

# Women 'less likely to progress at work' than their male counterparts following childbirth

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Women and men experience a 'large divergence' in their career paths in the years following childbirth, according to a study following more than 3,500 new parents.

Only 27.8 percent of [women](#) are in [full-time work](#) or self-employed three years after childbirth, compared to 90 percent of new fathers.

And while 26 percent of men have been promoted or moved to a better job in the five years following childbirth, the figure is just 13 percent

for women.

These are just two of the findings from researchers at the Universities of Bristol and Essex, who examined how childbirth affects employment and career progression. The findings suggest women still suffer economically and often become 'stuck' at work as a result of taking on childcare responsibilities, while there's no impact on fathers.

Using data from [Understanding Society](#)—the largest longitudinal household panel study of its kind—researchers observed 2,281 new mothers and 1,687 new fathers over three and five years after a child's birth, between 2009/10 and 2016/17. Of these, 43 percent were first-time mothers.

Analysis, captured in a report for the Government Equalities Office, reveals mothers increasingly withdraw from [full-time](#) employment over time and the more children a woman has, the lower the likelihood she will work full-time.

Other key findings include:

- Fewer than one-in-five of all new mothers, and 29 percent of first-time mothers, return to full-time work in the first three years after maternity leave. This falls to 15 percent after five years.
- 17 percent of women leave employment completely in the five years following childbirth, compared to four percent of men.
- A women's likelihood of returning to work in the years after birth is independent of the number of children she has; what matters to her likelihood of working is her employment status the year before her child is born.
- In the year before birth, the man was the main earner in 54 percent of couples. This increases to 69 percent three years after

birth.

- For couples where the woman was the main breadwinner prior to birth (12 percent), just 46 percent remained the main earner three years later.
- Mothers who leave employment completely are three times more likely to return to a lower-paid or lower-responsibility role than those who do not take a break.
- For new mothers—but not fathers—staying with the same employer is associated with a lower risk of downward occupational mobility but also with lower chances of progression.

The study also found that prior employment status was a key predictor of returning to work, particularly full-time, which suggests that policy should focus on getting young women into work before childbirth if they are to achieve economic equality in later life.

Of those working full-time prior to childbirth, 44 percent returned and remained in full-time work three years after having a baby but this falls to 31 percent after five years.

Of the 30 percent of new mothers who were not working before birth, fewer than one in four return to work in the subsequent three to five years.

Professor Susan Harkness, from the School of Policy Studies at the University of Bristol, led the research and said: "The results of our study highlight how gendered employment patterns are following childbirth, with men typically remaining in full-time work and women leaving full-time work.

"This loss in [work experience](#), and in particular full-time work experience, is an important part of the explanation for the gender pay gap and suggests women still suffer economically as a result of taking on

childcare responsibilities.

"Worryingly, it appears that women who return to employment typically see their chance of moving up the occupational ladder decrease. Women who return to the same employer risk becoming stuck in their job roles with limited career progression."

The study also found that increased commuting time was strongly linked with career progression: those whose daily commute increased by 10 minutes were four times more likely to climb the ladder.

However, changes in working hours had no effect on career progression over the period of the study.

Co-author Dr. Alina Pelikh, from the Institute for Social and Economic Research (ISER) at the University of Essex, said: "While we've only looked at the first five years following a child being born, all these factors suggest that the patterns we've observed are unlikely to be reversed as children grow older.

"Thanks to longitudinal data, like Understanding Society, in a few years' time we'll be able to check whether our predictions were correct. We still need to better understand the reasons why many women do not return to full-time work and encourage policies that enable women reconcile work and family life."

Those working in education are more likely to go back to full-time work, while those in the public sector and working in larger firms are more likely to work either full- or part-time.

But while those in education or the public sector are more likely to go back to work, they are more likely to become occupationally 'stuck,' being less likely to move up or down the occupational ladder in the years

after birth.

Co-author Dr. Magda Borkowska, also from ISER, added: "While those working in the [public sector](#), in education or in larger firms are much more likely to have working conditions which allow them to go back to work full-time after birth, these women are much more likely to become occupationally stuck with less chance of moving up or down the job ladder.

"Employers need to think beyond policies that allow women to return to work to also consider whether [mothers](#) are able to progress on their return."

**More information:** Employment pathways and occupational change after childbirth: [assets.publishing.service.gov. ...  
1\\_Summary\\_Report.pdf](#)

Provided by University of Bristol

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