid, too slow to adapt, and stuck in a dysfunctional mindset.
3. Work unhappiness persisted for a while, but then became "ridiculous" or "intolerable", and the decision to leave and to create one's own business was taken.
4. The precise shape of the business was not always clear when the decision was made, but these entrepreneurial women had confidence that answers to questions and solutions to problems would be worked out.

The quote below describes one participant's journey:

"I was working really closely with another woman, and neither of us liked working for these guys. Their lack of inspiration – I found it really hard going. For me, it's always got to be someone who inspires me if I can work with them. [The other woman] and I kept on being unhappy together and going, "What are we going to do?" and, "We should set up our own business." It was just a joke. Then we started doing some work for our previous managing director, who was amazing, and was now the non-exec director on a few charities. He asked if we wanted to help run these projects helping the charities unleash their potential and innovation. Then my friend ended up leaving, and the next month I had a really difficult conversation with my boss, and I said I thought the firm's mindset was stifling and I was going to leave.

I didn't have anything to go to, but [my former co-worker and I] had this idea of our own business and started it there and then, even though we didn't have clients. It was scary but I asked myself, "What's the worst that can happen?" And, "Can it be worse that what's going on now?" Because nothing is as bad as inaction, or being uninspired. We were willing to take the risk and figure out what we didn't know. We knew we could work well together and come up with the answers.

So that's sort of where it all started, and now we have 12 people working for us. It's always inspiring, and sometimes stressful, but at least we're in charge.

When I had my daughter, and I took a step back, and was around only two days a week at first, and [my business partner] was so focused about giving me work to do in those two days that was just right for me and important to the business. But it was hard to give someone else so much control. So going back to four days a week was better from that side, but it was hard, too, because I wanted to give everything to my daughter and I wanted to give everything to work. But my daughter is a little older and it's gradually got a little easier and the business has had highs and lows, but overall it's amazing." *Company Director, age 40.*

A significant perk of setting up one's own business is control over the work culture.

"Starting this company was the most exciting career move I ever made...It has defined who I am because, finally, I could be myself at work. It was a massive realisation that that was possible. [Other organisations] talk loads about brands and being yourself is being your best, but [in my own business], suddenly I realised what that meant, because I could totally be me at work." *Company Director, age 37.*

The entrepreneurs believed they combined challenge and career progression with balance:

> "For me having a job with a massive purpose, one I really believe in, is still my main driving factor. I've got that, but I've also got the ability to have a balance of sorts." *Company Founder and Director, age 41.*

"Balance of sorts" is a key phrase. Running one's own business does not totally remove the tension between professional ambition and life balance, though the entrepreneur has more control of this process:

> "I set up my own company, which gives me more flexibility. But there's still a tension between getting the right work/life balance and growing a business. I have plenty of work, and there's opportunity for the business to expand, but I'm not sure if it's what, at this point, I want out of life." *Technology Consultancy, Company Founder, age 40.*

In founding one's own company, the entrepreneurs wanted to correct mistakes they saw larger firms making:

> "I want to set up my own business to do things my own way. It's not a matter of rising to the top, but every day I see how this business [I'm currently working in] is making mistakes, doing things I want to fix. That's what I will do in my own company." *Director, Data Analytics, age 38.*

Some women set up a business and then re-joined a large corporation, but wanted to take into a larger company what they had learned:

> "The agility and the speed of reaction and the entrepreneurial mindset of a start-up are very much needed in the big corporate world, and that mindset being applied into the corporate world is the only way those big businesses will survive in certain areas. That way of working benefits my role [at this large corporation] and then obviously [the] reverse is true, too. There is a hell of a lot to be learnt from big corporates who have done it very successfully, that have strong brand values and a great culture. There is a lot for them to learn from my start-up as well, so I think they complement each other really well." *Senior Business Transformation Manager, age 35.*

These positive outcomes, however, should not be seen as the solution to problems that need addressing in organisations.

6.3 The Lockdown Effect: possible lessons and potential risks

The interviews took place during the Covid-19 pandemic and periods of lockdown. Many commentators and researchers predicted that lockdown would increase gender inequality in the home, with women having to do far more than men[xli]. However, the *Women at Work* project found the lockdown facilitated greater balance. There was more family and domestic work to be done, often without the childcare support – either paid support or, from relatives (usually grandparents who had to be 'shielded' from the virus). But the women's partners, also working from home during the strict lockdown, were more available for support, including childcare. The hard, endless work of childcare was more salient: there is nothing like a child's presence to enlist a parent into active service. There was also a sense of togetherness, with more opportunities to meet together for lunch, for tea.

> "Weirdly since Corona, we have done much more of that together because we had to go, 'How are we going to make this work?' That's one of the things I wanted to change coming out of this. Be interesting to see if it does happen..." *Company Director, age 40.*

Men who participated in the study shared this perspective, as a 37-year-old Director of Transformation and father of four:

> "Before the lockdown period, I would arrive at my office at half seven, so that meant a kiss on my daughters' heads, and off. The pandemic has meant that I start work at half seven but without the commute, and cooking every night as a family which has been lovely. This has made me think, 'Is there a way to maintain that as the world comes back to normal?' "

Enforcing remote work has normalised flexibility and home working, and this is a big change:

> "On the flexibility thing at work, I was told when I discussed going part-time by a number of people, that it will be career suicide. It will look like you aren't committed and you don't want to progress. I think even now that's old fashioned, but that was the view a few years ago when I discussed it. And they said, 'You know, you could probably get away with 80%.' But the reality is if you do 80%, you'll work 100% anyway and get paid less and be slightly overlooked for promotion compared to other people, so it's just not worth it.
>
> I think COVID is really changing how people work flexibly. It's moving things forward in a good way, where we can lean into balance and investing in our personal lives." *Head of Leadership, age 38.*

> "The hardest thing about my [former] job was not having the flexibility. With a longer commute I just spent my life racing everywhere all the time, racing to parents' evening, racing to work, racing to drop offs and maybe I was doing too much. I didn't want to miss the sports day. I didn't want to miss an assembly. I would always try and do everything, but at the cost of deep exhaustion. I knew that, and I knew that I could say 'no' to more things, and maybe some women do say 'no' to the school stuff. Probably it is my personality. I'm a bit bad at always saying 'yes'. But with lockdown, I realise my favourite Christmas card had been a sloth with a hat on, with the caption, 'Let it slow,' and I remember at the time looking at it at Christmas and thinking, 'Yes, let it slow!' When lockdown happened, I felt this terribly guilty pleasure: Finally I don't need to go anywhere. I know I've got to juggle these different set of issues but I realised how tired I was." *VP, Global Media Firm, age 41.*

The crisis, however, also generated anxiety about the future: "Will the company I have built up survive?" and, "What will the future be like?" But the majority of participants reported less pressure, particularly from commuting, saving between two and four hours per day. There was reprieve from strict time keeping and "the military precision" demanded in timed departures and pick-ups. The reprieve was not only for parents. Many women who were not mothers enjoyed a better balance in their lives. There was "a chance to breathe", to think, to absorb, and "to do stuff I really love doing."

> "Actually since we've been in lockdown I have to say what I'm enjoying is no commute, I've got another eight hours in my week that I can luxuriate in. Even before this I could work from home one day a week if I wanted to, but I think it's added more flexibility or autonomy to my working week. Yeah, that's a perk." *Senior Campaign Manager, age 41.*

One 37-year-old Director of International Governance found in lockdown an opportunity to reflect on her dreams:

> "The last few months, in lockdown, have crystallised things, because one of the challenges is that we don't even give ourselves permission to dream big enough. What for me would be a 10 [on the Cantril Ladder of Life Scale measuring life satisfaction]? Usually I'm just caught up with kind of making do, making the best of things. So it's good to do this interview because I realise I've now been thinking about what would be the best situation for me. It's my recent discovery that these things I have been doing with a women of colour community has made me realise that it is my passion and purpose, so I want to get to a place where I am bringing my data experience together with my passion for diversity, and I am actually doing that fulltime."

All participants – with two exceptions – hoped that the lockdown would change, permanently, the pace of work, normalising working from home, removing the association of flexibility as a characteristic of women's work.

> "I really hope this busts forever the myth that working can't be done remotely and I think it will but you know there's two schools of thought – one is that life will be changed forever and there is another school of thought that we'll just ping right back, that the old habits still die hard. But I, you know I think this time apart from the treadmill of travel and computing lets the really big topics sink in, about the pandemic but not only the pandemic, because this is all happening at a moment of maximum angst about climate change. How will we ever change our habits? And now, we're forced to change our habits overnight, and we have the opportunity to look anew at all sorts of things." *VP, Global Media Firm, age 41.*

> "With Covid, organisations really have gone through the eureka moment: 'Oh, we can actually trust people to be at home all day and work. Their productivity is pretty darn good!' I really hope that will stick in some form." *Executive Director, Not-for-profit, age 60.*

The two exceptions who found little benefit from the shift in working patterns were teachers, citing time-consuming preparation for zoom lessons. One of our participating men, a 35-year-old teacher who also was caring for a young child during the day during the first lockdown explained:

> "It was like having to prepare your very first lesson for a course. In the classroom, I can stand up and talk and get feedback from the class. Preparing remote lessons is very time consuming, and even though I have adopted some of what I've learned from lockdown one – like collecting assignments and distribution materials – into normal classes, I miss being in school."

For others, returning to work when restrictions initially eased, was problematic. Early on in the pandemic it became clear that BAME people were at greater risk and, combined with the global impact of Black Lives Matter, some participants hit a low point when organisations were unresponsive to the benefits of working from home. They felt that ignoring the increased risk to them was another form of bias:

> "My biggest low has been in the last month with all of the things happening, with Black Lives Matter and Covid, I've found that I have had to have tough conversations at work around the approach to reopening offices on a voluntary basis in June. As a BAME person we already know Covid is hitting us twice as hard, and George Floyd happened, and then in the same week my office is saying you can come back to work. It just felt like a huge disconnect and I had to have very tough and emotional conversations to try and explain my point of view. It was upsetting knowing that my view and

> experience can be so different to other people. I am in a large black community and using public transport puts us all at risk. That was quite a dark point where you actually see people who are reasonable, people who are empathetic, but don't see such crucial issues the same as you. That is still quite a raw one, and recent." *Head of Data Governance, age 35.*

A common question posed by the participants is whether firms will move forward in response to the experience of lockdown. Will firms draw on the benefits of remote working? Some reported that virtual meetings, where people were on camera and were less likely to multitask, were more efficient. Would the need to accommodate some informality,[xlii]including interruptions from children, introduce greater flexibility to the workplace? Or would businesses simply try to recover work as it had been?

Before the lockdown, working at home was not common. Only 5% of employees worked from home regularly, and only a quarter worked from home sometimes.[xliii] Now employers are looking at working from home in a more positive light.[xliv]

However, there are concerns that the ability to work from home is largely a feature of more highly paid jobs, and many women will be left behind. A watch-list of risk is required. Evidence is emerging that, as a whole, women are more likely to have lost jobs and experienced a reduction in income than men.[xlv] There is concern that women who work at home will not have appropriate support in managing domestic work and childcare. There is a risk that the subsequent financial recession will be a "she-session", resulting in a generational setback for working mothers[xlvi] as families revert to a breadwinner/housewife model. The benefits of lockdown – a re-structuring and re-thinking of the work of a desirable, productive, talented employee -need to be secured and gendered penalties avoided.

In December 2020, I arranged for the participants to be contacted again to get an update on their experiences of remote working. Would they be so positive 4 or 5 or 6 months later? The press coverage of the possible impact the Covid-19 crisis was having on women continued to be predominately negative. Yet the intervening months of remote working confirmed, for most of the participating women, the value of remote working. While they missed face-to-face social interaction, all but one of the 17 women who responded to the additional questionnaire wanted to continue remote working between 80 and 50 percent of the time. The drawbacks of screen time fatigue ("back to back zoom meetings"), uncomfortable workstations in the home and absence of informal interactions were, in most cases, minor. The pressure of combining childcare and home working was eased when school re-opened. The benefits of flexibility were, in most cases, pronounced. The quotes below are from among the 88 percent of the women who responded positively to remote working:

> "Working from home is so good for my mental wellbeing but also my creativity. Getting up to an alarm, facing the elements, enduring a commute do not leave my mind feeling clear and refreshed – just exhausted!" *Copy Chief, age 42.*

> "[Remote working] requires discipline around time management and switching off, but I love having more flexibility around my own schedule. I can listen to my body and my mood. I enjoy the reduced commute hours and increased time for me, plus I find productivity is higher, too." *Vice President of HR, age 43.*

> "Lockdown has been the "best" thing for my job as my organisation have embraced working from home – just prior to lockdown, we had already begun talks on this process and so I feel it would have come anyway but COVID has forced it to happen." *Company Legal Counsel, age 37.*

> "I got a promotion in September as I am now given more responsibility. I am definitely more aware that I want to live and work calmer and am not necessarily wanting to stay in a bigger city." *Artist, age 27.*

> "For me [remote working] gives great flexibility and has established more trust by default with managers and teams. I have a better sense of wellness and balance, my daily life is more on my terms and I am under less pressure. If anything remote working has made me realise how much trying to 'act corporate' and fit the 'professional' mould particularly as a woman of colour is exhausting and involves contorting myself in ways when in the office which I do not need to do when working remotely." *Head of Data Governance, age 35.*

A career setback, however, brought with it a far more negative view. Though the quote below is exceptional in terms of the *Women at Work* participants, it will, sadly, resonate with many women and men's recent experiences:

> "I've not been privy to knowledge that I would have picked up had I been in the office, which leaves me weak as knowledge is power where I work. I've also felt quite isolated and low, finding it difficult to motivate myself. I've also suffered with muscular skeletal issues on account of temporary work stations at home. I've now been made redundant as well which wouldn't have happened if I was in the office and seen as key to the ongoing future of the business. Remote working makes it easy to forget about people and the personal elements of the working relationship." *Senior Business HR, age 45.*

There is a fine line between the pros and cons of remote working as there is flexibility, freedom and capability on the one hand, and isolation and exclusion, on the other. Neither story should eclipse the other, and organisations need to work with their employees to avoid wasting these transformative experiences of new ways of working.

6.4 Mental wellbeing

In the 1994 study, depression was a common issue for the participating women. The incidence among them was considerably higher than the rate for men. Forty percent of the participants described significant difficulty in meeting or even expressing their individual needs. Their own needs, they reported, were "silenced" on behalf of others.xlvii They also struggled with internal ruminations or "shadow voices" in which they weighed up anxiety about "being selfish" or "unfair to others."xlviii

In the Women at Work study, some participants spoke about episodes of mental illness, but the proportion was no greater than that found in the general population. The vast majority described themselves as "positive" and "resilient". They had a rich enjoyment of daily life, even though many faced considerable worries and setbacks, including cancer diagnosis of a partner, children with particularly demanding needs, and dependent elderly parents.

Of the 65 participants, 10 reported either ongoing mental health issues or issues they had dealt with in the past. These included anxiety or panic attacks (5), eating disorders (2) and episodes of depression (3). Mental health – both positively and negatively – was impacted by how well their work was going, whether they enjoyed it, whether they felt they had impact and were respected, and whether there was integrity and transparency in the work culture.

Some firms provided access to a confidential 24-hour mental help line, and this had been found to be very helpful. Given the interplay between satisfaction and a sense of fair treatment in the workplace, and individual mental health, it would be appropriate to roll out this provision more widely.

One aim of the Women at Work project is to ensure these benefits and choices are available to more women.

7.

Recommendations
The Need for Dynamic Collaboration

The recommendations that emerge from this report provide a road map for a more inclusive, humane work culture that will secure greater efficiency and promote the UK's economic recovery from the shocks of the pandemic and the transition out of the European Union. In following these recommendations, organisations and their workers will avoid the abuse and waste of female talent. Protecting and fostering talent requires collaboration between organisations and their workforce.

After consultation with members of The Female Lead team and the remarkable Advisory Board formed to discuss the Women at Work project, two salient recommendations emerged, both of which draw attention to the key question of how most effectively to measure, promote and protect what really mattersxlix:

1. **Design high-value jobs, for high-value people.**

   Familiar templates of a good career and a valuable worker need to be reconsidered. Women have entered the workplace, but the template of a good job and a good employee retain the model of a person dedicating a full life to the employer and to his or her career and securing prospects, while someone else services family and domestic and other aspects of a personal life. In short, today's idea of the model worker shares all too much of the old family model where a private life is serviced by someone taking the role of the "traditional wife". We can go beyond this model. Now, as we plan for economic recovery after the pandemic, more care is needed in optimising all talent available to organisations.

   Creative design of "a good job" and "a valuable worker" will enable women to progress in their careers just as those who do not have children would do during these years. Reciprocal discussions between bosses, managers and employees are needed, prospectively and proactively, to design good jobs to protect both the careers of those who require flexibility and the organisation's investment in high-potential talent. These discussions would form what one employment lawyer participating in the study called, "The dream solution, actually enabling employers to spend time with their workforce, actually understanding things about their respective needs, and trying to address them." A 33-year-old VP of Human Resources elaborated, "You need an area where you can be vulnerable to each other, particularly in talking about ethnicity and feeling sidelined, and with the Black Lives Matter movement, white people feel defensive, and need to talk to ethnic

minority colleagues about this." The problem, she continues, is that "Large-scale programmes are generally a one size fits all. Or they start with the assumption that they know what women need. But what we need is to not forget that we're all individuals. We need to listen and support them by designing things that are right for them as opposed to what people assume is right for everybody."

Important questions include, "Where were you before going on (any kind of) family leave? What talent got you there? How can we use it now? This requires jobs that do not fit the traditional full-time model, but that nonetheless demonstrate and grow leadership skills; think of ways a very good job could be streamlined, perhaps by focusing on one of its elements.

Innovative job design could go a long way towards addressing the sticking points of allocation of labour within the home. Men as well as women want to give more to their partners and their children and to achieve a better balance to improve both wellbeing and productivity, but they often forego these aims because they are averse to the risk of career penalty. Allocation of domestic labour in the home is not just a private matter, but also a matter of shifting the paradigm of what a good job, and what good employees, look like.

The disruption of the Covid-19 crisis presents an opportunity for a paradigm shift in regard to the question, "How does someone demonstrate their positive impact?" and "What do firms expect employees to be as people?" An important question every organisation should ask is, "Are we setting a good example of talent stewardship throughout the organisation?" As the report shows, the most women-friendly were those in which people throughout the organisation, however lofty their position, also worked from home sometimes, or worked flexibly. Extending this practice would lead to more sustainable careers for all, without lowering the value of any employee.

Women also carry a special mental load both in the home and in the workplace, expecting themselves and being expected by others, to champion other women and to play a strong part in diversity initiatives. While the participants in the Women at Work project embraced this role, and felt energised by it, research suggests that many women find this a burden in terms both of time and of risk to their reputation as a congenial worker. Moreover, this is often a role that is undertaken without pay. There is new urgency in assuring diversity and inclusion; as a result, any work that is done in these areas needs to be assessed and rewarded and shared among all workers. Including more white men in this role would signal that diversity is now seen as an urgent, and indeed

mainstream issue. In many organisations, everyone is already on board, even though the way forward is not always clear.

2. **Re-focus gender diversity efforts – from myths to the real sticking points**

There has been tremendous progress in correcting biases about women's abilities, goals and needs. Identifying biases that remain, and the environments in which low-lying biases are triggered, are key to utilising all workers' talents.

This report refutes many myths about women. The myths that women are uncomfortable with ambition, that they feel ambivalent about independence, that they are likely to place greater value on their private as opposed to their public or professional identity can be set aside. By and large, organisations do not buy into these myths. By and large organisations value the drive, ability and dedication of all who work within the organisation. But women returning from maternity leave nonetheless experience a shift from being a player on a level field, to being something else. This shift arises, partly, from good intentions, such as offering assurance that the organisation does not wish to add demands. The effect, however, is to lower expectations. As a result, returning women report career setback.

Recommendation one contains guidance in avoiding this outcome through job redesign: in developing jobs that offer career development but that resist the template of total time worker, the organisation is able to meet its wish to protect women returning from maternity leave from excess demands without lowering career expectation. Here, in recommendation two, I consider ways to change the environment that maintains and often magnifies residual biases.

Pay gap reporting presents an opportunity for organisations to track and correct any inequality, but often organisations do not understand why progress towards closing the gap is so slow. The drag in progress arises from lack of understanding of the mechanisms by which the gender pay gap is maintained. It is maintained, partly, via the myth that pay and bonus allocation and promotion are decided according to merit alone, but judgments about merit include many assumptions about what value looks like, and biases are often embedded in these assumptions.

At each stage of promotion and bonus allocation, questions should be asked about who is being awarded what, and why. "How are the women doing?" is a question that requires fine-tuning, and include consideration

of parental status and ethnicity. This is not to allocate more to anyone just because they are a certain gender, race or creed. This is to challenge scales of merit that may not be as objective as supposed. The deficit of objectivity occurs not because anyone is a hypocrite but because objectivity is another myth.

Another factor in women's persistent promotion gap is linked to the 'unentitled mindset' that this report identifies. While this is seen as an internalised bias, it is triggered by the context in which negotiations occur. Sometimes it is triggered by poor treatment in the workplace (perhaps by a previous employer). The better behaviour of another employer, who offers better conditions, then seems like a gift beyond which she should not reach. Women's experience teaches them, for example, that flexibility is rare, and that if offered, then asking for more – such as higher pay or status or responsibility – would risk their employer's good will, and possibly even their job. To change the environment, organisations simply need to make their willingness to embrace flexibility salient.

Another context in which 'unentitled mindset' emerges is in pay negotiations. The report shows how women with leadership skills, status and courage, feel anxious and reluctant to argue their own case for increased pay and promotion. As organisations understand how the environment (as opposed to the attitude of anyone in the organisation) triggers this bias, they can correct it. Proactively inviting pay discussions, clarifying the possible outcomes, explaining how and when and with whom these discussions should be held, goes a long way towards reducing the ambiguity in which women are more likely to experience 'unentitled mindset'.

Sensitivity to how bias arises in identifiable contexts is a far more effective route than subjecting everyone to diversity training programmes that do not effectively reduce bias in hiring assessment or performance ratings.[1]

These two broad recommendations, achievable through reciprocal conversations, between employee and organisation, can harness the goodwill most organisations have in efforts to avoid waste and abuse of female talent. Instead of the directive to "lean in", directed either at women or at organisations, economic recovery requires a dynamic collaboration.

A reminder why gender balance is good for business

Gender is a business issue, not a women's issue

The business case for gender balance in the workplace is now overwhelming. More women in the workplace makes good business sense, leads to better decision-making and increases profitability. However, continued economic challenges caused by Covid-19 mean that the progress made towards gender balance in recent years is at risk. So, before we delve deeper into the findings of our research, let's take a moment to remind ourselves why organisations need to think strategically about gender.

4 in 10
FTSE 350 companies
Have failed to reach the Hampton Alexander Review target to individually ensure women make up 33% of their board by the end of 2020[4]

£150bn
added to the UK economy
Bridging the gender gap would add £150bn to the UK economy by 2025[5]

25%
more likely to have above-average profitability
Companies in the top quartile for gender diversity on executive teams are 25% more likely to have above-average profitability[6]

19%
higher innovation revenue
Companies with more diverse management teams have 19% higher revenues due to innovation[9]

3 times
higher profit margins
FTSE 350 companies with more than 25% women on their Executive Committee have profit margins almost 3 times higher than those with all-male[7a]

£6.35bn
gender dividend
If all FTSE 350 companies performed at the same level as those with women on their executive committees[7b]

61%
of women look at gender diversity of employers
61% of women look at the gender diversity of the employer's leadership team when deciding where to work[10]

87%
better business decisions
Inclusive teams make better business decisions up to 87% of the time[8]

Joy Burnford. 2020. Rethinking leadership through a gender lens. My Confidence Matters. p.9. Uploaded 12/01/2021

References p.46.

Acknowledgements

The Research Participants

Thank you to all of our participants who shared invaluable insight and experience. You gave us new visibility into the mindsets and challenges women face in the workplace today and trusted us with your voice in the hope and expectation that together, we will encourage, inform and shape change. You referenced good and bad practices but importantly, shared first-hand examples of where businesses, individuals and legislators have designed a better environment, where new *policies* and processes create balance and gender equality.

"It is our wish, our mission, at The Female Lead, to share where good has been done and seen to be done, where successful pathways and support has been created and to make this a model and framework for others to follow."

Women at Work Advisory Board

We are grateful for the wisdom and experience of our Advisory Board, appointed in 2020, to help layer the revealing insights from our study with practical recommendations and solutions for business, for individuals and for legislators. The board has separately and collectively shared their opinions and comments on the *Women at Work* research and our findings.

The board comprises business leaders and experts whose multi-sector experience helps guide and inform The Female Lead's research, work and objectives

Hannah Feldman
Co-founder of Kidadl
Former Head of Strategic Partnerships at Bluebox Corporate Finance Group, Hannah co-founded Kidadl in 2016.
Kidadl aims to solve the problem of "what can we do with the kids today?" and helps families get out and make the memories that childhood is all about by use of the Kidadl marketplace, online and by app. Events and experiences can be specially tailored to location, interests and budget.
Hannah has previous corporate experience with Hamilton Bradshaw, UBS and Linklaters.

Jane Frost CBE

CEO of Market Research Society

A CEO with 30 years experience in board level marketing and strategy positions in major blue chip companies and public bodies.

Holding over 150 awards for advertising, branding, and design as well as being executive producer of a double platinum record. Extensive experience as a non executive at PLC as well as smaller boards, Jane also brings significant experience on various committees as well as chairing charity boards and government consultancy panels.

Laura Jones

Research Associate, King's College London, Global Institute for Women's Leadership

Laura is a Research Associate at the Global Institute for Women's Leadership. Her recent projects include a comparative analysis of international gender pay gap reporting regimes, research for the Government Equalities Office into the barriers to women's progression in the workplace, a study on women's representation at different stages of engineering education, and research into bullying and harassment in the research and innovation sector.

Lucy Davis

Marketing, Google UK

Lucy has been working in Marketing at Google for the last 7 years, and is currently focused on Google's brand and reputation in the UK. Previously Lucy worked as a Marketing Director at American Express and in a number of advertising roles, at WPP and as a Partner at Engine Group.

Lucy mentors female entrepreneurs in emerging markets through the Cherie Blair Foundation for Women. She advises Dharma Life, a female focused social impact venture based in India. Lucy is also one of the leads of Google UK's women's network.

Lucy has an MBA from London Business School and read Philosophy, Politics and Economics at Oxford University.

Lucy Warwick-Ching

FT Communities Editor

Lucy is the Communities Editor at the Financial Times; formerly the personal finance digital editor, she now writes columns including Family Money and edits the Your Questions column. Lucy has a wealth of experience in the newspaper industry including business journalism, podcast producing and presenting & editing. She has previously won Lifestyle & Interiors Property Writer of the Year

Martin McCourt

NED, Former Dyson CEO

Martin has spent the majority of his career at the heart of British-based manufacturing, including 15 years as CEO at Dyson where he was instrumental in transforming the company from a single product, single market producer into a worldwide brand.
A former UK Business leader of the Year (2010), Martin also has extensive board experience, including Chair of Glen Dimplex Group and The Learning Curve Group. He Chairs Lightfoot and Free Flow technologies and has various NED roles including the Weber Group.

Vanessa Sanyauke

Founder of Girls Talk London

Vanessa is a global diversity and inclusion specialist with over 14 years of experience in the financial services, technology and government sectors. She has been listed in both the Financial Times Top 5 ethnic minority future leaders (2018 and 2019) and has been featured as one of the 1000 most influential people in London by the Evening Standard newspaper.
Vanessa is also the founder of Girls Talk London – an organisation that connects women and girls with Senior leaders and FTSE 100 businesses to empower them to develop skills and confidence.

Yasmine Chinwala OBE

Partner at New Financial LLP

Currently a Partner at New Financial LLP – a think tank and forum to promote the role and reform of capital markets via a programme of collaborative events, research and analysis. New Financial is HM Treasury's data partner in monitoring the progress of signatories to the HM Treasury Women in Finance Charter. Yasmine was awarded an OBE in 2020 for her work on the Charter.

Yasmine previously ran the features desk at Financial News.

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[i] The gender pay gap, or average difference between hourly wages for women and men, currently stands at 8.9% among full-time employees. This shows very little change since 2018. In fact, the gap has decreased by only 0.6 percentage points since 2012. While different sectors and organisations take very different approaches to equal pay, 78% of the largest UK companies report a gap in favour of men. https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/bulletins/genderpaygapintheuk/2019

[ii] L. Jones. October. 2019. Women's Progression in the Workplace. Government Equalities Office.

[iii] M. McDonagh and L. Fitzsimmons. 27 July 2020. WomenCount2020: Role, Value and Number of Female Executives in the FTSE 350. Pipeline; McKinsey Insights. June 2020. Diversity Wins: How Inclusion Matters.

[iv] T. Apter. 1995. Working Women Don't Have Wives. London: Macmillan. This research

[v] It is more common to talk about unconscious bias, but since conscious/unconscious refers to the mind of the biased person, I am more interested in characterizing the perspective of people who are targeted by bias.

[vi] C. Dowling. 1981. The Cinderella Complex: Women's Hidden Fear of Independence. New York: Simon and Schuster; N. Wolf. 1991. The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women. New York: William Morrow.

[vii] C. Goldin. 2015. Hours Flexibility and the Gender Gap in Pay. Center for American Progress. 2015.

[viii] It is important to note that this allocation of labour is not endorsed by Goldin. In fact, as I discuss below, she argues that the part-time penalty expresses and reinforces significant and unacceptable gender inequalities.

[ix] C. Hakim. 26 October 2015. Preference Theory. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405165518.wbeosp138

[x] C. Cain Miller, 26 April 2019. The Upshot. New York Times.

[xi] This model was developed under the guidance of Elizabeth Garnsey. See T. Apter and E. Garnsey.1994. Enacting inequality: Structure, agency and gender. Women's Studies International Forum. vol. 17(1): 19-31.

[xii] T. Apter. 1995. Working Women Don't Have Wives. London: Macmillan. This research and analysis is also cited in Wikipedia's Women in the Workforce https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women_in_the_workforce

[xiii] This is when the trajectory of women's careers stalls. There is another issue in early in women's careers, sometimes called the "sticky floor versus springboard" question, whereby women are more likely to stay in low paid entry jobs whereas men experience these as springboards. L. Jones. 2019. Women's Progression in the Workplace. Government Equalities Office. October 2019. See also, E. Bukodi, S. Dex, H. Joshri. 2012. Changing Career Trajectories of Women and Men Across time. Edward Elgar Publishing.

[xiv] J. Huang et.al. Women in the Workplace 2019. McKinsey/LeanIn

[xv] L. Jones. 2019. Women's Progression in the Workplace. Government Equalities Office. October 2019. L.K. Lindley, J.K. 2016. Lousy pay with lousy conditions: the role of occupational desegregation in explaining the UK gender pay and work intensity gaps. Oxf. Econ. Pap. 68, 152; M. Costa Dias, R. Joyce, F. Parodi. 2018. Wage progression and the gender wage gap: the causal impact of hours of work. The Institute of Fiscal Studies; T. Warren, C. Lyonette. 2018. Good, Bad and Very Bad Part-time Jobs for Women? Re-examining the Importance of Occupational Class for Job Quality since the 'Great Recession' in Britain. Work Employ. Soc. 32, 747–767. https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017018762289

[xvi] D. Atewologun, T. Cornish, and F. Tresh. 2018. Unconscious Bias Training: An assessment of the evidence for effectiveness. Equality and Human Rights Commission Research Report, no 113.

[xvii] L. Jones. 2019. Women's Progression in the Workplace. Government Equalities Office. October 2019. P. 63.

[xviii] T. Apter. 1995. Working Women Don't Have Wives. Macmillan. Also cited in Wikipedia's Women in the Workforce. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women_in_the_workforce

[xix] This quote is from an interview with Dr Tosin Bowen-Wright published in The Psychologist. September 2020.

[xx] Amy Sunny, Chief Marketing Office in from LabCorp spoke at a Female Quotient webinar on the 25th of August 2020.

[xxi] McKinsey Insights. June 2020. Diversity Wins: How Inclusion Matters.

[xxii] For a thorough analysis of the meaning and impact of entitlement see K. Manne. 2020. Entitled: How Male Privilege Hurts Women. Allen Lane.

[xxiii] See A. Kim. December 2020. Why "leaning in" Won't End the Gender Wage Gap. Medium.

[xxiv] M. Recalde and L. Vesterlund. December 2020. Gender Differences in Negotiation and Policy for Improvement. Nation Bureau of Economic Research. Working paper 28183.

[xxv] H. Riley Bowles, L. Babcock, L Lai. 2007. "Social incentives for gender differences in the propensity to initiate negotiations: Sometimes it does hurt to ask". Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes. 103 (1): 84–103.

[xxvi] H. Riley Bowles, L. Babcock, L Lai. 2007. "Social incentives for gender differences in the propensity to initiate negotiations: Sometimes it does hurt to ask". Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes. 103 (1): 84–103.

[xxvii] H. Riley Bowles. October 23, 2020. Hardwiring Gender Parity in the New Economy. Presentation to the World Economic Forum.

[xxviii] Salary and compensation statistics on the impact of Covid-19. Randstausa. https://rlc.randstadusa.com/for-business/learning-center/future-workplace-trends/randstad-2020-compensation-insights

[xxix] Research elsewhere shows that imposter syndrome as manifest here is more common in women. Men seem more comfortable putting on a front, brazening it out. P.R. Clance and S.A. Imes. The Imposter Phenomenon in high-achieving women: Dynamics and therapeutic intervention. Psychotherapy: Theory Research and Practice. 15(3). 241-247. 1978. See also, T. Apter. Rethinking Imposter Syndrome. Psychology Today. March 15, 2019.

[xxx] D. Atewologun, T. Cornish, and F. Tresh. 2018. Unconscious Bias Training: An assessment of the evidence for effectiveness. Equality and Human Rights Commission Research Report, no 113. See also, F. Dobbin and A. Kalev. July-August 2016. Why Diversity Programs Fail. Harvard Business Review.

[xxxi] H. Riley Bowles. October 23, 2020. Hardwiring Gender Parity in the New Economy. Presentation to the World Economic Forum.

[xxxii] See also A.S. Hewlett. 2003. Baby Hunger: The New Battle of Motherhood. Atlantic Books.

[xxxiii] https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2014/1398/made

[xxxiv] https://consult.gov.im/economic-development/flexible-working-regulations-2020/

[xxxv] Nor did the theme of guilt in the Women at Work participants play the same role as it had in the women described by Arlie Russell Hochchild's The Second Shift, first published in 1990.

[xxxvi] A. Russell Hochschild. 2012. (Revised edition. First published 1990). The Second Shift: Working Families and the Revolution at Home. Penguin Books.

[xxxvii] G. Becker. 1965. A theory of the allocation of time. Economic Journal. 75 (299) pp. 493-517.

[xxxviii] J.K. Lindley, 2016. Lousy pay with lousy conditions: the role of occupational desegregation in explaining the UK gender pay and work intensity gaps. Oxf. Econ. Pap. 68, 152.

[xxxix] M. Costa Dias, R. Joyce, F. Parodi. 2018. Wage progression and the gender wage gap: the causal impact of hours of work. The Institute of Fiscal Studies. p. 3.

[xl] This is based on the Cantril Ladder of Life Satisfaction, widely used, for example, in the World Happiness Report and in the Gallup poll.

[xli] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/03/i-feel-like-a-1950s-housewife-how-lockdown-has-exposed-the-gender-divide, and

https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/03/feminism-womens-rights-coronavirus-covid19/608302/

[xlii] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-53901310

[xliii] Office for National Statistics 2020.

[xliv] J. Dingel and B. Neiman. 18 June 2020. What has coronavirus taught us about working from home? Economics Observatory. https://www.coronavirusandtheeconomy.com/question/what-has-coronavirus-taught-us-about-working-home

[xlv] R. Blundell, M. Costa Dias, R. Joyce, X. Xu. 4 June 2020. Covid-19 and inequalities. Institute for Fiscal Studies. See also https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/women-bear-brunt-of-coronavirus-economic-shutdown-in-uk-and-us

[xlvi] https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/03/business/economy/coronavirus-working-women.html

[xlvii] see D. Crowley Jack. 1991. Silencing the Self. Harvard University Press.

[xlviii] This is discussed in greater detail in T. Apter. 1995. Secret Paths: Women in the New Midlife. W.W. Norton.

[xlix] Thanks again to Laura Jones for suggested the use of this phrase. See also, Gender Equality in the Workplace: Measuring What Matters for Transformative Change. September 2020. United Nations Research Institute for Social Development.

[l] F. Dobbin and A. Kalev. July-August 2016. Why Diversity Programs Fail. Harvard Business Review.