

For UK women in low-paid jobs, a second child is a mixed blessing ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

One child is manageable for working mothers, but the addition of a second can have a serious financial impact on those towards the bottom of the earnings ladder.

A new study finds that, while the addition of a second child has little effect on the working hours of mothers in skilled jobs, it has a substantial and negative effect on low-skilled women who are forced to reduce their hours considerably or even give up their jobs altogether. The findings reinforce the view that there is a shortage of affordable childcare in the UK, despite successive government attempts to help women into work in recent years.

The study, by the Centre for Economic Performance at the London School of Economics, to be presented at this month's annual congress of the European Economic Association in Geneva, examined a group of 3,000 women in the UK aged between 20 and 36 who had their first child between 2000 and 2001.

Economists Claudia Hupkau and Marion Leturcq examined the positions of women in skilled and low-skilled jobs before the birth of their first child. They then examined their positions in the labour market when their first child was between six and 12 years old.

The results were striking. In the first decade of the millennium, almost 60% of all women with a child aged up to four were working in some form. This compares with 75% for women with a child aged between five and 10 and reaches 80% when the child is older.

But stark differences emerged when a second child arrived. Women in skilled jobs continued to combine work and having a larger family. Those who cut the number of hours they worked after the arrival of their second child did so due to a shift in their career aspirations rather than the demands posed by an addition to their family. Low-skilled mothers, in contrast, had no such option. Many were forced to severely decrease the number of weekly hours they worked after a second child.

The study showed that women in skilled jobs who had more than one child ended up working five hours less a week on average. In contrast, women in low-skilled jobs cut the amount they worked by an average 18 hours a week following the arrival of their second child. The proportion of women in unskilled jobs working in excess of 20 hours a week dropped by more than 50%.

"It is often thought that women stay at home because they 'want to', but the reality seems to be that they often do not have a choice, or indeed that going back would make them financially worse off," Hupkau explained.

The findings present a challenge to the government as it tries to encourage more women into work. "Our research indicates that it seems to be very difficult to combine working full time with having a second child for women working in low-skilled jobs, and indeed for women and their families this will imply a significant drop in resources," Hupkau said.

More than 900,000 childcare places have been created since 1998 following the launch of the National Childcare Strategy. Low-income working families are currently given help with childcare via tax credits.

The government is also giving free part-time nursery places for all three- and four-year-olds and disadvantaged two-year-olds. But there are concerns that the initiative is not feasible. The Pre-School Learning Alliance, which represents nursery providers, has warned that many do not have the capacity to deliver extra childcare places. It is warning that, without urgent action, many parents who have been promised 30 hours of free childcare may end up disappointed when the scheme is rolled out next year.

Hupkau said that it was not enough simply to offer free childcare. "Women in low-skilled jobs often have zero flexibility in the start and end times of their jobs, being required to work in particular shifts or at very specific times," she said.

"If the government wants to help these women back into the workplace, it must offer childcare that is adaptable to their particular needs."

-reprinted from The Guardian

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