

Gender and Employment in Local Labour Markets

Connecting Women With The Labour Market

Executive Summary

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Key findings

- There are large numbers of women of working age who are outside paid employment and who want to work. In England, in 2004, almost 1.4 million women were in this situation.
- The widespread assumption that women outside paid employment are largely content not to work is not supported by evidence.
- Women outside paid employment lack distinct public policy support in making the transition back to work.
- There is significant variability, across districts and wards, in women's disconnection with labour markets. This means policy responses must be based on local labour market intelligence.
- Women express a strong desire to work, seeing it both as a route to independence and an important example to children.
- Being out of work is psychologically damaging and can lead to poverty and debt.
- Women's disconnection from the labour market is often linked to their lives as women and mothers and to interrupted work histories.
- In some wards in our study, more than a third of young women and more than one half of older women have no qualifications.
- Women who want to work would like to see more public policy support to help them gain work experience and up-to-date qualifications.
- The poor quality of the jobs available in some localities, and the scarcity of jobs with flexible hours of work, both act as barriers to women in the labour market.
- For lone mothers, the transition from benefit claimant to paid worker is a precarious process, fraught with difficulties and setbacks.
- Young women without jobs have often experienced exploitation in the labour market. This can have a long-term impact on their 'distance' from the labour market.
- In some localities levels of unemployment and economic inactivity among women of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin were very high.
- Some women have experienced 'post code' and racial discrimination in their search for work.
- Good practice in the provision of employment services for women involves understanding and responding to women's circumstances, and adopting a strategic and gender-sensitive approach.
- Women need more job-focused training, developed in close collaboration with employers, so that training and work experience provision matches with genuine job opportunities.
- To support women in the transition to work, services which devote time to listening to women and understanding their specific circumstances are required.
- Women want practical support: help with interview techniques, guidance on completing application forms; help in writing CVs. They also want constructive advice and help in achieving longer-term labour market goals.
- Responding to the needs of economically inactive women is best achieved as part of a local, strategic, approach to labour market issues.

Background

This study aimed to examine the characteristics, views and experiences of women who are outside paid employment and who want to enter paid work. It also sought to explore how, at the local level, women can be assisted in the transition from unemployment or unpaid family work into paid employment. Over a million women in England who are currently not in paid employment would like work. This study shows that, for many women outside paid work, especially those living in deprived neighbourhoods, the transition into paid work can be a complex journey, fraught with difficulties and setbacks. Women who participated in our research expressed a very strong desire to take up paid work, but a range of factors related to conditions in local labour markets, the nature of women's lives, and public policy, currently serve to exclude them from it.

The study highlights the extent to which local labour markets are not working efficiently for many of the women outside paid employment.

The main **research questions** we hoped to answer through the study related to:

- Local variability in women's disconnection with the labour market.
- The extent to which women who are outside paid employment want to work.
- The characteristics, views and experiences of women outside paid employment.
- The nature of local employment projects and services.

Five of the local authority partners in the *Gender and Employment in Local Labour Markets (GELLM)* research programme chose to take part in this study. They were:

- **Birmingham City Council**
- **The London Borough of Camden**
- **Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council**
- **Thurrock Council**
- **Wakefield Metropolitan District Council**

Women Outside Paid Work

The desire to work

The widespread assumption that women outside paid employment are largely content not to work is not supported by evidence. In 2004, 23% of economically inactive women in England, a total of 903,400 women, wanted paid work¹. In addition,

4.4% of women were unemployed, a further 472,000 women. This means that 1,375,400 women who were not working would like to work. These very high percentages of women who are outside paid employment but who want to work are evident across the localities in our study. In these 5 localities alone we estimate that 61,000 women would welcome the opportunity to engage in paid work but are currently not working.

Variability in women's disconnection from the labour market

Understanding women's relationship with labour markets at the local level is a vital part of the evidence necessary for the development of appropriate policy responses to women's economic inactivity and unemployment. Our analysis of the statistical data shows considerable variability in the extent of, and reasons for, women's economic inactivity, as well as very different unemployment rates across the districts and wards. It also shows that, in different localities, there are very different patterns of disconnection from the labour market, depending on age, ethnicity and family status.

Women outside paid work: women's views and experiences

A core range of factors affect women's ability to connect with the labour market. Some of these factors arise from the particular ways in which women, and especially mothers, engage with the labour market over the course of their lives. Breaks from work to bring up children mean that women can lack recent work experience, which then places them at a disadvantage in the labour market. Women's skills and qualifications can also become out-dated or obsolete after a break from work. Some women experience a loss of confidence as a result of a break from work, and they can struggle to present their skills to prospective employers, finding it difficult to prepare for interviews, write their CVs and fill out application forms. Some women with children face pressure not to work from other family members, although this pressure was often resisted by women themselves.

Many women seeking to connect with the labour market after a break from work, or for the first time, as young women or women who have migrated to Britain, are often facing entry into the lower levels of the labour market. Yet the poor quality of local jobs, and low pay, can be significant barriers to women's engagement with the labour market, especially for lone mothers. The transition from benefit claimant to paid

¹ Source: ONS, Annual Population Survey, December 2004 – March 2005, Crown Copyright.

worker is a precarious process for lone mothers, who have to secure a particular level of income to maintain their families. This can be an acute problem where the cost of living is high. But in localities with lower average pay overall, the very scarcity of higher paid work contributes to lone mothers' disconnection from the labour market.

Many women want part-time work or jobs with flexible working hours, but they struggle to find the kinds of jobs they are looking for, with an appropriate working pattern.

Many economically inactive women have no relationship with employment services and agencies, and thus can be unaware of local job opportunities.

Some women face a range of additional barriers to the labour market, often because they lack qualifications or because their skills are at a very low level. Women who have migrated to Britain can lack the level of English language skills appropriate for the contemporary labour market.

Young women under 18 who are outside paid employment, particularly those without qualifications, can face a hostile labour market. Their search for work can be extremely demoralising, as they rarely receive responses to their job applications, and if they secure a job pay levels are often so low that the sense of exploitation they experience can serve to distance them even further from the labour market.

Levels of unemployment and economic inactivity are very high for some groups of ethnic minority women, evidence which suggests that race discrimination has a significant impact on women's ability to connect with the labour market.

Connecting women with the labour market

Good practice in employment services for women involves understanding and responding to women's circumstances, and adopting a strategic, gender-sensitive approach.

To reconnect with the labour market, women need recent work experience and job-focused training. Providing appropriate training and work experience is dependent on excellent labour market intelligence and firm links with employers and their specific recruitment needs. Labour market intelligence must acknowledge the gendered dimensions of labour supply and demand.

Women are searching for a wide range of jobs and, equally, their labour market skills and experience are wide ranging. Some unemployed

and economically inactive women are skilled and educated women, while others have few skills or qualifications, or little knowledge of the British labour market. Employment projects and services must appreciate this diversity, and tailor support services accordingly. Projects can focus on specific client groups, depending on their distance from the labour market.

Often women are looking for practical support: help with interview techniques, guidance on completing application forms; help in writing CVs. They also want constructive advice and help in devising a strategy for connecting with the labour market. This requires the skills of well-qualified, experienced advisors.

Responding to the needs of economically inactive women is best achieved as part of a local, strategic approach to labour market issues. A strategic approach also involves taking a longer term view of the funding needs of successful projects. Voluntary sector projects cannot be sustained without core funding for management and administration costs, and without core funding new work cannot be developed.

Policy messages

The women who participated in this study expressed a strong desire to work, yet this is not always acknowledged by policy makers, and in some areas myths and false assumptions about women outside employment hamper efforts to provide more support to them. The first step in connecting women with the labour market is to acknowledge this desire to work.

Women's disconnection from the labour market is often a consequence of the circumstances of women's lives. The tendency for women to take breaks from work is widespread, but an interrupted work history damages women's ability to secure paid work because they then lack the continuous work experience that employers seek. Yet there is no distinct policy response to this, often leaving women to do their best they can to reconnect with the labour market. There is a strong case to develop a more comprehensive set of support services for women.

Across the localities and wards participating in this study there were unique patterns of women's disconnection with the labour market. Because of this, the local level appears to be the best level at which to address the issues associated with women's disconnection from the labour market.

Women seeking to connect with the labour market often lack recent work experience and up-

to-date qualifications, and this places them at a disadvantage in the labour market. There are many excellent projects which seek to address these issues, providing women with work experience and job-focused training. Policy makers should consider ways to develop provision in collaboration with employers, so that training and work experience match with genuine job opportunities.

Many women returning to work are looking for part-time jobs, work during school hours or term-time, and flexible working hours. Employers could review the scope for extending the availability of jobs offered with more flexible working hours.

In some localities, for some groups of women, there are very high levels of unemployment and economic inactivity. Women living in some disadvantaged communities are struggling to get a foothold in the labour market or to return to it after a break caring for children. Employers should be encouraged to take a risk, develop new approaches to recruitment, and offer opportunities to kinds of people they do not normally recruit.

Young women who are outside paid employment often feel abandoned in the labour market with no support. Some employers exploit them, paying them wages considerably below the minimum wage. Much more could be done to support young women, through practical, one-to-one support, listening to their views and aspirations, and acknowledging their desire to work. There is scope to review the careers advice offered to girls to ensure they are aware of the full range of opportunities in contemporary labour markets.

Local labour markets are not working as efficiently as they could be for economically inactive women. As more strategic approaches to local labour market issues develop, measures to connect economically inactive and unemployed women with the labour market need to be part of these strategic plans. Focusing all interventions on benefit claimants overlooks the economically inactive women who are struggling to connect with the labour market. Local employment rates could be significantly raised by addressing the needs of these women within a local strategic plan.

About the GELLLM project

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Copies of the full report
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can be obtained from www.shu.ac.uk/research/csi or
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