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BEYOND THE CAREER BREAK

Women Returners' Perceptions of the Skills they bring from the Home and Barriers to their Return to and Advancement in Paid Work: An Exploratory Analysis

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of the requirements for the degree of
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ABSTRACT

This thesis reports the results of a study about the perceptions of women who have returned to work after taking a career break due to family responsibilities (women returners). Most of the women who participated in the study believed that their career breaks and ongoing family commitments had adversely affected their careers. The participants also believed that, because of the skills they had acquired through their roles as caregivers and home managers, they were better employees. However, not all of the women valued those skills themselves, and many believed that their employers did not recognise them either. The study also found that women returners have various needs that, if not met, become barriers to their ability to be involved in paid work. The two most commonly reported needs were reduced hours and flexi-time. Good quality and affordable childcare, understanding from managers and colleagues, and a change in societal attitudes that equate time spent at work with ability and commitment were also important needs of women returners. Conclusions that arose suggest that employers should change policies and train managers and those involved in the recruitment and selection process to meet the needs of women returners. This will increase the organisation's ability to develop creative solutions that will support the needs of both the organisation and its employees. Furthermore, the government needs to consider the implementation of paid parental leave and allowing all childcare expenses to be claimed against earnings. Through implementing these suggestions, mothers will have more choice about when they return to work, allowing them to better meet their own needs as well as those of their families.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Women do two-thirds of the world's work, receive ten percent of the world's income, and own one percent of the world's resources (Scott, 1985; Spender, 1985; in Wilson, 1995).

This well-known quotation illustrates that women are an important source of labour throughout the world. However, women's involvement in work is not always as part of the formal economy (the labour force), which explains their unequal share of the world's income and assets. The major portion of women's work is carried out as a part of the 'informal' economy, where they undertake unpaid domestic duties and voluntary work.

However, women are increasingly becoming a significant source of labour in the formal economy. Their labour force participation rates have increased continually throughout the 1900s (Wilson, 1995). In New Zealand, over the past decade alone the labour force participation rate for women has increased by 2.4 percentage points (Statistics NZ, 2000b). Women's heavy involvement in the service industry and willingness to work part-time has made them a favourable source of labour to employers.

Despite women's increasing involvement in the formal economy, there are still many who remain outside the labour force. Up to 11 percent of the working age population in New Zealand may consist of women who are currently not in the labour force, but would like to return to work. These women, who are taking what might be termed a 'career break', are not in paid work because of their family responsibilities. It is important that, when they chose to return to work, they be encouraged to do so. Women returners represent a large pool of labour from which employers can potentially draw. Their abilities are particularly important in light of projected skill shortages due to the ageing population and, with the growth of the knowledge industry, demands by employers for higher skilled employees.

However, women who have taken a career break often find it difficult to return to paid work. There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, their skills are

considered to be outdated or are difficult to define in the customary manner. This is because many of their skills may have been obtained through their work in the home and community rather than through paid work experience or formal education or training. Historically, there has been no parallel between the skills acquired through unpaid work in the home and those used in paid work. Secondly, various barriers exist that make it difficult for women to return to paid work. For instance, women returners may need good quality and affordable childcare available to enable them to work. Furthermore, they may need to work part-time or have flexible hours to enable them to meet their families' ongoing needs. Therefore, women who would like to return to work probably represent the largest source of labour that is under-utilised by employers.

The present study focuses on women who are currently in employment, but at some stage have taken a career break for childbearing and rearing purposes. There are various terms used to define these women, but in this report they will be referred to as 'women returners'. The study poses three main questions:

1. Do women returners believe that their career breaks and ongoing family commitments have negatively affected their career progression?
2. What skills do women returners believe they gain in the home that they use in their paid work, and are those skills valued by themselves and their employers?
3. What barriers do women returners encounter that make it difficult for them to return to work or to continue working?

This is a qualitative study that focuses on the perceptions of the women returners involved in the study. It does not attempt to define 'reality'; the aim of the study is to explore the experiences of a group of women returners to gain insights into the answers to the questions posed by the study.

The next chapter of this thesis (chapter 2) reviews relevant literature to determine whether other researchers have been able to answer the questions

this study addresses. Chapter 3 describes the present study, outlining the research objectives and providing a rationale for the methodology used in the study. A description of that methodology will be provided in chapter 4, which outlines how participants were selected, and how the data was collected and analysed. The results of the study are reported in chapter 5. Chapter 6 discusses those results, relating them to the previous research reviewed in chapter 2. It also reflects on the findings and overall significance of the study. The final chapter (chapter 7) draws conclusions about the answers to the questions the study poses, together with recommendations about what should be done to enable women returners to balance paid work with family responsibilities.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

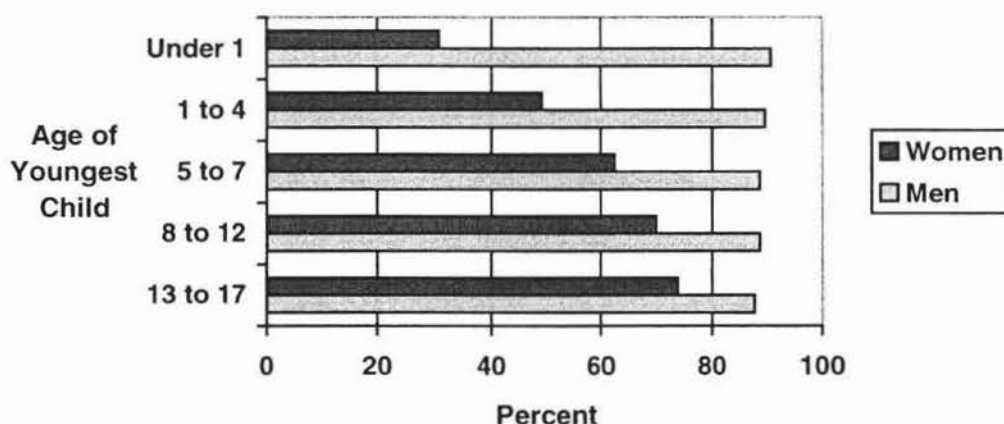
2.1 Taking a Career Break

While women continue to have children, their careers will be affected by family responsibilities. Although family responsibilities also have an influence on men's careers, the presence of dependent children does not affect their participation in the labour force to the same extent. The Ministry of Women's Affairs (1998) states:

A much higher proportion of women than men are not in the labour force because they are doing unpaid work at home and caring for children and dependant older relatives (p.40).

Figure 2-1 below shows the effect the presence of dependent children has on both women's and men's labour force participation.

FIGURE 2-1: LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION BY PARENT, BY AGE OF YOUNGEST CHILD



Source: Statistics NZ, 1999, p.86

We can see from this figure that women's labour force participation is directly related to the age of their youngest child. Women are less likely to participate in the labour force while their children are young. For example, only 30.9 percent of women whose youngest child is under one are in paid employment. In contrast, 73.8 percent of women whose youngest child is between 13 and 17 are in paid employment.

Figure 2-1 also demonstrates that, in direct contrast to the pattern for women, men are slightly more likely to participate in the labour market while their children are young. This relationship is not strong, however, showing that the presence of dependent children influences women's labour force participation much more than it does that of men.

Even when a woman with dependent children remains in the labour force, her career will be more profoundly affected than that of the father of her children. Employed mothers are more likely than fathers to take time off to care for children during school holidays or when they are sick (NACEW, 1999). Furthermore, the mother's hours of work are affected. Women with young children who are in paid work are most likely to be working part-time (less than 30 hours per week). Only 39 percent of employed women with a child under one work full-time. In contrast, almost half of employed women whose youngest child is between five and seven work full-time, and for those with teenage children, 67.1 percent are employed full-time (Statistics New Zealand, 1999).

2.1.1 Changes in Women's Career Breaks

Although women's labour force participation remains affected by family responsibilities, the effects have been changing over the years. There are three main changes to the life-cycle work patterns of women – the timing, frequency, and length of career breaks taken due to family responsibilities.

Timing of Women's Career Breaks

Women are delaying childbearing until later years. By 1986 the 25-29 age group had replaced the 20-24 age group as the peak childbearing age group (Statistics NZ, 1999). A survey of 758 professional and managerial women by the Institute of Manpower Studies in the United Kingdom found that the average woman had her first baby at 30 ("Beyond the career break", 1992).

Therefore, many women have had extensive work experience by the time they have their first child. This was illustrated in a study of women taking parental leave from the NZ Customs Department, which found that those taking parental leave averaged 8.9 years service with the Department, ranging from

one to 17 years (Glendining, 1992). This has many advantages for women, in that they have sufficient time to establish themselves in their careers. They have learned the job and been accepted by their peers, but now need to put forth effort to make a secure place for themselves within their chosen field. This stage in one's career is referred to by Hall (1976, cited in Robbins, Millet, Cocioppe & Waters-Marsh, 1998) as stabilisation – a growth phase, and time for advancement. Therefore, women will be taking a career break at a crucial time for advancement.

Frequency of Women's Career Breaks

Women are also having fewer children. During the baby boom period, which ended in the early 1960s, the average number of children per woman peaked at four. From 1962 onwards this number steadily declined, and by the early 1980s had dropped to around two children per woman, a figure that has changed little since (Statistics NZ, 1999). As women often return to the labour force between births, this means that they will require fewer career breaks.

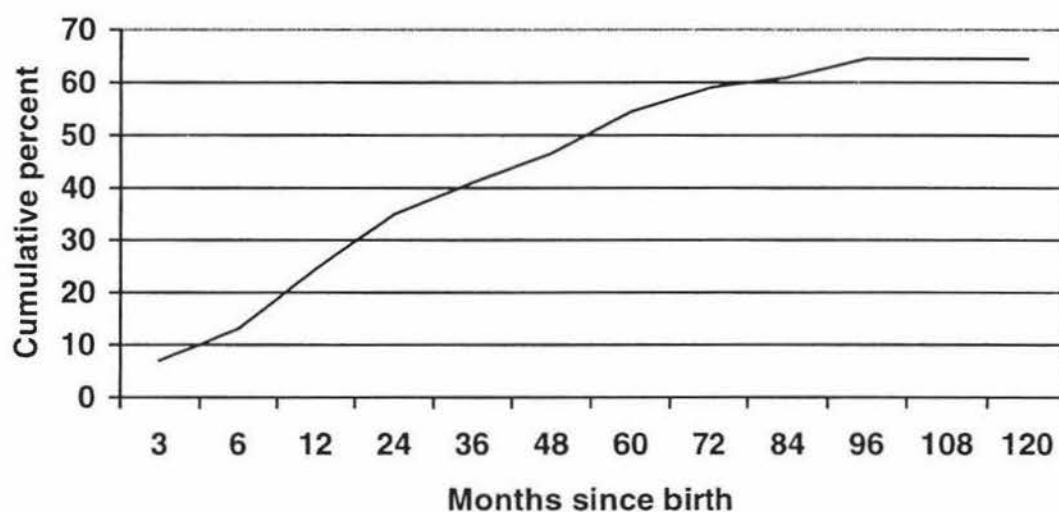
Length of Women's Career Breaks

Women with young children have become more involved in the labour force. They are now more likely to remain in the labour force, or to return to it more quickly than in the past (Revell & Riley, 1990). As a result, the labour force participation rates for women have been increasing considerably, particularly for those with young children. For example, between 1986 and 1996, the labour force participation of women, whose youngest child was under one, increased 7.9 percentage points. The labour force participation of women, whose youngest child was aged between one and four, rose 10.6 percentage points in the same time period (Statistics NZ, 1998). The Women's National Commission (1991) claims that the increase in the number of women returning to work soon after having a baby is part of a long term trend – one that has now been going on for the around 20 years. Throughout the childbearing and rearing years, women are increasingly likely to be in paid employment.

This trend is further illustrated by a 1995 survey of 1,026 women by the Population Studies Centre at the University of Waikato. This survey found that around a quarter of the women entered employment in the first year after

the birth of their last child, and just over half by the fifth year after having had that child. In the next five years, only a further 10 percent of the mothers entered employment. This indicates that most of those intending to return to the labour force do so within the first five years (Hillcoat-Nalletamby, Dharmalingam & Pool, 1998). Figure 2-2 (below) graphically illustrates these results, showing the cumulative percentage of mothers entering the labour force after the birth of their last child.

FIGURE 2-2: CUMULATIVE PERCENTAGE OF MOTHERS ENTERING LABOUR FORCE AFTER BIRTH OF LAST CHILD



SOURCE: ADAPTED FROM HILLCOAT-NALLETAMBY ET AL., 1998, p.9

There is a trend in New Zealand and internationally for women to have greater continuity in their life-cycle work patterns, with their work patterns being less dependent on family formation behaviour (Hillcoat-Nalletamby et al., 1998). This trend in New Zealand has already been demonstrated with New Zealand Statistics figures given above. On the international scene, a study of over 2,000 British women found that over half had gone back to work within a year of the birth of their child ("More women return", 1996). A study in the United States of America of 324 employed pregnant women found that slightly more than 80 percent returned to work within six months of childbirth ("Most women return", 1994).

The next section of this thesis will look at why women's career breaks are changing, with women returning to the labour force earlier.

2.1.2 Why Women's Career Breaks are Changing

According to Revell and Riley (1990), women have changed the timing, frequency and length of their career breaks to ensure success in the labour force. These authors claim that the labour market is structured around notions about careers, notions that are built on a male career model – one of “continuous full-time hierarchical work with domestic needs provided by somebody else” (Revell & Riley, 1990, p.10). Therefore, women who accept this model and base their careers around it are more likely to be successful. Those with a weaker adherence to the male career model will have limited labour market success, as they will be faced with explicit conflicts and barriers.

Therefore, because of their attempts to adhere to the male career model, the effects of family formation have less affect on women's careers today than ever in the past. However, the presence of dependent children still has a significant impact upon the labour market participation of most women at some time during their lives (Revell & Riley, 1990). Women are still forced to take career breaks, but many are keeping those breaks to a minimum. This raises the issue of what factors women take into consideration when deciding when to return to paid work.

According to Rotherham (1995) a number of studies have shown that there are two distinct groups of women who are most likely to return to work after having a child. The first group of women return to advance their careers. They are highly attached to the labour force, have higher incomes, higher status occupations, higher educational qualifications, and are older than the average mother. These women are likely to take parental leave and return to the same employer.

The second group of women return to work due to financial need. These women tend to have lower incomes, lower status occupations, lower educational qualifications, lower skill levels, and are younger than the average

mother. They are more likely to return to a different employer (Rotherham, 1995).

In their study of maternal participation in the full-time workforce in New Zealand, Lloyd, Fergusson & Horwood (1989) found that women's full-time workforce participation is highest amongst mothers whose:

- youngest child is over five
- families are of low socio-economic status
- families are experiencing financial difficulties
- sex-role attitudes are non-traditional.

It would seem logical to assume that those mothers whose families are of low socio-economic status are also those experiencing financial difficulties.

Therefore, this study seems to confirm Rotherham's (1995) claim that many women return to work because of financial need. One could possibly also assume that those women whose sex-role attitudes are non-traditional are also those who are highly attached to the labour force – going against traditional attitudes that a mother's place is in the home.

Traditional attitudes about a woman's role in society still abound. A survey into the roles of men and women in society carried out by the Department of Marketing at Massey University found that most New Zealanders (51%) believe that pre-school children are likely to suffer if their mother works. Many (44%) believe that the family suffers when a woman has a full-time job (Gendall & Russell, 1995). Despite these attitudes, however, women's labour force participation rates show that women with dependent children are returning to work in increasing numbers.

The studies referred to above suggest that women take three main factors into account when deciding when to return to paid work. One factor they consider is their attachment to their career versus their belief that a woman's place is in the home with their children. Another factor they consider is the age of their youngest child. Finally, they take into account their financial situation, and whether there is a financial need for them to return to paid work.

With women returning earlier to the labour force, there is an increased demand for parental leave. The next section of this thesis will explore parental leave policies in New Zealand and elsewhere and whether these policies are meeting the needs of women returners.

2.1.3 Parental Leave

Parental leave policies allow parents (typically the mother) to take leave for a specified period, for the birth or adoption of a child and the caring of that child, and then return to their previous job (NACEW, 1997). The broad term 'parental leave' actually covers three types of leave: maternity leave, paternity leave and extended leave. Maternity leave is intended to protect the mother and the child. Paternity leave can encourage the participation of fathers in the care of their children. Extended leave enables either parent to care for children at home while they are young (den Dulk, van Doorne-Huiskes & Schippens, 1996).

Parental leave benefits the woman, her employer, and society (NACEW, 1997). The woman benefits economically, as she is able to maintain continuous labour force attachment, meaning she can retain favourable terms and conditions and have better lifelong earnings. The employer also benefits economically, as it is able to retain its human capital investment (in the form of recruitment and training costs) in the woman. Finally, society benefits through reduced government expenditure on benefits and family assistance spending, an increased tax take, and reduced likelihood of benefit dependence, child poverty and repeating cycles of disadvantage (NACEW, 1997). As women with young children increase their participation in the labour force, the provision of parental leave becomes increasingly relevant.

The Parental Leave and Employment Protection Act 1987

New Zealand's statutory parental leave entitlements are contained in the Parental Leave and Employment Protection Act 1987. All parental leave under the Act is unpaid. The main types of leave provided by the Act are:

- Maternity leave: up to 14 weeks for the mother
- Paternity leave: up to two weeks for the father

- Extended leave: up to 52 weeks, less any maternity leave taken, for either parent or shared by both (with the total period not exceeding 52 weeks)

Leave is available to employees who have worked for the same employer for 12 months, for at least 10 hours per week, at the expected date of birth. The employer must allow the parent to return to their previous job, unless it can prove that the job is a key position and cannot be filled on a temporary basis. The Act also protects employees against dismissal when they apply for or take leave. However, it has been claimed that parental leave is of little benefit to women, especially those in lower socio-economic groups, unless it includes some form of payment (Smith, 1996).

The Paid Parental Leave Bill

New Zealand is one of the few countries that does not provide paid parental leave (NACEW, 1997). In an attempt to overcome this disparity, the Alliance's Laila Harre introduced a Private Member's Bill in 1998. If it had been passed, the Paid Parental Leave Bill would have amended the Parental Leave and Employment Protection Act 1987, entitling women workers to 12 weeks' paid maternity leave, with the right to transfer this in part or full to her partner. Payment would have been at 80 percent of earnings, but not at more than the average male weekly wage (McClinchy, 1999).

In the 1999 budget, the Government announced the Parental Tax Credit, to be introduced on 1st October 1999. This income-tested tax credit is for \$150 per week for eight weeks after the birth of a child (Birch, English & Sowry, 1999). It is expected that approximately 45 percent of new parents in New Zealand will qualify for this payment (Guy, 1999). The Alliance have described the tax credit as "a mean-spirited attempt to deflect the Alliance's Paid Parental Leave proposal" (Anderton, 1999). If this was the purpose of the tax credit, it seems to have been successful. The Paid Parental Leave Bill was defeated in September 1999 when it did not receive enough support to proceed in Parliament (Guy, 1999). This happened despite a poll that shows that the majority of New Zealanders (60%) supported the Bill (McClinchy, 1999).

However there are some, such as Steve Marshall, Chief Executive of the New Zealand Employers' Federation, who claim government should not interfere in

the employment relationship, and paid parental leave should not be required by statute, but be negotiated between individual employers and their employees (Marshall, 1999). According to the EEO Trust, it is becoming more common practice for employers in New Zealand to provide voluntary paid parental leave, (McClinchy, 1999). The Trust has reported an increase in paid parental leave schemes in the past 12 months. It holds a list of 31 companies with schemes in place, though most organisations providing the schemes are large employers – often national organisations – which equate to only a very small percentage of employers in New Zealand.

Voluntary paid parental leave schemes are all aimed at increasing the profitability of the organisations offering them. They tend to involve an ex gratia payment of up to three months wages, usually paid after a certain period of return to work. This can in effect limit women's choice, in that they are pressured to return to paid work to receive this lump sum payment. Women should have maximum choice – including the choice to remain in the home full-time if they feel this is in the best interests of themselves and their families. Paid parental leave schemes targeted at encouraging women to return to work quickly can also be seen as a form of discrimination against those women who chose to stay at home with their children. It effectively means that some women are being paid for mothering, and others are not (Woods, 1993). For this reason, it is the author's view that paid parental leave should be regulated by statute, and its provisions designed to ensure women maintain the ability to choose, and are not penalised for the choices they make.

Statutory Paid Parental Leave in other Countries

Globally, there are over 122 countries that make provision for paid parental leave, including non-western countries such as Brazil, India, and Malaysia (Drake & Keshvara, 1998). Most western nations make national provision for paid parental leave. New Zealand, Australia and the United States are among the few who do not (NACEW, 1997). However, New Zealand did recently introduce the Parental Tax Credit and Australia a Maternity Allowance (both of which are detailed in Table 2-1 on page 14). Furthermore, while there is no federal provision for paid parental leave in the USA, eight states do provide

legislated payments. Table 2-1 (overleaf) details the paid parental leave available in various countries, including New Zealand.

As can be seen from this table, there are great differences among nations regarding paid parental leave. For example, Sweden and Denmark have generous parental leave systems. At the other end of the spectrum are countries such as New Zealand, Australia, and the United States of America, where there is little government involvement. Somewhere in the middle are countries such as Germany, the Netherlands, and Italy, which have developed statutory parental leave arrangements but still assume the women will take care of the children at home. There is no paternity leave available, and it is expected that the mother will take any extended leave (den Dulk et al., 1996).

TABLE 2-1: PAID PARENTAL LEAVE AVAILABLE IN NEW ZEALAND AND OVERSEAS

Country	Maternity Leave	Paternity Leave	Extended Leave	Total Length of Leave
Australia	None. Means-tested one-off grant of \$A750 + \$A200 on proof of vaccination	Not known	52 weeks, unpaid	1 year, unpaid
Denmark	18 weeks, paid at flat-rate benefit equivalent to approximately 65% of average earnings of an industrial worker	10 days, paid at same flat-rate benefit as maternity leave	10 weeks, paid as maternity leave + 6 months for each parent, paid at 80% of unemployment benefit + additional 6 months (depending on employer's agreement)	19 months, paid (six months of which must be taken by other parent) (+ additional 6 months for some)
Germany	14 weeks, paid at 100% of earnings	None	Until child is 3, paid at flat rate benefit of DM600 per month for first 6 months, followed by income-related benefit until child is 2.	3 years, paid for 2 years
Italy	5 months, paid at 80% of earnings	None	6 months, paid at 30% of earnings	11 months, paid
New Zealand	14 weeks, first 8 weeks paid at means-tested flat rate of \$150 per week, remainder unpaid	2 weeks, unpaid	Additional 38 weeks, unpaid	1 year, 8 weeks paid
Sweden	60 days, paid at 90% of earnings	2 weeks, paid at 80% of earnings	18 months, first 360 days paid at 90% of earnings, next 90 days at flat-rate benefit	20 months, 17 months paid
The Netherlands	16 weeks, paid at 100% of earnings	None	6 months at reduced hours (minimum 20 hours per week), unpaid	4 months, paid + 6 months at reduced hours
United Kingdom	40 weeks, first 6 weeks paid at 90% of earnings, next 12 weeks paid at flat-rate, remainder unpaid	None	None	10 months, 4½ months paid
United States of America	None. 8 states provide paid leave for both men and women for varying time frames (12-20 weeks) capped at applicable minimum wage		None	0 – 5 months, paid (depending on state)

Sources: McClinchy, 1999 (USA and Australia); NACEW, 1997 and Birch et al., 1999 (New Zealand); den Dulk et al., 1996 (European nations)

The unpaid provisions of New Zealand's parental leave laws are among the best in the world, offering strong job protection and access to maternity,

paternity and extended leave (NACEW, 1997). However, its paid parental leave provisions remain one of the worst in the world. This must be seen as a form of discrimination against women, who are expected to put their careers on hold while they take the bulk of responsibility for childbirth and rearing, yet receive no financial compensation for doing so. Generous paid parental leave increases equality between men and women in the labour market by reducing the gender pay gap (den Hulk et al., 1996). It also reduces poverty, enables low-income families to take sufficient leave, and encourages breastfeeding (Guy, 1999), which in turn increases the health of both mother and child.

However, many forms of paid parental leave, particularly voluntary schemes aimed at increasing an organisation's profitability, do not meet the needs of women. The women who are eligible for paid leave under these schemes tend to be those who Thomson (1999) refers to as the 'work-rich'. The work-rich are generally better educated and skilled, are reasonably (and sometimes highly) paid, and have a degree of certainty, continuity and control over their working lives. This control includes the decision on whether to remain in paid work (Thomson, 1999). At the other end of the labour market are the 'work-poor' – a group with a record of broken employment, part-time work, no security or continuity of work, and little control over their working lives (Thomson, 1999). It is women who fit into this description who work for low pay, are in the most need of parental leave, and yet are the least likely to receive it. In fact they will most likely not even be eligible for the parental tax credit in New Zealand, as a family does not qualify if it has received any form of government assistance in the year of birth of a child (Guy, 1999). It is therefore likely that these women and their families will suffer poverty while they are taking a career break. They will be forced into a quick return to paid work, possibly adversely affecting themselves and their families.

Therefore, it can be seen that paid parental leave may not be the whole answer to women's career break problems. In many instances it is not available to the women who need it most. In other instances it can reduce women's choices, virtually forcing them to return to work earlier than they may have desired so they can receive *ex gratia* payments for their parental leave. Furthermore, paid parental leave does not reduce labour force segregation; particularly

where rising participation is accompanied by growing part-time employment (den Hulk et al., 1996).

Possibly, something that would benefit women more would be if they received status and recognition for their unpaid work in the home and community. The next section of this thesis will explore the skills women develop while taking a career break, and whether women returners receive any recognition or increase in status as a result of their unpaid work in the home and community.

2.2 The Skills and Status of Women Returners

Before we proceed with a discussion of the skills women returners acquire in the home and bring into their paid work, it is necessary to explore the notion of careers and what constitutes a career. No one definition of the concept 'career' has been agreed upon. The traditional, and probably still most popular, model of the successful career is one of a vertical career ladder with periodic advancement and promotion. However, this model has now been accepted by academics as only one possibility, and one with increasingly limited viability (Rudman, 1999).

Obviously, our concept of what a career constitutes will influence our thinking about careers and their process of development. According to Robbins et al. (1998), a career constitutes any work, whether paid or unpaid, that is pursued over an extended period of time. Therefore, it would seem that a more useful way to think about careers would be to consider them as a sequence of role-related experiences. By looking at careers in this way, careers are not restricted to (usually upward) movements between paid occupational roles, but may include other role-related experiences, such as the career of the housewife (Hall & Hall, 1976, cited in Rudman, 1999). In this way, experiences and learning that have occurred outside the formal environment of paid work or employment are not ignored.

When we look at careers in this way, unpaid work in the home can be considered to be a career. For many women it is a temporary change of career, supplementing the repertoire of skills they use in their paid work. The

Women's National Commission claims that running a home and family develops women's organisational and management skills, and enables them to cope well with the demands and stresses of the workplace. The Women's National Commission also believes that women who have successfully raised a family have an inner confidence and sense of personal worth which are valuable resources to any employer (WNC, 1991).

Unfortunately, historically there has been no connection between skills developed in the home and those recognised for selection and promotion in paid work. According to Butler and Leigh (1995):

Unpaid work in the home is work done for love, not money, for family approval rather than external recognition. It has been argued that unpaid work is intrinsically different from paid work and so cannot be recognised by it, except in cases where the unpaid work is perceived to have almost exact parallels in paid work, such as care (p.1).

The false notion that what women returners have learned from family life is of little value in their paid work has damaged women's prospects in the workplace (WNC, 1991). When women return to the labour market they are seen as beginners or fresh starters. Skill atrophy or human capital depreciation has been used as an explanation for the effect of career interruptions on women's subsequent earnings in several studies (Albrecht, Edin, Sundstrom & Vroman, 1999). In other words, any skills women had prior to their career break are considered to be lost or depreciated, and no new skills are recognised as having been developed while outside the labour force. This means that women not only miss out on promotion possibilities while they are outside the labour force because they have allegedly not increased their skills (Revell & Riley, 1990), but are also likely to return to the labour force at a *lower* level due to perceived skill depreciation. As women do more work for more of their lives unpaid in the home than in any other form of work, it is important for them to be able to take full advantage of vocational competence gained through their work in the home (Butler & Leigh, 1995).

In her study of the perceived value of women's unpaid work, Cave (1998) found that many women entering the paid workforce after years of managing their homes are not given any credit for this work by prospective employers.

Unpaid work in the home, she claims, is not valued because it is unpaid, and because women do it. In a capitalist market economy, unpaid work is perceived to have no value. It is considered to be unproductive simply because it does not involve a market transaction, where money changes hands (Hyman, 1997, cited in Cave, 1998). Furthermore, Cave states that, when there is an expectation that certain work will be carried out by women, that work is devalued. If a man were to carry out the same work it would be valued more highly. Cave defends this claim by showing how the feminisation of any work results in the under-valuation of that work. She cites the example of secretarial work, which was devalued when it became a 'woman's domain' (Matthews, 1991, cited in Cave, 1998). Therefore, because unpaid work in the home does not involve a monetary transaction, and is carried out predominantly by women, it is undervalued.

Unfortunately there has been little formal research done into the skills women develop in the home and community while they are taking a career break due to family responsibilities. The few studies that have been undertaken are detailed below.

Arvey and Begalla (1975) analysed the 'homemaker' job using the Position Analysis Questionnaire. Their results showed that being a homemaker is personally demanding with a highly variable schedule, requiring considerable attention both to the work environment and also to oneself in relation to that environment. The researchers concluded that homemaking has a close similarity to supervisory jobs, or jobs with a troubleshooting, emergency-handling orientation.

Ekstrom, Beier, Davis and Gruenberg (1981) analysed the experiences and activities of full-time mothers with the aim of assessing their relevance to paid work. Their study found that women develop skills and knowledge through a variety of life experiences (homemaking, parenting, voluntary work, and recreation) that are job relevant. They concluded that homemakers require a high degree of flexibility as well as high levels of responsibility and autonomy, which enhance their value as employees.

Research carried out on behalf of the Women's Bureau in Australia (Consumer Contact, 1996) discovered that employers who had hired women returners found they possessed many valuable skills and abilities. For example, they had organisational and interpersonal skills, a sense of responsibility, and an ability to work autonomously. These employers also found women returners were stable, reliable, dedicated, compassionate and hard working.

Mason (1998) researched employer attitudes towards woman returners. She found that employers consider women returners possess organisational and time management skills, can cope with multiple tasks, have a strong sense of responsibility, and are stable, committed and mature.

2.2.1 A taxonomy of competences

By far the most comprehensive study that looked into the skills of women returners was a project undertaken by Butler and Leigh that began in 1993. Butler and Leigh (1995) believe that the dissociation of competences acquired in the home from those recognised for selection and promotion in paid work has a highly negative impact on women's career paths. They state that this view has been challenged in research and practice in the UK and USA, but these challenges have been hampered by the lack of a reliable and credible taxonomy of competences acquired in the home (Butler & Leigh, 1995). They set out to develop such a taxonomy, which involved several distinct steps.

Firstly, they completed a functional analysis of unpaid work in the home. They used contemporary methodologies exactly paralleled in the mapping of paid occupations by the Employment Department. This, they believed, allowed them to separate the competence acquired in the home from any underlying values or motivations. Through this functional analysis, nine key roles were identified. These nine key roles were:

1. Develop and manage systems to meet routine and non-routine needs.
2. Optimise the acquisition and use of material and financial resources.
3. Obtain, record and provide information to others.
4. Support and care for adults.
5. Care for and supervise children.

6. Maintain the health and safety of household members.
7. Provide services to household members.
8. Maintain the interior and exterior of the house.
9. Contribute to the national and local community.

From these key roles, were developed a list of 'core' elements present in the functional analysis and in paid work. The core elements identified were: planning and managing own workload, planning and managing change, managing budget, conservation of resources, obtaining and exploiting information, negotiation/networking, developing oneself and others/teamwork, providing an environment conducive to work, and working in a variety of contexts.

Butler and Leigh (1995) then used 'experts' in the field (careers guidance officers, computer-aided guidance systems, and training and personnel managers) to assess the relationships between these key roles and paid occupations. Table 2-2 (overleaf) details the career options the experts identified as emerging from each key role, along with caveats they made about each relationship.

There was strong agreement between experts regarding the occupations listed and the perceived 'core' elements present in the functional analysis and those in paid work.

TABLE 2-2: CAREER OPTIONS EMERGING FROM THE FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS OF UNPAID WORK IN THE HOME

Key Role	Career Options	Caveats
Key Role A: Develop and manage systems to meet routine and non-routine needs	General management Supervisory management Administration Any other job which allows one responsibility for planning one's own and/or others' workload	The individual would generally need to be prepared to undertake training linked to various work placements, although this could be accelerated.
Key Role B: Optimise the acquisition and use of material and financial resources	Management Self-employment	For management, some accelerated training would generally be required
Key Role C: Retain, record and provide information to others	General administration functions at a level lower than management	None
Key Role D: Support and care for adults	Management Counsellor Social services/social work Teaching Careers/advice worker	None
Key Role E: Care for and supervise children	Youth and community work Childcare Fostering Nanny, etc	These positions tend to be dominated by women, low paid, and difficult to find
Key Role F: Maintain the health and safety of household members	Seen as core in many occupations Nursing Health and safety instructor	
Key Role G: Provide services to household members	Dressmaking Waiter, cook, chef Hotel work Events organiser Driver	None
Key Role H: Maintain the interior and exterior of the home	Interior designer Painter and decorator Building maintenance Plumber Carpenter, etc	Reputable training and work in interior decorating could be hard to find. Other areas are male dominated, with limited training opportunities
Key Role I: Contribute to the national and local economy	Community advocacy (e.g. advice agency work) Fundraiser Police officer	None

Source: Adapted from Butler & Leigh, 1995, pp.10-14

Next, NVQs related to the listed occupations were analysed against the units of the key roles. A matrix was developed showing the detailed relationship between competence developed through unpaid work and NVQs. Standards covered included business administration, supervisory management, management, training and development, construction, retail, customer service, sport and recreation, care, childcare and education, and catering and hospitality.

A supporting development took place at the same time as Butler and Leigh's (1995) project. During the twelve months between the functional analysis of unpaid work and the assessment of relationships with paid work, a group of women undertook NVQ training in Business Administration with the Barnsley & Doncaster Training and Enterprise Council. By taking into account the trainees' existing competence, acquired in the course of the daily running of their homes or in community work, these women were able to achieve NVQ Level 2 in 20 weeks, rather than the usual two years. This result confirms that using unpaid work competence can have a significant impact on the achievement of learners who ordinarily would have been treated as inexperienced and lacking relevant competence (Butler & Leigh, 1995).

In sum, all of these studies suggest that women returners develop many valuable skills in the home and community that are readily transferable into the labour force. In particular these skills equip them for supervisory jobs, management, business administration, and other jobs requiring high levels of responsibility, flexibility and autonomy. Women returners also possess many personal characteristics that are highly valued in the workplace, such as organisational and interpersonal skills, reliability, and dedication. These findings have very important implications for the position of women in the labour market, as it encourages one to recognise that unpaid work in the home is no different from other kinds of work – it simply takes place in a different setting (Butler & Leigh, 1995).

2.2.2 Assessing Competence

However, one cannot simply assume that all women returners possess these skills. Women returners are not a homogenous group. Individual women returners acquire differing skills according to the unique experiences they encounter (Ekstrom et al., 1981). Furthermore, it cannot be assumed that all women are competent carers or home managers. Therefore, assessment is required to determine the skills acquired.

Assessment of skills should obviously take place as part of the recruitment and selection process. Employers should be using selection methods that enable them to objectively assess the skills women returners develop while

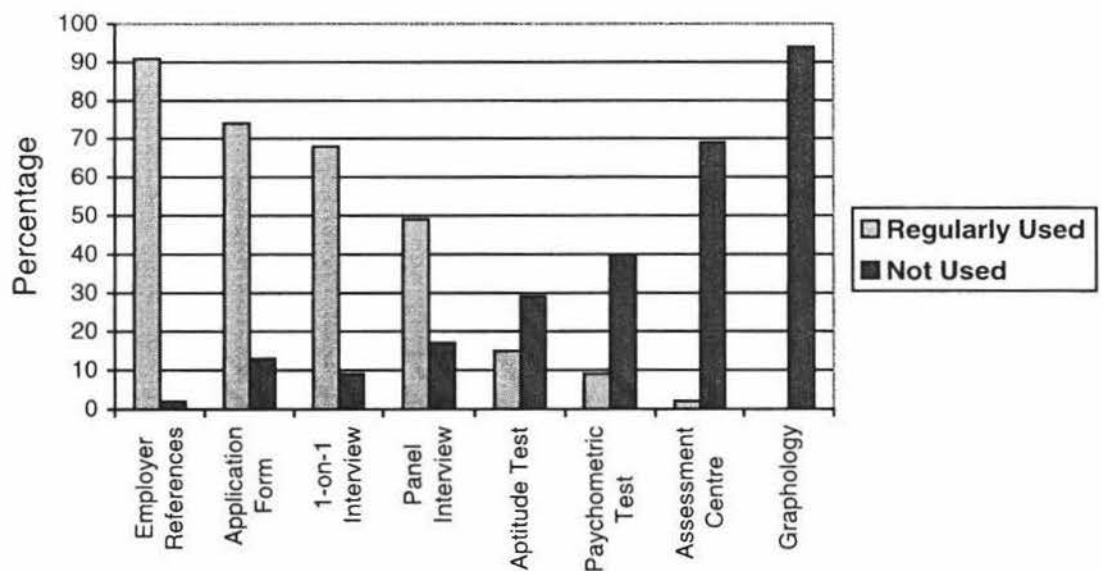
outside the paid workforce. This can be achieved by making use of methods that are reported to have high levels of validity.

However, this does not seem to be happening. Harris, Toulson and Livingston (1996) cite several researchers who have expressed concern regarding selection methods used by employers. Their own study found selection methods with high reported validities are used infrequently, while those with lower validities are used more frequently.

A study conducted by Mason (1998) concluded that the selection methods used by employers are not likely to give an accurate and objective measure of the skills women returners possess. She claimed that although many of the participants in her study stated that their organisations make competency-based appointments, the selection methods they use for assessing competence did not seem to be either objective or reliable, as they did not have high levels of validity.

Figure 2-3 below shows the percentage of selection methods used regularly (for all or most appointments) or not at all, by employers in New Zealand.

FIGURE 2-3: SELECTION METHODS USED REGULARLY OR NOT AT ALL BY EMPLOYERS IN NEW ZEALAND



Source: The Cranfield Project, 1999, p.11

It can be seen from this figure that employer references are by far the most regularly used selection method, followed by application forms and one-on-one interviews. Much less frequently used on a regular basis are aptitude or psychometric tests, assessment centres, and graphology.

The most popular selection methods – employer references, application forms, and interviews – are known to have low predictive validity. Meta-analysis of employer reference checks found them to have an average validity of between 0.16 and 0.27, depending on the criterion being predicted (Hunter & Hunter, 1984). Application forms have been reported as having predictive validity of 0.2 (Roberts, 1997) and interviews as low as 0.14 (Hunter & Hunter, 1984). However, the type of interview used greatly affects its predictive validity.

Unstructured interviews have the lowest validity and are characterised by inconsistency, lack of job-relatedness and interviewer bias (Taylor & O'Driscoll, 1995). Recent research (for example Huffcutt & Arthur, 1994; McDaniel, Whetzel, Schmidt & Maurer, 1994; Wiesner & Cronshaw, 1988; Wright, Lichtenfels & Pursell, 1989) indicates that structured interviews are more valid and reliable predictors of success than unstructured interviews. A structured interview approach attempts to ensure individuals are not discriminated against, and focuses on specific job-related behaviours. While reported validity co-efficients vary, the use of a structured approach, where pre-determined questions are based on formal job analysis, and administered in the same sequence to all candidates, has been found to improve validity markedly (e.g. Harris, 1989). Some authors report a validity coefficient as high as 0.87 for structured employment interviews (Weisner & Cronshaw, 1988), making them one of the most effective selection techniques.

While The Cranfield Project (1999) results do not specify the type of employment interview used, it is reasonable to assume interviews are predominantly unstructured in nature. Research on selection methods in New Zealand conducted over the last decade has shown that, when interviews are used as a selection method, they are most likely to be unstructured. (George, 1989; Harris et al., 1996). Of even more concern is the lack of knowledge of human resource practitioners and consultants regarding which selection methods are best. They perceived the predictive validity of the various

selection methods to be related to frequency of use, or in other words, because devices are used frequently they are considered to be accurate (George, 1989; Harris et al., 1996). While organisations continue to use selection methods that have low validity (such as reference checking and unstructured interviews) it is likely that something other than the applicant's ability to do the job well is being measured (Harris et al., 1996).

Competency-based recruitment and selection is a selection method that makes use of structured interviews based on a formal job analysis. This method is therefore more likely to benefit women returners. A competency-based job analysis aims to identify and objectify the competencies required to perform a particular job. Job applicants are then assessed in terms of whether or not they possess those competencies (Roberts, 1997). Competencies are usually assessed through a selection *process* rather than a single event. A textbook competency-based recruitment and selection process would consist of a competency-based application form, followed by a competency-based interview. The applicant may then be given a psychometric test, followed by participating in an assessment centre (Wood & Payne, 1998). This type of selection method would allow the job-relevant skills of women returners to be assessed and recognised by prospective employers.

If women returners' skills were recognised when they are seeking paid work, one would assume they would have little difficulty in securing a job that utilises those skills. However, women returners often face various barriers that impede their return to the labour market. The next section will explore these barriers.

2.3 Barriers to Women Returning to the Labour Force

Ideally, returning to the labour force should be a non-issue. If jobs were organised in such a way that the performance of them was completely compatible with parenthood, there would be no barriers to impede the return of women to the labour force (Revell & Riley, 1990). Unfortunately, this is not the case, and women returners are faced with many barriers and conflicts that can make it difficult for them to return to paid work.

2.3.1 *Public and Private Worlds*

Men's and women's lives both involve paid and unpaid work; what Novitz (1987) refers to as public and private worlds. However, men and women tend to do different things and spend different amounts of time in work inside and outside the home (Novitz, 1987). Women, more often than men, are the ones subjected to conflict between their public and private worlds. For example, it is women who more commonly adjust their time spent in paid work to accommodate the needs of their families. This is because women with partners and/or children still have primary responsibilities for their families' non-material well-being. Therefore, their involvement in paid work will always cause conflict, entailing trade-offs that involve implicit and explicit costs (Wilson, 1995).

One possible solution to this is for women to become more like successful men – to consign childcare to others and devote themselves to achievement in their public sphere (Novitz, 1987). Another solution is to change the way the labour force is organised. As mentioned in section 1.1.2, the labour market is structured around a male model of work. This model assumes that committed employees work full-time throughout their adult lives, can transfer around the country at the discretion of their employers, and their private worlds have no impact on their public worlds (WNC, 1991).

However, the family responsibilities of the woman returner complicate her life and make her less flexible and mobile (Farmer & Backer, 1977). Her public and private worlds are inextricably linked. Therefore, a model that might adequately cater for women's work would need to take account of work done at home as well as paid work. As Novitz (1987) states "we need to question the sanctity of the eight-hour-a-day, forty-hour week and find more collective and collaborative ways of organising the workplace" (p.50). Therefore, what we are seeking are not ways where individual women can succeed in a male-dominated society, but changes to the way work is structured and organised that recognises involvement in paid and unpaid work – a model that does not carry substantial pitfalls, penalties and traps for women returners.

While the labour force is based upon the male model of work, women returners public and private worlds will remain in conflict, and these women

will experience barriers that prevent them from fully participating in the labour force. In particular, these barriers include sex-typed family roles, employer discrimination, the unavailability of resources, and the characteristics of the labour market.

2.3.2 Sex-typed family roles

Wilson (1995) claims that men are prejudiced against women who are or could become mothers. A 1992 survey in the United Kingdom found that 47 percent of men believe mothers should not work (Wilson, 1995). A more recent (1995) survey in New Zealand into the roles of men and women in society found similar attitudes. Most New Zealanders (51%) believe pre-school children are likely to suffer if their mother works, with only 2 percent of respondents agreeing that women with pre-school children should work full-time (Gendall & Russell, 1995).

With attitudes such as these about women's roles within the family, it is little wonder that this can be a barrier to women returners. Women may face opposition from employers as well as their own families. Conflict may also arise within them; they may experience feelings of guilt because they are going against predominant views of their proper role within society. Sex-types family roles can lead to the next barrier – employer discrimination.

2.3.3 Employer discrimination

Stereotyped views about women and their level of commitment to paid employment by employers can create a barrier to women returners (Revell & Riley, 1990). Empirical research that examined the link between career breaks and subsequent earnings found that a possible explanation for the significant negative effect of a career break on subsequent earnings could be that employers see taking a career break as a signal of a lack of commitment (Albrecht et al., 1999). Because women often have 'broken' career patterns, they tend to be perceived as less committed to paid work than men are (Wilson, 1995).

Rowe & Snizek (1995) attribute blatant discrimination in the workplace to the myth of gender differences in work values. In their study of the work value preferences of both men and women, they found that gender is largely irrelevant to individual preferences for particular work values. They found that women, like men, attach more importance to a feeling of accomplishment, high income, and opportunity for advancement than they do to either job security or short working hours. The authors claim that continued emphasis on differences reinforces traditional gender-role stereotyping and perpetuates gender inequality in the workplace.

2.3.4 Unavailability of resources

Mothers of young children find it difficult to participate in the labour force without the availability of certain resources, particularly affordable, high quality childcare in a convenient location. A recent New Zealand survey of approximately 3,800 families with children under the age of 14 years found that problems accessing childcare affected around a quarter of the mothers. The majority of those mothers were prevented from participating in the labour force, with two main reasons being the cost and lack of suitable childcare services (NACEW, 1999).

Women who do participate in the labour force are less satisfied with their jobs when they are dissatisfied with their childcare arrangements (Holtzman & Glass, 1999). Due to this lack of satisfaction, one would presume that women who are unable to secure satisfactory childcare for their children are more likely to exit the labour force.

2.3.5 Characteristics of the labour market

Often the jobs that are available do not meet the needs of women returners. Women returners may require flexible working arrangements or reduced hours, especially initially when their children are young. Excessive working hours, which is becoming the norm in the labour force, is known to reduce the job satisfaction of mothers (Holtzman & Glass, 1999). Close to full-time work hours (30-35 hours per week) is preferred by mothers, as is the ability to work at home (Holtzman & Glass, 1999). Inflexible working arrangements that do

not recognise these needs are a barrier to women returners. However, while the labour market is structured around a male model of work, it will not be flexible to the needs of women returners.

2.3.6 Other Barriers

There are two other barriers to women returners who have had a lengthy absence from the labour force; lack of confidence and lack of or outdated customarily defined skills.

Lack of Confidence

Women who have had a lengthy career break often suffer from a lack of confidence. These women may need to participate in specifically designed courses to increase their confidence as well as their awareness of the options open to them – whether it be paid work or further training. These bridging courses provide the means of moving from the home to the classroom or workplace. They provide both the necessary skills, such as job search skills, CV preparation, and interviewing techniques, and the confidence required to return to the world of paid work (Farmer & Backer, 1977). There are many such courses available in New Zealand, such as Wahine Ahuru run by Work and Income New Zealand.

Lack of or Outdated Customarily Defined Skills

Given the rapidly changing nature of many jobs, it is likely that most women returners who have had a lengthy career break will require some form of training to update their skills (WNC, 1990). Women returners may not be familiar with current technology or workplace practices.

Furthermore, although women develop many valuable and job-relevant skills in the home, these are not normally taken into consideration. Because these skills are acquired through non-traditional means, they do not fit easily into what one could describe as customarily defined job skills. Therefore, many of the skills they do possess are often overlooked by prospective employers, and even by the women themselves.

2.4 Beyond the Career Break

What happens when women returners do make it past the various barriers that make it difficult for them to return to the labour force? Can they now wholeheartedly pursue their careers and expect to do so on the same terms as their male colleagues? Unfortunately this does not seem to be the case. Several empirical studies have shown that career breaks adversely affect women's occupational attainment (Mincer & Polachek, 1974; Polachek, 1981; Treiman & Terrell, 1995; cited in Felmler, 1995) and earnings (Corcoran & Duncan, 1979; Corcoran, Duncan & Ponza, 1983; Kim & Polachek, 1994; Light & Ureta, 1995; Mincer & Ofek, 1982; Mincer & Polachek, 1974; Sandell & Shapiro, 1980; Wellington, 1993; cited in Albrecht et al., 1999).

The Institute of Manpower Studies in the United Kingdom completed a survey of 758 women in professional and managerial jobs who returned to work after having a child. The study found that women felt that their line managers saw them as less promotable once they had become mothers ("Beyond the career break", 1992). Most women (90%) remained committed to their jobs, but had lower career aspirations, and felt less certain about their future career prospects. Part-timers in particular felt others saw them as less career-oriented and having lower potential.

Another British survey of over 2,000 mothers found that those mothers who had more or less continuous employment were three times more likely to receive promotions than those who took more lengthy career breaks ("More women return", 1996).

Research undertaken by Felmler (1995) found that even a single career break has significant negative consequences for a woman's career. This study showed that, not only does a career break significantly reduce earnings, it also reduces occupational prestige and affects mobility. Women who had had a career break had higher rates of downward mobility and lower rates of upward mobility.

A study of the career and life expectations of Chinese business students found that women expected that the arrival of a child would have a significant impact upon their careers, but not their husbands'. They expected to suffer a

loss of promotion and be permanently held back in their careers (McKeen & Bu, 1998).

Even in Sweden, a country that has gone to great lengths to make it easy for women to combine work and family as well as encouraging men to become closely involved with their children, parental leave is considered to have an affect upon ones' career. Top management still appear to hold traditional values, and you will not get to the top if you take more than the minimum time off for family reasons (Beck, 1998).

Butler (1995) agrees that career breaks result in a lack of advancement. He states that, as far as employers are concerned, a break is incompatible with job commitment, and that resistance grows as one climbs the corporate ladder. "[W]hen it comes to senior managers, long breaks are almost unheard of" (Butler, 1995, p.54).

These studies suggest that taking a career break can result in one being permanently held back. Although women returners are committed to their jobs, their employers perceive that their family responsibilities are incompatible with their work lives, and therefore assume that they have a lower level of commitment to their jobs. As a result, women returners may be passed over when promotion decisions are being made.

But why is it important for employers to attempt to remove barriers that prevent women returners from returning to paid work? Quite obviously, from an EEO perspective, it is important that employers ensure women returners have equal opportunities when they are seeking employment. However, it is also economically in an organisation's best interest to do so. The next section will explore why women returners have become an important source of skilled labour today.

2.5 The Importance of Women Returners

Women returners represent a significant portion of the population in New Zealand. Unfortunately, the number of working age women in New Zealand who are currently taking a career break due to family responsibilities is not a

statistic collected by Statistics New Zealand. However, it is known that a large percentage of working age women in New Zealand are classified 'not in labour force'. For the December 1998 quarter, there were 624,700 women in New Zealand with this classification – 42.4 percent of working age women, and 21.8 percent of the working age population (Statistics New Zealand, 2000a). In the United Kingdom there are six million women of working age not in current employment (which represents more than ten percent of the UK's total population), and research found that well over half intended to return to work (WNC, 1991). If only half of the working age women in New Zealand who are currently outside the labour force intend to return to work, this represents 10.9 percent of the working age population in New Zealand.

It does not make economic sense to ignore or marginalise such a large pool of untapped labour. It is important to utilise women returners' skills due to demographic trends, increasing skill shortages, and because it is in society's best interest.

2.5.1 Demographic Trends

Demographic trends can influence the sources of labour available to employers. Two demographic trends over recent years have had a marked influence on labour sources: women's increasing participation in the labour force, and the ageing of the labour force.

Women's participation in the labour force has been steadily increasing over the past century (Wilson, 1995). In New Zealand, a decade ago women made up 42.6 percent of the labour force, and five years ago that statistic had increased to 43.7 percent. By the year ended December 1998, women made up 45 percent of the labour force in New Zealand (Statistics NZ, 2000b). Even recessions do not impact on women's employment circumstances as negatively as that of men. Women are less likely to suffer employment losses because of their heavier involvement in part-time work and the service industry. During periods of recession, employment losses tend to be in full-time work and in manufacturing and production industries (Statistics NZ, 1999). This trend demonstrates that women are increasingly becoming an important source of labour.

The ageing of the labour force has also affected the source of labour available to employers. Decreasing birth rates and increasing mortality rates have resulted in an ageing population, with a resultant decrease in the proportion of working age people. With declining birth rates, the numbers of school leavers are falling, meaning there has been a rapid decrease in the numbers of young people available for work (Field & Paddison, 1989; WNC, 1991). This ageing of the workforce, which has become particularly marked as the baby boomers reach the latter years of their working lives, has resulted in projected labour force shortages. Therefore, employers have to look beyond school leavers, the traditional pool from which they draw skills, to other sources of labour to fill their human resource needs. The full potential of the community will need to be utilised and, with women representing the largest example of under-utilised workers, they provide a prime target (WNC, 1991).

2.5.2 Skill Shortages

There are increasing skill shortages in the labour force today (Field & Paddison, 1989). This is due not only to the demographic trends referred to above, but also to the demand for workers to be more highly skilled than ever before.

2.5.3 Society's Best Interest

It is in society's collective interest that those who are capable of work are able to do so (WNC, 1991). The productivity of a nation will grow as its citizens are able to develop their skills and talents and use them to the full. This will result in an increased tax take by government as well as reduced expenditure.

Furthermore, long-term benefit dependence has become a major problem in welfare states such as New Zealand. The government in New Zealand has recently targeted women returners as a means of reducing its expenditure, requiring women on a benefit to work at least 15 hours per week once their youngest child reaches six years of age.

In sum, it is in everybody's best interests for women returners to be able to return to the paid workforce when they are ready to do so. Women returners have become an important source of skilled labour. In a labour market where there are skill shortages, we cannot afford to marginalise or ignore the skills of these women.

Women's careers are affected more than men's by the presence of dependent children. Women's workforce participation is directly and significantly related to the age of their youngest child. However, there is a trend for women to bear children later in life, take a shorter break, and return to work between children. This trend may have been caused by women's attempts to enhance their chances of success in the labour market by adhering more closely to the male career model.

Parental leave, particularly when paid, increases equality between women and men in the labour market by reducing the gender pay gap. It also reduces poverty, enables mothers in low-income families to take sufficient leave, and encourages breastfeeding. However, paid parental leave can reduce women's choices, and is only available to the 'work-rich'. Furthermore, paid parental leave does not reduce labour force segregation.

Making the choice to take a break from the labour force due to family responsibilities can be considered a viable career option. For many women it is a temporary change of career, where they acquire skills that supplement the skills they use in their paid work. Empirical research has shown that women acquire many valuable skills through their work in the home and community that can be readily transferred to the paid workforce. Nevertheless, there has been no historical connection between skills developed in the home and those recognised for selection and promotion in paid work.

Several barriers prevent women from returning to the paid workforce, particularly those who have taken a long career break. Conflict between public and private worlds, society's attitudes towards women's roles within the family and at work, employer discrimination, unavailability of resources (particularly affordable, high-quality childcare), characteristics of the labour market, lack of confidence, and lack of or outdated customarily-defined skills

are all barriers to women returners. Furthermore, even when women do return to work, they can be permanently held back in their careers.

Employers perceive that women's family responsibilities are incompatible with their work lives, assume they have a lower level of commitment, and may pass them over when making promotion decisions. It can be concluded, therefore, that career breaks have a profound impact upon women's careers

CHAPTER 3: THE PRESENT STUDY

3.1 Research Objectives

This study explores the experiences of women returners while outside the paid workforce and when returning to paid work. The objectives of this study are:

Objective 1: to identify whether women returners' perceive that their career breaks and ongoing family commitments negatively affect their career progression.

Objective 2: to identify the skills women returners perceive they gain in the home through their roles as caregivers and home managers, which of those skills they believe they use in their paid work, and whether they and their employers seem to value those skills.

Objective 3: to identify any barriers women returners perceive exist that make it difficult for them to return to paid work or to continue working.

The methodology that would be most suitable for meeting these research objectives will now be considered.

3.2 Rationale for Methodology

3.2.1 Questions of Paradigm

"Questions of method are secondary to questions of paradigm" (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, cited in Highlen & Finley, 1996, p.177). Paradigm can be defined as the basic worldview or belief system that guides the researcher. Therefore, consideration of this paradigm is essential, as it affects not only the choice of methodology, but also how the data will be analysed. Additionally, when evaluating the quality of research, consideration must be given to the criteria, or epistemological validity, for evaluation within that paradigm (Highlen & Finley, 1996).

Paradigms are rooted in philosophical differences about the nature of reality (Patton, 1990). Numerous paradigm classifications have been proposed (e.g. Highlen & Finley, 1996; Parker, 1994; Patton, 1990). The most basic classification appears to be a bipolar distinction of paradigms – realism (also commonly referred to as positivism) and social constructionism (Parker, 1994).

Realism is based upon a scientific model of research – one that assumes that an objective reality exists that can be verified and quantified. In contrast, social constructionism is founded on the belief that all forms of knowledge produce images of the world that then operate as if they were true, or in other words, that all knowledge is constructed socially (Parker, 1994).

Post-positivism could be considered to be a subset of realism, and attempts to address some of the criticisms levelled at this paradigm. Post-positivism assumes an objective reality exists but, in contrast to realism, believes it can only be approximated.

A post-positivist paradigm underlies this research. The researcher believes that an objective reality exists, but acknowledges that this cannot be measured precisely using quantitative procedures. Therefore, the investigation is based on the assumption that reality can only be approximated, and that this can best be done through qualitative methods.

3.2.2 Questions of Method

Interviews and observations are frequently the source of data collection for post-positivist research (Highlen and Finley, 1996). The semi-structured interview was chosen as the data collection technique for the present study.

The semi-structured interview is a qualitative technique that is systematic, yet flexible and individualised (Patton, 1990). It involves the use of a number of basic questions that have been predetermined by the researcher. However, there is allowance for the interviewer to probe and explore certain subjects in greater depth, or to undertake a whole new area of enquiry to pursue topics or issues not anticipated (Patton, 1990).

The semi-structured interview was chosen as the method of data collection for this study for several reasons. Firstly, the use of a semi-structured (as opposed to structured) interview is more likely to uncover reality as experienced by the participants. Reality is not imposed by the researcher but, through using open-ended responses, participants are permitted to 'tell it as they see it' (Reinharz, 1992).

Furthermore, free interaction between researcher and participant provides opportunities for clarification and discussion (Hughes, 1996; Reinharz, 1992). New questions can be introduced as the interview proceeds when unanticipated patterns, issues, or topics emerge (Patton, 1990; Reinharz, 1992). This was essential in the present study, as the women's experiences were so diverse that it was not possible to pursue the same line of questioning with each participant.

The discovery of reality is also encouraged in the semi-structured interview because it allows a sense of connectedness to be developed between the interviewer and participant, avoiding "alienation of the researcher from the researched" (Reinharz, 1992, p.20). As a result, the participant is more likely to share information about herself, particularly information of a sensitive nature or that may be 'socially unacceptable'.

This advantage is further exploited when the interviewer and participant are both women, as was the case in the present study. Woman-to-woman talk is different from talk in mixed-sex groups, and has self-revealing and consciousness raising potential (Spender, 1980, in Reinharz, 1992).

Finally, the semi-structured interview helps to ensure that the needs of the participant are met. The participant is able to tell her story on her own terms, rather than those imposed by the researcher. This allows the participant to be actively involved in the construction of data about her life (Graham, 1984, in Reinharz, 1992).

However, interviews do have several disadvantages that can threaten their validity. Mouley (1970, in Newman & Benz, 1998) claims that interviewer bias is the major weakness of this method. Semi-structured interviews introduce a

further weakness in that they have reduced comparability of responses (Patton, 1990). Validity can also be challenged when the researcher's subjective bias affects the interpretation of data, resulting in misrepresentation of the participant's reality (Newman & Benz, 1998).

There are several steps that can be taken in an attempt to overcome, or at least minimise, these weaknesses. Firstly, there should be a high level of interviewer training in an attempt to prevent interviewer bias from affecting participant's responses (Newman & Benz, 1998). Secondly, an increase in sample size provides more evidence for common meaning from participants and decreases potential biases in the researcher's perceptions (Newman & Benz, 1998). Biased analysis of the data can also be overcome by testing emergent hypotheses against the data, searching for disconfirmatory and supporting data, and attempting to use multiple perspectives by searching for alternative explanations of the data.

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

4.1 Selection of Participants

Participants in the study were all women returners who are employed by Massey University. The reason for restricting the underlying population in this way was to define and limit the population. These issues will be discussed below.

The number of women returners is an undefined population. As mentioned before in this report, it is known that women returners represent a significant portion of the working age population in New Zealand (possibly around 11 percent). However, the precise number of working age women in New Zealand, who are taking a career break at any particular time, is not known. Furthermore, as women returners represent such a large population, it made sense to reduce the size of the population by limiting it in some way.

Choosing women returners who are employed by Massey University as a way to define and limit the population had several advantages. Firstly, they represent a diverse group of people. Massey University staff are employed in a wide range of occupations. These include academic positions covering a comprehensive array of disciplines, and general positions such as managers, cleaners, secretaries, and computer programmers. Furthermore, diverse ethnic groups are employed at the University. Secondly, Massey University covers a wide geographical area, with campuses in Auckland, Palmerston North, and Wellington. Finally, although Massey University is one organisation, its various colleges and departments within those colleges have a high degree of autonomy, and the management styles and cultures across departments vary significantly. Therefore, although they all work within the constraints of a massive bureaucracy, they represent diverse organisational cultures, which it was expected would have a significant impact on the experiences of the participants.

Women returners were invited to participate in the study through various media. All women returners who subscribe to Parent Support were contacted

directly via e-mail. Parent Support is an e-mail network to which all parents who are employed at Massey University are invited to subscribe, and which had just over 100 subscribers at the time of mailing. In addition, an advertisement was placed in Massey News, a weekly publication that is sent to all staff, asking for volunteers. Finally, the Human Resources Section of the University sent letters directly to a random sample of 60 women returners who had had career breaks within the past two years. It was considered that, by using these various media, maximum coverage of the underlying population would be obtained, thereby increasing the likelihood of obtaining a diverse sample of women returners.

4.2 Collection of Data

Data was collected by way of semi-structured interviews. An interview guide was developed that included a set of predetermined questions grouped into four categories: demographics, the effect of career breaks, attitudes towards the skills of women returners, and barriers (see Appendix I for a copy of the interview guide). Questions were worded so that they were neutral, singular, and clear, and encouraged an open-ended response.

All of the interviews were conducted by the researcher. In accordance with ethical guidelines, participants had already been provided with an Information Sheet (see Appendix II) and had signed a Consent Form (see Appendix III). It can be noted from the Information Sheet that participants were provided with sufficient information about the study to enable them to give informed consent. The Information Sheet also detailed steps that were taken to protect the participants' confidentiality and anonymity, as well as the rights of participants, such as the right to withdraw from the study at any time. These measures were taken to subscribe to the ethical guidelines surrounding this type of study.

Generally questions were asked using the same words and in the same order as on the interview guide, though this was done in a spontaneous manner, with the basic focus being on building a conversation within a particular subject area. The interviewer remained free to explore, probe and ask questions to elucidate and illuminate that particular subject. At times it was

also necessary to pursue a whole new line of questions, particularly for those women who had had lengthy career breaks, and did not fit neatly into the categories prescribed by the interview guide.

It can be noted from the interview guide that the demographic data was collected first. Some writers (e.g. Patton, 1990) suggest questions relating to demographic information should be saved to the end, or strategically spaced throughout the interview. This is claimed to avoid both boredom and the establishment of a pattern of short answer responses. However Yeandle (1985, in Reinharz, 1992) states that, when the collection of demographic data is done first, it is a good 'ice-breaker', enabling women to relax and talk about themselves. This was found to be ideal in the present study. The demographic data not only provided important background information on which future questions could be based, but also did seem to relax the women and helped to establish rapport between interviewer and participant.

The interviews ranged in length from 20 minutes to one hour, depending on how talkative the women were and how much of their 'story' they wanted to disclose. Most interviews were between 35 and 40 minutes. They were recorded on audio cassette and later transcribed.

4.3 Analysis of Data

Unfortunately, there are no agreed upon ground rules for qualitative analysis.

There are no formulas for determining significance. There are no ways of perfectly replicating the researcher's analytical thought processes. There are no straightforward tests for reliability and validity. In short, there are no absolute rules except to do the very best with your intellect to fairly represent the data and communicate what the data reveal given the purpose of the study (Patton, 1990, p.372).

The data in the present study were analysed using three main steps. Firstly, categories, recurrent themes, and belief systems that were shared across participants were identified. Secondly, emergent hypotheses were tested against the data. This was achieved by searching for disconfirmatory data and

supporting data. Finally, in an attempt to use multiple perspectives, a search was made for alternative explanations of the data.

To summarise this chapter, it is believed that the design of the present study allows for the adequate achievement of the three objectives outlined in chapter three. To define and limit the population, participants were restricted to employees of Massey University. Massey University was an ideal organisation to use for this study in that it encompasses a diverse range of employees, a geographical spread, and varied management styles and cultures across departments.

The data was collected in a manner that was systematic, and yet flexible enough to accommodate for the different experiences of the participants. Furthermore, the data was analysed in a manner that was systematic and objective, with particular focus on overcoming the disadvantages of semi-structured interviews.

CHAPTER 5: RESULTS

5.1 Demographic Data

5.1.1 *The Participants and their Children*

Forty-two women participated in the study. Forty percent of the participants were academic staff, with the remaining 60 percent being classified as general staff. The general staff were involved in a wide range of occupations, such as information technology professionals, laboratory technicians, managers, clerical staff, and accountants. The participants had between one and four children, with the average number of children being two.

The age of the women when they had their first child ranged from 17 to 37, with the average being 30 years. Over half of the women (57 percent) had at least one pre-school child. Around a quarter (24 percent) of the women's youngest children attended school, but were below the age of 14 years. These women's children, though at school during the day, still legally had to have arrangements made for after school and holiday care. Only 19 percent of the women had children who were all over the age of 14 years.

Almost three-quarters (74 percent) of the women considered themselves to be the primary caregiver of their children. A further 24 percent considered they shared care of the children equally with their partner, while only one woman stated that her partner was the primary caregiver of their children.

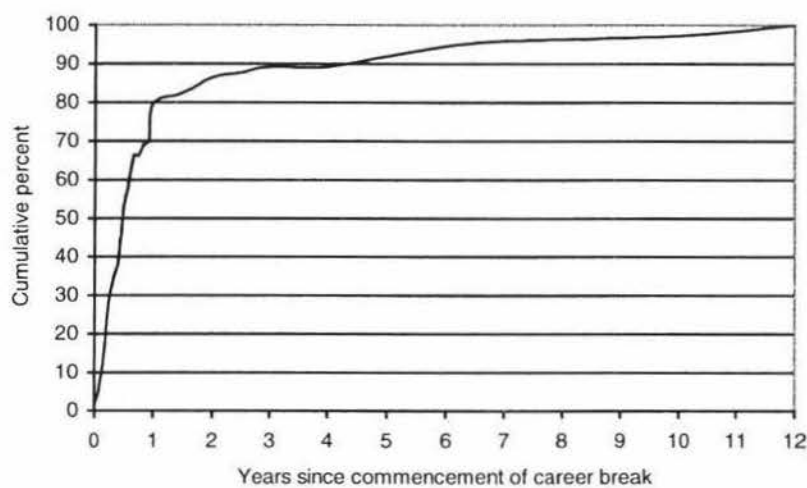
5.1.2 *The Participants' Careers*

The women who participated in the study had an average of ten years paid work experience before they had their first child. This varied considerably, with one woman who had not been in the workforce at all prior to the birth of her first child, to two that worked 20 years before becoming mothers.

Eighty-eight percent of the sample returned to paid work between the birth of each of their children. In consequence, the 42 participants had a total of 73 career breaks. The length of their career breaks ranged from one month to

twelve years. Similar numbers of participants (around 25 percent) took career breaks of up to three months, three to six months, and six months to one year. The remaining 20 percent of the sample had a career break of more than one year. Three-quarters of this final group took up to five years, and the remaining quarter took more than five years. Figure 5-1 (below) graphically demonstrates these data, showing the cumulative percentage of women returning to work after their career breaks.

FIGURE 5-1: CUMULATIVE PERCENTAGE OF WOMEN RETURNING TO WORK AFTER COMMENCEMENT OF CAREER BREAK



5.1.3 The Participants Return to Work

The participants cited numerous reasons why they had returned to paid work. The majority of the women (57 percent) returned to Massey from parental leave, and were entitled to the ex gratia payment provided by the University's collective employment contract. The current contract specifies that an employee who returns to work upon expiration of parental leave immediately qualifies for payment equivalent to 30 days paid leave. Although many women commented that this was "a nice bonus", the majority (88 percent) stated that it made no difference to their decision to return to work.

Nevertheless, financial considerations were the most common reason for women deciding to return to work. Sixty percent of the women stated that this was one of the factors they considered when deciding when to return to work.

However, it was the ongoing income rather than the one-off ex gratia payment that these women needed.

The next most common reason for returning to paid work was concern about the effect the break would have on their careers. Those women who did not take parental leave expressed a loss of confidence in their ability to return to paid work. Three women's expressed concerns about this were:

In your mind you think well if you don't go back to work until they're out of school and you're out of the workforce 15 or 18 years, you're sunk. So I knew that I had to get back into the workforce, even if it was just doing those bit jobs.

I felt that taking a long break is suicide.

I personally thought that I'd had long enough out of the workforce. I had ... concerns about how long you need to be out of the workforce before they'd consider you as ... unemployable if you like.

A woman who would have liked to have a lengthy career break, but was afraid to, stated:

I've always thought I'd really like to do it [full-time parenting] for a couple of years. It's just that ... it's a bit frightening not working and then having to try and get back into the workforce. I've got friends that have worked, but at the moment they're trying to get back in, and it's just ghastly. And they used to be very well respected – really good at their jobs. They stopped; they devoted themselves to their kids. Now they're going spare and they want to get back into the workforce and they're finding it really hard.

The women who took parental leave were equally concerned about the effect it would have on their careers. For example, one woman said:

I guess I was scared that I would lose something, whatever it is – my position, my job, somehow I'll lose potential, promotion prospects, pay rise prospects... I just had these ideas that if I wasn't back full-time and roaring away like nothing had happened that I would suddenly be out of the game.

Apart from financial considerations and concern about their careers, the participants considered the needs of themselves, their children and their employers when deciding when to return to work.

A Woman's Needs

The most commonly expressed need of the participants was the need for social contact. Furthermore, several women stated that work was a familiar environment, and they did not like being at home. For example:

I found it quite foreign, quite hard being a mum ... It was such a strange thing, suddenly working full-time to being stuck at home with a baby.

I just found that I couldn't adjust to being at home having been in the workplace all that time. I don't know whether it was that or whether it was just a ... flaw in my character in terms of nurturing (I say that quite facetiously I guess)... It just didn't seem right; it didn't seem me...

Surprisingly, I've found ... there are quite a number of people who are the same as me. There are those that are quite happy to stay at home and there are those that aren't. And I guess that the world is such these days that we have the option to do something about it, whereas 30 years ago, even 20 years ago, you wouldn't have.

Other needs the women expressed were the enjoyment and mental stimulation they got from their jobs, and that they did not want to lose touch with what was going on at work. Others stated that they felt emotionally ready to return to work, and that work provided a good balance in life – supplying a welcome break from full-time parenting.

Her Children's Needs

Women also considered the needs of their children when deciding when to return to paid work. They wanted to “do the right thing” by their child, so took into account the age, developmental stage, and needs of the child. Some women wanted to ensure that breastfeeding was well established, that the child was on solids, or that he or she was placed into care before reaching the “clingy” stage when mother and child would find it difficult to part from each

other. Others wanted to be at home with their children while they were young, possibly until the youngest started school.

Her Employer's Needs

The participants who took parental leave also considered the needs of their employers when deciding when to return to paid work. Many timed their return to work to fit in with their teaching semester or other timelines. Others expressed feelings of guilt about putting strain on the department or leaving it in the lurch, so returned to work sooner than they would have liked. While on parental leave, some women answered telephone queries from work and, when no replacement was appointed, continued to do some essential work from home. One woman continued to attend departmental meetings so she could keep abreast with what was happening in the department. These measures taken by the women demonstrate a clear desire to minimise any inconvenience their leave may cause.

5.2 The Effect of Career Breaks

5.2.1 Level of Return

Massey University's collective employment contract provides job protection for employees who take parental leave. An employee returning from parental leave is entitled to resume work in the same or a similar position to the one occupied at the time the leave was commenced. Therefore, the women who returned from parental leave returned to the same or a similar job at the same level. However, the women who resigned from their jobs did not fare so well. When they returned to work from their career breaks one-third returned to lower level positions and forty percent to positions at the same level. Twenty-seven percent of the women had a change of career (usually to fit in with their needs as mothers of young families).

5.2.2 Promotion Opportunities

When asked whether they believed their career breaks had affected their prospects for promotion, half of the participants believed that their promotion prospects had been detrimentally affected. Just over one-quarter of the

women believed that their career breaks had made no difference to their promotion prospects, and the remainder stated that they had no promotion prospects in their present positions.

The most common reason for women's promotion prospects slowing down was through a conscious career choice these women had made to allow them greater flexibility or allow them to reduce their hours to suit the demands of their families. In three women's own words:

I guess I've just made a ... lifestyle choice to accept less money and position in trade-off for having more time and a less stressful life. And of course in career terms that's going nowhere.

It's certainly cut the career off at the kneecaps. But that was a choice thing. I chose that I didn't want to work full-time with a child, and so therefore I didn't put my name in the hat at all [for a promotion opportunity]... One day it will come to my turn. That's fine by me.

Everything's kept up-to-date except for the publications that I'd like, and that's the key to promotion in the university. So every year that you're part-time you slip back further... You have to weigh up all the time *well what's most important to me and for our family in the short-term and the long-term?* And I think it's important to have time at home with your kids and so does my husband.

However, even those women who continue to work full-time find it difficult to meet the promotion requirements for academics:

You see these young people coming through who are getting their PhDs and they're just pumping out the papers and really getting ahead, and you just know you can't compete because you can't put in the time.

For me to go much further I need to do a PhD and I'm not prepared to give up my family time to devote it to a PhD. And I'm not prepared to give up my job to become a full-time student... But that's of my choosing rather than having it forced upon me.

One woman did not receive a promotion through what she believed was direct discrimination by her previous employer:

While I was having my second baby, the work got reorganised. And what they did was they had something like six jobs that were equal, and they decided to make two of them senior jobs and four of them more junior jobs. And of those six people, I was like the most senior. But I didn't get one of those senior jobs; like people were judged on their performance acting in those jobs while I was on parental leave. It was sad management; it was discrimination basically.

One of the women who believed her promotion prospects had not been affected by her career break had an interesting comment to make:

I think it's because of taking leave for such a short time. I wasn't out of it long enough for people to start thinking ... *she's been out of it for so long.*

5.2.3 Status

Participants were also asked whether they believed their status at work had been affected by their career breaks. Approximately half of the women believed their status had been adversely affected, with the other half believing it had not been affected.

Those that stated their status had been affected cited several reasons for this. Firstly, lack of publications was believed to cause a reduction in status:

That's how you get promotion and that's how you get profile and respect and all those sorts of things.

Many women who worked part-time believed that their status had reduced with their reduction in hours. Another reason for reduced status was that the women felt they were not considered to be as committed to their work. One of those women stated:

Before I had children, I would come into work often earlier, I would stay late, I would do a lot of work at home. Obviously since having the children I can't do that, and by not going the extra mile, I don't know if people think you're not working as hard, but you're seen as having other priorities... You feel, not a lesser person, but different.

Two of the women believed that their status had been affected initially, but that they had managed to 'earn' it back:

I feel that just now really ... I've got back to the status, the unwritten position, where I was before. But it's taken a while [4 years] to build up that influence again I guess.

My colleagues used to make odd comments ... [but now] I think they respect the fact that I'm reliable and that I don't use the children [as an excuse for putting in fewer hours].

5.2.4 Overall Effects

When the participants were asked whether they believed their careers had been affected, only one-quarter thought their career breaks and ongoing family commitments had not affected their careers. Two of the women believed their careers were in a better position than they would have been if they had not had children. One of those two women stated "I think perhaps I wouldn't have done as well because I have to make more focused choices". The other woman had acquired important skills through her directorship of a voluntary organisation she became involved in through her children. She believed that it was those skills that steered her career in a different direction and to a higher level than would otherwise have been possible.

The remaining women (almost three-quarters of the participants) stated that they believed their careers had been detrimentally affected. They believed there were two main reasons for this: lengthy career breaks, and the ongoing effects children have on one's career.

The women who had taken lengthy career breaks had particularly poignant stories to tell. Two of these are quoted below.

I didn't think about the repercussions of not working for about four or five years. I just assumed when I went back to work I could pick up on my old career... It's basically ruined my career... If I had known the effect it would have on my career, who knows if I would have chosen to have kids. I had this idea before I had kids that they wouldn't stop me; ... that I was going to be able to handle it all... I've analysed this a lot

with friends who've gone through the same thing. Some of them didn't take the career break and some of them did. We all had kids and the ones who did not take the career break have definitely fared better... Now the problem with that is you may have kids who are a lot worse off... Now that I'm back on track and I'm happy with work I'm glad I was home with the kids when they were young... I think *okay; well it was worth that sacrifice*. But I had to work really hard to turn this job around. And somebody not as strong as me probably would have either quit or resigned themselves to being in a horrible job... I do know women doing that... I used to cry driving home from work every day *am I really doing this? I've got to get out of this job or change it*. So I did, and now I love it.

I think I would have probably remained in primary teaching and probably I would be a principal now – on about \$80,000 probably. I had quite a revelation at one stage when I was at home with children. A person who had been in my class at college, who had been a lazy, quite incompetent student, who had absolutely no flair and was sort of a drain on the rest of the class, got a principal's job at an intermediate school... And I was just so astonished at that and then thought *where would I be if I went back teaching today?* And I would be right back as a Scale A teacher – right at the bottom. And I looked at his career. He had started at exactly the same time as I had, ... but the fact that he'd remained in the workforce and was a male gave him a very privileged position. And when I looked at what I had done and where I would go back into the workforce, I was so enraged I decided that I wasn't going to do that. I would fast track my career by getting an additional qualification. So that was the reason I went back to study... But financially I probably would have been better off if I had stayed in the workforce and gone right through and not had a break for family... I mean I would probably be at least \$25,000 better off than I am now if I had stayed there.

The women who had taken short career breaks found that the ongoing responsibilities of having a young family continued to affect their careers.

I feel that I can't give it as much as other people without children, therefore they probably get further ahead than I can.

I would have been more single-mindedly focused on my career and getting to the top.

Academics find it particularly difficult to continue with career progression due to the University's requirement to complete a PhD and be involved in ongoing publication of research.

I basically set goals for myself that are realistic... But I've said to myself: *Well I'm having kids now. They're very demanding. I can't do everything, so my career's sort of less important.* But at least I'm ... putting the right blocks in to develop. Like I'm doing my PhD even though it's quite slow and I am publishing. So my job is secure and I'm in a career job so that security is really important.

Some women had even built their careers around the needs of their families:

I probably wouldn't have chosen to do this job if I hadn't had children, because it's a more of a lifestyle job... I'm working in a lab situation and it's a nine to five scenario; there's no after hours or anything like that... So I'm making a decision to move my career in a different way to suit.

I just decided that I was better off in education with a family because it's much more flexible than it is in the private sector and the corporate world where you've got to work much harder... As long as you deliver your courses and get published, you can do it however you like really ... the flexibility there is great.

5.2.5 *The Importance of a Career*

The participants were asked a set of questions that endeavoured to establish the importance of their careers in their lives. This was approached by firstly considering the various roles in each woman's life, how important each role was to her, and how she divided her time between those roles. Then the

women were asked about their commitment to their work, and finally they were asked how important it was for them to be in paid work.

Career as a Role

The women stated that they had several important roles in their lives, with career being only one of those roles. The roles the women identified are listed below, in descending order of the frequency each role was mentioned.

- Nuclear family (mother, wife/partner)
- Career
- Other relationships (daughter, sister, grandmother, friend)
- Household management
- Self (social, sports, hobbies)
- Church and other voluntary work
- Student

A woman's relationship within her nuclear family, that is her role as mother, and for some that of partner also, was one of the most important roles in almost every woman's life. Only one participant, a single woman whose children were all adults, did not rank motherhood as one of her most important roles. Other than that participant, three-quarters of the participants stated it was their most important role, with the other quarter stating they ranked it equally with their career and sometimes one or more other roles. According to two of those women:

No one is more important than the other – they're just different. But what I mean is if my family needs me, that comes first. But it doesn't mean that role is more important than my work role because, as primary income earner, if I didn't have my work role, we couldn't provide for the family.

It is important to balance all of those things. You might give some more priority at different times when it's needed... I watch a lot of the men in this department concentrate totally on their jobs, and if anything's going on at home that comes second... If there's something happening at home, I have to actually put that first as a priority. So you tend to make up with your commitment to your job at other times. That balancing act does go on your whole life as a working woman.

The participants were also asked to estimate how they divided their time between their roles. For three-quarters of the women, there was an approximate balance between the importance of a role and the time they spent on it, or in other words, they spent at least as much time with their nuclear family as they did at work. Some of the women achieved this by reducing their hours at work:

The reason I went half-time was that [my husband] and I were very, very busy. So I'd get home at night, I'd bath the kids, I'd feed them, I'd go to bed. And you feel like you're doing things to the kids rather than interacting with them. So that's when I decided I had to go half time – cause I didn't enjoy it, the kids didn't enjoy it, life was just chaotic.

However, it is not always easy to maintain this balance, particularly for those who work full-time.

With four teenage children, a really busy full-time job, a relatively new partner, ... I don't have any time to do extra study in my job. I've had to look at the possibility of fitting in a PhD, and doing that would actually ... encroach into my personal time, and even into my time as a mother and a partner and so on. And so I've strongly resisted that for as long as I can... However, there is no alternative, so my response to that is: *Well okay, I'll do it in my own time and if it takes me six years, so be it.* If I never finish it I really couldn't care less because I'm not going to compromise those other things. I have learnt a few lessons along the way. My health ground down to a point where I felt so run down I got meningitis... And a life-threatening situation like that makes you rearrange your ideas.

There were some women, however, who managed to maintain that balance but were still unhappy with the division of their time. Although they managed to balance their family demands with their career, a common cry was "I'd like more time for me". Others sacrificed their career for their families, which they considered to be more important.

I would like to be working more hours than I am at the moment, and I think: *Is that a selfish attitude?* ... It's a difficult one – I'm trying to balance the needs of the whole family as opposed to my individual needs as a person.

Of the remaining quarter of the participants who did not manage to maintain this balance, two were still happy with the division of their time. As one of them pointed out:

In terms of time commitment, that's not the same thing – that's the priority order... What I'm saying is, that if there's a conflict, like if I've got a child who's sick at home and deadlines at work, I'll stay home with the child who's sick and find another way to do the deadline.

However, the majority of the women who did not maintain a balance between the importance of their roles and how their time was divided between them were not always happy with the division of their time. As some of these women stated:

I always feel rushed. I'm often late – late to work, late to pick up the children. So it's a constant battle to beat the clock... I do have my days when I think: *Oh I'm just not coping. I've got too much on my plate.* But with the wider picture, yes I enjoy the status I get from working full-time, I like the money. I get intangible benefits from the job... I've made that decision, and I'm just living with it.

I hate the rush and I hate the tiredness you get at the end of the day and not feeling like you're giving 100 percent sometimes to your family. Although I try to make them come first, sometimes there's the tired factor as well.

I have days that I feel it's okay and other days that I actually think that I would probably be doing better by working part-time. So that fluctuates and changes.

I've sort of sacrificed time with my family in order to perhaps later reap the benefit... It's hard on a day-to-day basis to go through with it.

Commitment

When asked about their commitment to work compared to before they had children, three-quarters of the women stated that their commitment to their work was unchanged. However, they were unable to put in the long hours

they once did, so were concerned that perhaps their employers would consider them to be less committed.

It means that you're being pulled in more directions. When you haven't got children there's your husband and work. But with the children, there's husband, children and work. It's being able to divide yourself that much more. So while yes, I've got the commitment, I've got those other demands as well – I have to juggle.

It's not that I'm less committed to the work, it's just you have other pressures on your time.

If you had to make a choice between work and home, the kids would come first. Whereas if you don't have kids, your commitment to the rest of your life might be on a par and you can put things on hold for a wee while and get over a patch of work that really needed drastic input.

Some woman mentioned that, although their commitment remained the same, other job related attitudes had changed. For example, one woman stated that her job satisfaction had reduced because "you just can't do the extras because you just don't have the time". Several women mentioned a reduction in ambition.

I don't have the same commitment to climbing the ladder any more. I really like my work. I like what I do and I try and do a good job. But I'm perfectly happy where I am. I'm not as ambitious as I was before I had the kids.

A sixth of the participants stated that their commitment to their work had increased since they had children. Two examples of this are:

My motivation, particularly both times when I first came back, was really high to get on and do the best I could. Because I'd made a conscious choice to be here, and if I wasn't going to be happy with it then there's somewhere else I could be doing a good job too.

You're fresher because you're coming from doing something quite different. Because work's not my whole life anymore, I find that when

I'm here I really enjoy it more, and probably work harder, better, smarter probably.

Only four of the participants stated that their commitment to their work had reduced since having children. One mother of two pre-schoolers who was struggling to remain in her full-time job stated:

I've been working full-time for 13 months now, and there wouldn't be a week that goes by that I think *this is just stupid, it's mad*. I keep going back to: *how would I be if I didn't have children?* and I'd be putting a lot more into my job than I am currently.

Another woman, who believed she was less committed because she no longer allowed her work to encroach on her life at home, stated:

Once I go out the door that's it – I don't think about work. Whereas before, ... I'd take work home, or I'd stay later. But now I come in, do my hours and do what I have to do, and if I don't get it done, well it waits until the next day. But in saying that, ... I think I'm more productive anyway. I've realised that you actually don't achieve if you take things home.

How important is your work?

When asked how important work was to them, the women's answers ranged from quite or fairly important through to incredibly important and really crucial. Only two women stated that their work was not an important part of their lives. One of those women stated that she only works for the money; her focus is on her children and iwi. The other woman (the mother of two pre-schoolers quoted above) said she would be happy to be at home.

I was perfectly happy there, but I was trying to think of the future.

Another women mentioned that, although work is important to her now, it was not important when her children were younger.

I look back on those years of being a home with very happy memories and I should imagine that they, looking back on it, were probably some of the happiest times.

For those women to whom work is important, it is important to them for several reasons. Basically, it meets their financial needs, intellectual needs, social needs, and their own personal needs. Each of these needs appeared to be equally important to the women, as they were all mentioned with similar regularity.

Intellectual needs included the need for mental stimulation, challenge, and a sense of achievement. For example:

I'm a goal oriented, achieving sort of person, and there's just not enough goals you can do at home that mean anything.

From parenting the sense of achievement can become illusive.

The job gives me the satisfaction of making a difference, being part of a team, and being respected as an individual other than being a mother.

You do have concrete tasks and long term projects you're working toward, and I find that is somewhat missing in the home environment.

The women's intellectual needs were met at work through learning, being extended in their thinking, having structure to their day and deadlines to meet, and having an involvement that is not emotional.

Social needs were met by giving women the opportunity to interact with other adults. The participants also stated that being in a paid job provides status, identity, and a sense of importance. As one woman stated, work "defines who I am". Another mentioned that when you are not in paid work "one of your roles, and a great chunk of your identity, disappears". Others stated:

It justifies me. ... If I'm being introduced to somebody and they say *what do you do?* and I say *I'm an accountant* that feels good. Whereas if I was saying *I'm a full-time mum* I think you get dismissed by society invariably.

I don't know what it is about being a mother, but you don't feel as if it's good enough... It's important, but you feel as if you're doing nothing.

Women also enjoy the appreciation and recognition they receive from their paid work.

You get appreciation for what you do at work, whereas at home you get absolutely no acknowledgement, appreciation or thanks.

The participants also indicated that their own personal needs are met through paid work. Many women talked about the enjoyment they get from their work. Many also mentioned that they do not like being at home "I think I'd go mad being a full-time mum", "my work is in a sense a break from the kids" and "a break away from being needed" were common remarks. The women also mentioned that paid work is "an adult world" that bolsters their self-esteem, is fulfilling, and gives a sense of control. One woman stated that because of her work "I'm a better person, I'm a nicer person". Another woman stated that one of the reasons she believes it is important for her to work is because it provides a role model for her children.

I think it's important to say that women can do a variety of things and can have a career and develop themselves.

5.3 Attitudes Towards the Skills of Women Returners

5.3.1 The Skills of Women Returners

The participants were asked what skills they believed they had acquired through their unpaid work in the home and community. A lot of the women found this question particularly difficult; they stated that they had never really thought about the skills that you need to be a good mother and to run the home competently. As one participant stated:

I just use them all the time without even thinking about it actually.

However, the participants readily acknowledged that motherhood is a difficult job. Typical comments were:

I would say that being a mother is the hardest thing I've ever done.

Motherhood is by far the hardest job and by far the one with the greatest demands, so anything after that is cushy.

There are so many skills that you need as a mother that you are never taught, that you discover along the way. I think it's one of the most important jobs in the world.

The women were also asked which of the skills that they had identified were used in their paid work. Two of the women pointed out that the skills transfer both ways – some of the skills they have learnt at work they bring into the home and vice versa.

The women identified between two and nine skills each, with a median of four. However, between them, they came up with an extensive list of skills and qualities that can be grouped into four categories: management skills, personal qualities, people skills, and parenting skills. Tables 5-1 (below) lists these skills and qualities, and also indicates the percentage of participants who identified each skill or quality, and the percentage of participants who believe they use that skill or quality in their paid work.

TABLE 5-1: SKILLS AND QUALITIES OF WOMEN RETURNERS

Skill/Quality	% of Participants Identifying Skill/Quality	% of Participants Using Skill/Quality at Work
Management skills:		
Organisation	45	26
Time management	38	36
Multi-tasking	33	26
Prioritising	24	17
Planning	21	19
Budgeting	19	7
Efficiency	14	14
Resourcefulness	10	7
Being aware of/adjusting to the environment	10	2
Delegation	7	7
Problem solving	5	5
Emergency handling	5	2
Decision making	2	2
Management skills	2	2
Co-ordinating	2	2
Common sense	2	2
Assessing information for usefulness	2	2
Coping	2	0
Bookwork	2	0

Table 5-1 cont.: Skills and Qualities of Women Returners

Skill/Quality	% of Participants Identifying Skill/Quality	% of Participants Using Skill/Quality at Work
Management skills (cont.)		
Administrative work	2	0
Juggling	2	0
Always thinking	2	0
Personal Qualities:		
Patience	38	19
Flexibility	24	14
Empathy	14	14
Energy, enthusiasm, motivation	14	5
Understanding	10	5
Imagination, creativity, vision	10	7
Selflessness	10	0
Initiative	7	7
Tolerance	7	5
Relaxed, able to cope with stress	7	5
Perspective	2	2
Sense of humour – not taking things so seriously	2	2
Confidence	2	0
People Skills:		
Interpersonal skills	29	21
Listening	12	10
Negotiation	12	7
Conflict resolution	5	5
Communication skills	5	2
Networking	5	2
Being “tuned in” to others’ needs	5	2
Allowing people the space to express their emotions	2	2
Providing balance – having fun while meeting needs	2	0
Parenting Skills:		
Nurturing	7	5
Teaching	5	2
Cleaning, tidying	5	2
Interviewing (nannies)	2	2
Setting boundaries	2	0
Cooking	2	0
Learn to play	2	0
Taxi service	2	0

Management Skills

Table 5-1 shows that organisation, time management, multi-tasking, prioritising, planning, budgeting, and efficiency were all management skills identified by the women that are used in their paid work. One woman defined multi-tasking:

One of the things that I learned very quickly is what I call multi-tasking. Its being able to run on several fronts at the same time and keeping it all in your head. Sort of parallel type actions: dressing your child, running a bath, cooking a dinner, thinking about what you're going to wear, thinking about your next day's meeting or lecture... At the same time making a mental list of your groceries. Do we have enough milk? Do we have enough bread? All of that is kind of going all at the same time. And it's a definite skill. You get better at it as you go along.

Prioritising was defined as "not sweating the small stuff". One woman stated that, since she has become a mother "I just get on with the important things. I can't be bothered with trivialities."

Planning is used by mothers daily:

Every morning I get up and I think what does [my daughter] need today, what does [my son] need today, who needs to be dropped off, who needs a form filled out ... what are we going to have for tea. It's just constantly thinking of the daily plan, the weekly plan, the monthly plan, Christmas.

Personal Qualities

Patience, flexibility, and empathy were the most commonly identified personal qualities, and also the ones most commonly used in paid work. Flexibility was described by one of the women as:

If you try to stick to a plan, you'll go crazy. Inevitably it will get changed by someone, so flexibility is very important – not getting frustrated.

One participant described how she uses flexibility in her paid work.

I've become involved in the management of the lab so if something goes wrong it's up to me. And if a piece of equipment has stopped working

in the middle of someone's project, it's got to be dealt with now ... and that might blow your plans for the day or the week. That can be really frustrating if it's happening all the time. But it can be exceedingly frustrating if it happens because someone's done something they've already been taught not to do, or if someone comes asking you about something that you've already told them three times and they just haven't bothered listening... Psychological training to deal with that and not get stressed out is one thing that you potentially learn at home.

An academic woman demonstrated how empathy has made her a better teacher:

I've got a concrete appreciation rather than the theory of appreciation of people who are trying to juggle studying with children. I think it probably does make you a better teacher because I think you're more aware of looking at things from other people's point of view.

Three of the women considered initiative to be an important quality that they use at work. One woman defined initiative as "seeing things that need doing and just doing them without being asked". Another described how she has introduced some initiatives at work.

In my job, here, I have started some very productive ... national initiatives that bring in huge amounts of money to our department... I started lots of initiatives in my community and in my local school and I think that just transferred into this environment as well. When I arrived here, I had certain responsibilities, but I also had some opportunities that I could also make other things happen, and I have done that. Without that experience back in the home and in the community, I wouldn't probably have had the confidence even to do those sorts of things.

People Skills

People skills identified by the women included interpersonal skills, listening, negotiation, and conflict resolution. As one woman stated:

Having to cope with a family and solve all the fights with kids all the time, and sometimes, in all honesty, you get to work and you get the

same thing again... You do find you use the same skills that you do with the kids ... because they [adults] tend to act the same way.

Parenting Skills

One may not think that parenting skills would be useful at work, but nurturing was a parenting skill two women believe they use in their work. As one of them stated:

I think for me there's been a change of philosophy away from materialism and achievement, to that kind of 'people are more important'. I think I've brought that into a job, where people are important and those kind of nurturing, caring for other people.

5.3.2 Recognition of Women Returners' Skills

Did the Women Value their Skills?

One way to assess whether women recognise and value the skills they obtain in the home and community was to find out whether they have or would mention those skills when applying for a job. When asked whether they have in the past or would in the future 'market' those skills when applying for a job, two thirds of the women said they would not. One woman said it would depend on "whether I'd had any cues about what that employer felt about family commitment." They gave various reasons for this, three of which were mentioned frequently.

Firstly, many women believed that the skills they had gained at work or in formal education or training were more relevant to their jobs than those obtained in the home. An equal number of women believed that those skills would be undervalued by prospective employers, or could even negatively impact upon their job application. Two of these women's views are quoted below:

I don't think people would take any account of the skills that mothers need. Vastly under-rated, under-valued.

I'd probably market myself that I got them at work, even though I got them at home. I think it would be under-rated if you said that you got them at home.

The third common reason why women mentioned that they had not marketed their skills was that either they had never thought of mentioning those skills, or did not themselves value the skills they acquired at home.

I guess they become second nature – not something you think about unless you're directly asked.

A less frequently mentioned reason for failing to market their skills was the lack of opportunity to do so:

I was never asked... You have your resume, you fill out the application, and even in the interview ... I don't think I was ever asked an open-ended question like *what skills do you think you bring to the job?*

The final reason given by women was that they did not feel they had been in the home full-time for a sufficient period to warrant mentioning those skills.

One of the remaining one-third of women who said she would market her skills said:

I think they're really important, and I think the days are gone when an employer thinks that that's funny to talk about the skills that you get at home... I think that if people think that, then they are really out of touch because so many people of my age are juggling home and work and they know that. And it's really important that you put that as a positive thing.

Do Employers Recognise Women Returners' Skills?

The participants were asked whether they believed that employers recognise and value the skills women acquire in the home and community. Only one-fifth of the participants agreed that they would. These women were very positive about the growing awareness by employers of the value of these skills.

I actually think more and more employers are starting to recognise those skills.

I think a lot of employers are now. Certainly I get a feeling from that job offer that I had last week, that they're actually looking for some of these mothers, perhaps in their 30s and 40s, who have been through that growing experience. Because they know that if you can cope with all of that and stay sane, that you'll probably be a very good manager and be quite understanding of the environment and how they work. I feel that if you're a working mother and you have a child or children, putting that in a CV is like a notch.

One of the women who believed her employer had recognised her skills stated that "it probably is the way that I do it as much as what I say". She believes it is important to sell the skills in a positive way.

Almost half of the women believed that employers do not recognise the skills that women gain while outside the paid workforce. They made comments such as:

I think that there would be very little understanding of the skills that are developed by women at home.

I do think that employers would tend to trivialise that sort of experience over actual work experience.

I don't think society is such that it is valued enough yet to be a good mother.

I think ... the skills that women do bring with them from the home are not recognised in a way that they should be. I mean, they might say things like *Can you manage a budget?* Well, you could demonstrate that you've actually run a home and so on, and you can manage a budget, but ... they would probably be more impressed with somebody who could demonstrate that they'd managed a budget that was more like what this institution runs. Whereas I think that the skills that you learn in running a budget in the home are easily transferred into this situation, and I would point that out to them in the interview... I don't think many men on appointment panels would recognise that.

Another group of women (one third of the participants) believed that some employers would recognise women returners' skills, while others would not.

I think employers would probably run through the whole range, from accepting it really wholeheartedly as a positive skill gaining experience, right through to *she's been sitting at home all day with the kids*.

I think if you probably had women who may have children themselves or who also have those same values, then I think they probably would have been. But perhaps if you had men, or people who perhaps didn't have children, they might be seen as perhaps bringing up skills that they didn't see as relevant.

I think if I'm interviewed by women, they probably will. I'm not sure about men.

Depending on the job I was going for and the type of people on the panel, I'd be very careful before I said anything like that... I do think we do tend to hide that whole home side of our lives and just pretend that we can be up there with the rest of them who are single and can devote 100 percent of their time to the job.

Does Being a Mother Make You a Better Employee?

Each participant was asked whether she believed being a mother had made her a better employee. Three-quarters of the women believed that they were better employees. The reasons they believed they were better employees varied. Some women believed they were more organised, better at managing their time, and more efficient.

I know that I've got a short space of time to achieve buckets, whereas what I notice is that people that are there all day and it is their sole responsibility pretty much are just *oh well, we'll stop and have a little chat*.

Others believed motherhood had made them more understanding and flexible.

I can say for the other women I know here at Massey, or work with, that the ones with kids are easy to work with. It's ... that flexibility, that understanding.

Many women commented that motherhood had given them a more balanced perspective.

I think you get stronger values in some areas, more balanced in your perspective. It stops you getting caught up in pettiness and politics of a workplace.

Being a mother makes you a more rounded person ... Although you've got work and you dedicate yourself to it, there's another link to life as well... I think that it makes you a better worker because you know that you've got a set amount of hours so you do the best within those hours and then you go to something else.

I think I'm more mature and more laid back and mellow than I was when I first arrived here when I was very driven. I wouldn't say I'm less ambitious now, but I would say that I've got a more rounded perspective, which I think makes me a better employee, but some managers may not think so.

Some of the participants mentioned that they were more patient with their students and colleagues. One mentioned that she had become more in tune with her environment.

I think it's made me more responsive, more in tune ... just knowing what's going on around you – sensing a situation that's about to become a disaster, which you can see with kids quite a lot when they're actually heading into trouble... It's definitely of benefit to an employer.

One of the women summed it all up by saying:

It's such a huge, rich, all-embracing sort of experience where you do so many things. I think just to survive being a mother is a major accomplishment.

5.4 Barriers

In an effort to establish what barriers can prevent women returners from re-entering the paid workforce, the participants were asked four questions. The first question asked them what special needs they had, if any, to allow them to return to work. Secondly, they were asked how accommodating their manager had been in meeting those needs. The third question asked how they were finding it balancing the demands of motherhood and working, and finally they were asked for suggestions of what would make it easier for them to balance those demands.

5.4.1 Special Needs

Table 5.2 (below) shows the special needs identified by the participants, as well as the percentage of participants who expressed that need.

TABLE 5-2: SPECIAL NEEDS OF PARTICIPANTS

Special Need	% of Participants who Identified Need
Reduced hours	67
Flexibility	29
Breastfeeding	26
Quality childcare	21
Occasionally bring child to work	14
Leave work on time	10
Support and understanding by manager and/or colleagues	7
Working from home	7
Location to home and school	2
Parking close to work	2

This table shows that the most common special need identified by the participants was the need to reduce their hours of work. Two-thirds of the participants had reduced their hours either for a short period to enable them to ease back into the paid workforce, or on a permanent basis. In one case, job sharing was used to reduce hours. However, this was seen to have two disadvantages – part-timers were believed to have a lower status, and workloads were not always reduced in line with the reduction in hours and remuneration.

I don't altogether think that people think you're as valid if you work part-time. I'm sure they think that it's just a little something that you want for yourself.

I'm not convinced that working part-time is that good a deal, because it seems to me that you could very well be cutting your pay and cramming a full day's work into less hours.

Well funnily enough, it was when I was in the part-time jobs that I actually found it much more difficult. Because I think, when you are working part-time, people actually give you a heap more responsibility than they should. And so the minute I became full-time ... I suddenly found that my job was a lot easier.

The second most common need, mentioned by almost a third of the participants, was the need for flexibility. The women expressed the need to be able to chose when they worked their hours to fit in with their parenting responsibilities, and to be able to leave if a child became sick during the day.

I know an awful lot of mothers here ... and I know that work hour flexibility is one issue which does get to people. It's easy until they [your children] turn five because the childcare centre's open till half past five... Once they go to school you've got this real hassle... I always adopted the mentality that the after school hours were quite precious. So my husband or I always stop at three ... and we pick up the kids and go home. I would compromise by not having a lunch hour and all that sort of stuff - you can make the time roughly equal.

Another common need was the ability to be able to continue with breastfeeding. This sometimes meant the women needed to go to the childcare centre or have their child brought to them during breaks. Some women needed a quiet room where they could feed their babies or express milk.

Considering that the majority of the participants used some form of childcare, a relatively small percentage of women expressed the need for quality childcare. Those women that did state this need said that quality childcare was a big factor in their decision to continue working.

The childcare centre here was a big influence. Because I knew that they would be happy there once they were settled in... And a quality thing too. It wasn't like I was just dumping them somewhere where they were going to get observed all day sort of thing... That was really important.

I think definitely that a background to all those decisions and priorities, and my decision to work, is that there's this really excellent childcare available.

A small percentage of the women occasionally brought their child to work. Women who returned to work while their child was a small baby, and the baby could sleep in their office while they worked, most commonly did this.

The ability to always leave work on time was important to some of the participants, as they had to collect their children from the childcare centre before it closed. Some women also stated the importance of having a manager and colleagues who understood of their needs.

Having an environment, or a manager, where that feels comfortable is really important in terms of being a working mother. For me, those are more important than financial reward.

One of the participants pointed out that she didn't consider her needs as barriers to her being able to work.

I think I'm probably more the sort of person who, if I had a need, I would make sure it got filled rather than just seeing it as a barrier... Most of the managers here, if you present to them solutions as well as your request, they're not likely to say no.

5.4.2 Accommodation by Manager

Only one participant stated that her manager was not understanding:

Well, my manager is in Palmerston North – that's the problem – and you'll find that with a lot of people up here on this site [Albany]. They wouldn't even know about the problems if there were any ... so those human resource type issues never really get dealt with. You just sort of

end up dealing with them on your own and getting a bit disgruntled with the whole thing.

Four-fifths of the participants stated that their managers had been understanding and willing to accommodate their needs. A further tenth said that it was not necessary for their managers to be understanding, as they had not allowed their children to affect their work at all.

Demonstrating understanding could be achieved by something as small as showing an interest in the woman's children.

My Head of School ... shows interest in the children and she likes the children. I think that's really quite important.

One participant talked about the difference between two of her previous managers, one who had shown understanding and the other who had not:

When my partner brought in the baby he [my manager] was quite interested in holding the baby and all that sort of stuff. Whereas the other one, I felt thought that the baby shouldn't come into the workplace ... that it must be very disruptive to my work, and that I must be wasting a lot of my time feeding the baby and that. For that reason I more or less decided to stop breastfeeding at work at six months.

Many of the participants were of the opinion that the reason their managers were understanding was because they were women who had shared similar experiences.

My manager, she sort of had been a bit like me – she'd taken time off. She had three kids ... If she was caught I'd fill in for her and if I was caught she'd fill in. We had a really good arrangement, so I was very lucky.

My supervisor here was very understanding because she was a woman and had three grown children. She knew my story and knew that I really wasn't doing what I wanted to be doing. And so I stayed on and she's helped me through.

It's mainly females and most of them have children themselves. The Head of Department has four children in a range of ages, and she has often been caught with sick kids and things, and they come into the office. It's pretty relaxed and child friendly in that respect.

Others stated that men with children were also more understanding.

He [my manager] has kids, which might explain some of his attitude.

But he's got his own family, he's got grandchildren, he understands.

I'd say that our department's actually very good and I'd say that one of the reasons is that just about everybody in our department has got or has had young children, and I think that has made a huge difference.

Three of the participants stated that their feelings were mixed about whether their managers were understanding. One of them stated:

It's one thing I think to pay lip service to an idea and say all the right things, which she does, and another for it to be really meant and for it to be enshrined in the whole culture of the department and the way it works. It's good that she says things like she wants to be family friendly and things, but in practise that's not always the message that I get. I'm, getting sort of mixed messages.

Another felt pressures within the department tied her manager's hands.

I've had two HODs during the whole time I've had both my kids. The first HOD I had was absolutely excellent. He was very encouraging and he always said: *Work in this situation shouldn't come first. Work should come second. Your children won't be little again.* It was his advice to value every moment that you can with them and, even in terms of things like starting my PhD, he was totally for the idea, but it had to come at the right time, whether that was when the children were little or later on. And it was something that he said not to worry about. My second HOD was still very flexible as such, but pressures within the department have changed, a lot. There is a very strong pressure now to actually publish, strong pressure to do research, and a strong pressure

to be committed in every other aspect of work as well: attending meetings, admin.

5.4.3 *Work-Family Conflict*

By asking the participants how they balanced the conflicting demands between work and family, other barriers were identified. Childcare was a common problem, either because quality childcare was not available:

Childcare in the school holidays is a nightmare. It's a panic every time. or because it was unaffordable:

Childcare is not affordable – it costs a fortune.

Childcare in Auckland is very expensive. By the time you put a couple of children in childcare it becomes one major chunk of the income just going on that. So it's almost like you're in a job and keeping this job for the future. It's not of major benefit financially at the moment.

Well, my salary's reasonable, so it's high enough to cover. If I didn't have another income, I guess it would be a hell of a lot of money from one salary because it's about \$8,000 or \$9,000 a year. Hardly any of that is tax deductible. You'll only get about \$300 out of that. So ... we were really lobbying for tax deductions for working mothers who have day care, because you are producing income and paying taxes.

Other participants felt that paying for childcare was simply a cost of being a working mother:

We've probably spent I think it's about \$120,000 on childcare fees over the last 16, 17 years. Easy. I don't begrudge it at all. I think it was just part of the deal.

or that it is good value for money:

I could never give him the stimulation at home, on a one-to-one basis, that he gets from Kohanga. He's got visual stimulation, he's got language stimulation, he's learning social skills.

Many women said that sick children were a constant worry for them. They had no problems getting the time off, but felt guilty being at home with a sick child.

Work social activities were “restricted”, “out the window”, or even “I don’t get invited any more”. Women stated:

I do feel that you miss out a lot in your relationships at work with colleagues because you’re the only one that doesn’t go out to the drinks after work.

I think the thing that was most difficult was the social life at work. Because there was a lot of work dinners and stuff, and for a long time I just couldn’t do that – I wasn’t going. Even if I could do it, it meant picking kids up and taking them to a babysitter and then coming back and then everyone else had sort of had their drinks. So you miss out a lot of the networking and that sort of stuff.

The final barrier that the participants mentioned was the “constant juggle” in organising their conflicting demands and the pressures on their time.

Oh I think it’s really hard ... it just keeps you hopping all the time. And the weekends are sort of just *catch a breath and get ready to go again on Monday*.

It’s an interesting juggling act – trying to make sure that you’re there for the things that are important for the kids. Like with the youngest starting school; being there for his last day of kindy and his first day of school. I’ve been fortunate in ... that the job is flexible enough that I can rearrange things to work in with that.

There are days when I pick up him, I go home, and everything seems to be going well and I feel on top of the world. And there are other days when I’m just pulling my hair out.

The following story related by one of the participants aptly illustrates what life can be like for a working mother.

I often wondered whether it was all worth it, whether I'm really selfish by putting my career ahead of, or parallel to, him. Mid this year I had some hiccups with my doctorate, and seeing that things were not how I hoped to be, I kind of asked myself: *All the things I do, and all the effort I put into organising our lives, all these mornings I leave my son and he really tugs on my hearts strings and he says "I don't want to be here, I want to go home, I want to be with you, I want to play with you", is it really worth it in the end?*

5.4.4 Suggestions

The participants gave several suggestions as to what could make it easier for them to balance work and family demands. Table 5-3 below lists these suggestions, and also gives the percentage of participants who made each suggestion.

TABLE 5-3: SUGGESTIONS GIVEN BY PARTICIPANTS

Suggestion	% of Participants Who Made Suggestion
Flexibility with hours	36
Part-time or job sharing	24
Affordable/subsidised, quality childcare	21
Understanding manager and/or colleagues	19
Change of attitude by society and/or employers	14
Work from home and/or remote access from home	12
Car parking close to the building	7
Support groups, a professional women's club	7
Change of attitude by women returners	7
Paid parental leave	5
Recognition of the skills of women returners	5
"No children on campus" rule removed	5
Address equity issue for part-timers	5
Family room	2
Additional leave for school holidays	2
Childcare centre hours extended on Wellington campus	2
Social functions with children included	2
Nanny provided for when children are sick	2
More transparent organisation policy	2
Change in promotion system	2
Women should stay at home	2

This table shows that flexibility with hours was the most common suggestion. Flexibility could be something as small as taking a couple of hours off to attend an important event, with the time made up at some other time.

There are times that I'd really like to get to the odd assembly, play, show - something that the kids are putting on and it's important to them, which I can't... I take work home now. To have that acknowledged ... where I have a half-day in lieu or something like that.

This table also shows that part-time or job sharing was needed by many of the participants.

Full-time work plus looking after children and trying to raise a family in my mind is just a nightmare. So I think the university should be open minded to women being able to go half time. I remember when I first raised the issue: *Oh my God. Very little precedent for this sort of thing happening, for an academic to go half time.* But it worked out.

However, they suggested that this should be done in such a way that future promotion was not affected, and that their workload was reduced in line with their reduction in hours and remuneration.

A career structure that provided for part-time work so that you could reduce your hours without losing all your rights.

There seems to be this general perception that if you work part-time in the university system as an academic member of staff that you're almost exploited. You're doing almost the same amount of work really, but for less money and less time. I think somehow we need to work through that issue. We should make it possible for a lot more women for instance to job share and work part-time and know that they're doing really only part-time work for it. Without feeling that they're totally disadvantaged in terms of repression of future opportunities.

They could have a career structure that provided for part-time work so that you could reduce your hours without losing all your rights.

Even though I got down to a point seven, they never reduced any of my workload... I think it's a real equality issue which the university just aren't addressing, and there are many women who are in this area, ... and we're really disgruntled about the way we've been treated in terms of coming back to work ... part-time... But the university is just not doing anything about our workloads. They're just saying: *Well, you're the privileged few. That's your choice.* That's their attitude, and a lot of it's because most people in senior management in our institute are men. I'm absolutely convinced of that.

Affordable or subsidised quality childcare was also a common suggestion.

Affordable good quality childcare definitely is the key I think. I think the government needs to take some responsibility at the moment too. New Zealand is pathetic in terms of the support it gives families... There's all sorts of ways that you can give families support so that they can afford childcare... Like in Canada, basically families or women are able to set up in a small business ... and so they can get all the tax deductions that you can get in a small business.

In some instances, the necessary care was simply not available.

I think one of the hardest things for a woman who returns to work is school holidays. It is an uphill battle getting reasonable care during school holidays, and that to me is the biggest bug bear and it looms four times year and it is so difficult. I can't have all that time off. [My son's] at an age now when the usual childcare places are just too juvenile for him ... so I usually have to get a private person in to look after him ... and that costs a lot of money.

Another common suggestion was for managers and colleagues to be supportive and understanding of the special needs of women returners.

Try to make it so that they feel part of the team... What I find really good is we have staff meetings every second week and they try to rotate it so that I can go.

Having a manager that's flexible and understanding has really been the key thing for me.

I don't think enough employers are creative enough about thinking about how they can use women and keep them involved in the workforce when they're having kids as well. Providing more options and negotiating with people on an individual basis, recognising what they have got to offer and supporting it, and then finding ways that they can make it work for those parties. And you have to actually have quite committed and understanding managers to do that... More concerns about outcomes and less of processes really.

A change of attitude by society and by employers was another suggestion some of the participants made.

There could be an attitude that doesn't equate time spent at the workplace with how good you are – that the longer you work the better you are.

So much is still unspoken expectations of workers ... and those sorts of things I think are hard to change because it's wider than just Massey or just the department, it's all New Zealand society and culture. We need to all accept that it's a natural thing and that mothers are actually doing a service to society by bringing up children well – that's a benefit to New Zealand in the future.

Attitudes need to change slightly... It's just that I still think somewhere in the back of men's minds is that you either should be at home, or you can't be taken very serious because your half-pie not here. Or on the other hand, what they think is if you're here, then you have to do like we do. I'll explain this last statement. I had an interesting meeting which was to do with my doctorate... In the meeting ... they told me that the only way that I was going to get a doctorate was that I'll have to work on it every night and every weekend... That would mean never spending any time with my son, except for maybe half an hour, or an hour, every morning. I was at a loss to understand, *how can anybody say that, that has a family, that work has to be so important that it just wipes away every other aspect of your life?* ... One of them said to me that he didn't really see his children for five years very much while he was doing his doctorate and that his children to this day resent that

because he didn't play with them, go out with them, go fishing, or whatever. I just thought that that in itself is a really sad statement, and how can anybody recommend that I do the same.

Three participants suggested that women returners need to change their own attitudes.

Don't think you're superwoman, don't have too high expectations. You can't do everything.

I guess I had to learn that you can't be everything to everybody all the time. And I think if young women are taught that they can have these amazing careers ... and have this amazing family life without any cost, I think that's just basically foolishly telling them something that's not true. I think that the reality is that ... they have to delegate all of their family care to paid help, to somebody else. In which case I think it's nonsense to have children if you decide it will be nannies and everybody else bringing up your children and you just come to visit them every now and then.

They need to realise that they have got a lot to offer, that they don't have to consider themselves second class employees simply because they're mothers. And if they decide that they want flexible hours, then ask for them, make it make no difference.

One participant suggested that Massey provide a family room:

Just a little room like a common room but for families, maybe with a quiet room where you can express if you want ... in a nice environment, and where there can be notice boards up on family activities, support groups, and all that sort of stuff, and little play materials. Like if your husband or wife is at home with the family so they can bring them in and meet you for lunch.

Another participant suggested that social functions be organised that include their children, such as a Christmas function for the children. She stated "it's just acknowledging the fact that you have children".

One woman suggested that the promotion system should be changed to acknowledge the contributions of women returners.

I think that there has to be a change in the promotion system. It has to be restructured, it has to take into account that everybody's an individual rather than this ridiculous and generic format – you have to publish this much, you have to have done this much. They should look at other things that people do that contribute to their workplace... You see an institute like ours: bastion of male dominance. All the top line managers – they're all men. We've got one woman I think. As junior lecturers, 99 percent of us are women.

Only one participant held what might be considered to be the traditional view of a woman's place in society:

I believe a woman should be at home to raise the children personally. I think it's very very important for the children to have a stable upbringing and a stable home life. And I think at least until they go to school ... that you should be at home with them if it's possible. And then once they're at school, I still believe that you should be at home to see them off to school and at home when they come home from school... At the end of the day the most important role for any woman with children is to be a mother, because you're raising the next generation... It doesn't hurt to put your career on hold.

In summary, the key themes emerging from this chapter are:

1. The majority of the participants in this study believe that their career breaks and ongoing family commitments have negatively affected their career progression.
2. The participants in this study devised an extensive list of skills that they believe they have gained in the home through their roles as caregivers and home managers, many of which they use in their paid work. However, in many instances the participants themselves did not value those skills, and the majority of the participants believed that many employers would undervalue those skills.

3. The main needs that, if not met, can become barriers to women returners are a reduction in hours and flexibility with work hours. The affordability of childcare is also a major issue.

These key themes will be discussed at length in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

This chapter will begin by establishing the representativeness of the women who participated in this study. Then the three key themes referred to in the previous chapter will be explored in some depth. The concluding section of this chapter will consider the limitations of the present study, and how this may affect the generalisability of its results.

6.1 Demographic Data

By comparing the details of the women who participated in this study, given in section 5.1, with those of the typical woman who takes a career break, it can be seen that, in some ways, the participants in this study were very similar to the typical woman returner. However, in other ways they differed, sometimes only slightly and sometimes significantly. This can be demonstrated by looking at particular statistics.

Firstly, the participants were similar to other women in New Zealand in that it was their careers, rather than their partners', that were affected by family responsibilities. Only three of the participants mentioned that their partners had taken a career break and had at some stage been the primary caregiver for their children. The majority of the participants, although now in paid work, still consider themselves to be the primary caregivers for their children. Furthermore, many of the participants found it necessary to reduce their hours of work to enable them to meet their family responsibilities.

Another factor to consider is the timing, frequency, and length of the participants' career breaks, and whether they conform with the current trends referred to in section 2.1.1. In accordance with those trends, the participants delayed taking their career breaks until they had extensive work experience, took fewer career breaks, and reduced the length of their career breaks. Each of these changes will be considered separately.

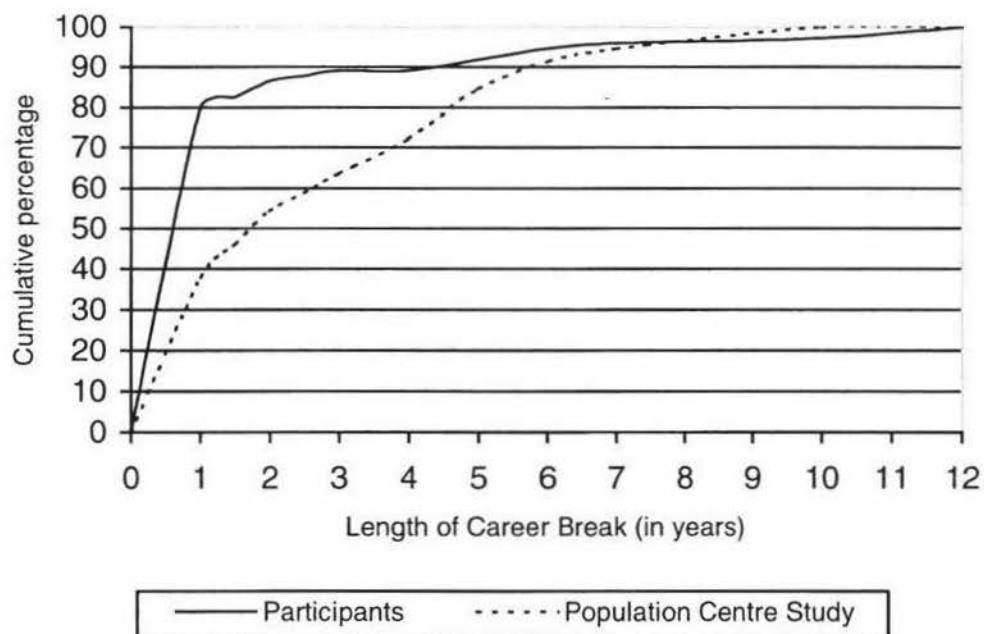
Firstly, the participants delayed childbirth until later in their lives. On average they were slightly older than the average New Zealand woman when

they had their first child. The peak childbearing age for women in New Zealand is the 25-29 age group, whereas the average age that the participant's had their first child was 30. It would appear that the average length of time the participants had in the workforce prior to the birth of their first child (10 years) was also slightly longer than the average for New Zealand women. In the NZ Customs Department study previously referred to (Glendining, 1992), the length of service with the Department prior to taking parental leave averaged 8.9 years.

Secondly, in accordance with current trends, most of the participants returned to work between the birth of each of their children and, due to the fact that they were having fewer children, they took fewer career breaks. The participants had an average of two children, the same as the national average.

Finally, when comparing the length of the career breaks taken by the participants with national averages, we can see that the participants took relatively short career breaks. Figure 6-1 (below) gives a comparison of the length of participants' career breaks with those taken by women in the study undertaken by the Population Studies Centre referred to in section 2.1.1.

FIGURE 6-1: COMPARISON OF LENGTH OF CAREER BREAKS BETWEEN PARTICIPANTS AND POPULATION STUDIES CENTRE STUDY



The Population Studies Centre figures have been converted to exclude the women in that study that did not return to paid work.

This figure shows that, although the participants in this study originally returned to work earlier than the women in the Population Studies Centre study, by the time their children were five years old they had returned in similar numbers.

Another factor to consider when comparing the participants with other women returners is the range of occupations represented in the study. The majority of the participants were classed as general staff, which covered a wide range of occupations. However, due to the nature of the organisation from which the sample was taken, academic women constituted a large portion of the participants (40 percent).

The reasons the participants gave for returning to work reflect current research findings about women's reasons for returning to paid work. As discussed previously, women consider the age of their youngest child, their degree of attachment to their career, and their financial situation when deciding whether to return to work.

The results of this study show that the participants considered similar factors. The participants considered the needs of their children, which included the children's age and developmental stage. They also considered attachment to their careers by taking into account the enjoyment and other intangible benefits they receive through their work. Almost all of the participants considered their work to be important to them, and some of them expressed concern about the effect that taking a lengthy break would have on their careers. They were scared that they would lose something if they did not return to work as quickly as possible. It appears that the participants had a high level of attachment to their careers.

Financial considerations were the most common reason the participants gave for the timing of their return to work. Many would have preferred a longer career break, but financial difficulties prohibited them from doing so. The provision of a lengthier period of paid parental leave would have made a big

difference to these women. Although they could take up to a year's parental leave with job protection guaranteed, only six weeks of that was paid. Therefore, many participants could not afford to take a 12-month career break.

New Zealand's provisions for paid parental leave are one of the worst in the world. The women in this study who received six weeks paid leave were among the lucky ones, as the provision of paid parental leave in New Zealand is voluntary, and is only provided by a handful of large organisations. These organisations provide paid parental leave to gain economic advantage, so their schemes are designed to encourage women to return to work as quickly as possible. Yet generous paid parental leave that enables parents to remain in the home with their child for a longer period provides many benefits. The family is the basic building block of society, so anything a government can do to support the family will have long term benefits for society as a whole. The provision of paid parental leave increases the physical and mental health of both mother and child. When parents are able to spend time with their children, the children are more likely to become well-adjusted adults with high self-esteem. This in turn will lead to improvements in society such as reduced crime rates, reduced benefit dependence, and a higher educated workforce.

To illustrate this point, a study of 9,000 people born in 1970 is being conducted by Professor Heather Joshi from the Institute of Education in the United Kingdom. This study has found that children whose mothers were at home with them when they were under five tended to advance higher up the educational ladder than those whose mothers worked in their pre-school years ("New mothers finding it hard", 2000).

Therefore, the government must give serious consideration to legislating for the provision of paid parental leave in New Zealand to bring it in line with countries such as Sweden or Denmark. Although such a scheme would be costly, the long term advantages it would produce would far outweigh its costs. When a parent is financially able to remain in the home with a child until the child is secure enough to go into care, that child will eventually become a more valuable member of society.

The women who participated in this study who had taken parental leave took one additional factor into account when deciding when to return to work – the needs of their employer. These women took measures to ensure that their parental leave caused as little inconvenience as possible to their superiors, colleagues, and students (their customers).

It can be concluded, therefore, that the reasons the participants in the present study returned to work reflect current research findings, with the participants who returned from parental leave also considering the needs of their employer. However, this consideration of the employer's needs may merely be further evidence of the participants' high degree of attachment to their careers.

The high level of career attachment that the participants in this study demonstrated, together with their age when they had their first child, provides some evidence that the majority of them returned to work to advance their careers. As previously mentioned, a number of studies have shown that there are two distinct groups of women who are most likely to return to work – those who are highly attached to the labour force and return to work to advance their careers, and those who return to work due to financial need (Rotherham, 1995). Members of the former group are in higher-paid and higher-status occupations, and are likely to have children when they are older and take parental leave, as was the case with the majority of the participants in the present study. Although many participants stated that financial considerations were one of the reasons they returned to work, this was possibly more of an effort to maintain their current lifestyle rather than being due to financial hardship. This also indicates that the majority of the participants could be classed as Thomson's (1999) 'work-rich'. It would seem that very few of the women in the study would be considered 'work-poor' – a group with no security or continuity of employment, who would certainly have no entitlement to parental leave.

In sum, the participants in this study were similar to the typical woman returner in many important ways, but did have some differences. In particular, the sample contained more academic women than would appear in the population, and the participants had very high career attachment, and were mostly 'work-rich'. Therefore, they were not completely representative of

women returners in New Zealand. However, this does not appear to have significantly affected the results of this study. It will be demonstrated in this chapter that the participants in this study faced the same issues that research has found other women returners encounter.

6.2 The Effect of Career Breaks

The research literature shows that women who return from career breaks experience a loss of promotion and feel they are permanently held back in their careers. Women returners have higher rates of downward mobility, and lower rates of upward mobility. Although they are committed to their jobs, the perception that family responsibilities are incompatible with work results in employers assuming that women returners have a lower level of commitment. This reduces status and affects promotional opportunities.

This study found similar results. The participants perceived that having children had a profound negative impact on their careers. Almost three-quarters of the participants stated that their careers had been negatively affected by having children. There were two main reasons given for this. Firstly, a lengthy career break was seen to have a negative impact on their careers. The majority of the participants who did not take parental leave either returned to a lower level position or had to change to a career that was better suited to their family responsibilities. Secondly, the ongoing effects of work-family conflict meant that the participants could no longer single-mindedly focus on their careers. This meant they could no longer put in the long hours they had before they had children.

As a consequence, the majority of the participants believed that their promotion prospects had been adversely affected. It was interesting to note that many participants indicated that their reduced promotion opportunities were caused by what they termed a 'lifestyle choice'. Many of the participants made a conscious decision to temporarily reduce their career ambitions to enable them to meet the needs of their families. They chose to work part-time or, if remaining full-time, reduce the amount of work they did in the evenings and weekends. Many stayed in lower level jobs that offered more flexibility rather than seeking promotion.

Many of the women who stated that they had made this 'lifestyle choice' were quick to stress that it was not their employer's fault that their promotion prospects had been reduced, but that it was their own choice. Only one participant believed that she had not been promoted due to direct discrimination on the part of her employer. This clearly illustrates Revel and Riley's (1990) claims that careers are built on a male career model. The women *expected* reduced promotion prospects while they were the primary caregivers for young children, tacitly acknowledging the male model of work. In order to secure promotion, they would have to wholeheartedly pursue their careers, but they realised this was incompatible with their family commitments. Therefore, they decided to sacrifice their career aspirations for a time, but attempted to make it look like they were adhering to the male model of work by not taking a lengthy career break. However, what they were in fact doing was simply working to keep their jobs open for when they would once again be in a position to devote their full energies to their careers.

Another effect that having children had on the participants' careers was a loss of status. The results show that around half of the participants believed their status in their jobs had reduced since they had children. Most of the participants stated that this was because they had reduced to part-time hours, or were considered to be less committed due to their family responsibilities. A reason given by some academics for their reduction in status was that they were unable to produce the same outputs (publications or doctoral research) because they were no longer able to work evenings and weekends.

Despite concerns by many of the participants that their employers may consider them to be less committed at work, there was clear evidence that this was not the case. Almost all of the participants stated that their work was important to them, and only ten percent indicated that their commitment to their work had reduced since they had had children.

In sum, it can be seen that this study supports previous research findings that show that career breaks and ongoing family commitments adversely affect women returners' careers. The results of this study show that work is still an important part of women returners' lives, to which they remain highly

committed. However, many women returners find it difficult or even impossible to continue with their career aspirations while their children are young. Their status is reduced if they reduce their hours, and employers see women returners as being less committed to their work – clear evidence of employer discrimination. Furthermore, promotion criteria are based upon an expectation of producing output that requires extensive evening and weekend work. As a result, many women returners are excluded from promotion opportunities.

It can be concluded from this that women returners' careers are adversely affected due to employer discrimination and the way work is structured. Work continues to be structured around a male career model – one that involves continuous full-time work without interference from family commitments. In an attempt to adhere to this model, and therefore increase their likelihood of success, women are establishing themselves in their careers before they have children. When they do take career breaks, they are shorter and less frequent than in previous generations. However, despite these efforts, while the expectation for employees to work long hours to the exclusion of almost everything else in their lives remains the norm, women returners will continue to be held back in their careers, perhaps permanently.

6.3 Attitudes Towards the Skills of Women Returners

The women who participated in this study acknowledged that motherhood is a difficult and demanding job, but many found it extremely difficult to articulate the skills required to be a competent mother and run the home efficiently. Burton (1994) claims that there are “no easy words” (p.10) to describe the competencies used in women's work, so the people who use them are inclined to think that they are not skills. This certainly seems to have been the case in this study.

However, with input from all the participants, they managed to successfully identify a lengthy list of skills and personal qualities needed by mothers. Many of the participants believed that they use some of those skills in their paid work, but did not seem to value them or believe they would be valued by their employers. These issues will be considered separately. Firstly the skills

identified by the participants will be considered in relation to how they compare to other research into the skills of women returners. Then the results of this research will be considered in light of how much those skills are valued by the participants and by their employers.

6.3.1 The Skills of Women Returners

Considering firstly the skills identified by the women, table 5-1 showed that the skills identified by at least ten percent of the participants were:

1. The management skills of organisation, time management, multi-tasking, prioritising, planning, budgeting, efficiency, resourcefulness, and an awareness of, and ability to adjust to, the environment.
2. The personal qualities of patience, flexibility, empathy, energy, understanding, imagination, and selflessness.
3. The people skills of interpersonal skills, listening, and negotiation.

Many of these skills have been identified by previous research. Organisation was identified as a skill of women returners by the Women's Bureau (Consumer Contact, 1996) and Mason (1998). Time-management and multi-tasking were also identified by Mason (1998). Butler and Leigh (1995) stated that planning, budgeting, and resourcefulness are skills of women returners. Attention to the environment was a skill found in Arvey and Begalla's (1975) study. Both Arvey and Begalla (1975) and Ekstrom et al. (1981) found flexibility to be an important skill of women returners. Compassion, which could include both empathy and understanding, and interpersonal skills, were identified in the Women's Bureau study (Consumer Contact, 1996). Butler and Leigh (1995) also identified negotiation as a skill of women returners. Emergency-handling, a skill mentioned by only two of the participants in the present study, was identified by Arvey and Begalla (1975).

Skills that were identified by previous studies but not mentioned by the participants in this study were:

- responsibility (Ekstrom et al., 1981; Consumer Contact, 1996; Mason, 1998)
- autonomy (Ekstrom et al., 1981; Consumer Contact, 1996)
- stability (Consumer Contact, 1996; Mason, 1998)
- reliability (Consumer Contact, 1996)
- dedication (Consumer Contact, 1996)
- hard working (Consumer Contact, 1996)
- commitment (Mason, 1998)
- maturity (Mason, 1998)
- developing oneself and others/teamwork (Butler & Leigh, 1995)
- providing an environment conducive to work (Butler & Leigh, 1995)
- working in a variety of contexts (Butler & Leigh, 1995).

It may well be that, if presented with this list, the participants would have agreed that these were also skills they use in the home. However, it was considered important to allow the participants to spontaneously provide their own list of skills rather than be presented with a pre-prepared list.

It is also important to consider the skills that the women who participated in this study listed that have not been identified by previous studies. These were prioritising, efficiency, patience, energy, imagination, selflessness, and listening skills. Patience was the second most frequently mentioned skill – the only skill that was named more often was organisation. Prioritising was also frequently referred to, with almost one-quarter of the participants identifying that skill. The other skills (efficiency, energy, imagination, selflessness, and listening skills) were referred to less frequently.

However, it seems that women returners consider these skills to be important. If one were to consider the role of mother and home manager, these would seem obvious skills that would differentiate a good mother and home manager from a bad one. Yet previous research has not identified these skills. This may possibly be because the majority of them may be considered personal qualities or personality characteristics rather than skills. However, this should not reduce their value. Certainly most of these skills would be highly valued by employers.

This result certainly demonstrates that the perceptions of the people who actually undergo an experience can be quite different from that of the researchers who endeavour to objectively analyse their lives. Qualitative research such as that undertaken in this study can uncover some important and interesting observations.

The participants also indicated, out of all the skills they had identified, which ones they use in their work. Many of the skills women returners bring to the workforce cannot be defined in the customary manner, as they have not been acquired through formal education or training or paid work experience. A number of researchers maintain that the skills women acquire in the home are readily transferable into the workplace (e.g. Arvey & Begalla, 1975; Butler & Leigh, 1995; Ekstrom et al., 1981, Mason, 1998). Therefore, those skills increase the value of women returners as employees. Table 5-1 showed that the skills that at least ten percent of the participants stated that they use in their paid work were:

1. The management skills of time management, organisation, multi-tasking, planning, prioritising, and efficiency.
2. The personal qualities of patience, flexibility, and empathy.
3. The people skills of interpersonal skills, and listening.

The relationship between the number of participants who identified a particular skill and the number that believed they use that skill in their work varied considerably. This ranged from all of the women to only half the women stating that they used the skill at work. However, this result still gives a clear indication that women recognise that many of the skills they acquire in the home readily transfer to their work.

Nevertheless, some of the skills they recognised that they had acquired at home were not seen to transfer into the workplace. For example, budgeting, resourcefulness, awareness of and ability to adjust to environment, understanding, and negotiation are all skills that previous researchers identified as valuable in a paid work environment, but many of the

participants did not recognise this. Furthermore, energy and imagination would also seem to be valuable work-related skills, which few participants recognised.

It can be concluded from this that women returners recognise that they acquire many management skills, personal qualities, and people skills in the home that they use in their paid work. Many of those skills concur with past research in the area. Nevertheless, some of the skills that the participants recognised that they develop in the home were not seen to transfer into the workplace, even though these are skills that are used at work.

6.3.2 Recognition of Women Returners' Skills

We turn now to a discussion of whether the skills of women returners are valued by both themselves and their employers. Dealing firstly with the women's perceptions of their skills, three-quarters of the participants indicated that being a mother had made them a better employee. Those participants believed that motherhood had given them important management skills and personal qualities that improved their performance at work. They believed they were more organised, better at managing their time, and more efficient. They also believed they were more understanding, flexible, balanced, and patient.

However, many of the participants had difficulty defining the skills they had acquired in the home, and some of the skills the participants recognised they had acquired at home were not perceived to be transferred to the workplace, despite previous research having shown that they are. This may be an indication that the women did not value those skills. Furthermore, when asked whether they had or would 'market' the skills they had obtained in the home when seeking a new position, two thirds of the participants said that they would not. Some of the participants explicitly stated that they would not do so because they did not value the skills, had not thought of them, or that they were not as relevant to their work as paid work experience. This gives a clear indication that they did not value the skills in relation to their careers.

It is a well-known phenomenon that women have a tendency to undervalue their skills. Research undertaken by the South Australian Department of Labour (cited in Wilson, 1995) confirmed this. Their report claimed that women learn to do this from the workplace and wider culture. Clearly, the results of the present study indicate a tendency on the part of some of the participants to de-value the skills they had obtained in the home.

Another reason the participants gave for not marketing their skills was because they believed employers would undervalue the skills, or that mentioning them may even have a negative effect on their job application. Two-thirds of the participants indicated that, if they did market their skills, they had doubts about whether employers would take account of them. More than half of that group of participants believed there would be little understanding by employers of the skills, and that they would be undervalued and trivialised. The remainder of those participants who had concerns about employers recognising their skills thought that, where an interview panel contained women, or men with children, it would be more likely that their skills would be recognised.

The literature shows that there is no historical connection between the skills developed in the home and those recognised in paid work (Butler & Leigh, 1995; WNC, 1991). Furthermore, even if such a connection is made, the selection methods used by most employers have low validity, so are unable to objectively assess the skills of women returners (Mason, 1998). Therefore, even with an individual being included on a selection panel who may have an appreciation of the skills of women returners, it is unlikely that these skills would be able to be recognised.

It can be concluded from these findings that many of the skills that women learn in the home can be readily transferred to their workplace. However, many women returners do not value those skills. Furthermore, most of them are concerned that their employers would not value the skills they bring into the workplace from home. In fact, some women believe that employers have such a negative view of women returners that they would not even mention that they were mothers when seeking a new position, let alone make a claim to the skills they had obtained through their roles as mothers.

6.4 Barriers

It was demonstrated in the literature review that many barriers make it difficult for women to return to paid work. Conflict between public and private worlds, sex-typed family roles, employer discrimination, unavailability of affordable and high quality childcare, characteristics of the labour market, lack of confidence, and lack of or outdated customarily defined skills were all listed as barriers that impede women returners' ability to be involved in paid work.

The results from this study clearly indicate that flexibility and reduced hours are the two greatest needs of women returners. When these two needs are not met, they can become major barriers to the ability of women returners to return to or continue working. Flexi-time and reduced hours give women returners the ability to reduce the conflict between their public and private worlds.

Fortunately, Massey University was, in most cases, able to accommodate the participants' needs. Numerous participants considered that they had been 'lucky' that their manager had been so understanding and able to accommodate their needs. It would seem that they had a perception that it is not usual for employers to be so accommodating. Research undertaken by Bristol University involving 560 women returners reiterates this perception. This research showed that more than a third of the women had given up their full-time careers within two years of returning to work. Forty-seven percent of those women were able to continue working, but with reduced hours. The remaining 53 percent left work altogether ("New mothers finding it hard", 2000). Where employers will not consider allowing more flexibility with working hours or alternatives such as part-time or job sharing, women are being forced out of the workforce. This is an example of how the characteristics of the labour market can be inflexible to the needs of women returners, making it impossible for them to work. However, this was not the case in the present study.

Many women that obtain a balance between their public and private worlds do so by reducing their hours, but this is not done without cost. Many of the

participants in this study were concerned about the equity issues involved in part-time work. Some of the participants stated that they did not have their workloads reduced in line with their reduction in hours and remuneration. Many of the participants were concerned about the general perception of part-timers that results in a reduction in status. Superiors and colleagues see them as working for 'pin money' and not being committed to their careers. This evidences a form of employer discrimination exercised against women returners.

A major barrier for many women returners is the unavailability of good quality affordable childcare. In the present study, quality childcare was a barrier mentioned by only a small percentage of the participants. Considering that the majority of the participants (81 percent) had children under the age of 14 years, most of whom were pre-schoolers, it was anticipated that this would be frequently mentioned. This may have been because it was not a barrier to them, due to the fact that good quality childcare facilities are available on all of Massey University's campuses. Furthermore, some of the participants who did refer to childcare stated that the quality of childcare that was available made the difference between whether they were able to work or not.

The affordability of childcare was a concern more frequently expressed by the participants. The University charges commercial rates for its childcare facilities, and many participants believed that childcare was unaffordable – that childcare costs took such a large portion of their salaries they were basically working to keep their jobs open. This is a common barrier that women returners experience. Cost is one of the main reasons given for childcare preventing participation in employment, and is most likely to affect Maori and sole mothers (NACEW, 1999).

It would not seem reasonable to expect employers to meet childcare costs themselves, so this is an issue that needs to be addressed by government. Women returners are earning money, paying taxes, and contributing to the economy of the country, and more of them would be able to be involved in paid work if childcare was affordable. Childcare costs are an expense of women returners working, so why are they not an expense that can be fully claimed against their earnings? In 1999, only \$940 of childcare expenses could be

claimed against for tax rebate purposes – giving a maximum rebate of \$310. A family with two pre-school children could be paying as much as \$16,000 per annum in childcare expenses. A tax rebate on that amount, at the current rate of 33 cents in the dollar, would amount to \$5,280. No doubt this would make quite a difference to the affordability of childcare for families, particularly low-income and single-parent families. In some instances it would mean women returners who would not otherwise be able to be involved in paid work are able to do so.

One common need that the participants in this study expressed was the support and understanding of managers and colleagues. Fortunately, this support was forthcoming for the majority (81 percent) of the participants in this study. Many of the participants indicated that women who had shared similar experiences and men with children were more understanding.

Several of the suggestions given by the participants as to what would make it easier for them to balance work and family responsibilities gave evidence of this need for understanding and support. For example, the provision of a support groups, a family room, a nanny for sick children, social activities involving children, and additional leave for school holidays, are all low-cost options employers can use to demonstrate an understanding of and support for the unique needs of women returners. The recognition of the skills of women returners was another suggestion that meets this objective.

Another barrier that was commonly named by the participants in this study was the attitudes of society. There are many unspoken norms and expectations that evolve around work within our society. As mentioned previously in this chapter, work is structured around the male model of a career, which entails continuous full-time work, with an inherent expectation that, for those who wish to receive promotion, working long hours is the norm. People who accept this model and base their careers around it are more likely to be successful. This is an example of characteristics of the labour market that are inflexible to the needs of women returners.

In an attempt to overcome this inflexibility, it must be acknowledged by society that any parent who wants to be actively involved in their children's

lives must devote a large part of each day to their children. A parent who is not able to make that time available becomes an absentee parent, and is that what society really wants? As one of the participants in the present study pointed out, women are doing a service to society by bringing up their children in a responsible manner. Our children are our future and, if they are neglected by parents who devote most of their waking hours to their careers, our future may indeed be bleak.

This is an issue that faces both men and women. As women return to the workforce in greater numbers, the traditional support they gave to their partners' careers is no longer available. Consequently, family responsibilities are increasingly intruding on men's work lives as well (Stone, 1998).

Although work-family conflict is an issue felt more by women than by men, men today are increasingly feeling the need to become more involved with the responsibilities involved with having children. Therefore, any employer who perceives a lack of commitment or lower standard of work from an employee who is not able to put in a 60-hour week is doing an injustice to both the employee and society.

When an employer does this, it is impossible for women to balance family life with ambition in their careers. They are forced to choose to 'tread water' in their careers, literally putting their career ambitions on the back burner for several years, or changing their occupation to one more suited to balancing work and family

A couple of the participants, and some writers (e.g. McKenna, 1997, in Stone, 1998), claim that women returners need to change their attitudes and accept that they cannot 'have it all', as this belief puts them under undue stress. If having it all means working a 60-hour week and arranging for your children to be brought up by somebody else, then it is probably not something that many women returners would desire. However, there is no reason why men and women alike cannot confront societal norms and expectations that make it impossible for women to successfully balance a career with family responsibilities. It is time to change the way work is structured away from the male model of careers that carries substantial pitfalls and penalties for women returners. A more useful career model would be one that is open to more

collective and collaborative ways of organising work, and which recognises involvement in paid and unpaid work.

Before these changes can occur, it must be recognised by everybody that work has value for all adults – both women and men – and that active parenting also has value to mothers and fathers, as well as society as a whole.

Employers can lead these changes by taking steps to enable parents to balance their work and family responsibilities. Balancing work and family life has become an important issue in the workplace today. As employers are able to meet the needs of their employees, they will be rewarded with increased commitment from their employees as well as becoming an employer of choice.

In summary of this section, the women in the present study had various needs that, if not met, became barriers to their involvement in paid work and upward mobility. The most common need was flexi-time and reduced hours, which enabled them to balance their public and private worlds. Employer discrimination was evidenced in that many participants believed that their status had been reduced and they were perceived as being less committed. Good quality and affordable childcare was a further barrier. The final barrier was attitudes of society, which constitute a characteristic of the labour market that requires excessive hours of work in order to be considered for promotion.

In summarising this section, it is important to emphasise that the majority of the participants in this study were women who had returned from parental leave, and all of them were currently in the paid workforce. Therefore, some of the other barriers, such as sex-typed family roles, lack of confidence, and lack of or outdated customarily defined skills, which research indicates are barriers for women returners, were not barriers experienced by the participants.

6.5 Limitations and Generalisability

As with all research, this study was subject to certain limitations relating to the sample, methodology and design of the project.

6.5.1 Limitations of Sample

The population from which the sample was drawn for this study was women returners employed by Massey University. The reasons why it was necessary to limit the population in this way, and the advantages it gave, have already been outlined in section 4.1.

The method of sampling used in this study was purposeful sampling, with women returners being invited to participate in the study through the use of various media (also outlined in section 4.1). It was not possible to undertake random sampling, as the entire population of women returners at Massey University could not be identified. Therefore, the only way to draw a sample was to call for volunteers to participate in the study. Purposeful sampling is known to have limitations. In particular, the characteristics of the participants, all of whom were volunteers, may be quite different from the characteristics of the underlying population.

It was concluded earlier in this chapter that the women who participated in this study were not completely representative of women returners in New Zealand. However, as the previous sections of this report have shown, the participants in this study faced similar issues to those that research has shown other women returners experience. Therefore, it would seem that the characteristics of the participants have not limited the results of this study significantly.

Another limitation of the sample was its size. A large sample size is often used to add strength to claims made for results and their generalisability, particularly in quantitative research. However, large samples can also be limiting. The greater the sample size, the less the researcher is able to understand and respect the individuality of each participant's responses (Banister et al., 1994). The sample size in the present study (42 participants) was aimed to achieve a balance between the two extremes of a one-off case study and a large sample. The sample was sufficiently small to enable a richness of data to be obtained, enabling the researcher to gain an understanding of the meaning of individual responses to the participants. Yet the sample was also large enough to be able to establish commonalities and

differences between participants, lending greater strength to any claims for generalisability.

6.5.2 Limitations of Methodology

Semi-structured interviews are known to have several disadvantages that can threaten their validity. These disadvantages were discussed at length in section 3.2.2, but briefly the main threats to validity are interviewer bias, reduced comparability of responses, and bias in the interpretation of data.

To overcome interviewer bias, questions used in the interviews were worded so that they were neutral. Responses from the participants did not receive either positive or negative feedback, though participants were given reassurance that their responses were valid to encourage them to give full answers. Although the interviewer (the researcher) established common ground by stating that she too was a mother with similar experiences to their own, this was not shared in a manner that would influence their responses.

To increase the comparability of the responses of individual participants, an interview guide with a set of predetermined questions was used. Due to the uniqueness of their experiences, it was not feasible to ask every participant all of the questions. However, by following the predetermined questions in the interview guide, the responses of participants with similar experiences could be compared.

Procedures were used by the researcher to discourage bias in interpretation of the data. Emergent hypotheses were tested against the data by searching for disconfirmatory as well as supporting data. Furthermore, an attempt was made to use multiple perspectives by searching for alternative explanations of the data.

By taking these measures, the researcher was able to overcome the disadvantages of semi-structured interviews, while retaining the many advantages of this method.

6.5.3 *Limitations of Design*

As with any research project, there were limitations on what could be done in the present study. Time and resource restrictions placed constraints upon the researcher in certain aspects of the research.

For instance, it would have been preferable if the researcher could have returned interview transcripts to participants to see if, in hindsight, there was anything they would like to change or add, or perhaps something that they had not explained well that may be open to misinterpretation.

The sample size was also a limitation placed upon the present study. It was not possible for the researcher to conduct more interviews and have them transcribed. Though, in some ways, this limited the generalisability of the results, it meant that the data that was collected was rich in detail.

In sum, although this study was subject to several limitations, where possible steps were taken to minimise or eliminate those limitations. In some cases, such as sample size, it was even possible to turn those limitations into strengths. However, it would be desirable for further research to be undertaken to substantiate the results of this study. In particular, it is necessary to determine whether women returners who work for different employers and in different occupations share the perceptions of the participants in this. Also, the experiences of women returners who may be classed as 'work poor' – a group not represented in this study – should be explored to see whether the same issues confront them. Another avenue for future research would be to explore the issues surrounding those women who have been prevented from returning to paid work to identify the barriers that they have experienced.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSIONS

Women who have taken a career break often find it difficult to return to paid work. Their skills are considered to be outdated or are difficult to define in the customary manner. Furthermore, there are various barriers that may make it difficult for them to return to paid work. Even those women who do return to the workforce, or who take a short period of parental leave, can find it difficult to balance their careers with their ongoing family responsibilities. Because they are no longer able to devote their full energies to their careers, they are often held back, and suffer a loss of promotion opportunities. Some even find that they are unable to continue working because their employers are unable to reduce their hours or allow some flexibility in when those hours are worked.

Due to demographic changes, which have resulted in projected skill shortages, employers must make full use of the skills available in the community to fill their human resource needs. They must look to non-traditional pools of skills to draw from. Women returners probably represent the largest source of labour that is under-utilised by employers. Employers must look seriously at this pool of labour, and ensure that women returners are given equal opportunities to participate in the workforce.

The present study has shown that employers are not accommodating the special needs of women returners to enable them to make the best use of the skills they have to offer. The specific findings of the study, as they relate to the objectives set out in chapter 3, are:

Objective 1: Identify whether women returners' perceive that their career breaks and ongoing family commitments negatively affect their career progression.

Women returners believe that their career breaks and ongoing family commitments adversely affect their careers. Work remains an important part of their lives to which they remain highly committed but, due to the way work is structured and employer discrimination, many are excluded from promotion opportunities.

Objective 2: Identify the skills women returners perceive they gain in the home through their roles as caregivers and home managers, which of those skills they believe they use in their paid work, and whether they and their employers seem to value those skills.

The women in this study identified a lengthy list of skills and personal qualities they believed they had developed in the home. In accordance with previous research in this area, many of the skills they learned in the home were transferred to their workplace. Most women returners in this study believe that, as a result of their motherhood, they are better employees. They believe they are more organised, better at managing their time, more efficient, more understanding, and more flexible. However, not all of the women valued those skills, and many believed that their employers did not recognise them either. However, they believed that it is more likely that those skills would be recognised and valued by an employer who was a woman or man with children.

Objective 3: Identify any barriers women returners perceive exist that make it difficult for them to return to paid work or to continue working.

Women returners have various needs that, if not met, become barriers to their ability to be involved in paid work. The most common needs are:

- reduced hours,
- flexibility in the hours they work,
- good quality and affordable childcare,
- understanding from their managers and colleagues, and
- a change in societal attitudes that prohibit women returners from gaining promotion while they are working part-time or, whilst working full-time, are no longer able to be involved in evening and weekend work.

In conclusion, this thesis makes the following recommendations:

1. Employers train their managers to recognise that, although women returners may be working part-time or are unable to undertake evening and weekend work, this does not mean they are less committed to their work.

2. Employers encourage their managers to focus on outputs rather than processes. For example, a person who is not working in the traditional manner (e.g. someone who is working from home or non-traditional hours), but is still producing the same output as others who conform with traditional work forms, should not be excluded from consideration for promotion.
3. Staff involved in the recruitment and selection process receive training in recognition of skills obtained outside the workforce. In particular, application forms and other materials sent to job applicants should explicitly request information about skills obtained outside paid work experience.
4. Employers adopt competency-based recruitment and selection procedures to enable them to focus on job-related competencies rather than how or where those competencies were obtained.
5. Employers adopt a policy that flexibility towards the needs of their employees is the rule rather than the exception. Options such as part-time, job sharing, and flexi-time should receive serious consideration, and on a case-by-case basis, so that the needs of individual employees can be accommodated where possible.
6. To make childcare more affordable, government allow families to claim all childcare expenses (as opposed to the current maximum of \$940) for tax rebate purposes.
7. That men and women alike push for a change in societal attitudes by recognising that:
 - Involvement in paid work has inherent value for all adults.
 - Parenting has inherent value to mothers, fathers, and the whole of society. The future of our society depends on the quality of parenting (and *quality* parenting involves large *quantities* of time) that mothers and fathers are able to provide for their children.

8. The government provide a longer period of paid parental leave to acknowledge the valuable work undertaken by parents and to give them the choice to take a longer career break, without being constrained to return to work through financial considerations.

It is also recommended that future research be undertaken to determine that the perceptions of the sample of women returners used in this study are not unique – that they are shared amongst other women returners who may work for different employers, in different occupations, or belong to different socio-economic groups.

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APPENDIX I: INTERVIEW GUIDE

A. DEMOGRAPHICS

1. How many children do you have?
2. What are their ages?
3. Are you the primary caregiver?
4. How many career breaks have you had?
5. How long was each career break?
6. How many years of paid employment did you have before your first career break?
7. Are you academic or general staff?
8. Did you return to Massey after parental leave or start with Massey at some time after your career break/s?
9. What factors affected your decision to return to paid work?
10. Were you entitled to the ex gratia payment from Massey?
11. If so, did the ex gratia payment play any part in your decision?

B. THE EFFECT OF CAREER BREAKS

12. What level are you in the organisation now compared with before?
13. What do you believe your promotion prospects are now compared with before?
14. What do you believe your status is now compared with before?
15. Do you believe you are where you would have been career-wise today if you had not taken a career break?
16. Has your commitment to paid work changed since you became a mother?
17. What are the various roles in your life?
18. How would you rank these in order of importance?
19. Now, can you rank them according to the amount of time you devote to each role?
20. Are you happy with this division of your time?
21. Is there any aspect of your life that would not be fulfilled if you were not in paid work?
22. In general, how important is paid work to you?

C. ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE SKILLS OF WOMEN RETURNERS

23. Do you believe there are specific skills required to be competent as a mother and home manager?
24. Are any of these skills used in your job?

25. Did you let your employer know about these skills when returning?
26. If so, did your employer seem to take these seriously?
27. Has being a mother made you a better employee?

D. BARRIERS

28. Did you have any special needs when you returned to work?
29. Did you return to work full-time or part-time?
30. Would you have preferred part-time if it were available?
31. Did your manager seem understanding of your needs and was he/she willing to be flexible and accommodate your needs?
32. How do you find balancing work and family demands?
 - a. Childcare arrangements?
 - b. Sick children?
 - c. Timetable?
 - d. Economics (e.g. childcare costs)?
 - e. Work social activities?
33. What suggestions do you have as to what would have made your return to paid work easier?

(FOR WOMEN COMING INTO MASSEY AFTER THEIR CAREER BREAK – I.E. NOT RETURNING AFTER PARENTAL LEAVE)

34. Did your motherhood factor into the selection process at your interview for this job or any other jobs you have applied for since having children? Were questions asked of you (either directly or indirectly) that referred to work-family conflict?

APPENDIX II: INFORMATION SHEET

BEYOND THE CAREER BREAK: Women Returners' Perceptions of the Skills they bring from the Home and Barriers to their Return to and Advancement in Paid Work: An Exploratory Investigation

Who are the researchers and how can they be contacted?

My name is Ruth Mason. I am a student at Massey University. This research is in partial fulfilment of my Master of Business Studies in Human Resource Management. My contact details are:

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What is the study about?

The study is about women who have had a career break due to family responsibilities. It will aim to explore the experiences of these women while outside the paid workforce and how this has impacted on their careers. It will also explore their experiences in returning to paid work, looking at such issues as their own and employers' attitudes towards the skills they gained while outside the paid workforce, and any barriers they faced when returning to paid work.

How were the participants selected?

Participants in the study will all be staff of Massey University. They will be women who have taken a career break due to family responsibilities. The career break may be as short as a few weeks or as long as several years.

What will the participants have to do?

Participants will be invited to attend an interview with the researcher at a time and location convenient to them. With the permission of the participants, the interviews will be tape recorded, though participants will have the right to have the tape recorder turned off at any time during the interview. Questions that will be asked will include the following:

How long was your career break?

What factors affected your decision about the length of your career break?

Do you think your career break has affected your career in any way?

Do you believe there are specific skills required to be competent in the home?

Are any of these skills relevant to your paid work?

Did you make a claim to these skills when seeking paid work or promotion?

If so, did employers seem to take these skills seriously?

If you had a lengthy career break:

- *did you find there were barriers that made it difficult for you to return to paid work?*
- *were employers understanding of your needs and willing to be flexible to accommodate your needs?*
- *what suggestions do you have as to what help you could have received to make your return to paid work easier?*

How much time will be involved?

It is anticipated that the interviews will last between 30 and 45 minutes.

How will the participants' confidentiality and anonymity be protected?

Confidentiality and anonymity of participants will be maintained at all times. Only the researcher will be aware of who was involved in the study, and this information will be held secure. Tape recordings of the interviews will be erased immediately after transcription.

What can the participants expect from the researchers?

At the participants' request they will be provided with a summary of the research findings when it is concluded.

How will the results of the study be used?

The results of the study will be used to write a thesis in partial fulfilment of my Master of Business Studies in Human Resource Management. They will also be submitted for publication to an academic journal.

Your rights

If you take part in the study, you have the right to:

- Refuse to answer any particular question, and to withdraw from the study at any time.
- Turn the tape recorder off at any time if you have given permission for the interview to be audio taped.
- Ask any further questions about the study that occur to you during your participation.
- Provide information on the understanding that it is completely confidential to the researchers. No other person will be advised of those who were involved in the study, and this information will be held secure. All information will be recorded anonymously, and it will not be possible to identify you in any reports that are prepared from the study.
- Be given access to a summary of the findings from the study when it is concluded.

APPENDIX III: CONSENT FORM

BEYOND THE CAREER BREAK:

Women Returners' Perceptions of the Skills they bring from the Home and Barriers to their Return to and Advancement in Paid Work: An Exploratory Investigation

I have read the Information Sheet for this study and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions about the study have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I also understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time, or to decline to answer any particular questions in the study. I agree to provide information to the researchers on the understanding that it is completely confidential.

I agree/do not agree to the interview being audio taped. I am aware that I have the right to turn the tape recorder off at any time.

I wish to participate in this study under the conditions set out on the Information Sheet.

Name: _____

Contact Details:

Signed: _____

Date: _____