Connecting Women With the Labour Market

Synthesis Report

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PREFACE

The GELLM Partnership and Research Programme

Between 2003 and 2006, the Gender and Employment in Local Labour Markets (GELLM) Programme\(^1\) explored an extensive range of factors affecting the labour market situation of women in 11 local labour markets in England.

This unique programme of research, perhaps the most extensive study and analysis ever undertaken of the local labour market situation of women in England, was developed in a close and active partnership with 11 local authorities, and with support, guidance and additional investment from two national agencies, the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) and the Trades Union Congress (TUC). Working closely with its 13 external partners, the GELLM project team, comprising an experienced and diverse group of social scientists (with expertise in sociology, social policy, urban and regional studies, social statistics, and gender studies) produced 12 Gender Profiles of Local Labour Markets (Buckner et al 2004, 2005), each presenting a comprehensive picture of gender-disaggregated local labour market statistics\(^2\). The team then went on to develop, in 2004-5, six new Local Research Studies, each carried out in parallel fashion in up to six of the local labour markets which had been profiled, and designed and implemented in close collaboration with local policy-makers. The evidence from these studies was reported at the local level in 31 Locality Reports published (in spring 2006) with the support of the local authorities concerned, and disseminated in each of the English regions in a series of successful local events\(^3\).

Carrying out this research in partnership with a wide range of local authorities over a three year period was important in a number of ways:

First, it enabled us to focus our studies on topics which were of interest not only as subjects for academic study, but also as issues of major policy relevance and current concern to our partners. We debated the topics we should explore (and the precise focus of each study) with each of our partners in meetings of the GELLM Regional Project Groups (established by each local authority partner to support the project at local level), in consultations with the GELLM National Advisory Group (which comprised all our local and national partners, and also had the benefit of three external academic advisers with relevant expertise\(^4\)), and within the research team. This led to the decision to develop 6 multi-method Local Research Studies, with each local authority partner able to participate in up to three of the studies.

Second, it enabled us to design the studies so that they would draw on local intelligence and expertise about the issues involved. This was particularly important in those studies where there was thought to be existing research, or a body of knowledge about our topic, which had not previously been drawn together into a single report (and most notably in our study of ethnic minority women and their local labour markets).

Third, our partnerships made the process of securing research access (to organisations, documentation, agencies and individuals) both efficient and effective. Our various partners thus assisted in identifying suitable venues for focus groups, in contacting agencies and individuals who could provide a practitioner or policy-maker perspective at the local level, and supported us in accessing interviewees, workshop facilitators and the additional resources needed to support this type of research.

Finally, the partnership ensured that this body of research was not merely ‘policy relevant’, but achieved our wider aims for the GELLM programme. These were: to produce an evidence base fit for the purposes of local authorities and their partners; to deliver the research in a way which was ‘policy engaged’ and recognised the realities and challenges of addressing the entrenched local labour market problems which underpin women’s employment disadvantage; and to conclude the partnership, at the end of the three year period.

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\(^1\) The programme was based in the Centre for Social Inclusion at Sheffield Hallam University, and directed by Professor Sue Yeandle. It was made possible by a large core grant from the European Social Fund.

\(^2\) The Gender Profiles were launched at events hosted in each locality by our local authority partners in 2004-5, and were attended by a total of approximately 800 people.

\(^3\) A list of the 31 Locality Reports and details of the local dissemination events can be found at www.shu.ac.uk/research/csi.

\(^4\) Prof. Ed Fieldhouse and Prof. Damian Grimshaw, both of the University of Manchester, and Prof. Irene Hardill of Nottingham Trent University.
period, by supporting our local authority partners to mainstream gender equality in their planning, operations and strategic policy-making in relation to local labour market issues. Our Locality Reports were presented at well-attended conferences and workshops organised by our local authority partners in spring/summer 2006. These events were used to launch the reports, to debate the new evidence and recommendations, and to consider what actions should follow. Across the country, over 500 people attended these events, and at most of these meetings clear commitments were made to give further detailed consideration to the research findings, and to explore ways of addressing the issues identified at the local level.

The GELLM Synthesis Reports

This *Synthesis Report, Connecting Women With the Labour Market*, draws together the findings from the local research study of women outside paid employment who want to work, which was carried out in Birmingham, Camden, Sandwell, Thurrock (Essex), and Wakefield. It provides a comparative analysis of the issues associated with women's disconnection with the labour market in 5 local labour markets, and draws on the wider body of GELLM research of which it forms a part. As indicated above, it is one of the 6 GELLM *Synthesis Reports* published in summer 2006, and completes the study output as funded under the original research award.

In the 6 *Synthesis Reports*, we show how both gender and locality play out in the way local labour markets operate, and identify features which affect women's labour market situation in similar ways across 11 very different local labour markets. We also show that in some cases, particular local labour market circumstances act as quite locally specific constraints and opportunities for the women living and working within them. In each case we explore the diversity of the female working age population, and take account of changes and developments which have affected the structure of the local labour market. In our analysis we have tried to tease out those factors which are within the sphere of influence of local authorities and their local partners - employers, trade unions, voluntary sector organisations and publicly funded agencies – as well as to identify those policy issues which require attention at the national level if local agencies are to achieve their objectives.

Because they offer a comparative analysis of data relating to different local labour markets, our *Synthesis Reports* present the research findings in ways which will be of particular interest to national and regional agencies with responsibilities for developing effective labour market policy, and for ensuring that the labour market operates in an inclusive manner, making full and fair use of the talents of both women and men across the whole economy. The research therefore contains messages of crucial importance to:

- those charged with seeking effective ways of tackling local pockets of ‘worklessness’
- those responsible for achieving a high level of productivity and making effective use of national investments in education, skills and training
- employers and trade unions seeking to create modern workplaces which can attract and retain staff and support employees to achieve their full potential
- employers and service providers concerned about labour and skills shortages

The GELLM Research Studies

We developed the GELLM programme in a partnership in which all parties shared the view that local labour markets should aim to offer women (and men) equitable access to employment opportunities and a fair chance to realise their full potential as labour force participants - and that they should assist those who desire to enter the labour market to do so. Across the entire programme we have therefore:

i) explored the situation of women outside the labour market who wished to enter it (Grant et al 2006a; Escott et al 2006)

ii) examined the particular situation of women from minority ethnic groups (Stiell et al 2006)
iii) looked in detail at women's employment in the local authority sector (Bennett et al 2006)

iv) studied the situation of women in low-paid jobs and examined why so many part-time women workers are employed ‘below their potential’ (Escott et al 2006; Grant et al 2006b)

v) explored the recruitment, retention and workforce development policies of employers in the highly feminised domiciliary care sector (Yeandle et al 2006a)

vi) through the Gender Profiles (Buckner et al 2004, 2005), provided the fullest possible statistical evidence for our topic of enquiry, making extensive use of the 2001 Census and other official statistics.

As we pointed out in the introduction to the Gender Profiles, given the importance of two critical factors - the gendered nature of labour force participation and the local nature of most employment - it is remarkable that previously so little attention has been given in analysis of labour force participation and behaviour to gender-disaggregated data at the sub-regional level. We believe the output from the GELLM Programme represents a major step forward in developing evidence-based policy in this field, makes it quite clear that such data is available, and shows that new evidence-based understanding of entrenched labour market problems and how to tackle them can be secured through a gender-sensitive approach to labour market analysis.

### Box 1  Policy Relevance of the GELLM Research Programme

When we began the study, we could not know quite how close the fit between our research and new developments in public policy would be.

During the research period:

- The Women and Work Commission reported its findings (in 2006).
- The Prime Minister commissioned two major Equality Reviews (reporting in 2006).
- The Equality Act 2006, setting up the Commission for Equality and Human Rights and placing a new duty on public bodies to promote gender equality (from 2007), achieved the royal assent.
- The Equal Opportunities Commission conducted new GFIs into:
  - occupational segregation
  - pregnancy discrimination
  - flexible and part-time working
  - ethnic minority women at work
- Important new developments occurred at the national level, affecting policy on:
  - skills and productivity - The Leitch Review of Skills 2005
  - access to the labour market - DWP Green Paper 2006 A New Deal for Welfare: empowering people to work
  - the delivery of health and social care - DoH White Paper Our Health, our Care, our Say: a new direction for community services
  - work and family life - Work and Families Act 2006

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5 GFIs are the ‘General Formal Investigations’ which the Equal Opportunities Commission has statutory powers to conduct under the Sex Discrimination Act 1975.


1 INTRODUCTION

The study

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. The study shows that there are at least 1,375,400 women in England who are currently not in paid employment but who would like work. It also demonstrates how, 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. Whilst the women who participated in our research expressed a very strong desire to take up paid work, a range of factors related to local labour markets, the nature of women’s lives, and public policy currently serve to exclude them from it.

In order to understand how women who want to work experience being outside paid employment and what might assist them in the transition to paid work we sought to explore:

- The 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

The research was undertaken between July 2005 and February 2006 in five localities in England (Birmingham, Camden, Sandwell, Thurrock and Wakefield). The research focused on specific wards within these localities, and was undertaken using a variety of methods: statistical analysis of ward level data; interviews with people with a knowledge of the local labour market and of local employment projects; interviews with people with an understanding of the circumstances of local women; and focus groups with local women who were not in paid employment. 51 people with knowledge of their local labour market and of local employment projects took part in a face-to-face interview, and 101 women participated in 10 focus groups.

There are a number of reasons why we chose to examine the circumstances and experiences of women outside paid employment. First, there are large numbers of women of working age who are outside paid employment. In England, 1 in every 3 women of working age is outside paid employment, and in some of the wards we focused on, as many as 1 in every 2 women of working age is outside paid employment. There are many reasons for this, often to do with women’s lives, as mothers and as carers, and the choices they make at particular points in their lives. Many of these women have chosen not to work, because they are caring for children or other relatives, because they are students, or because of illness or disability. However, the evidence reveals that around one quarter of these women are not content to be outside paid employment. In 2004, 23% of economically inactive women in England, a total of 903,400 women, wanted paid work. In addition, 4.4% of women were unemployed, a further 472,000 women. Thus approximately 1,375,400 women outside paid employment would like to work. Some of these women have been made redundant, some have been looking for work but find they do not have the right skills or experience to secure a job, and some have experienced discrimination because of where they live or because of their ethnicity, sex or age. Others have found work, but struggled to stay in work. All of these groups of women are the focus of this study; they are women who want to work but who, for a range of reasons, are not working.

Secondly, this group of women has been neglected, both in terms of an understanding of their lives, and in terms of policy. We know very little about their experiences, their aspirations and the circumstances of their lives. They also largely lack distinct public policy support in making the transition back to work (Tomlinson et al 2005).

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Because this group have been relatively neglected in recent research there is no clear policy agenda in terms of their return to work. Other work has shown that for some groups of people it may be necessary to develop new and innovative policy and programmes to support the step into paid work and to increase their employability in the future (Schmid 1998; Fagan and Rubery 1996). This study sought to explore whether this group of women require specific services and support in making the transition to work, and if so, what kinds of support and services would be beneficial. Indeed, whether a woman-focused response to unemployment and economic inactivity can be justified.

Finally, the study seeks to highlight the importance of ‘the local’ as the context in which people can best be supported in their engagement with work. Central government policy and regulations have been shown to be insufficient in themselves to bring about effective and sustainable transitions into paid work for some groups of people, and there can be unique circumstances in specific localities. Instead, it has been recognised that it is important to delegate ‘more decision making power to individuals and to local agencies in order to adjust to individual needs and local circumstances’ (DWP 2006; Schmid 1998).

**Policy Context**

The New Labour Government regards paid employment as the best route out of poverty, and since 1997 has reshaped tax, benefit and employment policy with the aim of transferring people from welfare into work. Key policy developments include: the New Deal programmes, which provide different amounts of support and compulsion to join the labour market; the introduction of Tax Credits for low paid earners with children, as incentives to enter paid work; and the introduction of the National Minimum Wage (NMW).

Despite significant employment growth, the government acknowledges that pockets of worklessness persist in certain localities; developing new ways of addressing worklessness has thus become a key focus of government policy (DWP 2000; HM Treasury 2000; HM Treasury 2002; DWP 2004; DWP 2006). These developments engage not only central government but also local authorities and their partners, in some localities through Local Strategic Partnerships. It is recognised that deprivation is often highly concentrated in neighbourhoods, and requires tailored approaches to providing services and work incentives. Government and local authorities are also committed to closing the gap between average employment rates and the employment rates of disadvantaged groups and those living in deprived neighbourhoods where unemployment and economic inactivity are high (HM Treasury 2004). The overall target is to achieve an employment rate of 60% for women in the European Union by 2010 (EU 2004). In the UK the government has set a target of an 80% employment rate overall.

Yet the policy context is one in which there are few national programmes and policies specifically focused on women. The key national programmes are The New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) and the New Deal for Partners of the Unemployed (NDPU), but many economically inactive women who want to work do not fit these categories. Indeed, only women with some connection to the benefit system would be drawn into these programmes. Many women outside paid employment do not have this link with the benefit system, and thus lack a connection with organisations such as Jobcentre Plus.

In some localities, voluntary sector organisations have developed with a specific focus on women who are out of work, and we consider the contribution of these organisations in this report. Such projects are often an invaluable support to local women but, by virtue of their voluntary nature, they are usually small scale projects, with insecure funding.

**Women outside paid employment**

Women have different ways of combining work with family life, often depending on their social class and level of qualifications. Some women remain in full-time work through their child bearing years, while others switch from full-time work to part-time work after a period of maternity leave (Dex and Joshi 1999). Some women take a longer break than the statutory maternity leave from work and then return to part-time work, often to a job below their full potential in the labour market (Blackwell 2001; Grant et al 2005; Darton and
Hurrell 2005). Yet other women experience a combination of circumstances which make the transition back into work a difficult and sometimes an impossible process. There appears to be little systematic contemporary research on why this occurs for some women, in some places.

Existing research reveals in broad terms the range of factors that may affect women’s ability to return to work. One set of factors relates to women’s level of skill and qualifications. In our set of studies of women outside paid employment, in the various localities participating in this research, women without qualifications are consistently more likely to be economically inactive than women with qualifications.

Social policies, such as Tax Credits, the National Minimum Wage and the New Deal for Lone Parents, can also play a part in supporting women, to a greater or lesser extent, in a return to the labour market (see for example, Bennett 2002). Equally, the varying cost and availability of childcare in different localities can affect women’s ability to engage in paid work (Dex and Joshi 1999). The cost and availability of public transport can also impact on women’s relationships to the labour market.

The nature of local labour markets, the quality of local jobs, and the flexibility associated with them are also important factors in affecting women’s ability to secure paid work. For example, in some localities there are high levels of part-time working amongst women and a growing number of part-time jobs. The availability of part-time jobs can affect some women’s ability to combine work with family life (Grant et al 2006b). In some localities the changing nature of the industrial structure has a significant bearing on women’s ability to get paid work or to return to paid work. For example, in some labour markets where there has been a decline in a manufacturing industry which employed large numbers of women, such as the textile industry in Leicester and Sandwell, large numbers of women have been made redundant, and these women then face difficulties re-engaging with the labour market in newly developing areas of employment, sometimes because their English language skills are not at an appropriate level to secure access to other jobs (Grant et al 2006a). Average pay levels vary across labour markets. In some ‘low pay’ economies women who are outside paid employment and claiming benefits can find the transition from claimant to paid worker extremely difficult because the wages to be earned are insufficient to meet household costs (Escott et al 2006). Equally, in labour markets where average wages are higher but the cost of living is also very high, such as London, women claiming benefits need high earnings to meet their housing and other living costs.

Women from ethnic minority groups may face additional obstacles in the labour market, including race discrimination (Reid 2002; Willson 2003; Yeandle et al 2006b). Women who have migrated to Britain may be restricted by a lack of familiarity with the British labour market, lack of fluency in the English language, limited knowledge of British training and educational systems, and difficulty in securing recognition for qualifications gained overseas.

In this report we explore the salience of these and other factors which can influence women’s relationship to the labour market, as they play out in different local settings. We begin, in the following section, by examining the nature and extent of variability in women’s disconnection with labour markets across the different localities. This examination of variability by locality serves to highlight the importance of understanding local labour markets and of developing local responses to women’s unemployment and economic inactivity.
2 WOMEN OUTSIDE PAID WORK: LOOKING AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

One of the key aims of this study was to explore the issues associated with women’s economic inactivity and unemployment at the local level. Understanding women’s relationship with labour markets at the local level is a vital part of the evidence necessary for the development of appropriate local responses to women’s economic inactivity and unemployment, an approach which is now being emphasised in government policy (DWP 2006). 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. In this section we discuss aspects of this variation and provide an indication of the relative importance, in different localities, of the variety of reasons for women’s disconnection with the labour market. The study highlights the extent to which local labour markets are not working efficiently for many of the women outside paid employment.

Variability in women’s disconnection from the labour market

In England as a whole, 29% of women of working age were ‘economically inactive’ at the time of the 2001 Census. This categorisation of people who are not in (or actively seeking) paid work includes:
- students (excluding those who also have paid jobs)
- people looking after their home and/or family full-time (who may variously be looking after young children, be carers of sick or disabled people, or other full-time homemakers)
- those who are not in paid work because of their own long-term sickness or disability
- those who have retired from paid work
- those who are seeking work but not available for work in the next two weeks

In addition, of those who were economically active, 4% of women described themselves as ‘unemployed’ on their completed Census return. These economically inactive and unemployed women of working age totalled over 4.7 million in April 2001.

The variation in levels of economic inactivity and unemployment among women across the localities in the study is shown in Table 1, revealing particularly high levels in Birmingham, Camden and Sandwell. In Birmingham and Camden, higher levels of economic inactivity are related to the large student populations resident in them, but this is far from the only source of differentiation, as we discuss below.

Table 1   Economic inactivity and unemployment among women of work age: April 2001:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Locality</th>
<th>All Women aged 16-59</th>
<th>Economically active women aged 16-59</th>
<th>Unemployed women as a % of those economically active</th>
<th>Economically inactive women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Birmingham</td>
<td>287,518</td>
<td>176,140</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camden</td>
<td>70,785</td>
<td>45,218</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandwell</td>
<td>81,520</td>
<td>53,426</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thurrock</td>
<td>43,865</td>
<td>31,890</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wakefield</td>
<td>93,662</td>
<td>64,953</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>England</td>
<td>14,643,350</td>
<td>10,332,809</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: 2001 Census Standard Tables, Crown Copyright 2003

If we explore the circumstances of women outside paid employment and include ward level information, the extent of variability is much more dramatic. For example, Figure 1 shows the levels of unemployment amongst economically active women for the districts and wards included in the study. This shows that unemployment in the Aston ward of Birmingham, at over 16%, was more than twice as high as that in Birmingham as a whole. Similarly, women’s unemployment rate in Soho and Victoria in Sandwell, at over 14%, was twice as high as the Sandwell district figure of 7%. Thus, ward level data reveals levels of disconnection from the labour market distinct from those at the district and national level.
Figure 1  Economically active women who are unemployed

Source: 2001 Census Standard Tables, Crown Copyright 2003

Figure 2  Economic inactivity by reason

Source: 2001 Census Standard Tables, Crown Copyright 2003
Variability in the reasons for women’s economic inactivity

These distinct patterns across wards and districts are also evident when we consider economic inactivity and the reasons for it. The standard categorisation of the reasons (apart from unemployment) why women of working age are outside paid work was captured in the 2001 Census. The census enables us to explore this at different geographical levels. Figure 2 shows that while 48% of economically inactive women in England are ‘looking after home and family’, in some districts and wards the figure is much higher, or much lower. For example, in Aveley and Uplands in Thurrock, 61% of economically inactive women are looking after home and family, while the comparable figure in Gospel Oak in Camden is just 35%.

Figure 3 Economic inactivity amongst women aged 16-24, 25-49 and 50-59 by reason for ‘inactivity’: England and selected districts. (a) Economically inactive women aged 16 – 24 (b) Economically inactive women aged 25-49 (c) Economically inactive women aged 50 – 59

In Figure 3 we show this categorisation of economic inactivity for women in three different age groups, in the five local authority districts studied, comparing this with the data for England. This shows large variations between the districts. Among young women aged 16-24, the most common category of ‘economic inactivity’ is being a student, usually regarded as a positive situation not requiring a policy response. However, while 82% of Camden’s young economically inactive women were students in 2001, this was true of just 48% of comparable women in Thurrock. For women aged 25-49, by contrast, the most common category of economic inactivity is ‘looking after home and family’ - yet across the localities the percentage in this situation ranged from 50% in Camden to 74% in Thurrock. Meanwhile, among women
Figure 4  Economic inactivity amongst women aged 16-24, 25-49 and 50-59 by reason for ‘inactivity’: England and selected wards. (a) Economically inactive women aged 16 – 24 (b) Economically inactive women aged 25-49 (c) Economically inactive women aged 50 – 59

aged 50 to 59, being ‘sick or disabled’ was the most common economic inactivity category. Yet here the figure varied from 39% of economically inactive women in Wakefield, to 27% in Thurrock. These distinctions by age reveal not only the complexity of female economic inactivity, but also the degree of variation by locality. Understanding this differentiation by age thus contributes to the necessary evidence base for developing policy responses to address women’s economic inactivity.

In Figure 4 we consider data for some of the wards being studied in each of these five districts, again differentiated by age, further underlining the importance of geographical differences. For women aged 25-49, the patterns of economic inactivity are relatively consistent between the five districts and the selected wards within them, particularly with regard to the proportions who look after their home and family full-time. But for other age groups there are quite different patterns when comparing ward data with district data. For example, in Castleford Ferry Fryston in Wakefield, the percentage of young women looking after home and family was 43%, compared with 26% in the Wakefield district, and 19% in England. In the Camden ward of Gospel Oak, 24% of economically inactive women aged 50-59 were looking after their home and family full-time, compared with 30% in the London Borough of Camden, and 40% in England as a whole.

Source: 2001 Census Standard Tables, Crown Copyright 2003
These marked differences still do not capture the full extent of the underlying variation in, and causes of, economic inactivity, however. Insofar as they relate to women’s personal and family situation, it is important to be clear that the broad categorical explanations discussed above conceal more subtle differences between women, and that these differences shape their relationships with labour markets. For example, our interview data suggests that women who have migrated to the UK from abroad, and women from some minority ethnic groups, may be ‘looking after home and family’ (and therefore ‘economically inactive’) for very different reasons from those that apply to White British women. These women can face distinct barriers to the labour market, including discrimination or language-related difficulties, at specific periods in their lives. These are circumstances which might make ‘looking after home and family’ the only available ‘choice’ open to them.

Table 2  Unemployment as a proportion of economically active women (aged 16-74) by ethnicity (selected ethnic groups) %

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All</th>
<th>White British</th>
<th>White Other</th>
<th>Indian</th>
<th>Pakistani</th>
<th>Bangladeshi</th>
<th>Black Caribbean</th>
<th>Black African</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aston</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIRMINGHAM</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gospel Oak</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haverstock</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kentish Town</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAMDEN</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St Pauls</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soho and Victoria</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SANDWELL</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THURROCK</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>**</td>
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</table>

Source: 2001 Census Standard Tables, Crown Copyright 2003
Note: ** Missing values are due to small population sizes.

The complexity in the real choices open to these different groups of women can also be seen in the data on levels of unemployment among economically active women from certain minority ethnic groups. Thus while the 2001 Census recorded 5% of economically inactive White British women as unemployed in Birmingham, the comparable figures were very much higher for some other groups in that city – 22% of Pakistani women, 22% of Bangladeshi women, 10% of Black Caribbean women and 12% of Black African women.

Table 3  Economic inactivity of women aged 16-74 by ethnicity (selected ethnic groups)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All</th>
<th>White British</th>
<th>White Other</th>
<th>Indian</th>
<th>Pakistani</th>
<th>Bangladeshi</th>
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<td>75</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: 2001 Census Standard Tables, Crown Copyright 2003
Note: ** Missing values are due to small population sizes.

7 Data from the Standard Census Output are only available at ward level for women aged 16-74 and not working age (16-59).
As is becoming well known, levels of economic inactivity also vary according to ethnicity, and are particularly high for some groups of women. In most of the localities studied, levels of economic inactivity were very high among women of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin in 2001. Thus, while the economic inactivity rate of all women aged 16-74 in England was 40%, in Birmingham 80% of Bangladeshi women in this age group were economically inactive, and in Sandwell 77% of Pakistani women were economically inactive. Among Black Caribbean women, much lower levels of economic inactivity were found - in Birmingham 39% and Sandwell 37% - while rates were also relatively low among Indian women in Sandwell (43%) and Camden (44%) and among White British women in Birmingham (42%) and Sandwell (45%).

Overall this complex picture of variability across wards and districts is a clear reminder that our policy responses must be sensitive to specific local conditions and to the particular circumstances of women outside paid employment in terms of age and ethnicity, as they play out differently in different local labour markets. Because the issues to be addressed are quite distinct, depending on age and ethnicity, and because different factors are more or less significant in particular localities, if policy is to be effective and local labour markets are to begin to work efficiently for unemployed and economically inactive women this variability must be acknowledged and responded to by policy makers.

Despite these important differences, however, there are some common factors across the localities which have a bearing on women’s ability to engage with the labour market. In the next section we examine a range factors which act as barriers to the labour market. These factors were consistently highlighted across the localities in the study.
3 WOMEN OUTSIDE PAID WORK: WOMEN’S VIEWS AND EXPERIENCES

This chapter discusses the characteristics, views, experiences and aspirations of women who are outside paid employment but who want to work. We explore how women who want to work experience being out of work, and highlight the importance many women attach to paid work. We also seek to explain the range of factors that currently prevent these women from working, drawing on the discussions with women themselves and the interviews with representatives of organisations in the localities studied. One set of factors we discuss is related to women’s work history and their family context and status. A second set of important factors is concerned with the way labour markets work and how women relate to local labour markets. A third set of factors is concerned with discriminatory processes. Overall, in this section we argue that women experience being out of work ‘as women’, yet current policy responses regarding unemployment and economic inactivity largely fail to treat women as a distinct group requiring a particular policy response.

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 work. 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 (see Table 4). In these localities alone we estimate that 61,000 women would welcome the opportunity to engage in paid work but who are currently not working.

Table 4 Women who want to work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Economically active women who want to work (%)</th>
<th>Women of working age who are unemployed (%)</th>
<th>Unemployed and economically inactive women who want to work (numbers)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Birmingham</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>33,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camden</td>
<td>34</td>
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<td>Sandwell</td>
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<td>10,500</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thurrock</td>
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<td>4,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wakefield</td>
<td>29</td>
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<tr>
<td>England</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1,375,400</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Why work is important to women

Although it is widely accepted that paid work can be a defining feature of men’s lives and crucial to their identity, these arguments are less firmly established and less widely discussed in relation to women. Yet women who want to work, and find themselves unable to do so, express the importance of work for their sense of independence, self-esteem and success in life. Work is also valued by women for the friendship and sense of inclusion in social life it brings.

It's important to have something for yourself. A job gives you that. You need a bit of space. If you've got a good job you can do more things.

I enjoyed working...I loved the atmosphere of working with people, having a good laugh...It felt like you were achieving something for yourself.

As much as I love being at home and being a mum, I don't feel I have anything to say to anybody. I have become more and more resentful of others gaining success in an industry I could have contributed to.

It's not that you're lazy. It's not that you don't want to work to help yourself. I've always worked. I loved my jobs.

Mothers tend to define the importance of work in additional ways; they want their children to succeed, and hope that, by working, their children will learn to appreciate that paid work can bring rewards and security.
Because mothers view work as an important dimension of motherhood, not being able to work can be a source of great regret.

If you don't work, the children will say, 'Why didn't you do anything with your life mum?' Our mums didn't think about studying or anything like that. We knew it affected us. We don't want it to affect our children.

It doesn’t look good for my daughter, me sat at home. I’ve been sat at home for 5 years. So when she’s 16 she’ll think, ‘me mum’s been able to sit at home all my life, I don’t need to get a job’. It’s me she looks to as a role model. I’d willingly go to do anything.

I am a single parent, and I really want to do what’s best for my son. I want to show my son that you go out there and work hard for it. Even now, I am still upset that I didn’t go to University. I did want to do that, for myself - but also for my son. I want my son to get a degree.

**Being out of work**

Given the importance that women attach to work, being out of work is often described as a depressing and demoralising experience.

I got very bored and depressed. It took a couple of years before I pulled myself together and started doing voluntary work. That really helped, to have a useful role in life other than wife and mother.

Personally I've been suffering from depression ever since having the children because of not working. I feel like the world is spinning round and I'm watching everyone else go round and I'm stuck still, really out of it. That's why I am so desperate to get back in, I want to go back to work.

To be honest, I feel terrible about not working. I'm very conscious of it. I really do feel it. It would be nice to provide for myself and my children.

Being out of work also, of course, has significant material implications. Many of the women who participated in the study were struggling to make ends meet. Some had to rely on parents for financial support, but this lack of independence was felt sharply.

I live on £100 a week at the moment and I have got 3 kids to support. I've got no support from anywhere else. We really struggle. I can't have treats because we can't afford it. All my money goes on things I need to pay out at home

My mum lives around the corner, so she helps out financially because she’s in full-time work. They give me money, they buy the kids shoes.

There are a lot of sacrifices you have to make. You have to do without, so the children can have something. You are always in debt, and you can't give the children the things they want. There's a lot of stress, a lot of worry

You can’t go out. You are dependent on your Mum and Dad. You feel shit. You’ve got no money so you have to keep begging.

Despite the passion with which women described their desire to work, some felt that women’s unemployment was not viewed as an important social issue and that their plight was overlooked in public policy.

When men are out of work, everyone knows how emasculating it can be and what it does to them, and what a disaster it is for them. But nobody seems to acknowledge what it does to us.

In many ways this is a realistic assessment. There are very few projects or services focused exclusively on women or which seek to address women’s specific experience of being out of work.

Although women expressed a strong desire to enter paid work, the very process of looking for work sometimes added to a feeling of worthlessness and depression amongst the women participating in the study.

If you ain't got a lot of confidence and you've been for interviews and you get knocked back, it does affect you. You just feel like giving up.
Given this strong desire to work and its negative impact on women and their quality of life, why is it that hundreds of thousands of women in England who want to work are not working? We outline here a range of factors which help to explain the situation of women outside paid employment. One set of factors relates to being a woman and mother: many women have interrupted work histories; responsibilities for childcare and other domestic tasks; and appear to be more likely than men to experience family pressure not to work. A second important set of factors relates to the labour market and the ways in which work is organised. But this also has a gendered aspect; the labour market women relate to is segregated by gender. A further set of factors is connected with discrimination in the labour market.

The availability, quality and nature of services for women who are outside paid work but seeking work also impacts on their ability to enter the labour market. We explore this issue in section 4.

**Gender, unemployment and economic inactivity**

One set of factors which makes it difficult for women to enter, or re-enter paid work, derives from the ways in which women relate to the labour market as women. Because of women’s responsibilities for childcare and other caring, as well as domestic work, many women have gaps in their work histories. During these gaps from paid work women’s qualifications can become outdated, their confidence can decline and their lack of continuous work experience places them at a disadvantage in the labour market. And despite the fact that taking a break from work is an extremely common experience for women, there is little support for women in this situation.

**Work experience**

One of the most important outcomes of taking a break from paid work is that women then lack the work experience that employers often require. This was a frustrating issue for women; despite an awareness of their own abilities they lacked the opportunity to demonstrate them. They were baffled as to how they could attain the work experience employers were seeking:

> Sometimes employers make it very difficult. They want continuous experience. When you go with that broken CV it creates some doubt in your ability to do a job. They put too much on experience.

> Many of the jobs, they want experience. If you’re a woman and you haven’t worked for a while, where would you get that experience? It’s not easy. They say, ‘Have you done this before?’ you say, ‘No, but I am willing to try’, but that’s not good enough.

> If I’ve got a lack of experience, why don’t they give me a job, then I can get the experience. Even when you’ve got experience, it’s not enough as far as they’re concerned.

> For me, it’s having to look at my CV and having big gaps. How do you explain that to an employer?

**Qualifications**

A second important factor highlighted across the localities concerned women’s qualifications and the importance of holding up-to-date qualifications.

Table 5 shows the variation in levels of qualifications for different age groups across the wards and districts. In some wards and districts, for some age groups, more than 50% of working age women have no qualifications. This is the case for women aged 35-49 in Aston, Birmingham, and for comparable women in the Soho and Victoria and St. Pauls in Sandwell, and in the Ferry Fryston and Whitwood wards in Wakefield. These very high proportions of women without qualifications compare with a figure of 20% for England as a whole. Similarly, in some wards, over 30% of young women aged 16-24 have no qualifications, compared with just 16% of this age group of women in England as a whole.
Table 5  Qualifications and employment: women of working age

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</table>


Women without qualifications are much less likely to be in employment than women with qualifications. In some wards and districts more than one half of women without qualifications are outside employment. Finding ways to address the low levels of skills and qualifications amongst women in some districts was a key concern for locally-based organisations seeking to assist people back into work.

Yet even women who are well-qualified can sometimes struggle to get a foothold in the labour market after a break from work. This group of women explained that their qualifications can seem, or be, out-of-date after a break from work. Yet updating qualifications was expensive, and courses were not always accessible:

*Qualifications get out of date very quickly and some courses you have to pay for and that makes it very difficult.*

*I don’t feel I’ve got enough qualifications to get a job. I was a nurse for 20 years but now my skills and qualifications aren’t recognised anymore.*

*Qualifications go out of date so quickly. If you’re out of work you’ve had it. You’re not up to date anymore.*

*Now I’ve been out of work so long, I feel I couldn’t possibly go into work when every one else is so fresh and young. And I feel under-qualified now. Even though I’ve got qualifications, they seem out of date now.*

**Loss of confidence**

Taking time out of work to bring up children had also taken its toll on women’s confidence in relation to the labour market. Many of the women described their loss of confidence after a break from work, which made tasks such as filling out application forms, writing CVs, and attending interviews daunting experiences.

*I think it takes years to get back to where you were after you have a child. You lose yourself a bit.*

*I am petrified by interviews. It’s daunting. When I last did an interview it was a chat with one person. Now it’s a whole panel. It’s terrifying. That’s another skill you need.*

*I have been struggling with my CV - because how am I supposed to big myself up on a piece of paper? I don’t know what to say.*

*I know I am educated. Once I am in a job, I know I could do it. But for me, it’s the application. It’s putting myself under scrutiny.*
Some women, whatever their level of qualifications, lack skills in presenting themselves appropriately when applying for jobs. For example, filling out applications forms incorrectly was often a key barrier, although a skill that could be easily learned. This could be seen as a human failing rather than a particular problem for unemployed people.

I think they don’t get short-listed because they are rubbish at application forms.

A lot of people have tried and failed. I always thought that unemployed people were very bad at filling out application forms and presenting themselves, but I actually think all humans are, but we just happen to be lucky in getting jobs. Most people don’t get past the application form stage.

**Family expectations**

For some women ‘being a woman’ also meant that certain expectations were placed on them by their families. For example, some Asian women explained how, particularly in the past, there had been a family expectation that they would cease work on marriage.

*For the Asian woman, you have to be a practical housewife, you know, bring the kids up...We had that knowledge about the world outside...but we had to do the work at home, looking after the guests, the family, the children...It was expected.*

This situation was changing; Asian women explained that it was increasingly common for women to return to work, and quite acceptable in many families. It was also a situation that individual women were prepared to challenge.

*Now we can make a choice if you want to work, or study or anything.*

*When you married you had difficult times with your in-laws. You want to go back to work, but they don’t really understand it. I spoke to my husband about it, he understood, but your in-laws don’t. They don’t realise you want your freedom. But I said to them, ’I’ve had enough, I want my space’, so I went to work. I would love to go back to work now, but I’ve got a 2 year old daughter, and it’s hard for me to get someone to look after her.*

Nevertheless, even young unmarried Asian women could find themselves drawn into domestic work, caring for siblings and other family members.

*I’ve been looking after my younger brother, so I’m like a single parent really.*

*I’m at home helping my mum every day.*

There was a fear, in some localities, that this could have a longer-term impact on their engagement with the labour market.

*A lot of women in the area are carers for elderly parents. Some have been long-term carers. They start caring when they leave school at 18. Then when they try to get jobs it’s very difficult.*

It is important to recognise, however, that these kinds of expectations about women’s ‘proper’ role are not confined to ethnic minority communities. White women in our study had also faced similar pressures from family members.

*My partner’s family were against me going out to work. They said, ’Oh no, you can’t do that, you’ve got two kids.’ And that’s made me even more determined to prove them wrong. When the kids are older I want to have something for myself and I want to do it for them. I want to make things better for my kids.*

Such pressures and expectations may well exist to a greater or lesser extent across communities and across localities, reflecting evolving social attitudes to women’s employment. There appear to be some differences in the ideas expressed about women and work in different localities and communities which may have an impact on women’s views about the importance of work. Local cultures about women and work may well be one factor which contributes to the different employment rates for mothers across the localities in the study. For example, there was more ambivalence about the importance of paid work for mothers in the discussions undertaken in Thurrock than those in Camden. This may be simply a reflection of the particular women who participated in our discussions, but it could also be an outcome of distinct,
gendered cultures, or ways of thinking about women’s employment, which develop in the context of different industrial structures, often over long periods of time, and which can influence the tendency for mothers in particular communities to work or not to work (Walby 1997; Grant 2002).

**Gender, local labour market and job design**

A second set of factors which explain why it is so difficult for women who want to work to re-engage with the labour market are factors related to the ways in which local labour markets work and jobs are designed. As is well known, labour markets are highly gendered, with a tendency for women to be concentrated in particular occupations and sectors. In addition, a gender pay gap has been a persistent feature of the UK economy. In specific local labour markets these patterns of gender segregation and the gender pay gap can be very marked. Crucially, the low pay attached to many jobs which typically employ women impacts on women’s ability to transfer from benefits into paid work. Equally, the poor availability of jobs with part-time or flexible hours of work, can have a significant effect on women’s ability to take paid work.

**The quality of local jobs**

One of the critical barriers for women is the very low pay associated with the kinds of jobs readily available to women who have taken a break from employment. Women weigh up the advantages and disadvantages of a return to work for their quality of life, but the more limited the range of jobs available to them, the less attractive the labour market becomes. This was a particularly important issue for some women in labour markets where low pay was quite common and the availability of higher paid jobs was limited.

> It’s easy to get a job, but it’s any old job. Cleaning, packing, picking, they’re rubbish jobs.

> With the jobs around here the money they offer doesn’t seem to match the job they want you to do. You read the description of the job and they are only offering the minimum wage.

Better jobs were often available in nearby cities or towns, but for women with children, especially those seeking part-time work, a daily commute was not desirable or possible. This was not an outcome of a ‘culture of immobility’, but rather arose from mothers’ desire to work close to their children and to be accessible if needed. The cost of travel also often ruled out this option, especially if part-time work was sought.

> You can get a train to Leeds and because it’s a city that’s where the good jobs are. But there’s the time to get there and back, another hour in the day.

> I used to work in Stratford, East London, 20 miles away. But there’s a difference between how far you want to travel when it’s full-time and part-time. If you’re part-time you don’t want to travel that far from home.

In any case, the availability of local jobs was regarded as important in engaging women with the labour market as women might be more likely to sustain a commitment to paid work in a local job.

> Women want to use the skills they’ve built up before having kids. But they want something local, something that is flexible, something that will fit around the kids, and they often don’t want to work full-time.

**Table 6 Average hourly pay rates (excluding overtime) in the localities £s**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Women’s pay</th>
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<th>Men’s pay</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>Part-time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birmingham</td>
<td>9.68</td>
<td>6.44</td>
<td>10.69</td>
<td>6.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camden</td>
<td>14.68</td>
<td>9.18</td>
<td>16.24</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandwell</td>
<td>8.64</td>
<td>6.67</td>
<td>9.38</td>
<td>7.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thurrock</td>
<td>10.11</td>
<td>6.04</td>
<td>11.65</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wakefield</td>
<td>9.75</td>
<td>6.46</td>
<td>8.81</td>
<td>6.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>England</td>
<td>9.96</td>
<td>6.73</td>
<td>11.50</td>
<td>6.53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ASHE 2005 via NOMIS, Crown Copyright 2006

Note: ** Missing values are due to small numbers in the survey
The importance of pay levels is also an issue in relation to stage in the life course. Older women who had held good jobs in the past were reluctant to take any job in order to return to work.

Once you are past 30 and have kids, the money you need to live on is greater than if you are a single, younger person. You have more responsibilities, so you need to go back into a job that will give you that level.

Although women returners can lack recent work experience and sometimes do not have appropriate qualifications, many emphasised the importance of securing better paid jobs.

I always look in the paper and I always look at council jobs. We want better paid jobs, jobs in the council, in the fire service, those kinds of jobs.

This was vitally important in localities where the cost of living was high, such as Camden.

**The availability of jobs with flexible working hours**

Women were also often looking for part-time jobs, jobs with school hours and jobs where hours of work could be flexible. But, as with better paid jobs, they often argued that such jobs were hard to find.

I am finding it quite hard to find the right hours to fit around a three year old, so I've been looking into setting up a business doing childcare at home.

I scouted local papers every week but found many of them wanted longer hours, which I can’t do. I wanted school hours.

**Figure 5**  Women in employment and the proportion of these that work part-time

In some of the localities there were quite high percentages of women working part-time, as Figure 5 shows, and part-time jobs are widely available. It may be that women looking for work are unaware of this. Fagan (2001) has argued that most working women are not working the hours of work they would prefer, and thus for those not working it may be that they have very specific requirements in terms of working hours, which are not available in any local jobs for which they would qualify or have knowledge of.

I'm looking for part-time work but, the same as everyone else, it’s the hours you can work. So even experience doesn’t count for everything. You can’t just go and get a job anywhere because of the hours you’re restricted to.
I’ve got a qualification to work as secretary but it’s not easy to find a job as a secretary because you’ve got the hours problem. Who’s going to take your child to school, where are you going to leave her? You can’t keep asking your Mum.

In some of the districts there were fairly low percentages of working women working part-time (Camden 21% and Birmingham 36% compared with England 39%). And in some of the wards studied, levels of part-time working amongst working women were much lower than the levels in the district as a whole. This is especially the case in the Grays Riverside and West Thurrock and South Stifford wards in Thurrock, and in the St. Pauls and Soho and Victoria wards in Sandwell. In some localities where there is a low level of part-time working there are also low female employment rates overall, as in Birmingham and Camden. But the low percentage of women working part-time may also be an outcome of limited opportunities for part-time work for women in these wards. A further factor explaining low levels of part-time working may be the higher percentages of lone parents in these wards as, for many lone parents, working part-time is not an economically viable option. There may be a combination of these factors affecting women’s tendency to work part-time.

Overall, women wanted to see a different approach to job design, and more understanding of the needs of mothers in the labour market.

Employers should help, they should be accommodating with the hours for women with children. But they say, ‘if you can’t do it, leave it, we can’t help you’.

**Lack of knowledge about job opportunities**

Whether or not there are opportunities for part-time employment, women’s lack of accurate knowledge about job opportunities may be a factor hindering their connection with paid work. Lack of knowledge about job opportunities can occur as many economically inactive women have no relationship with employment agencies and services.

We get a lot of people who want to work, but aren’t registered with the Job Centre. We’ve had a lot of women returners whose partners work.

The people we’re meeting are very capable of working, but what they don’t know is the kind of jobs that exist, or where to get information if they’re not getting it from the Job Centre.

One organisation defines these women as ‘lost women’ because of their lack of contact with employment services.

We started talking about ‘lost women’, women who are lost to the labour market and are not on the radar of other support agencies. If they are not on benefits they are not being accessed by anybody. No-one is reaching them.

Sometimes women are unfamiliar with the finer details of local labour markets. For example, women who have worked in full-time jobs in manufacturing industry in the past, and who have been made redundant, can lack knowledge about the variety of working patterns available in contemporary local labour markets.

We had women on our course who said, ‘I never knew I didn’t have to work full-time.’ They immediately thought 9 to 5 or shift work, 2 til 10 or 6 til 2, that kind of thing. They didn’t realise they had this choice of working part-time.

**Lone mothers**

A combination of poor quality local jobs and a lack of flexibility in working hours can become very significant barriers to work for lone mothers, who must secure a specific income level to make the transition from benefits to paid work economically viable.

Jobs are no more than 12 grand, 14 grand and when you’ve got three kids and you’ve got to pay your childcare you can’t do it.

I would have to be earning an awful lot of money to pay the rent, the council tax and buy everything else.

From my experience, if there’s a mum and a dad in the house and you are both working it can work. Unfortunately, in this day and age, there are lots of single parents and being one of those… and if the other parent...
isn’t providing, then you’ve literally got to do everything and pay all your bills in full. It doesn’t work. I’m going to start crying now.

I’m kind of stuck in the middle, because I want to get a job but it doesn’t really benefit me to get a job...I’ve trained to become a teacher...I don’t know how it’s going to work out if I go and get a teaching job, if I’m going to be worse off. Put yourself in that position if you’ve got children, it’s difficult.

Figure 6 Economic activity of female lone parents

Nevertheless, it appears that in some localities lone mothers are finding it easier to engage with the labour market than in others, as economic inactivity rates for lone mothers vary considerably across the wards studied, as Figure 6 shows. These rates range from just 46% in Whitwood, in the Wakefield district, where 32% of lone mothers work part-time, to 61% in St. Pauls and Soho and Victoria, in Sandwell, where just 15% of lone mothers work part time, and 59% in Aston, Birmingham where, again, just 15% of lone mothers work part-time. This would suggest that some locality-specific factors are affecting lone mothers’ ability to enter paid work in some places. This may include the availability of jobs, the availability of jobs with flexible working hours, the pay rates associated with local jobs, and the scope and range of other services, such as transport, childcare services and employment services.

The transition for lone mothers from benefit claimant to paid worker can be a precarious process. Some lone mothers had made this transition in the past, but the outcomes were often extremely depressing. They had found themselves unable to make ends meet, and ultimately immersed in debt.

Every time I tried to get off benefits I found myself in financial straits. I always end up being in debt, and going back on benefits.

Trying to transfer back on to benefits could often be a very difficult process which, once experienced, could distance women even further from the labour market.

It made me feel like a failure, because I failed to provide for my son. I tried to go to work and failed. I got really badly depressed. I felt like I was useless. When I tried to sort out my benefits, they were saying: ‘go away’, ‘come back’, ‘go away’. I didn’t have any money. You try to do it the right way, but I felt very let down. I wanted to kill myself. I was so overwhelmed by everything.
Women carefully weigh up the potential outcomes of working for their income and quality of life. Where the only options open to them are poor quality, low paid jobs, it often simply fails to make economic sense to make the transition from benefits to work.

It’s actually impossible coming off benefits and into work…I’ve sat and calculated it, and it’s quite frustrating. You’re trying to move forward, but you’re stepping back.

If they want women to work, they’ve got to recognise our situation.

When you work out that you can earn more in receipt of benefits than you can working in employment, then that is a barrier. It isn’t because women don’t want to work.

If you are getting Job Seekers (Allowance), you are getting your rent paid, you are getting Child Benefit in your hand…If you get a job at £200 a week and they take a quarter of that in tax, why should you work for that, it’s a disincentive. That’s the way they see it: ‘I won’t be any better off working’. And 90% of local people are looking at very low wages.

Indeed, the very low wages offered in the kinds of jobs many women returners would be able to secure was a critical issue.

They would only earn the minimum wage doing horrible jobs. So it is a risk to come off benefits…It’s quite understandable why it’s difficult to break the cycle.

In addition, many lone mothers were not convinced that the current tax credit system was generous enough to make work worthwhile.

You do get tax credits but it’s still not worth it. When I work it out I’m better off not working. If there’s two of you it might seem a lot but when it’s just you…You get 70% childcare costs through the tax credits but you’ve still got to find the rest yourself.

If you’re on your own you’ve got childcare, you can only work 10 to 2.30 to have time to drop them off and pick them up. What you can earn in that 4 ½ hours isn’t enough to pay the rent. So the system is all messed up.
People do want to work, but all the tax credit in the world isn’t going to pay your rent, unless you’re earning maybe £350 a week. It’s sad, because I don’t want to sit in the house all day.

There is, however, considerable variation in the proportions of working age women who are claiming Income Support across the wards. In Aston, in Birmingham, nearly one quarter of working age women are claiming Income Support, and in Soho and Victoria in Sandwell 30% of working age women are claiming Income Support. By contrast, in Aveley and Uplands in Thurrock and in Glasshoughton in Wakefield, less than 10% of working age women are claiming Income Support. This corresponds with the low female employment rates in Birmingham and Sandwell and the relatively high female employment rates in Wakefield and Thurrock. In other words, women are finding it much easier to engage with the labour market in some localities.

**Special barriers to work**

Across the localities a similar range of barriers to the labour market facing women who want to work were highlighted. It is also clear that some groups of women face specific and very significant barriers to the labour market, for example, women who lack good skills in the English language.

- Amongst the refugees in the borough there’s a small proportion who are job-ready, but a lot of refugees have language issues and other barriers to sort out.

- Language is a big barrier for Somali women. People are impatient, they don’t listen, they don’t even try.

Women who have recently migrated to England often also lack knowledge about how the labour market works or who can help them to find work.

- With refugees there’s the whole thing about understanding the UK labour market, the processes, and the cultural expectations in interviews.

- People are coming here from all over the world and being a newcomer it is very difficult to get a job. Wherever they go they are asked, ‘Have you got any experience?’ And if they haven’t worked anywhere, where can they get experience from? So they are not getting jobs. I am meeting cases like that every day.

And, in general, women without qualifications face a hostile labour market unless they receive considerable support and advice.

- We’ve got loads of women coming in looking for work, but 50% will never get jobs with the kinds of employers we work with. 50% are unsuitable and they need some bigger intervention than we can offer to get them a job.

- There are a lot of women returners who can’t get there because they’ve got various barriers. They need a lot of one-to-one support to address whatever their barriers are - whether they are benefits issues, financial issues, or skills issues, or language issues.

- We did some work with community groups and provided some soft skills training so that people could take up opportunities coming up, and what came out is that people’s basic skills are really, really low...so when they came to filling out forms they still struggled.

**Young women**

There are also a distinct set of issues facing young women who are outside paid employment. For this group their encounters with the labour market can be particularly demoralising as often they receive no response from employers to their job applications.

- You give your CV out, but they never get back to you.

- I’m trained in childcare but I’ve sent CVs and had interviews but I get absolutely nothing back. They don’t even write to you.

- I’ve not done much since I left school. I’ve looked for work and you’ve either got to be 18 or they want experience...They say, ‘we’ll ring you back’, but they never do.
Since I've left school I've filled in lots of application forms and not got anywhere. I did work experience at a pharmacist. I enjoyed that. I look in the papers, I go to Connexions but I'm not getting anywhere.

When I left school I worked in a bottle factory. I only lasted one day. Since then I've been filling in application forms, sending them in, but no-one's got in touch with me.

I've been applying for jobs and they're just not getting back to me or, if they do, they say, 'you haven't got enough experience.'

They're always complaining about teenagers being lazy but they won't give us a job. They blame it on us.

In some wards in the study there are very high rates of unemployment among young women, aged 16-24, as Figure 8 shows. An unemployment rate for this group of women of 12% or more is quite common across the wards, and in the Birmingham and Sandwell wards the proportion of young unemployed women is even higher, reaching 21% in Aston. Clearly it is easier in some localities for young women to enter paid work than in others.

Some young women hoped they would be in a better position once they crossed the threshold from 17 to 18, or to 21.

It's hard to get jobs. You apply and nobody gets back to you.

I've not done much since I left school. I've looked for work and you've either got to be 18 or they want experience…They say, 'we'll ring you back', but they never do.

I'm looking for anything. They say it's easier to get work after you turn 18.

Some jobs say you've got to be over 21, with experience.

But in their current circumstances some young women expressed feelings of intense depression because of the difficulties of gaining a foothold in the labour market. These are women who felt abandoned by the system.
It just does your head in. You feel you are just being made out to be an idiot because you’re not 18 and you’ve got no experience. What’s the point of living really? Nobody’s helping you, nobody’s giving you no money from nowhere. What is the point? It’s nice to talk to someone who will sit and listen.

Some of the young women had had jobs in the past, but they had experienced a significant level of exploitation, which had left them not only out of work, but also disillusioned with local employment conditions. This experience appeared to distance them from the labour market even further.

My last job didn’t pay me £5.05, they paid me £4.50, even though I am 22. They were paying me below the minimum wage. I complained about it so many times and they said there was nothing they can do about it. I said, ‘No, that’s the law’, so I left in the end.

I was working for £60 a week and it was hard work. I had to bike there every day because I didn’t live close by and no buses go there. I ended up running the place for £60 a week.

I started a job at £5.05 an hour and then, in the second week, he said, ‘how old are you?’ When I said I was 17 he said, ‘it’s 3 quid then’.

Discrimination and the labour market

This study also shows that some women are concerned that they face various forms of discrimination in the labour market. Some women argued that ‘post-code discrimination’ affected their chances of getting work.

They look at your post code and they say, ‘Well, we don’t want anyone from ----- because these are no-go areas’ …you’re scary because you’re from -----.

As soon as I said I lived in ----- everyone gasped and said, ‘Oh my God, people get murdered there all the time.’

I’ve actually applied for jobs and put my sister’s address, -----, and my home address in -----, and I got a reply with my sister’s address

Others argued that when they applied for jobs they were not selected because of their race or religion. Muslim women felt that the current political climate was one in which their search for work would be difficult.

They look at the way you dress (indicating her headscarf and dress) and they won’t call you after the interview. I’ve applied for jobs and thought that was the reason they blocked me. Even though I have a health and social care qualification, they didn’t get back to me. Maybe it was the language. They didn’t say.

You don’t get feedback. They won’t tell you the truth, will they? They’ll say someone is better qualified, or has more experience than you.

They say there’s no sexism or racism, but there is. You can’t deny it. It’s there in the workplace.

It's going to be hard for us because we're Muslim. We wear the hijab, we always have our heads covered, we wear long dresses. They don't want you to be like that. Whatever level you are doing, it's going to be hard for a Muslim because of the news.

I think the main reason may be because we're Asians. With all that’s been happening and things you can see on the television. It’s not the main one, but it can be a reason.

As we showed in Tables 2 and 3, rates of unemployment are very high amongst women from some ethnic minority groups across the localities, particularly women of Pakistani or Bangladeshi origin. Some of these women may be women who have worked in manufacturing industry in the past, in firms where English language skills were not required. They have found that absorption into the contemporary labour market is difficult, since more sophisticated English language skills are often required. In Sandwell, some of these women have been pushed to the margins of the labour market:

With the older ones, that have come from textiles - they really want to work ... Some get jobs as cleaners or in the laundries, but a lot have ended up on Incapacity Benefit.

There’s a coach comes at the top of the road, every night. It takes women out to the farms where they work as night workers
Nevertheless, it is hard to explain the unemployment rate of 34% for Pakistani women in Soho and Victoria in Sandwell, or the rate of 28% for Pakistani women in Aston, Birmingham, without acknowledging the possibility of racial discrimination in the labour market. There is further discussion of this issue in our companion GELLM study on ethnic minority women and the labour market (Yeandle et al 2006b).

Certainly some of the women felt that discrimination, and other disadvantages they faced in the British labour market, would defeat them in their efforts to find work. Some had taken up voluntary work to fill their time and to make a contribution to their community. But the desire to work was very much alive, and being lived out through their hopes for the next generation. They were looking forward to better opportunities for their daughters.

_They will do better than us, because their language is better and because they've grown up here. Their attitude is different. We have ideas from our own country, they grow up here. But the image is still there to other people. But they are younger. They will have a better chance._

_We help our boys and girls to get higher grades in their GCSEs and A Levels. Each year their grades get higher and higher. We want them to do the best they can to go to university. That is our aim._

**Summary**

Across the localities there was a consistent reference to a core range of factors which had a significant impact on 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 meant 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 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 can 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 worker is an especially precarious process for lone mothers, who have to secure a particular level of income to maintain their families. This can be an acute problem in localities with a high cost of living. 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. This can be because of the poor availability of part-time or flexible jobs in some labour markets, or because women are seeking a job with a very particular working pattern, or it may be a result of a lack of knowledge of available jobs. 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, for example because they lack qualifications or their skills are at a very low level. In some localities very high percentages of women in particular age groups have no formal qualifications. And women who have migrated to Britain can lack the level of English language skills appropriate for the contemporary labour market. Some of these women have worked in manufacturing industry in the past, where sophisticated English language skills were not essential. But once made redundant from these jobs, they find it hard to be re-absorbed into other forms of work and find themselves on the fringes of the labour market in casual, cash-in-hand employment.

Young women under 18 and outside paid employment, particularly those without qualifications, can face a hostile labour market. Young women’s search for work can be extremely demoralising as they rarely
receive responses from 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.

Some women living in particular localities argue that where they live places them at a disadvantage in the labour market. Employers, they feel, are less willing to consider applicants with particular addresses. This can be compounded by race discrimination in the labour market. Levels of unemployment and economic inactivity are very high for some groups of ethnic minority women, evidence which suggests that racial discrimination does have an impact on women’s ability to connect with the labour market.

This study reveals that women face a distinct set of barriers to the labour market. Their disconnection from the labour market derives partly from the effects of interrupted working lives but it also flows from the gendered structure of local labour markets. Some of the barriers can be addressed with practical programmes, support and advice; other barriers require a broader challenge to the gendered and racialised dimensions of local labour markets. In the following section we examine some practical responses to women’s disconnection with these local labour markets, and seek to identify key elements of good practice in assisting women to connect with the labour market.
4 CONNECTING WOMEN WITH THE LABOUR MARKET

In this section we discuss how employment services and strategies could assist women who are outside paid employment to connect with the labour market. Based on our analysis of the range of factors and circumstances which currently operate as barriers to the labour market for women, and drawing on our research into locally-based employment services, we seek to identify a range of themes which illustrate aspects of good practice in connecting women with the labour market. One set of themes is associated with responding to women’s circumstances and aspirations. A second set of themes is concerned with the wider strategic response to the changing nature of local labour markets.

Responding to women’s circumstances

In Section 3 we identified a number of features of women’s lives and circumstances which can prevent unemployed and economically inactive women who want to work from connecting with the labour market. Helping to connect women with the labour market involves tackling these fundamental barriers.

Providing work experience

One of the key barriers to the labour market for women is their lack of recent work experience. One model in the provision of work experience is the Intermediate Labour Market (ILM). ILMs are employment projects which seek to build a bridge to work by providing participants with paid work on a temporary basis, together with focused training, support for personal development, and assistance with job search (Marshall and Macfarlane 2000). The length of work experience offered can vary, but many existing projects offer six to 12 months. Projects are founded on the understanding that many people need support in their transition from economic inactivity to paid work, and that without recent work experience they are at a disadvantage in the labour market. One of the keys to successful ILMs involves being close to real labour market conditions: offering work experience in areas of expanding work, or where there are shortages of labour, and ensuring close employer engagement. Trainees should be in a position to apply for real jobs once their period of work experience and training ends, and real jobs must be available for them to apply for.

This works as long as there are valid jobs at the end. It can’t be ‘thank you and goodbye’ at the end. There must be jobs… I worked with a project where there was no job offered at the end and it seemed quite cruel. It felt they were offering the world and then it was taken away.

Equally, successful ILMs offer intensive personal support to trainees so that they build their confidence and skills during the period of work experience. Some successful projects have developed in the field of para-professional jobs, such as teaching assistants and health care assistants, jobs which are attractive to some women. Overall, the work experience approach to re-connecting people with the labour market has been demonstrated to be more successful than a ‘skills first’ approach (see for example Mansour 2005). However, the high costs associated with ILMs are often cited as a disadvantage of this approach.

In some localities there are projects which are structured around some of the key principles of ILMs: work experience, personal support and employer engagement - but where costs are contained by offering shorter periods of work experience, or short periods of intensive job-focused training, or enabling recruits to continue to claim benefits during the work experience period. Having a clear focus in terms of client group and job requirements are vital in developing a more bespoke approach. Some groups of people have considerable support needs and are a long way from the labour market, whilst other people need minimal support and training in the transition to work.
Box 2   Thurrock Community Mothers

The Thurrock Community Mothers programme is an innovative parent support programme, which began in 1991 as the first pilot in the UK. A key focus of the scheme is promoting positive community health and developing early parenting skills. Whilst Community Mothers deliver the intervention, equal emphasis is placed on nurturing their own learning, personal development and employment opportunities.

The programme operates at the primary health care interface and provides flexible outreach interventions to engage with hard to reach parents. Community Mothers offer befriending and useful health, and parenting and other information to other parents with young children living in their local area. Community Mothers recognise the parents they work with as equals and as ‘experts’ in the rearing of their own children. They are representatives of their own communities and offer help from “within” using a pro-active non-stigmatising approach that values prevention. An experienced public health nurse, with a team of community mother development workers, provides ongoing support, monitoring, training and guidance.

Community mothers are first recruited on a voluntary basis and normally live in the same communities as the parents whom they support. No qualifications are required and a mother of any age can apply (including grandmothers). Once recruited, Community Mothers are offered individually tailored personal development opportunities to further develop literacy, numeracy skills and IT skills. A flexible approach is used because skills levels vary considerably. The project has gradually built its own capacity to deliver by employing a team of 14 Community Mothers who have gained skills at level 3 as the programme has progressed and developed over the past 15 years. Job responsibilities include various project coordinator roles, programme trainer and community support worker roles.

The programme is also an indirect route into associated work opportunities such as community development workers, Sure Start, early years sector and health promotion. By using a partnership model that embraces joint working between health, social care and adult education sectors, new workforce development opportunities are provided that support current practice development in relation to multi-skilled locality teams.

Focusing training on real jobs

Across the localities in this study there was a wide availability of training courses in skills such as IT, food hygiene and English as Second Language (ESOL). However, a number of concerns were expressed about the effectiveness of this training in terms of connecting women with the labour market. One concern was that sometimes people moved from one course to another without ever taking the step into work.

*It’s important to focus things on employment and jobs, and not to run training for the sake of it. There’s a lot of training out there, and people go from training course to training course.*

More fundamental, however, was the concern that the skills often acquired on training schemes were not job specific and were thus unconnected with genuine labour market developments, opportunities and requirements. This view lends support to the argument above, that training must be carefully geared to the requirements of specific jobs or to individual employer requirements to be effective and successful.

*I think we have to offer something more like a work environment than a training environment, and you’ve got to get the employers on board. I mean, anyone who wanted to train on anything in ---- - I bet you could find a course. There are buckets of it. It’s much more about being clear about the jobs coming through. We’ve got to focus on what’s coming through, so that we get local people into the new jobs.*

Providing practical, one-to-one services

One of the most important features of services seeking to re-engage women with the labour market involves understanding their circumstances, aspirations and service needs. The service needs of women returners and young women who want to engage with paid employment are often quite gender specific, and
stem from the nature of women’s family lives, their distinct relationships with labour markets and their labour market aspirations. Because of this it will not be sufficient to simply point women in the direction of job vacancies, as women explain:

I went to the Job Centre. I said I wanted to work in the hours my son is at school. I said I didn't want to be on benefits for the rest of my life. They told me to go and look at the machine.

They’re supposed to help you in your search for work, but I often wonder, ‘Is this a real job for you, because you’re not actually doing anything.’ They sit there...and they bring on the screen possible jobs and they give you a piece of paper and an application form, and they say ‘Fill it in and send out the application form’, and that’s the end of it. They’re not helping.

When you go to the Job Centre they say, 'just go on the machine', it's not that helpful.

I thought they’d be more about sitting you down and looking at what you want to do, a plan or something. Something constructive. But all they’re doing is looking on the internet and getting jobs up. You can do that yourself.

Box 3  Women Like Us

*Women Like Us* is a voluntary, job brokerage organisation based in Camden, which helps women with children to find local, part-time and flexible work. They do this by going out to women where they are every day, where they naturally network, and where thousands of women across the country are talking about how to get back to work: the school gates. They have built a network of ‘reps’ across 17 schools in north and central London who promote their service to other parents in their children’s primary school.

*Women Like Us* provides an excellent example of the success that flows from reaching out to women. By making contact with women in local schools they have engaged a large group of women who had no previous contact with employment services, and who lacked information about local job opportunities. *Women Like Us* provides a regularly up-dated list of local job opportunities on their website.

As well as a job brokerage service, *Women Like Us*, also offers a career coaching programme, which includes both group and individual discussions. The programme takes women through a mixture of individual 1-1 coaching and four, small group coaching sessions. In this way, women receive individual support to explore issues personal to them, and meet a small group of peers for networking, sharing ideas and informal support. The sessions are divided into three areas – analysis, ambitions and action. During the sessions, women focus on their own circumstances and explore how they feel about returning to work. They look at what is important to them, what they want to do, and how they are going to do it. This is followed with a session on practical steps in job searching.

What women are searching for when they approach an employment service is constructive, one-to one, practical assistance, which provides the knowledge necessary to apply successfully for jobs and to achieve success at interviews. They are seeking advice which is based on a careful appreciation of their specific circumstances.

It’s not just about filling in an application form. It’s how you come across when you do get an interview. It’s about bringing the best of us out, letting us recall that before we had all these kids we were somebody. It’s about bringing our individuality back.

I’d like a place where you could go and they say, ‘here are the jobs, we’ll help you. We’ll phone them for you. Just to be a bit friendly. They don’t make you feel welcome or that you are doing your best to find a job. If they could give us some help with interviews and help with CVs.
It isn’t that women don’t want to work, but they often need help with writing CVs, how you present at interviews, filling out application forms. We’ve even lent women clothes to wear to an interview. It’s all those kinds of things.

When women receive this kind of individualised, practical support it can make a real difference to their confidence and their ability to engage with the labour market.

For someone to look at your skills and give you ideas of the direction you could go was really helpful.

I’ve just done a career counselling course, with other women. It was fantastic because not only was it really good, but it was also finding that I hadn’t done this to myself, and that I wasn’t alone in feeling completely useless. It brought me to realise that I did have something that I could use again.

Often this is simply about listening to women, understanding their employment history and their particular individual circumstances and aspirations. Yet sometimes services fail to do this.

When I first went I wanted a job or maybe to go on a training course but I didn’t want to go to college and I said I didn’t want to go to college. But she put a College brochure in my hand. She wasn’t really listening to me.

Women experienced the frustration of not being able to connect with the labour market, but also felt keenly the experience of not being listened to. Sometimes assumptions are made about women which fail to appreciate their real circumstances. For example, some women were concerned that once identified as a ‘single parent’, this could lead to a range of unfounded assumptions about them.

They assume that if you are a single parent you just went out and got pregnant by some boy, haven’t finished school and never wanted to work.

There’s a huge gap between who we are and the way people on the other side are seeing us.

A local approach
A genuine understanding of women’s needs is most likely to develop by getting close to local communities. This is why projects which are locally-based and develop from a genuine understanding of people within a community can be very successful.

I try to talk to people in the council about what it’s like locally, but I am not sure they understand the detail. If we are going to help people into work they have to recognise how difficult it is to place people and how much support they need.

It’s finding out what women want. We tend to say, ‘We’ll put this on for you’, and then we don’t get anyone to attend.

Projects which have a physical presence within a locality are more accessible to women, who are then more likely to use their services. At the same time, some women may lack the confidence to approach a project or to take the step to seek advice or guidance. Others are unaware of the help and advice which exists. This is why some projects reach out to women in a locality and strive to make contact with them at the places they attend, day to day, such as schools and community centres.
Box 4  The Working For Health Job Shop

The Working for Health Job Shop, is based on the high street in Kentish Town, London. This service was launched by Camden Primary Care Trust to help local employed, unemployed and economically inactive people find new careers within local health services. The PCT are seeking to recruit more staff from the local community and the job shop is an innovative way to attract local people to work for local health services. The Working for Health Job Shop advertises vacancies for jobs at Camden PCT and other local NHS Trusts. The visibility of the Job Shop, situated as it is on the high street, makes this an extremely accessible way of finding out about health service jobs. It can also be accessed by a client group much wider than those who are registered as unemployed, but who nevertheless want to work. Many of the clients using this service are economically inactive women.

The Job Shop also provides various methods of support and assistance to those looking for jobs, including job-focused training sessions. The centre’s expert advisors offer career advice and help with completing job applications. As well as recruitment, the job shops aims to raise public awareness of local health services and health issues by displaying information about services, initiatives and campaigns.

Our evidence shows that women are frustrated in their search for work by the poor quality of some of the jobs available to them close to where they live. They were looking for jobs which offered opportunities for advancement, and some women wanted jobs with flexible hours of work. It was unrealistic to expect people to make the transition from benefits to work unless a good level of income was guaranteed.

The Jobs that go through the Job Centre tend to be crappy security jobs, retail jobs that are here today and gone tomorrow, minimum wage, 40 hour week jobs - and you never see your kids. These are not the jobs women want. The jobs might be entry level jobs, but they need to be jobs where people can progress.

This is why some employment projects make a special effort to identify good quality, local jobs with flexible hours of work. Linking women to jobs with progression opportunities is likely to lead to a much more sustained commitment to the labour market. But more employers need to be persuaded of the benefits of flexible working. Employment projects which have good links with employers are in a position to persuade employers of the recruitment benefits of flexible working.

We can make jobs more accessible by educating managers who can’t recruit to jobs because they advertise them as 35 hours. If they advertised them as part-time they’d get much higher quality candidates. It’s so obvious.

Employers also need to be persuaded to adopt new approaches to recruitment if economically inactive and unemployed women are to be re-connected with the labour market.

What we need to do is persuade an employer not to take the normal people, but to take unusual people, stretch their criteria, change their ways of working.

The key is having the employer on board. We can come up with the bright ideas, it’s having the employer on board, who will open up a placement and give their staff resources…It needs that extra effort because you’ve got people who are not used to working and not the usual recruits.

Employers will look for a business case if they are to be persuaded to recruit in new and different ways. There should be considerable scope to develop this approach, as the new public sector duty, being introduced in 2007 under the Equality Act 2006, comes into effect. Public bodies will need to demonstrate that they are promoting gender equality in their employment policies, as well as in the services they provide, and there may also be opportunities to influence employers in the private sector through the commissioning and procurement process.

However, to make a real change in employers’ recruitment practices and their approach to job design, a locality-based strategic approach is required.
Adopting a strategic approach

The recent Green Paper, *A New Deal for Welfare: empowering people to work* (DWP 2006) makes a strong case for local responses to worklessness. Such an approach is already being adopted in some of the localities participating in this study, and across the localities the importance of a strategic approach to addressing labour market issues was frequently referred to. There are a range of issues that need to be tackled strategically, in particular, developing local plans which address the changing nature of employers’ needs within local labour markets, taking a strategic approach to project funding, understanding and responding to the range of client groups, and, crucially, appreciating the gendered nature of local labour markets.

**Developing local plans**

In some localities a strategic approach was being developed through partnerships involving local authorities and a range of organisations concerned with training, education and skill development. In other areas there was a concern that a strategic approach to labour market issues was lacking, and that whilst there was considerable focus on physical regeneration, there was no strategic responsibility for labour market issues.

A strategic approach can involve developing local plans, with the local authority working with its partners in identifying the needs of local communities and seeking to:

> identify gaps in provision, put together new activities to address local needs and try to influence the mainstream activities that are already there.

Crucially, from the perspective of this study, a strategic approach involves a commitment to tackle employment issues on a localised basis and to engage with local voluntary sector organisations which often have a good knowledge of local issues and local populations.

Successful strategies for enhancing labour market engagement are based on a sound understanding of the changing nature of local labour markets and job opportunities. But our research shows that this must involve an appreciation of the gendered nature of local labour markets. Women’s disconnection from the labour market involves a specific set of circumstances, and requires a distinct policy response. More fundamentally, local policy makers must acknowledge women’s desire to work. In some localities representatives from key organisations maintain the out-dated view that certain groups of women do not want to work. This kind of perspective was hampering the development of gender-sensitive employment services.

*If you’ve got key workers holding that kind of attitude then they will never present women with opportunities...and because they hold those views they reinforce the problem of women not working even further.*

**Appreciating the differences between women**

Employment services and projects need a clear focus for their work. Unemployed and economically inactive women range across a spectrum, from those who are skilled and educated, to those with few skills and who are a long distance from the labour market. Successful projects are those which take a realistic look at the differences between women, and focus on specific client groups. Their service provision is then attuned to meet a specific set of needs. This involves listening to women and understanding their circumstances. Some women outside employment are skilled and qualified, yet employment services often overlook their specific needs in re-engaging with the labour market.

*They are missing us out. They assume everyone in the middle class is sorted. That doesn’t make any sense. The system seems to reflect these assumptions. There isn’t a box for educated women.*

*They are missing this whole pool of women like us with qualifications and experience.*

Often employment service providers only offered women outside paid employment information about a narrow range of job vacancies.
The ---- is absolutely useless if you want anything more than an NVQ in hairdressing or childcare. They don't have any other jobs. All these incentives that they say they are offering, free training, free childcare, it's only if you want to do one of their courses.

It’s all hairdressing, childcare – it’s for people without qualifications

At the same time, services for those women who are a long way from the labour market need to be intensive, long term and sensitive to their situation.

You have to deal with all their issues and it has to be done in a gentle, kind and supportive way.

If you want to encourage more women into work you need to look at the needs of those women, what sort of support do they require financially, educationally, we need a more holistic approach rather than - we'll have a bit of this and a bit of that.

You need to offer a lot of tender loving care, hand holding. It’s about building up people’s confidence and building self-esteem.

You have to work with some people for 14 months. People don’t necessarily understand the detail of what we do. There are a lot of problems. There is no easy fix.

**Adopting a strategic approach to project funding**

Across the localities participating in the research there were many excellent employment projects. Often these were subject to short-term funding, however, and were only able to operate on a small-scale. Good projects need long-term funding, core funding for project management and administration, and well-qualified and well-paid staff who can offer high quality services.

You need good staff members to do the training and get people into jobs, but it also takes a lot of management time getting the training right for the employers.

The biggest thing is, all the people who deal with clients are the poorest paid in the organisation, and that doesn’t work. You can’t pay people £14,000 to deal with really vulnerable people. If the advice is going to be really good quality advice, the people delivering it need to be well paid, or you won’t get that quality.

There’s a view that – oh, two years funding, that’s enough to turn it around…and I think, 'What planet are you on?’ … you are not going to turn things round quickly. That’s why we need much longer-term funding

We understand the local community, but we are never sure whether we can survive. Funders don’t cover our core costs, they will only fund projects. We need mainstream funding. Every year we have to stop everything to apply for more money to keep going.

Our study found some criticism of mainstream employment service provision as too heavily ‘programme driven’, with a rigid focus on a limited range of ‘categories’ of people who are benefit claimants. This had led to most funding being focused on a narrow range of people, neglecting the large numbers of economically inactive women who are not claiming benefits but who want to work.

**Funding drives you towards the women who are saturated with services they don’t want. It’s saying, we must deal with the most excluded women - but I think exclusion is on a scale.**

It was felt that a ‘programme-driven’ approach also made it difficult for the complexity of the lives and circumstances of those included within a target category to be appreciated. The same generic service was delivered, regardless of the unique circumstances of the person.

**Big organisations doing this kind of work - they are chasing the money. They don’t understand who the women are. Some organisations don’t talk to people.**

As a consequence, these programmes were less successful than they might be.

Some interviewees also referred to the way that local projects often competed for clients in an effort to meet their targets for 'people into jobs'.
We're all competing for the same client groups, so we are all seeking to cut each other’s throats. We are all trying to secure funding to keep ourselves in existence, so we are fighting over a pot that won't cover everybody. They call it a partnership, but they are all going behind each other's backs.

Interviewees linked this to the lack of overall co-ordination, and thus to the duplication of local work. And target setting, it was claimed, was too often simplistic and numbers-based. Organisations referred to others being prepared to 'cut throats' to meet their targets, and of the ways in which the current approach militated against genuine partnership working.

Voluntary sector and community groups were also hampered by problems created by short-term and limited funding for employment projects. This left them unable to plan services and to offer the kind of long term support that unemployed people often required.

We understand the local community, but we are never sure whether we can survive. Funders don't cover our core costs, they will only fund projects. We need mainstream funding. Every year we have to stop everything to apply for more money to keep going.

Raising young women’s aspirations

There was also scope, within a more strategic approach to connecting women with the labour market, to raise the aspirations of young girls. Our study has revealed that young women’s job search was often restricted to a very narrow range of jobs, in low paid sectors such as childcare, retail and social care. Limited knowledge of the wide range of job opportunities available in the labour market may be a barrier in itself, as young women are aware of the low wages attached to the kinds of jobs they are looking for. Across the localities the importance of adopting a more strategic approach to raising young women’s aspirations was emphasised.

We should start in school. There should be time set aside – not some tired old careers person – but someone that can actually show them what’s out there. Encourage them and plant ideas in their mind. Not just when they get to year 10 and 11, it’s too late then. They’ve got to be trying from year 7.

Summary

Good practice in employment services for women involves understanding and responding to women’s circumstances and adopting a strategic and gender-sensitive approach to labour market issues. 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, firm links with employers and an understanding of their specific recruitment needs. Labour market intelligence must acknowledge the gendered dimensions of labour supply and demand.

In order to support women in the transition back to work we need services which devote time to listening to women and understanding their specific circumstances. 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, 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: helping 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.

Much can be achieved in helping economically inactive women by working at the local level, with good knowledge of local people’s needs and good links with local employers. But connecting women with good jobs, which offer opportunities for advancement, is the key to sustainable employment. Local employers need to be persuaded of the benefits for recruitment of good job design and of developing jobs with flexible hours. And if they are to recruit women from disadvantaged communities, they have to be encouraged to take a risk and engage kinds of people that they do not normally recruit.
Responding to the needs of economically inactive women is best achieved as part of a local strategic approach to labour market issues. In some localities there is no strategic responsibility for labour market concerns and this leads to dislocation between projects, duplication of work, and the needs of particular groups or particular localities being overlooked. Projects can find themselves competing for clients rather than co-operating in a joint effort to help unemployed and economically inactive people. A strategic approach, also means 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.

Some aspects of women’s disconnection with the labour market start at a young age. Many young women have limited horizons in terms of the labour market, and are then frustrated by the poor rewards that work offers. Much more could be done to raise young women’s aspirations in schools.
5 POLICY MESSAGES

The women who participated in this study expressed a strong desire to work and our analysis of the statistical data shows that there are large numbers of women who are currently outside paid work who want to work. Yet this desire to work amongst women who are striving to connect with the labour market 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 are seeking. They also sometimes lose confidence in their abilities and skills. Yet there is no distinct policy response to this, leaving women to do the 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 seeking to connect with the labour market, based on an understanding of women’s position in the labour market.

Across the localities and wards participating in this study there were unique patterns of women’s disconnection with the labour market. This variability in women’s disconnection from the labour market across the localities was further complicated by differences between women in terms of age, ethnicity and family status. In turn, variation by age, ethnicity and family status plays out differently in different local labour markets. Overall, each local labour market presented a distinct set of issues to be addressed. 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. Yet these projects are often small scale, voluntary projects with insecure funding. Policy makers should consider ways to develop greater provision to enable women to acquire essential work experience. This needs to be done in close collaboration with employers, so that training and work experience provision match with genuine job opportunities and employer requirements. Voluntary sector projects need core funding and a longer-term commitment from employers if they are to sustain their work.

Many women outside paid employment are looking for practical support in connecting with the labour market. They want help with writing CVs, preparing for interviews and filling out application forms. They are also looking for constructive help with planning their future employment. Many women do not have access to this kind of practical, individualised support and some are unaware that advice is available. Economically inactive women who are not claiming benefits are unlikely to use mainstream services. Wider provision of these services would be beneficial, but services need to be of a high quality and delivered by well-qualified, experienced advisors.

Many women returning to work are looking for part-time jobs, work during school hours or term-time, and jobs with flexible working hours. The scarcity of such jobs can hamper women’s connection with the labour market. Whilst it may not be always be possible to meet specific working hours requirements, 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. Many employment projects seeking to assist these women into work argue that employers need to take a risk and offer opportunities to kinds of people they do not normally recruit. In many jobs a good knowledge of a local community and good connections within it are vital skills and employers will also benefit by developing a much more diverse workforce. Employers should be encouraged to take a risk and to develop new approaches to recruitment.
Young women who are outside paid employment often feel abandoned in the labour market with no support. They argue that service providers do not always listen to them and do not understand their labour market aspirations. Some employers exploit them, paying them wages considerably below the minimum wage. This set of circumstances can leave young women feeling depressed and isolated and further distanced from the labour market. They also lack the income that helps to build independence and self-confidence. Young unemployed women are sometimes offered only a very narrow range of job opportunities, and this serves to limit their horizons in the labour market and undermines their ability to achieve financial independence. Much more could be done to support young women, but it will be necessary to offer practical, one-to-one support, to listen to their views and aspirations, and to acknowledge their desire to work. There is also scope to review the careers advice offered to girls in schools to ensure that girls are aware of the wide range of employment opportunities in contemporary labour markets.

Local labour markets are not working as efficiently as they could be for economically inactive women. Yet there are many practical steps that can be taken to address this. As local authorities develop a more strategic approach to labour market issues, the measures necessary to connect economically inactive and unemployed women with the labour market need to be incorporated within these strategic plans. There is a danger in focusing all projects and programmes solely on benefit claimants, as this overlooks the economically inactive women who are struggling to connect with the labour market. By addressing the needs of these women within a local strategic plan, local employment rates could be significantly enhanced.

If women’s connection with the labour market is to be sustainable, it will be important to engage women in good quality jobs, which offer progression opportunities. Often the transition women make to work cannot be sustained because the jobs women move into are too low paid to maintain family income. A long term strategy for engaging women in the labour market will need to address the quality of the jobs available to women living in disadvantaged communities.
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APPENDIX 1  GENDER AND EMPLOYMENT IN LOCAL LABOUR MARKETS

The Gender and Employment in Local Labour Markets project was funded, between September 2003 and August 2006, by a core European Social Fund grant to Professor Sue Yeandle and her research team at the Centre for Social Inclusion, Sheffield Hallam University. The award was made from within ESF Policy Field 5 Measure 2, ‘Gender and Discrimination in Employment’. The grant was supplemented with additional funds and resources provided by a range of partner agencies, notably the Equal Opportunities Commission, the TUC, and 12 English local authorities.

The GELLM project output comprises:

• new statistical analysis of district-level labour market data, led by Dr Lisa Buckner, producing separate Gender Profiles of the local labour markets of each of the participating local authorities (Buckner, Tang and Yeandle 2004, 2005, 2006) - available from the local authorities concerned and at www.shu.ac.uk/research/csi

• 6 Local Research Studies, each involving between three and six of the project’s local authority partners. Locality and Synthesis reports of these studies, published spring-summer 2006 are available at www.shu.ac.uk/research/csi. Details of other publications and presentations relating to the GELLM programme are also posted on this website.

1. Working below potential: women and part-time work, led by Dr Linda Grant and part-funded by the EOC (first published by the EOC in 2005)
2. Connecting women with the labour market, led by Dr Linda Grant
3. Ethnic minority women and access to the labour market, led by Bernadette Stiell
4. Women’s career development in the local authority sector in England led by Dr Cinnamon Bennett
5. Addressing women’s poverty: local labour market initiatives led by Karen Escott
6. Local challenges in meeting demand for domiciliary care led from autumn 2005 by Professor Sue Yeandle and prior to this by Anu Suokas

The GELLM Team
Led by Professor Sue Yeandle, the members of the GELLM research team at the Centre for Social Inclusion are: Dr Cinnamon Bennett, Dr Lisa Buckner, Ian Chesters (administrator), Karen Escott, Dr Linda Grant, Christopher Price, Lucy Shipton, Bernadette Stiell, Anu Suokas (until autumn 2005), and Dr Ning Tang. The team is grateful to Dr Pamela Fisher for her contribution to the project in 2004, and for the continuing advice and support of Dr Chris Gardiner.

The GELLM Partnership
The national partners supporting the GELLM project are the Equal Opportunities Commission and the TUC. The project’s 12 local authority partners are: Birmingham City Council, the London Borough of Camden, East Staffordshire Borough Council, Leicester City Council, Newcastle City Council, Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council, Somerset County Council, the London Borough of Southwark, Thurrock Council, Trafford Metropolitan Borough Council, Wakefield Metropolitan District Council and West Sussex County Council. The North East Coalition of Employers has also provided financial resources via Newcastle City Council. The team is grateful for the support of these agencies, without which the project could not have been developed. The GELLM project engaged Professor Damian Grimshaw, Professor Ed Fieldhouse (both of Manchester University) and Professor Irene Hardill (Nottingham Trent University), as external academic advisers to the project team, and thanks them for their valuable advice and support.
APPENDIX 2  RESEARCH METHODS

The research for this study of women disconnected from the labour market included:

- interviews with 51 representatives from local organisations
- 10 focus groups involving 101 local women.

The fieldwork for the study was conducted during 2005 and 2006. The research also involved extensive analysis of statistical data, including the 2001 Census.

The interviews with key informants explored: the activities and priorities of their organisation; local social and economic conditions; the nature of the local labour market for men and women; the social and economic circumstances of local unemployed and economically inactive women and men; local services; local employment projects; and views about, and experience of, the Intermediate Labour Market (ILM) model.

The focus groups with women covered the following topics: work history; experience of looking for work; labour market support and advice; reasons for not working; views about not working; aspirations in relation to paid work; views about the ILM model.

10 focus groups with 101 women were conducted: 57 were women aged 25 – 49 and 44 were women aged 16-24.

Not all of the women participating in the focus groups gave details of their age and other characteristics.

Of those who supplied information aged 25-49 their characteristics were as follows:

- 17 were aged 25 - 30; 16 were aged 35- 40; 13 were aged 36-40; 8 were aged 40+
- 46 of the women had dependent children
- 50 women described their ethnic origin as follows: 16 as White British; 6 as African Caribbean; 8 as Black African; 1 as Indian; 11 as Bangladeshi; 3 as Pakistani; 3 as Nepalese; 1 as Mixed White and African; 1 as White European
- 42 of the women had worked in the past
- 43 were currently looking for work
- 8 of the women were educated to degree level; 4 to A Level; and 24 had GCSEs

Of those who supplied information aged 16-24 their characteristics were as follows:

- 31 were aged 16-20; 13 were aged 21-24
- 8 of the women had dependent children
- 44 women described their ethnic origin as follows: 23 as White British; 1 as African Caribbean; 1 as Black African; 1 as Indian; 8 as Bangladeshi; 9 as Pakistani; 1 as Mixed White and African Caribbean
- 29 of the women had worked in the past
- 35 of the women were looking for work
- 1 of the women was educated to degree level; 4 to A Level; and 18 had GCSEs

8 The authors of this report would like to thank Christopher Price and Gerard Poole for research support with the fieldwork and the analysis of census data.