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Opting-in: Senior Professional Women Challenging the Choice Between Motherhood and Career

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Executive Summary

In 2020, women still face a much harder time than men in combining work and family. This is particularly evident in highly demanding industries such as finance, which continue to see a disproportionately low percentage of women in senior roles. Research suggests that this may relate to social norms and ideas around motherhood versus fatherhood. For example, until recently, the most prevalent idea of motherhood was one of 'intensive mothering' – the idea that 'good' mothers devote 100% of themselves and their time to their children and act as paediatricians, psychologists, teachers and nutritionists. However, many of these norms do not exist for fathers – fathers are not expected to intensively parent their children, but rather to be involved in raising them.

There are a number of studies highlighting these difficulties and focusing on the choice women are often forced to make; however, studying mothers who *have* remained in senior professional roles in these industries provides an interesting and largely overlooked area of research. This report is based on a small-scale study conducted in 2019 which sought to understand what enables senior professional women to successfully manage the 'conflicting' identities of motherhood and career. Through a series of in-depth interviews, this study asks the following questions:

1. How do senior professional women with children navigate the conflicting identities of motherhood and career?
2. What is the role of external and internal factors?

FINDINGS

Findings from these interviews resulted in key themes, which are divided into external and internal factors. External factors include having a strong support network made up of paid help, family and friends both inside and outside of the office:

o **In the Home**
   - Paid help (childcare and cleaning)
   - Support networks of friends and/or family
   - Supportive partner/spouse

o **In the Office**
   - Policies and culture which supported a more gender equal family and work environment
   - Senior leadership
   - Informally flexible work environment

The internal factors were the most interesting, and included a series of internal reframing which focused on the benefits of combining work and motherhood:

o **Reframing the internal dialogue from being conflicting to being complementary**
   - Purpose in their work
   - Better time management & problem-solving skills
   - Empathy and compassion towards other colleagues

o **Thinking about good mothers as being role models**

- Normalising women as breadwinners to their children
- Inspiring confidence in their daughters
- Leading by example at work

o **Finding the right balance and accepting the idea of 'good enough'**
  - Finding the right subjective balance for themselves
  - Acceptance that they are unable to dedicate 100% of themselves to either your work or children, and focusing on having both and enjoying it

Whilst these findings are not generalisable, they may suggest a newly emerging trend among senior professional mothers and provide some interesting actionable points for women who are looking to combine motherhood with senior professional careers.

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Combining Work & Motherhood

'In actual fact wifehood and motherhood are not jobs; like husbandhood and fatherhood they are personal relationships which we degrade by using as alternative descriptions of domestic tasks.' – Vera Brittain

In most advanced economies, the majority of 'formal barriers to women's participation in employment had been removed by the 1970's' (Crompton & Lyonette, 2006; p379). Despite women's increased participation in the labour market; however, senior leadership positions in the majority of sectors across the US and Europe remain largely dominated by men (World Economic Forum, 2016). Just over a quarter of board members of the top 350 companies on the London Stock Exchange are women (Hampton-Alexander Review, 2018), and the percentage of female senior and middle managers in the United Kingdom has remained at roughly 34 percent since records began in 2006 (ILOSTAT, 2018). Moreover, women face greater barriers than men in leadership or managerial positions once they become parents (Hunt, et al., 2016). This may be linked to the fact that having children has opposite effects on the income earnings of men and women: after the birth of their first child, women typically experience a decline in wages, or what has been termed a 'motherhood penalty'; whereas, in sharp contrast, men typically experience an increase in wages (Cooke, 2014; Correll, Bernard & Paik, 2007).

The wage disparity between mothers and fathers may be linked to the way in which normative ideologies of fatherhood differ from those of motherhood. For example, in the 'intensive mothering' ideology of motherhood (Hays, 1996), mothers are assumed to be primarily responsible for reproductive work, and are expected to prioritise the child's material, emotional, psychological and intellectual needs over her own (DeVault 1991; Erickson 2005; Hochschild 2003; Thurer 1995; Warner, 2005). Although this is no longer the only ideology of motherhood (Johnston & Swanson, 2006), it is still highly prevalent in western economies, such as the United Kingdom, and has also, somewhat intensified (see Edwards and Gillies, 2013; Faircloth et al., 2013; Macdonald, 2009; Wolf, 2011). For example, Wolf's (2011) conception of 'total' motherhood examines the way in which mothers are expected to be: 'lay paediatricians,

psychologists, consumer products safety inspectors, toxicologists, and educators' who must 'not only protect their children from immediate threats but are also expected to predict and prevent any circumstance that might interfere with putatively normal development' (Wolf, 2011, p. xv). This 'expertise' in childrearing is time-consuming and often conflicts with the mothers' own needs (Wolf, 2011).

On the other hand, definitions of 'good' fatherhood are much more flexible, and fathers are not normally expected to intensively parent their children, but rather to be 'involved' in their children's lives (Bass, 2015; Miller, 2011; Shaw, 2008; Shirani et al, 2012). Additionally, the time that fathers spend with their children typically also involves mothers, whereas mothers spend more time alone with their children than fathers do (Craig, 2006). This difference in parenting ideologies can be related to the idea that motherhood is deemed incompatible with a highly-demanding professional career which may require long working hours or travel, and often leads to women being forced to either downgrade into less senior but more flexible roles, or to 'opt-out' of their careers altogether (Hewlett, 2002; 2007; Stone, 2007). However, evidence suggests that some women place equal weight on their careers as they do on their families (Armstrong, 2017; Pas et al, 2011; Gerson, 2010; Wajcman & Martin, 2002). This may indicate that some women are able to overcome the normative ideologies associated with being 'good mothers' and raises questions about how they do so.

Many senior professional and managerial careers are typically characterised by long working hours (Goldin, 2014) which conflict with spending time at home with one's family and may partially help to explain vertical occupational segregation by gender. Moreover, flexibility within these roles is even more difficult in particular sectors such as finance and law (Blair-Loy, 2003; Goldin, 2014) which may further explain why the majority of senior roles in these industries are also disproportionately held by men. Studying mothers who *have* remained in senior professional roles in these industries provides an interesting and largely overlooked area of research. Studying this group of women who are combining motherhood with senior professional, highly-demanding

careers is particularly salient when situated within a context in which research is focused on the conflicts women face and the senior professional women who are being forced to either 'opt out' of their highly demanding jobs or of motherhood (Blair-Loy, 2001; Hewlett, 2002; Stone, 2007). Whilst it is undoubtedly important to understand the barriers women face as it can enable companies and states to help mitigate these barriers; there is a danger in research which focuses on the 'doom and gloom' aspect of gender inequality in leadership (Nadkarni, 2017). In studying women who, despite the difficulties of being a working mother in high-pressurised environments, have remained and thrived in leadership roles may help shift focus away from barriers and towards understanding how these women are doing so. Therefore, this research project seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How do senior professional women with children navigate the conflicting identities of motherhood and career?
2. To what extent are they redefining what it means to be a good mother to fit into their career narratives?
3. What role do external factors such as parental division of labour and company culture play?

Conflicting Ideologies

Motherhood is performed and experienced in a variety of ways, many of which are dependent on social and structural factors such as cultural practices, ethnicity, geographical location, socio-economic standing, sexuality and state infrastructure (Shaw, 2008). Ideologies associated with motherhood are equally varied and are constantly in flux (ibid); however, there is a prevailing ideology of motherhood disseminated in advanced western economies which suggests that 'good' mothers centre their lives around their children (Arendell, 2000; Hay, 1996; Johnston & Swanson, 2006; Ross, 2016; Shaw, 2008). This ideology of motherhood is time-intensive and conflicts with full-time employment, particularly for mothers who have highly-demanding, senior professional or managerial careers. This section will examine this conflict, focusing specifically on empirical studies which seek to understand the link between mothering ideologies and women's employment.

A number of studies have examined the way in which motherhood ideologies relate to women's employment. Johnston & Swanson's (2006) study examined mothers in the US with varying work status: those who were in full-time employment, part-time employment and those who were stay-at-home mothers. Their findings indicate that work status plays a significant role in how mothers construct mothering ideologies and that full-time mothers 'focus on empowering their children and building their children's self-esteem' (p517) over being constantly present. Despite employing reframing techniques to evade any cognitive dissonance between their jobs and their family responsibilities, Johnston & Swanson found that 'for full-time employed American mothers, the difficulty in separating employment and family roles was a significant source of stress and unhappiness' (p518).

Gerson (2010) took a different approach by interviewing the children of what she calls the 'gender revolution' – adults between the ages of eighteen to thirty-two who were the first generation to grow up in a time where the majority of women were in paid employment. Gerson's findings suggest that the participants whose families were able to be more flexible fared better

than those who held rigid gendered divisions of labour, and that participants sought to emulate this in their own lives by 'fashioning flexible gender strategies for earning and caretaking' (p215) which were situationally dependent. Gerson further suggested that it is only by creating flexible social policies that people would have 'the right to shape and reshape our lives as we deem best in the face of new challenges and opportunities' (p224). In a more recent and cross-national study, Collins (2019) echoed these sentiments. Collins (2019) conducted interviews with middle-class working mothers in the US, Germany, Sweden and Italy about their experiences navigating work and family in different welfare state regimes. Her study found that supportive government policies had an impact on easing this tension, particularly in Sweden, however, mothers in all four countries still experienced a significant internal conflict. This study suggested that in order to resolve this conflict, a redefinition of the ideology of motherhood, and how this relates to work and family would be necessary and that governments could foster this by providing flexible policies which better supported individual choices (ibid).

Other studies have focused specifically on female managers, regardless of whether they have children. Blair-Loy's (2001, 2003) study on three cohorts of female finance executives in a major US city found that participants largely fell into either a 'work devotion' schema in which they prioritised work over family, often resulting in remaining childless by 'choice' or a 'family devotion' schema in which participants largely struggled to reconcile their conflicting roles. However, Blair-Loy (ibid) also found that the 'family devotion' (i.e., the ideology of motherhood) was shifting over time and younger women, who graduated from university between 1974 – 1980, were 'reformulating the family devotion schema into a model that incorporates the mother's frequent extended absences' (Blair-Loy, 2001, p703). Equally, some family-committed women were challenging the idea that only full-time employees could be successful professionals by negotiating part -time working arrangements with their firms in order to combine their careers with motherhood.

This group is similar to what Hakim (2002) termed 'adaptive women'. Adaptive women, who make up the most prevalent and diverse group in Hakim's preference theory classifications, are women who 'want to *combine* employment and family without either taking priority' (Hakim, 2002, p165) and may include professional or managerial women. As these roles are typically full-time and demanding roles, the women in this sub-group 'adopt other strategies to combine continuous full-time work with family life' (ibid, p167) which may include having less children, paying for childcare and having husbands who 'are invited to contribute to the child-rearing and domestic workload' (ibid, p167). However, as McRae (2003a, 2003b) has argued, having a preference for a particular lifestyle is not the same as having the means to act on this preference. Additionally, the limited opportunities for part-time work in senior career roles has often meant that mothers feel that they must choose between having a successful career and motherhood (Armstrong, 2017; Stone, 2007).

More recently and building on Blair-Loy's (2001, 2003) study, Chesterman & Ross-Smith (2010) interviewed senior executive and managerial men and women in Australia. Their findings largely support Blair-Loy's findings and suggest that women who have children continue to face significant guilt and conflict between their professional and familial roles. Chesterman & Ross (ibid) agree that in order for this conflict to end, a cultural change needs to take place which challenges the merits of both the family and work devotion schemas. In a similar study, Wajcman & Martin (2002) examine the way in which male and female managers in Australia create and navigate narratives about their professional and domestic lives. Here, the authors argued that 'women face a negotiation of employment and domestic responsibilities which is different from that of men' (p999) and generally chose one identity over the other. However, the illustrative cases chosen from the interviews suggest that men and women face a similar conflict between public and private identities, and that, similarly to men, some women were choosing to prioritise their career over their families. (ibid). This suggests that some women may be able to overcome normative ideologies associated with being good mothers and raises further questions about how

they are doing so, namely, are they redefining what it means to be a good mother to include providing financially for their families?

Other studies have focused on the conflict between motherhood and managerial career success by looking at women who have been unable to reconcile these two roles (Hewlett, 2002; Stone, 2007). Hewlett's (2002) study highlights American women who prioritised having a highly-successful careers and achieved senior levels in their companies but found themselves regretting their choices to forego motherhood as they aged. Similarly, Stone (2007) interviewed highly successful, married women in the US who left their careers in favour of being full-time mothers. In her study, Stone (2007) uncovers that, rather than *choosing* to 'opt-out' of their careers, her participants faced a 'choice gap' (p19) which *forced* them to leave the careers they had loved and in which they thrived. This nuance is highly significant and reflects problems surrounding a lack of flexibility and options in companies and policies to which other scholars have since referred (i.e., Collins, 2019; Gerson, 2010).

Whilst these studies have been pivotal in highlighting the conflicts that senior professional women face in trying to combine work and family responsibilities; they have largely taken place in the US, Australia and Continental Europe. The United Kingdom remains largely unexplored in many studies, despite the fact that London is one of the world's leading 'global cities' (Sassen, 1991). Global cities may be defined as cities which play a central role in the global urban system and which act as centres of control in the global economy (Sassen, 1991). Similarly, their emphasis on the difficulties of combining work with motherhood inadvertently perpetuates a cultural logic which suggests that motherhood and employment are incompatible and that mothers will inevitably face a conflict which fathers do not (see Blair-Loy, 2001; Collins, 2019; Hewlett, 2002; Stone, 2007). As Scott (2008) notes, 'attitudes do matter, and women (and particularly mothers) can experience considerable strain when attitudes reinforce the notion that employment and family interests' conflict' (p173).

The Study

Having spent many years working as an HR and Operations professional in London's finance industry, I have existing relationships with gatekeepers (Flick, 2007 p117) to networks of professional women who introduced me to preliminary participants. In order to protect the privacy of my participants, individual names, companies and identifiable characteristics have all been changed. The fieldwork for this study lasted approximately 8 weeks and took place during April – May 2019.

Participants for this study were selected on the basis that they hold a senior professional or managerial role as defined by the UK Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) system's sub-major group 11: Corporate Managers and Directors (ONS, 2010), and have at least one child under the age of seventeen. Other potential categories such as sexuality or race were not included as part of the selection criteria as it would have posed insurmountable problems to gain access to minority groups within such a limited timeframe. A total of eleven participants were interviewed for this study, ten of whom are in traditional heterosexual marriages and one of whom is in the process of divorcing her husband (Kimberly). Their ages range from 34 – 53 and have children ranging from six months to eighteen years of age. Ten out of the eleven participants are the primary breadwinner in their family, though three families would better be described as being dual high-earning couples as salaries and job seniority is fairly similar. All have bachelor's degrees, three have post-graduate degrees, including MBAs and PhDs, and all have achieved senior roles within their organisation, including head of department, vice president and partner.

Literature suggests that gendered division of labour in the home is linked to inequalities in the workplace (Armstrong, 2017; Crompton, 2006). As such, I wanted to understand how participants divided housework and childcare with their partners. Though all participants outsourced housework to professional cleaners and either outsourced childcare or had children in school during the working day, the majority reported that they shared the remaining daily domestic and childcare responsibilities (i.e., cooking, laundry, ironing and child-related activities)

with their husbands. Relatedly, as studies show that women who grew up in households with working mothers have less traditional gender role attitudes and are more likely to be employed themselves (Armstrong, 2017; Farre & Vella, 2012; Fernandez et al, 2004; Fernandez, 2007; Fernandez & Fogli, 2009), I wanted to find out whether participants own mothers worked when they were children and how participants felt about this.

Interviews focused on narrative accounts of current and past experiences and participant's internal thought process. Interviews lasted between thirty and ninety minutes and were all audio-recorded, and later transcribed. Interviews were semi-structured and consisted of two parts: during the first part, I asked closed-ended demographic questions including job title, number and ages of children, education level, length of maternity leave, childcare arrangements and who is the primary breadwinner in the family. Both high-status career and motherhood have been described as 'greedy institutions' which require a significant time commitment (Blair-Loy, 2003, p10). The tension between these two institutions creates a conflict which has often resulted in women having to choose one over the other (Hewlett, 2002; Stone, 2007). However, further studies have shown that mothering ideologies are influenced by career narratives and that some women reframe the ideologies of motherhood to be more congruent with their career identity (Elvin-Nowak & Thomsson, 2001; Johnston & Swanson, 2006). Based on these studies, I wanted to find out how my participants viewed motherhood in relation to their careers. Therefore, the second part of interviews focused on open-ended questions about self-understandings about their careers, their families and the importance and meaning behind each of these roles. If topics did not naturally arise, I asked direct questions about domestic division of labour at home, career ambition, thoughts on motherhood and what it takes to be a good mother and whether they felt any conflict between the role of mother and senior professional/manager.

Findings

This section will explore the most significant themes identified in my analysis of data collected from participant interviews: the necessity of structural support from paid help, family, friends and their companies; the importance of being a strong role model to their children and junior employees; challenging the discourse of 'conflict'; and finally, taking the overall view that being 'good enough' as both a mother and a professional was the best way in which to achieve the balance necessary to more effectively combine these two roles.

External Factors: Support Networks and Work-place Flexibility

Alongside their individual approach to balancing motherhood with a demanding career, all of the participants relied on some form of external support, whether that was paid childcare, family help, a network of friends or a company culture which allowed for more flexibility in working patterns. Data from this study substantiate existing literature which suggest that in order for women to more easily combine their professional and family lives, they need to have flexible structures in place which allow for a more heterogenous approach to a balanced life (Collins, 2019; Hewlett, 2007). As Amy (age 45; 2 children aged 9 to 12), succinctly notes:

> You need a good support network to do the things you do, to get to this level as a woman if you have children.

This section will examine these different structures and support networks which have enabled my participants to be successful in their careers.

Family & Friends

Having a strong support network made up of family and friends was of critical importance to the majority of respondents. The primary form of support for nine of the eleven women I spoke with was through their husband. Whilst some participants described their partners as 'traditional' in terms of domestic division of labour ('he takes out the rubbish, I do the washing up'), all of the

participants highlighted the importance of a mutually supportive home environment in which couples work together rather than focusing on a gendered, or even individual, division of labour.

In particular, having husbands who play an active and independent role in caring for the children has been critical in enabling the success for the women in my study. Jennifer (age 39; two children aged 1½ to 5½) notes how both her and her husband, also in a professional role, start work later one day a week in order to take the children to school together, and how they both take responsibility for caring and spending time with their children in different ways:

> Having dedicated little slots of time, particularly if you can do it one child at a time... things like my husband taking my daughter swimming, that's their thing, that's their little time together. Or I took my daughter with [another child] last week to see The Lion King…

Whilst most of the women I spoke with described having a shared responsibility for childcare when both parents were at home, several participants noted that their husbands took on more onus than they did and were often physically around more than they themselves were. Both Amy and Zoe were very forthright with regards to how their husband's support and encouragement enabled them to be successful professionals.

Zoe (age 40, three children aged 2 to 11):

> I've been successful [in my career] because of him. Because I'm balanced now and happy now and that's because if I need to go to Columbia next week, I can do that, because he steps in. And he pushes me forward and he encourages me in a way that is incredibly supportive. If I hadn't married him, there is no way I'd be as successful as I am now and as happy as I am now.

Amy (age 45; 2 children aged 9 to 12):

> I'm very lucky. I have to travel a lot for my job, so … having somebody here who's doing that role or picking up that slack allows me to go off and do what I need to do. Whereas if we were both working, I would constantly be feeling under pressure … that's probably the reason I am where I am and why I am as successful as I am.

Likewise, Clare (age 34; 2 children aged 6 months to 2) noted that she and her husband shared caregiving responsibilities equally when they were both at home, but that he was actually better at caregiving was generally in charge of organising childcare arrangements.

Many of the women I spoke with also relied on a combination of extended family and friends to provide support. Jennifer (age 39; two children aged 1½ to 5½) relied heavily on her husband's

family, who live 'on the doorstep' and play a significant role in helping care for the children. She noted that without their support, it would be significantly more difficult for both her and her husband to both work in demanding jobs. Similarly, although Lisa's (age 48; two children between the ages of 9 and 11) family are located on the other side of the globe in her home country, her high levels of income allowed her to 'ignore space' by bringing nieces and nephews over to live with her own family when any opportunity arose. Though she had also had au pairs who provided childcare support, she noted that there was a difference in the type of support and love provided by family:

> We are very focused on our kids, relationships with families... we brought family over to spend time with [the kids] and we encourage that. So, for example … must be like three years ago, or four years ago, we had a niece who lived with us for a year here and then we had another niece and nephew live with us for year here. So, we've, sort of ignored space or anything like that and just any opportunity to have family stay with us, we've done it. Having family, I think was just, you can see the difference in how they feel about having someone in the house. It's *family* versus [having someone] in the house that's an au pair.

On the other hand, many of the women I spoke with were unable to rely on their families of origin, whether due to having immigrated to the UK as adults, having parents who are deceased, incapacitated or simply not having a very close relationship with their parents. In some cases, this was mitigated by creating and relying on a network of close friends and 'families of choice' (Weston, 1991) who could step in to attend school plays, concerts, sports days etc when either participants or their husbands were unavailable. As Claudia (age 38; two children aged 9 to 12) notes, in these instances, it was critical that the stand-in have a strong emotional connection to the kids:

> So, what we do have is a really good support network. I'll say to my best friend, or someone who loves them dearly, can you go and watch them? Can you take photos, can you clap for them, can you send me the videos? If we can't make something, one of our best friends goes, like Carol, my best friend who helped me raise them, will go. My brother was in town for two days this week and [my husband and I] couldn't make something. I got [my brother] to pick them up from school. You know, if we can't be there, somebody who loves them is there.

The vast majority noted the importance of having a supportive network around them to facilitate their ability to combine high-status careers with motherhood, but that having a supportive

husband who shared the childcare responsibilities equally (and in some cases, took on more) was critical.

Supportive Company Culture

Despite the focus and significance placed on sharing responsibilities equally with their husbands, however, over half of participants indicated that they were primarily responsible for organising childcare outside of normal routines. This suggests that even in some of the most egalitarian households, some normative ideas about gender roles may still be prevalent. Several participants suggested that these gendered norms stem from company cultures which expect that women will take more time off to care for children than men, whether in the early stages of parental leave or when children are sick. Jennifer (age 39; two children aged 1½ to 5½) reflects on the importance of having more gender-neutral policies at work and of promoting a more equal role in family life:

> To create a more equal work society, if you like, I think we have to be able to see men taking big chunks of time off to look after their children so there is not a stigma around hiring women… I think the visual representation of seeing both men and women taking time off means that there isn't a stigma around women leaving at 4.30pm to go and pick up their kids, because, men are doing it as well and there's just not this embarrassment and therefore guilt that people feel themselves about working more flexibly. I think that's really important to help a generational shift towards getting more senior women into the workplace.

Clare (age 34; two children aged 6 months to 2) echoed this idea of gender-neutral policies, and further suggested that in order for these policies to be effective, companies should adopt a flexible working culture towards all employees, regardless of parental status:

> I think it needs to be a firmwide initiative that whether you need to get home for your kids, or whether you want to go to the gym or the theatre. [Companies should say], 'this is what we expect of you - you've got core working hours and you work it out as adults'… and people who are, what I would call, in that sort of dinosaur category, need to recognise that if we want to retain people who are good and probably younger, then we need to be open to their demands…

Participants also talked about choosing companies whose culture reflected values which were similar to their own, with particular emphasis on family values and policies which supported a more gender equal family and work environment. Lisa (age 48; two children between the ages

of 9 and 11) recalls her initial interview at her current firm and the meaning she drew from seeing photographs of the CEO's family:

> I started to look for values and the organisations I was joining. So, for instance, one of the reasons … I came here, was the CEO… When I interviewed with him there was a picture of him and his wife and his kids on the wall and you know, when I kind of acknowledged that the energy he had when he spoke of his wife and his family was very positive. I didn't look for someone who had a working wife – it wasn't that – it was just pride and family values that I sought…. And it's not everywhere but it's got to be in the leadership, and it's got to be either now good or on a journey to be good.

As such, ten out of eleven participants placed a great deal of importance on their companies affording them flexibility in their working patterns, something which struck me as being incongruent with the work-centric commitment that senior professionals are said to typically hold. Furthermore, the majority of participants stated that they currently have either formal or informal flexible working schedules where their organisations acknowledge that people have 'a life outside of work' whether that's a family or other commitments and interests and that, as senior women, they try to engender that culture with their own teams. The importance of company culture is so significant to this group that, in Clare's (age 34; two children aged 6 months to 2) case, the lack of a flexible and modern company culture has resulted in Clare feeling unable to manage her home and work life in a way that worked for both her and her company. She described the push-back she received when she mentioned that she would need some flexibility whilst her husband's job required him to travel more frequently:

> I got pregnant in March, and in the May, [my husband] was told that he had to spend more time in [another city in the UK]. So, I said, I need a bit more flexibility, i.e., I need to leave the office at 5 because I have to get home at 6:15 [to relieve the nanny] which I really don't feel is unreasonable. And [a female colleague] said to me 'I guess the thing is, you've got to make a decision as to whether or not you're cut out for this industry because ultimately, the work needs to get done'. And I said ' yes, the work does need to get done, and as you probably know, when I put my children to bed at 7pm, I then work until 10pm'.

Clare described her company culture as 'archaic' in requiring a great deal of face-time from their senior employees, and despite knowing that she was fully capable of continuing to perform well in her role, at the time of our interview, she had requested a demotion from head of her department to resume her old role as a manager and was waiting to find out whether this request

would be granted. However, she also noted that there appeared to be a generational element and that this was slowly changing as younger people were joining the company:

> I think it also depends very much on culturally, the business you're in. The business I work in could not be more old-school... it is old-school, it is inflexible and it's wooden in terms of the culture, the policies, everything like that is just seen as so alien. And that's not only for women but also for [different] ethnicities ... there's a whole spectrum [where] there is nothing. And that is something that we've been working on quite heavily but it just shows that they just never feel that it's been important. But interestingly, with younger people coming in, they're like 'oh what do you do on the diversity side' or 'what do you do in terms of women returners' and we're just like 'nothing, nothing, nothing'. And they ask 'do you have flexibility' and we're like 'no'... And it *is* changing, it's not a bad company, it's just not ever been at the forefront because actually the people running the business have been white, male and middle-aged.

The importance of working in a company with strong 'family values' and where flexibility is promoted suggests that the women in my study may be challenging traditional ideals of what it means to have a strong career identity and what it takes to be successful in a highly-demanding role. However, participants all noted that this flexibility works in both directions, and that it was equally important for employees to be flexible with companies about ensuring that when necessary, employees were willing to, as Lani put it, 'push it over the line'.

Paying for Help

Eight of the women I spoke with employ childcare providers, whether in the form of a childminder or a full-time nanny; however, only one participant had a live-in nanny. The remaining three participants indicated that their husbands were primarily responsible for childcare outside of normal school or nursery hours as their jobs allowed them to be home earlier than the participants. In addition to employing childcare providers, many of the participants employed a domestic cleaner and noted that this enabled them to spend more quality time with their children when they were not working. Claudia (age 38; two children aged 9 to 12) notes:

> I've got friends who say, 'oh, I could never get a cleaner, I wouldn't want them touching my stuff.' Well, you can't do it for 10 hours a week, so fucking pay someone... [I'm really lucky in that] I can afford a cleaner who comes for five hours a week. So, there's five hours that I have free now, you know. I can pay for my groceries to be delivered. So, you learn amazing tricks when you're learning to do it all, I guess. There are things that you just know are not worth your time. Going to Tesco is not worth my time any more... Spending seven hours on a Saturday cleaning my toilet is not worth my time, I get someone to help me do that.

However, the ability to pay for either childcare or domestic cleaning is reserved for the most privileged in society. All of the women I spoke with noted that without sufficient economic means, they would be unable to access this support, and were aware that affordable childcare options were not available to most women. Many participants suggested that this posed a significant, and often unsurmountable hurdle for many mothers who are simply unable to afford to return to work after the birth of their children.

This section has underlined the importance of having external structures in place which allow women to create support networks in which they are able to thrive as both professions and as mothers. The primary external factors were having a husband who was equally responsible for caring for the family and home, having a company who valued output over face-time and having financial access to quality childcare. Participants placed equal importance on all of these external factors, and noted that without these, their commitment to having a demanding career would be untenable. The next section will expand on this by discussing how participants are challenging the idea that motherhood and career are necessarily in conflict, and how they view many elements as being complimentary.

Internal Factor 1: From Conflicting to Complementary Schemas

During my interviews, it became apparent early on that my participants disagreed with normative assumptions and discourse about motherhood and careers 'conflicting' and many of them audibly bristled when I asked how they managed or balanced between these roles. Lisa speaks about how the very nature of questions surrounding senior professional women with children is problematic and that these types of questions implicitly suggest that a conflict exists, and that success is an objective reality:

> When I've been asked on panels or different things because inevitably, there's not enough women in these roles, 'how do you balance?' or, someone says, you know, 'You do it all, how do you do it all?' I always say that I think that's really a rubbish statement. I mean I don't do it all, what is 'all'? I do everything I want to do, right? There's nothing I feel that I want to do that I'm not doing because of either work or family.

Whilst none of the women in my study were naïve about the challenges that mothers face in combining work with motherhood, the majority of participants suggested that there was a symbiotic relationship between being a mother and being senior professionals. Ten of the eleven respondents indicated that they saw motherhood as a strength rather than a weakness. The primary reasons for seeing motherhood as a strength was that being a mother has provided them with a greater purpose, particularly in terms of providing financially for their family; more focus, and better time management; a greater perspective about the 'small inconsequential things' and better problem solving skills at work.

Many participants suggested that being a mother has actually made them better at their jobs, as it gave them more focus and determination that they previously lacked or may not have otherwise. Below are two extracts which best exemplify this theme:

Claudia (age 38; two children aged 9 to 12) recounts how being a mother and having the financial responsibility as the primary breadwinner for her family helped her career progression as it made her persevere in jobs or roles which she may have otherwise left:

> I do think that if I was single and selfish and just thought about myself, and maybe [my husband], I never would have stuck through some of the things I've stuck through to get to where I am in my career. I would've gone, you know what, stuff this. I'm quitting this job; I'm going off to something else. But because of the kids, and because of their needs, I think, you cannot afford to blow this into the wind. You've got to be stable for the family, and I've stuck through things that I wouldn't have stuck through. So, in my career, I'm kind of where I am because of that, and because I've pushed through things I shouldn't or couldn't have pushed through.

Nikole discussed how once she had children, she began taking her job more seriously and shifted from focusing on the image of being a barrister to being more focused on doing her job well:

> Before I had children, it was probably... I probably just liked the sort of glamour side of it. I liked people asking me what I did and me telling them what I did and being very excited by it. I probably didn't take it very seriously if I'm honest. And after I had kids, there was ... it's cliché... but it was I felt, that I had to prove that I could do it all and so I think I have become more professional, more hard working, more organised, more focused in my career after kids, to prove, mainly to myself probably more than to anyone else, that I can do it and it is important and I want to do it.

Equally, many of the women in my study suggested that their jobs made them better mothers as it allowed them to enjoy mothering more than they would if they were stay-at-home

mothers. In some cases, having a senior career which challenged them intellectually gave them a sense of achievement which was different to what being a mother provided, as is the case with Zoe (age 40, three children aged 2 to 11) who noted that 'I think that fact that I am fulfilled intellectually makes me a better mother'. Zoe further discussed being happier at work because of her children and how this has made her a better employee:

> I think you're better at work if you are happy. [Motherhood] has definitely impacted me, and it's given me more of an objective and more of a cause to work. Sometimes I worry whether I am prepping as much for a meeting as someone who don't have kids and might not be up all night with a child who might be sick - perhaps not - but I think that in the long run if you're dedicated and focused and happy, it does balance out. [Being a mother] has given me more of a reason and determination and objective and focus to work, which others that might not have children might not have.

For Claudia (age 38; two children aged 9 to 12), being a mother and caring for her children gave her a greater sense of compassion and altered her perspective on the type of people she wanted to work with:

> I think I'm really compassionate towards people who have kids or who don't have kids at work. I can understand that life gets in the way of work sometimes, and that actually, they bring a human nature to work… So I've always tried to foster and hire in people who I think have that compassion, whether they are just family compassionate or whether because it's part of their nature. I think they're better employees, because they'll feel the same towards you as they do towards their families. They'll build a family network in the office, and they'll be caring of you, thoughtful of you…

This section has examined the way in which the women in my study challenged the idea that a conflict was inevitable and suggests that whilst there are sometimes competing issues to navigate in combing parenthood with a demanding career, the way in which we view these conflicts is subjective and not restricted to mothers. Several participants noted that, regardless of whether one has children or not, there are stressful elements in life and there are always things which may conflict; to suggest that the only people who experience conflict are working mothers struck many of them as being incongruous with shifting gender norms. The next section will expand on this by discussing how participants are doing their part to change traditional understandings of gender and work by acting as role models to their children and the junior employees on their teams.

Internal Factor 2: Being a Role Model

One of the prevailing themes which stood out in my interviews was the importance of role modelling. Despite not being asked any direct questions about role models, ten of the eleven participants brought up the topic during their interview. Within this theme, I identified three key elements: the importance of participants' parents, but especially mothers, as role models, participants being a role model for their own children and participants being a role model for junior employees in their firms. This section will examine these elements in relation to how participants view the development and importance of their roles as both senior professionals and mothers.

Many participants noted that their decision to work was significantly impacted by their parents' employment status and can be divided into two groups. The first group, comprised of a majority of nine participants, had both fathers and mothers who worked full-time throughout their childhood; whereas the second group (Jennifer and Amy) had mothers who stayed at home to raise their families, and only returned to work when my participants were older (eleven and nine, respectively). Of the second group, though both participants' mothers stayed at home throughout their childhood, this had a different impact on each participant's decision to work. Jennifer (age 39; two children aged 1½ to 5½), recounts how although her mother stayed at home to raise children until she (Jennifer) was eleven, most of her memories of her childhood revolve around her mother working:

> I have to say, my mum going back to work when I was at school was good for me. My mum considers herself a feminist, [and] even though she stayed at home throughout our formative years, she wanted to be a kind of role model for working. She went back to work when I was eleven, so most of my stronger memories are with her working. She was a dressmaker as well, so she'd make her own suits, and would go out to work and she was a working mum. And wanted to be, so I kind of have some of that…

Contrastingly, though Amy's (age 45; two children aged 9 to 12) mother went back to work when Amy was nine, she recalls her mother's unhappiness at staying home to raise children and notes how this influenced her decision to continue working:

I also was quite conscious, looking back on it, that my mum was not happy staying at home. She was bored out of her mind. She's an incredibly intelligent educated woman. We grew up in the country so it's different. There weren't that many opportunities for her, you know, in the middle of nowhere. And I could see how frustrating that was for her. And I didn't ever want to be that. I didn't want to be like that. But that didn't make her not a good mother … we've talked very openly about [it] and I think having somebody that can help guide you through those kinds of things and say, 'actually I wasn't happy, and it didn't fulfil me'. And you knowing that means maybe then you don't make the same mistakes.

Mary's (age 53, three children aged 18 to 21) mother also missed out on opportunities when she was a young woman herself, and Mary spoke about how her mother's sense of regret was a 'powerful driving force' in how she and her siblings were raised:

I suspect that that set an example. And also, she had very, very strong views about education, because she was bright, but her family circumstances were such that, although [her family] wanted her to go off and train to be a teacher, financially she had to be kept at home and I think that's something that she always felt deep regret over. And therefore, bringing us up, that was a really powerful driving force, and I think the driving force was regret in a sense - you know, I don't want you children to miss out on an opportunity in a way that I did, so education was really, really important.

Many of the participants in the first group noted that the fact that both their mother and father worked full-time whilst they were growing up instilled in them a work ethic which placed significant value on hard work. For example, Zoe (age 40, three children aged 2 to 11) talked about how seeing both of her parents work and working herself as a child for pocket money provided her with a work ethic and determination which she wanted to ensure her children had as well:

[It's important for my children] to understand the importance of hard work. From a very, very young age, I was working for pocket money, and I saw first-hand that to go on nice holidays or to have nice cars or a house … you had to work hard for it. And I see with some of my friends when parents give them the money to be able to do those things, I don't think you enjoy it as much. Whereas when I do these things, when I bought myself a house or car, I really enjoyed it because I knew about the determination and hard work that went into being able to do that.

Similarly, the majority of participants said that it was important to be a role model for their children to show them that women 'can be more than just a wife and a mum' (Claudia) and to help change perceptions of what women could do for their children. Nine out of ten participants said that as a woman, it was important for their sons and daughters to see women in successful careers where they were financially independent and were the primary breadwinners in the

family. For their daughters in particular, participants wanted to show them that women could

(and in several cases participants stressed that women should) combine work with motherhood.

Kristina (age 43, two children aged 2 to 4) suggested that not only was being a working mother

important, but that being a stay-at-home mother had a negative impact on children:

> 'I don't think a child should have a mother who's a housewife – it's bad for their psyche. Especially if it's a girl, because what kind of a role model is that? It's a terrible choice for a woman, especially if you have girls, but even if you have boys…'

Nikole (age 43; two children aged 10 to 12) notes how she views the example she is giving her

son and daughter slightly differently but that in both cases, the fact that she works is what enables

her to illustrate her views on gender equality:

> For my daughter it was something that even when I went through that initial phase of being at home and thinking [that] potentially I wanted to be at home, part of that decision was that I wanted [my daughter] to work, and this sets an example. And the other professional women who I work with, friends of mine as well, [our daughters] see that we can stand our own - we can command a room, we can chat to anyone, we have a [sense of] confidence. I wanted to make sure that [my daughter] could stand her own [and know that] you can do whatever you want to do, and you don't have to be confined by the fact that you're a woman. I've never expressed it in that way, but I've always encouraged her to do that.

Nikole goes on to say that in today's social and political environment it was perhaps more

important for their sons to see a successful professional woman:

> And for my son, I wanted him to know that women aren't just there to serve him. At whatever age … [I want him to know] … that women are people in their own rights … and that women are equal. And so, as an example setting, I'm not working to set an example, but it's a [good] by-product of [my job], it's how I want them to be raised and how I want them to view life and to develop their relationships as they get older, and… I think more so for my son actually, for him to know that women are equal, and he should treat them with respect…

Mary (age 53, three children aged 18 to 21):

> All my children are boys, and I think it's given them a perception that it's normal that mum should have a high-powered job as well as dad and contribute in the same way and run the house in the same way. I would like to think it's helped them in that sense when they move forward in relationships, that they would be very supportive of a partner should they have children with a partner I would imagine that they would be very supportive of the career of their partner…

Lani (age 50; three children aged 13 to 20) described how her job as a 'boss' in the financial sector

makes her children feel proud and, although she didn't use the term role model per se, her hope

that her daughters would gain inspiration from her own role echoed the sentiments of other

participants:

> I know they are quite chuffed they've got a mum who works in the financial sector. They've
> sort of said, 'My mum's global head in a big hedge fund.' They're still trying to get their head
> around what a private equity firm is. They do check every now and then. They go, 'Are you
> the boss? You are the boss, aren't you?' I'm like, 'I'm the boss.' They're like, 'Okay' and they
> toddle off and tell their friends, 'My mum's a boss.' I know they do take some pride from it.
> I hope that, maybe, as the girls are growing up, they'll think, 'Actually it's fine to go out there
> and think I can be a boss'.

Kimberly (age 43; three children aged 9 to 14) makes a point to engage with her children about

gender norms and to actively speak with them about these topics:

> I'm really strongly raising my children… I've got [in age order] a daughter, son, daughter and
> it's important for them to understand that the way the world works isn't gender bound. It's
> like, 'mums can do this, and dads can do this, you girls don't need to pigeonhole yourselves
> into certain sectors.' I'm a feminist and I'm raising them that way purposefully…I'm really
> making a big deal about showing them strong women.

Furthermore, participants also related the importance of showing their children that work could

be something that can be truly enjoyed. Lisa (age 48; two children between the ages of 9 and 11),

sees work as an exciting and positive aspect of life and hopes that seeing this will show her

children that this is a tangible possibility:

> I think that I've had this good fortune to find myself in a career that I've loved, that I want to
> do, that I get excited about doing? I think that will definitely have an impact on them. You
> know, that's possible. You don't have to see work as a chore or a negative view. There is the
> chance in life to have this opportunity to go and do something you really love and enjoy it.

Similarly, for Kimberly (age 43; three children aged 9 to 14), doing something she loves gives her

a sense of joy and pride in herself, a feeling which she actively tries to pass on to her children:

> I enjoy working. Most of my jobs, bar a few, I've always loved what I've done and that's made
> it feel like, 'this gives me a sense of self-worth' … I think it's great to able to earn your own
> money and to show your children work is a good thing if it's something that gives you a lot
> back… Motherhood is still massively important to me, but I will always demonstrate to my
> children that it's great to have… I say to them now, "Whatever you do in life, do something
> you really enjoy and it will be like you never do a day's work.

> Interestingly and in distinct contrast to Blair-Loy's (2001, 2003) findings that senior managers

accept the 'pressure to work long hours' and 'reinforce [this] among their subordinates' (p693),

the women in my study highlighted the need to be a positive role model for junior employees in

their firms by actively promoting family-friendly work environments. Lisa (age 48; two children between the ages of 9 and 11) discussed the importance of using her seniority to be a role model to both men and women and to help shift the culture in her company to promote family-friendly working policies:

> I encourage people that work for me, men and women to [take time for their families]. [For example] one day, one of the guys had mentioned in a passing conversation that his kid was starting school for the first time and I said, 'Oh, can you go, can you be there?' And he … looked at me like, 'Really?' And I said, 'Oh, well, it's totally up to you, but I've been there every first day'. Or, there's a time of year when all the kids plays and stuff are on. So, I always make the statement, 'Oh, I've always taken the time out to go and do that'. I try and show people that it's their choice, but we are encouraging that sort of behaviour – for men and women - those sorts of things you should do. We take our pound of flesh. People work hard in these industries, so I sort of think it's important that we lead by example…

Similarly, Amy (age 45; 2 children aged 9 to 12), noted the particular importance of being a role model for the junior women on her team:

> Having a lot of young people working for me, I think it's really good to be a role model, particularly a female role model. I work in a quite male-dominated environment, there are a few bosses that are female, but when you look at the actual senior management, they're all men… so it's also important [to show female subordinates] that you *can* do it all, it's not impossible. Though I'm under no illusions that it's easy…

Both Claudia and Zoe also talked about the importance of empowering and supporting junior women on their teams to return to work after having children. Claudia (age 38; two children aged 9 and 12):

> I think bringing women back to work is a real focus that nobody has... it's because there aren't women who really champion that for other women … I had two or three women come back from maternity leave when I was their boss, and … I made sure that I knew when they were coming in, when they were going to be there, who was their primary caregiver if they weren't at work, what they felt bad about, what they were happy to do at work, what they could do from home. And it made it much easier, because I knew in their minds what they were going through before they stepped back in the door. It wasn't like, can you do your job? Of course you can do your job, you've been doing it for five years before you got pregnant. It's, how can you do your job now that you're a mum, and you probably have less support than you had before? There wasn't one mum that didn't come back to work for me. Not one.

Zoe (age 40, three children aged 2 to 11) listed providing more opportunities aimed at supporting women's returnships to work after having children as one of the key ways in which we can help increase the number of women in senior professional roles:

I'm doing 'returnships', which are aimed at exactly these sorts of women [returning to work] in order to support them in their return back to full-time work or part-time work. I think, for the women in my team, it's also about offering that flexibility.

Clare (age 34; two children aged 6 months to 2 years), who is Head of HR for the 600+ employees in her firm's UK office, noted that she has tried to promote a culture that embraces both formal and informal flexible working, and was responsible for the first ever job share in her company. However, push back from other senior employees and management has made this difficult, which she suggests has impacted her firm's ability to retain talented mothers who want to combine work with motherhood. Mary (age 53, three children aged 18 to 21) is a barrister and part-time judge, and though her children are now grown and no longer live in the family home full-time, she provided an interesting perspective on how attitudes regarding combining a career with a family have shifted over time in court houses across the United Kingdom. She noted that for both men and women, it was now becoming more acceptable to discuss childcare provisions and to request flexibility around any issues:

> Back in those days, it wouldn't even cross your mind to say, 'I've got to go early today, your Honour'. These days that's improved noticeably I think, or people feel much freer to say, 'Your Honour, I've got a childcare issue this afternoon, could we possibly finish early?'. That would never be said in the day, that just wouldn't be acceptable. I've noticed it sitting [as a judge] actually, and it doesn't have to be a woman, it can be a man, but the willingness to say out loud I've got a childcare issue. And I'm really sorry but this has arisen or 'today I need to...' and 'could we possibly...' [And though] it's much more likely a woman [who would] actually say it out loud, I think the biggest difference is that it's acceptable to say it in open court, and I find that very encouraging.

Mary further noted that as a judge, she believes the seniority and authority that her position affords her means that it is her responsibility to grant such flexible requests where possible in order to further promote an environment where this continues to shift until it becomes the norm.

This section has examined the significance of role modelling in relation to participants' decisions and experiences combining motherhood with a successful career. Most of the women in this study emphasised the role their mothers played in teaching them the importance of feeling fulfilled as an individual outside of the home, as well as the importance of being strong female role models themselves for both their own children and their junior colleagues in challenging

gender norms in relation to work and home. The next section will build on this by looking at how participants further challenged the idea that there was one particular way in which women should perform motherhood and suggested that finding their own balance has been a more effective tactic.

Internal Factor 3: 'Good Enough' Balance

During my interviews, the idea of 'finding the right balance' was put forward by nearly all participants on a number of occasions. Data from these interviews suggests that rather than striving for perfection at work or at home, the majority of the women I spoke with are trying to find a balance which they feel works best for them. The majority of participants also appeared to be continuously reflecting on their current situations and talked openly about their willingness to change tactics or make any necessary changes if anything felt 'off balance'. When asked to consider what her idea of a good mother was, Kimberly (age 43; three children aged 9 to 14) challenged my question and suggested that for her, being 'good enough' was much more relevant than being 'good'. This section will explore this idea of 'good enough' and how it relates to both career and motherhood identities and roles.

Career Identity and Importance

As existing literature on strong career identities suggests (London, 1983), the majority of participants expressed significant career satisfaction and cited their careers as being a key part of their lives. One of the primary reasons cited for career importance was the sense of self and identity, separate from that of their families, which their careers provided them. As Claudia (age 38; two children aged 9 and 12) notes:

> It's a different kind of pride. It's a self-thing, it's only down to me and my team around me how good I am at my job, so that makes me very proud of what I do. I think it's a very intrinsic part of my self-worth to be good at my job, because it's me doing it.

Similarly, Nikole (age 43; two children aged 10 to 12) spoke of her job giving her a separate identity from her family and truly feeling like herself when she was at work:

Identity. When you have your children, you become so-and-so's mother. And so many people now, I've joined a gym recently, for example, and a number of mums my age I'm seeing who I haven't seen since my daughter was born in that maternity [group], they can only remember me as my daughter's mum, not as [me]. They don't even remember my name and I only know them as 'oh you're Ella's mum'. And how awful is that as a person for your identity to be... not stripped... but [to be] identified as someone's mum. That's just bizarre. So, for me, work is my identity, being a barrister for me is ... not who I am... but it's a big part of who I am and, when I feel like myself is when I'm at work.

Most participants spoke passionately about how their happiness at work has enabled them to be happier at home. Having an identity separate from their role within the family afforded a sense of self-worth, pride and fulfilment, which, in turn increased their happiness levels and made them feel like better mothers. For example, Zoe (age 40; three children aged 2 to 11) spoke of her work as providing a sense of fulfilment, happiness and pride:

I think if I was at home, I would be... I don't think I would feel as happy or proud because I don't think I would feel like I was a good, genuine role model for my kids. For me, being a role model isn't about being super successful or having an amazing job, it's about, I was well educated and taking a path that fulfils that, rather than something that didn't. And I think if I was at home and I was washing and I was cooking, it wouldn't have fulfilled me, and I wouldn't be as happy.

Lani (age 50; three children aged 13 to 20) described the importance of hard work and how she felt a sense of excitement at seeing her achievements and outcomes of the hard work:

I come from a family that has always worked really hard, and they've always valued education and being the best that you can be…. Also, once you get a feel for [pushing something over the line], and once you get a hunger for that. Like, I love the trading floor … you just get a real buzz of being in the middle of a transaction … Then you start thinking about solving something. Then there is a real buzz in there…

The majority of participants further described being at home during their maternity leave as sometimes being 'boring' or 'mundane' and that, whilst they loved spending time with their children, they relied on work to provide a mental stimulation that motherhood couldn't offer. Speaking about her experience during her first maternity leave, Claudia (age 38; two children aged 9 and 12) noted the boredom she felt being at home and the importance of having contact with people and having to solve problems at work:

[I enjoyed] the mental stimulation of coming in every day and solving problems, speaking to clients… I really enjoyed coming to work and just having that personal experience. I'm a very people person. The time I was at home with the kids, it was very mundane. I felt very boxed in, I couldn't chat with people, I couldn't interact. I felt quite depressed, because it was all

me, and I really thrived on that contact with the outside world… I very much thrive on problem solving, and I think that was the bit I missed the most when I was at home.

Similarly, Jennifer (age 39; two children aged 1½ to 5½) talks about why she loves her job:

It challenges me, I've been learning, which I always enjoy. I enjoy the intellectual challenge of problem solving with people. I problem solve with relationships – how do we improve this relationship or how do we take this relationship to become more commercial. So really, it's about problem solving, dealing with people and the intellectual stimulation.

Clare (age 34; two children aged 6 months to 2) reflected on how being a mother to two small children, whilst something she actively chose and wants to do, 'is quite boring' and that she thrives on the challenges that her work presents.

Despite feeling strongly about the importance of their careers; however, the majority of participants noted that work was not the centre focus of their lives, and that having children often increased their work motivation, which diverges with traditional definitions of career identity or devotion (Blair-Loy, 2001, 2003; London, 1983). Only one participant suggested that there was 'no conflict – work wins [over children]' (Kristina), with the remaining participants reporting both roles as very important. One participant, Claudia (age 38; two children aged 9 to 12), noted that she never considered herself particularly ambitious and that her career identity was something which developed over time:

I don't think I've always been a very ambitious career person; I just think that I really enjoyed what I did when I did it, and I didn't want to stop doing it. I never grew up thinking I would have a career in anything, really…. But the more I worked, the more I really enjoyed what I was doing, and the harder I found [the prospect of] not coming back to work and using the kids as an excuse for that.

Views on Motherhood

Related to my anticipation of a strong career identity was the expectation that the majority of participants would have taken very little time off for maternity leave; however, half of the participants cited taking at least nine months off, and two participants took upwards of a year off. Only Kristina (age 43; two children aged 2 and 4) noted taking a very short (2 week) maternity leave out of choice, with Claudia (age 38; two children aged 9 and 12), who for economic reasons only took six and eight weeks off respectively, stating that with hindsight, she 'should've begged,

borrowed and stolen to have the money to spend more time with my kids when they were babies'. Nine of the eleven participants made a point to say that although their careers were central to their lives, if push came to shove, their children would come first. When I asked what it meant to her to be a good mum, Amy (age 45; 2 children aged 9 to 12) responded 'everything, it's a very important job'. Likewise, Lani (age 50; three children aged 13 to 20) lit up when she talked about her children, about being a mum and about enjoying taking several unusually long maternity leaves:

> With [my first child] I actually ended up resigning and I took a full year … It was wonderful, I took the year off. [After having my second] I ended up taking about three or four years off … I was just having the time of my life at home with my babies.

All of the women I spoke with talked about being a good mother in terms of providing a supporting and loving environment for their children rather than one which necessitated their being at home all of the time. This ties in with literature which suggests that working mothers reframe motherhood ideologies to align with their work status rather than accepting one dominant set of principles about how to be a 'good' mother (Johnston & Swanson, 2006). Nikole (age 43; two children aged 10 to 12) discussed her thoughts about the idea that in order to be a good mother, women have to stay home and devote themselves solely to their families:

> What are you actually doing with your day that's productive that makes you feel 'I've achieved something', over and above something where I'm working that I don't achieve? I'm able to be there to help them with their projects, I'm able to help them get their packed lunches ready if they're going for a school trip, I'm able to have play dates…

For Nikole, being a good mother and having a demanding and successful career are not mutually exclusive, and the idea that anyone else should define for her what being a good mother is was absolutely unacceptable. Although she admitted carrying a constant guilt about not doing enough for her children, she has come to accept that both her children and her career are highly important to her and refuses to be forced to choose between them.

In analysing the data, I identified three key themes in the good mothering narrative: providing emotional support and unconditional love for their children, teaching their children to

be independent people and the importance of 'being present' when participants were home.

Below are key extracts from the data which highlight these three themes.

Lisa (age 48; two children between the ages of 9 and 11):

> What's a good mum? I don't know what a good mum is. What I want to do is make sure my kids feel totally and unconditionally loved and supported. That to me is like the most important thing. I want them to be loved because I think that gives them comfort- is likely to give them confidence and happiness. And I couldn't ask for anything more.

Nikole (age 43; two children between the ages of 10 and 12):

> For me, it just boils down to loving your children and them knowing that they are loved unconditionally. It's as simple as that for me.

Kimberly (age 43; three children aged 9 to 14):

> I guess, being there for them emotionally is what I think is really key to being a good mum I think that's one of the biggest gifts you can give your children, that they know that you've got their back emotionally. Also, I think, another thing for being a good mum … is to give your children the tools that they need in their own lives to rely on themselves when life isn't so great for them.

Claudia (age 38; two children between the ages of 9 and 12):

> Being present when you're there is really important to me as well. When I'm at home, I'm at home. That doesn't mean I can't do other things, but I want my kids to know that I'm there.

However, Claudia also noted that showing her children that they could be independent people

outside of the family was very important:

> If I come home from work and I've had a hard day, it's okay for them to see I've had a hard day. I can say, I've had a really shit day. It's not because of you, it's because of my life. You're not the centre of my life all the time … I've had a great day. Why? Not because of you, because I've had a great day at work. And they can have great or bad days at school, nothing to do with mum and dad, their own feelings, and that's their own thing.

Jennifer (age 39; two children aged 1½ to 5½) considered that the fact that she wasn't at home

with her children all of the time could make their children more independent and resilient people:

> Me not being there, I like to think, sometimes, does build resilience. My eldest has been at nursery since she was eight months old, and my youngest is with a child minder. They are building, I think, a kind of social resilience and ability to learn to build relationships with other people outside of just me, so it's not just about me. I think that's just as important.

Finding the Right Balance

Overall, rather than being entirely devoted to their careers or their families, the majority of participants emphasised the importance of finding a balance that worked well for them. Jennifer (age 39; two children aged 1½ to 5½) talks about the importance of finding the right balance for herself and not feeling 'dominated' by either work or family demands:

> [It's important that you're] checking in and making sure that you're redressing the balance of the various parts of your life and that no one thing is overly dominant, but that's personal. People that don't work in a professional environment and are stay-at-home parents are completely dominated by their children and that wouldn't work for me … It's the collective sum of all of your experiences. Looking after my children is exceptionally important but being at work is exceptionally important to my character and who I am, so I need to do bit of both and not let either one of those things dominate me.

Lani (age 50, three children aged 13 to 21) talks about her decision to leave her previous job in order to spend more time with her family. However, at no point does she discuss looking for a less senior role, as reflected by her current job title of department head in the same industry.

> Part of leaving [my old company] was because I felt like I was not being a good mum. That was when I wasn't spending enough time with them. I don't have to be with them during the day, but it was when I was leaving early in the morning and not seeing them…Getting home at night and not seeing them… I just didn't see them. I felt like I'd lost control and I'd lost the grip of just steering them, and being there if times were tough, and making sure they were doing enough study. Just listening to them, or just having fun with them.

Similarly, they accepted that this may mean that they were 'not as good' as mothers who stay at home full-time to raise their children. Rather than try to be 'perfect' at either role; however, they seem to reject the idea that perfection was desirable. As Claudia (age 38; two children aged 9 to 12) notes:

> I think that you can be a great parent, mum or dad, as long as you have some balance in your life. And that includes with the kids, that includes being at home, that includes being away. I think as long as you know what your balance is, and you're there for your kids, and they know you're there for them, then I think you can be great at both. I think where we go wrong is when we try and be the best mum, the best parent, the best dad, do all of it ourselves and not ask for any help, and then we fail at both.

Lisa (age 48; two children between the ages of 9 and 11) also discusses the importance of setting your own (imperfect) bar and how success is highly subjective and contextual:

> If I set a goal for myself to be exactly the same as the very best full time mum and exactly the same as the very best full time CEO, of course I'm going to fail because you can't- no one

humanly can do that. But can I achieve a balance that works for me. And I'm clearly able to do well at the job I'm doing because I've risen and I'm clearly able to do well at home because I have a reasonably well balanced, happy household.

This section has examined the way in which participants in this study view motherhood and career identities. Data suggests that the majority of these women place similar levels of importance on both being mothers and having successful career. Thus, rather than assume 'schemas of devotion' to either family or career (Blair-Loy, 2001; 2003), the women I spoke with wanted to combine motherhood with their careers and appear to be recasting normative assumptions about being both senior professionals and mothers in order to allow them to do so.

Summary

Findings suggest that irrespective of whether their own mothers worked when participants were children, they all cited this as a contributing factor in their own decisions to combine motherhood and work. These findings are in line with current research which suggests that maternal employment status influences their daughters' career ambition (see Armstrong, 2017; Colaner & Rittenour, 2015; Farre & Vella, 2013). Equally, by recasting normative ideologies about being a 'good mother' or a 'successful professional', participants have taken a more agential approach in creating a belief-system which better suits their needs. However, external elements such as a supportive family, a flexible company and utilising paid child-care or cleaning services have also been important and cannot be ignored or diminished. Whilst most participants talked openly about the importance of choosing spouses and firms that fit in with their own values of gender equality, as seen in Clare's case, this is not possible for all women. Similarly, as discussed in the first section, without access to affordable childcare, the ability to challenge existing gender norms is reserved for high-earning mothers. These themes culminate in the view that rather than looking at motherhood and senior professional roles as being in competition with one another, participants largely held the belief that these identities and roles could be mutually beneficial in that each role allowed them to be better at the other. The next section will provide a discussion

situating these findings in the wider context and will highlight the limitations of this study and

potential areas for future research.

Discussion & Conclusion

Discussion

Based on my interviews with eleven senior professional women across several highly competitive and largely male-dominated industries in London, I have shown that whilst combining motherhood and career is a complex and highly subjective experience, there are some commonalities. The thread that runs through these findings is the interplay between participants determination to expand ideologies relating to motherhood and career, and the external factors such as company culture, gender equality at home and the financial ability to employ high-quality childcare. Overall, participants spoke of having strong identities of both motherhood and career; however, this did not necessarily negate feelings of guilt and stress which have been cited in other studies (i.e., Collins, 2019; Guendouzi, 2006; Wajcman & Martin, 2002). Irrespective, participants spoke about managing this guilt in a way that allowed them to balance motherhood and career rather than 'opting out' of their careers. These findings are congruent with studies (Elvin-Nowak & Thomsson, 2001; Johnston & Swanson, 2006) which demonstrate that mothering ideologies are malleable, and that mothers are reframing these ideologies to fit in with their career narratives.

However, by working in a more flexible way which allows them to spend time with their children, women in this study are largely challenging the ideologies behind career identities. In this way, this study both qualifies and builds on Blair-Loy's (2001, 2003) account of 'competing devotions' across three different cohorts of women, which suggest that the most recent cohort of managerial women were partially redefining the family devotion schema to be congruent with their devotion to their careers. Empirical data from this project further suggests that some women are also challenging the ideologies and identities surrounding being successful senior professionals. In this way, rather than redefine one 'devotion schema' to be compatible with the other, some women may actually be recalibrating their definition of success to focus more on

having the right (subjective) balance rather than having 'it all'. This poses wider questions about whether the inherent problems of a work-centric society are shifting and if so, whether senior managers and executives' changing attitudes will 'trickle down' to employees further down the career ladder. As such, my first research question asking how 'senior professional women with children navigate the conflicting identities of motherhood and career' was problematic in that it contained within it the assumption that conflict was inevitable and difficult. A more apt research question could have read 'what enables some senior professional women with children to balance motherhood with highly demanding careers' and could be complemented by a comparative study on senior professional fathers.

My findings also demonstrate that the women in my study may not be the only ones redefining traditional gender roles. The majority of the women I spoke with reported having consciously constructed households with their husbands in which they shared family and caring responsibilities, and where the overall division of labour was gender neutral. Similarly, the majority of the women in my study were the primary breadwinners in their families, and several husbands actually took on more of the care giving duties, which also challenges traditional gender norms. Considering that the majority of women in this study belong to what Gerson (2010) called the 'children of the gender revolution' (p219), it is perhaps unsurprising that they have adopted a more gender-equal and balanced approach to forming their own lives and families. It would be interesting to interview their husbands to determine whether Gerson's theories hold true in the United Kingdom. Perhaps in placing reproduction at the centre of political and social discussions, we can embody a feminist vision of both family and work which sees couples sharing family responsibilities and which encourages companies to promote a culture in which employees are not penalised for having a family. The symbiotic relationship between a more equal division of labour at home and gender equality in the workplace is difficult to argue against.

The prevalence of having egalitarian relationships highlights the importance of continuing to challenge traditional gender norms which have created a gendered division of labour and

suggests that some changes may be taking place. However, the success of dual-earning households is predicated on having to access childcare. This suggests that if companies and governments are serious about tackling gender inequality at work, they have a responsibility to not only create polices, but to provide material necessities such as affordable childcare. This is particularly relevant when considering that childcare in the UK is one of Europe's most expensive (Schober and Scott, 2012).

Finally, with respect to role models, this study validates the impact that maternal employment has on their daughters' career aspirations (Armstrong, 2017; Colaner & Rittenour, 2015; Farre & Vella, 2013). However, as one participant (Amy) noted, although her mother was not employed when Amy was a child, the regret that her mother expressed and conveyed to Amy had a great impact on her own desire to have a high-status and successful career. As Armstrong (2017) noted, despite their own mothers working in high-status roles, many of the daughters in her study expressed a desire to work-part time in order to 'have the best of both worlds' in terms of motherhood and career. Therefore, perhaps whether a mother works or not is less important than how she feels about it and what her daughters understand about these feelings.

This study has shown that rather than being a matter of external structures versus individual agency, it is a combination of both which will allow women to juggle their full-time, professional careers with family responsibilities. However, the intersection of class and gender at which my participants sit must not be underplayed. As discussed in the previous section, one of the primary reasons that the women in my study are able to be senior professionals and mothers is because their high salaries enable them to access high-quality childcare which helps ease guilty feelings about spending less time with their children. The fact that this paid childcare is typically performed by other women suggests that this 'has produced greater equality between educated middle-class women and men while creating greater inequality among women; (Young, 2001, p.315). Equally, outsourcing housework to other women, who may often be mothers themselves, stratifies reproduction (Colen, 1995) and may therefore reproduce existing inequalities,

particularly as they relate to global care chains. For these women, their socio-economic position, and often their immigrant status, limits their choices in how they are able to perform motherhood and work.

Although these results are interesting and provide an exploratory window into several recurring themes, a large-scale survey would be necessary to highlight how widespread these themes are. The sample size (n11) of this study negates the ability to capture any differences in industry culture, major occupational classification or division of labour, and would require a much larger purposive sample in order to do so. Additionally, the fact that all participants were (inadvertently) heterosexual women who were mostly married should not be ignored. In order to provide more comprehensive and comparative results, a future study should seek to include a representative number of lesbian couples with children and lone-mother participants. By removing the heteronormative gender roles which are particular to heterosexual couples, new and interesting findings may also emerge. Although such a wide-scale study was outside of the scope of this project due to time constraints, it would be an interesting area for future study.

In their study, Johnston & Swanson (2006) asked 'where are the full-time employed mothers who work for the sake of their career identity, require paid child- care, yet still strongly identify with their parenting role? (p511). I suggest that the women in my study are exactly that – women whose sense of self is comprised of both their identity as a mother and as a highly-successful senior professional. The question now becomes, how long will it take for company cultures and social norms to catch up with them?

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