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**CAREER BREAK OR BROKEN CAREER? MOTHERS' EXPERIENCES OF  
RETURNING TO PAID WORK.**

A THESIS PRESENTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF  
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR  
THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY  
AT  
SCHOOL OF SOCIOLOGY, SOCIAL POLICY AND SOCIAL WORK  
MASSEY UNIVERSITY  
PALMERSTON NORTH, NEW ZEALAND

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2007

## ABSTRACT

Servicemen returning from two World Wars were granted assistance in finding work, retraining and other benefits in recognition of the sacrifices they had made. Yet mothers' returning to work after time out bearing and raising children are reliant on a booming economy to obtain even limited entry to the labour market, and the work obtained is very often inferior to the jobs held by women before becoming mothers.

Currently due to lower fertility rates and the ageing populations of the world's richer nations, a shortage of working-age people is predicted to continue into at least the middle of the twenty-first century. To overcome this shortfall, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) advises its member states to assist mothers to return to paid work sooner. Most OECD nations are complying, with varying degrees of success. Some policy frameworks make this goal more easily attainable than others.

Mothers in liberal welfare states often return to paid work later than they might otherwise prefer. Many returners are overqualified for the work they are doing. While there appears to be relatively few barriers to re-entry, the choice of re-entry occupations are limited and returners are predominantly offered low status jobs with no career opportunities at the back of the job queue and gender queue. Mothers who interrupt their careers by taking a career break for childbearing and rearing generally face downward occupational mobility and loss of lifetime incomes.

This thesis assesses the experiences of mothers who return to employment in one liberal nation, New Zealand. It applies Esping-Andersen's three models of welfare states and Reskin and Roos' gender queues model to the situation of returners. The study investigates the precise nature of the obstacles and processes encountered by a number of mothers attempting to resume a career. It argues that social policies matter: returners in countries where state intervention is more widespread and where there is universal, extensive and generous social provision and support for working mothers are economically better off.

The research methods include in-depth interviews and a focus group with mothers, a mail questionnaire and interviews with employers, and a study of recent and current New Zealand and overseas government policies to assist working parents. The findings of this thesis are that regardless of skill levels, New Zealand returners are consigned to low status occupations where they are not fully integrated into the 'normal' full-time workforce with career opportunities. These mothers generally suffer more than one episode of returning to the back of the queue. They also earn less (weekly and annually) than mothers who do not take career breaks. The study identifies social policy frameworks and employers' policies and practices as factors contributing to the processes whereby returners are relegated to the back of the queue. Although New Zealand has recently brought in policies to assist mothers to return to paid work these initiatives have not addressed the processes that currently confine returners in low status, part-time employment. Policies similar to those created to specifically target the needs of ex-servicemen would go a long way toward assisting mothers to access higher status and better-paid jobs at the head of the queue. The thesis concludes with policy recommendations to facilitate mothers' integration into such jobs.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis has been a totally engrossing and stimulating project for me. Many people have walked with me on this long journey and I wish to acknowledge and thank their valued support and assistance along the way.

Firstly, I want to thank my chief supervisor, Dr. Celia Briar, for her quality supervision, constant encouragement and friendship. Without her I would not have had the confidence to embark on the project. Thank you also to Dr. Lesley Patterson who agreed to be my second supervisor half way through the project. I should also like to acknowledge and thank the contribution of my initial second supervisor, Dr. Jocelyn Quinnell, who unfortunately had to discontinue her involvement in the project due to ill health.

I also wish to acknowledge and thank the Massey University Advanced Degree Award Committee for awarding me a grant to relieve me of my teaching duties for a semester so I could complete my data analysis and write my first draft of the thesis. Without it I would not have been able to complete the project.

Last but most certainly not least, I want to acknowledge and thank my children Siok Khim, Beng Kian, Suu Min and Chieh Ling for having faith in me and for constantly telling me that I 'will get there'. In particular, I wish to thank Suu Min for the numerous cups of tea and occasional cards and lots of hugs as she cheered me on. And to my youngest daughter, Chieh Ling for her patience and constant back rubs and hugs as well as cups of tea. You have all made this a much lighter task than it could have been.

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## PREFACE

This thesis grew out of a personal quest to understand the experiences of returners. Prior to even conceiving any idea of doing a PhD degree I became a sole mother and income earner for four children aged one to eleven. There began for me a series of casual and part-time, temporary paid jobs. My hours and locations of work depended on the availability of low cost childcare provided by neighbours and friends, often at times dictated by their own personal circumstances.

In one of many workplaces, I came across a group of mothers in a similar situation to me. Together we would discuss our circumstances, marvel at the remarkably untouched lifestyles of our former husbands, and lament the lack of insight that had landed us in the precarious position that we found ourselves in. Although we held tertiary degrees and had been in paid work before having children, our occupational status was often no different from that of new entrants to the labour market. Indeed, we not only had to start over at entry (or near entry) level jobs, but we also had to compete for such jobs with younger and newly qualified candidates, often losing out to the latter. My discussion with partnered mothers found that their experiences of returning to work were similarly constrained by childcare, since husbands in full-time work were generally unavailable to help.

While some management experts such as Charles Handy (1994 and 2001) praise the personal and social benefits of a flexible, mobile and contingent 'career', our experiences suggested otherwise. We did not choose part-time jobs as a lifestyle preference. On the contrary, we were often faced with a choice between unemployment and part-time or casual employment, often at lower pay and status than standard full-time jobs. Our low pay meant that saving for periods of unemployment was an impossible goal. The periods of unemployment and the time prior to the termination of an employment contract were high stress points, so that when negotiating or renegotiating employment contracts, we felt powerless to demand better pay or conditions.

My interest in mothers who withdraw from paid work to care for children, thereby becoming partially dependent on their breadwinner husbands, was tinged with concern about the lack of information on the consequences of taking such an action. As a younger mother I had written a self-help book about morning sickness when I suffered from it. I thought I could do similar research on returners' experiences to provide information for mothers who for various reasons were returning to paid work. The idea gradually became the seeding ground for the research that is presented in this thesis.