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Can women really restart their career after quitting work for children?

It's all very well for some, but the obstacles facing women returning from an extended period away from work can be insurmountable

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Women often find their old job has changed or disappeared altogether when they go back to their old employer after having children. Photograph: Mark Edward Atkinson/ Mark Edward Atkinson/Tetra Im

Premieres, 12-hour days and trips across the Atlantic were the usual weekly fare for Kath McDonald, 41, who nine years ago worked in the film industry. Her clothes were by Vivienne Westwood and her makeup was "the poshest". "It was hard work, but I was good at it and valued, they certainly didn't want me to go and it was all promises of 'there will always be a job here for you' and 'come back whenever you want'."

But after leaving to have her first child, those promises were broken. "I took 16 months with my daughter and then went back to see my old company. It was the start of the recession, people were worried.

"My old boss had moved on and the place was full of bright-faced young things who

looked at me as though I was a mad dinosaur. I had a rethink and decided to have another baby and then perhaps retrain, but somehow it all just slipped."

She now cleans houses while the children are at school and is terrified of the future. "I have to get back to work, but it's really scary. I went for an interview at Marks & Spencer and practically had a panic attack. I used to phone up Leonardo DiCaprio and now I'm in rubber gloves in other people's toilets."

This spring singer Lily Allen dubbed her return to the stage after four years off a "mumback". "I've had two kids, and as much as I love that, I'm never going to be the sort of person who sits at home all day playing with plastic toys," she said.

Last week, Ruby McGregor-Smith, chair of the Women's Business Council, said Britain could create employment for many of the 2.4 million non-working women who would like jobs over the next five years if flexible conditions were embraced. She said women should not just be trying to fit in to the economy but "be shaping it".

Gaby Hinsliff, a former *Observer* political editor who quit to spend more time with her son in 2009, was chairing a debate at the [Mumsnet WorkFest](#) this weekend. She said: "Alpha-returners like Allen are increasingly coming back not just into any old job, but into decidedly stellar careers."

Hinsliff interviewed several women she said had "bounced back" and points to McGregor-Smith, who had an 18-month career break, and Professor Margaret Rayman, who had 17 years out before going back into science and making important breakthroughs in nutrition. Hinsliff said: "Nobody's pretending this kind of comeback is easy. Everyone I interviewed struggled at first and the best advice for exhausted parents tempted to give up work is to try going part-time if you can, and keep your options open."

But can a woman who leaves her career to have children really expect to get back into the workforce at a similar level? "No," said Alexa Kerr, a careers development consultant who runs First Focus Consultants. "I think really pretty much that's universally understood. Everyone has to accept that things will not be the same."

McGregor-Smith and Allen are not the norm. Kerr said that confidence and selling yourself were the key tricks to getting back into work, but both of those were qualities that women who had been at home with their children were likely to have lost.

"Our focus is on boosting confidence, how you give yourself the pep talk, how you understand that your emotions might be all over the place. But it's also about learning to say no when you do go back. Because when a woman is effectively being a housewife they'll be doing it all, and when they go back to work then they need some help sharing that load. You need to be supported.

"There are several different levels here, the mum who has taken maternity leave and goes back, maybe to the same job or to the same organisation but a different role. Other mums have been out for a longer period of time and they will be going back into an industry where technology has moved on and they have to re-establish themselves. They're the ones with the greatest fears," she said. "But you have to look at your skills and as a mother and repackage them to an employer: it's all about how you sell yourself these days."

Career consultants told mothers to remember how they spoke to their own children, she said. "They build their children up, they have to do that for themselves."

The Mumsnet conference in London heard from speakers who aim to help mothers find the crucial path back to work. "Career clinics" and consultants are becoming increasingly popular among mothers, many of whom find it a daunting prospect to find their way into fulfilling jobs.

Justine Roberts, the co-founder and chief executive of Mumsnet and mother of four children, said: "The idea of WorkFest is to provide help to those looking to go back to work or to reshape their working lives after a career break. Sometimes what's needed is a bit of inspiration and the confidence to know you can build a successful career after a break."

Roberts, who worked as an economist before having children, said she wanted the event to be a catalyst for women but also wanted other employers to recognise that a bit of flexibility could go a long way in keeping the right people. "I wanted Mumsnet to be a business that recognised an essential truth for many parents. Work is important but family comes first. Over the years I've hired many parents who have chosen to work flexibly – either part-time or from home part of the time – and who otherwise might have left the workplace. As a result, we've found some great people. And in this world of 24/7 access Mumsnet and increasingly all businesses need a flexible approach to thrive."

The recession and the resultant cuts have hit women hardest. The Fawcett Society estimates that by 2015 the average mother who is raising children alone will have lost the equivalent of one month's income per year.

Unemployment among women rose by almost 20% between 2009 and 2012, compared with 0.32% among men. In the workplace, women on maternity leave find themselves made redundant before worse-performing male colleagues. Childcare costs are keeping others at home or in part-time work, where perhaps one of the most telling statistics is that 54% of women are employed below their potential. In FTSE 100 companies, 17% of directors are female and women are outnumbered four to one in parliament and five to one in the cabinet.

Pay and pension divides remain. The pay gap between men and women in full-time

work is 10%, in part-time work 34%.

Even the highest-flying career women can find a radical shift in their standing when they have children. Katie Powell was a corporate executive for more than a decade. At 23, she became the youngest-ever director at Cable & Wireless. She orchestrated the launch of Thomson Reuters, a brand now ranked 34th in the world by *Business Week*. But in 2010, while she was on maternity leave with her daughter Molly, her role was moved to New York. "I think I was a bit naive. I ran a big team. You have this illusion that you can pick up where you left off but when I returned all the roles I was offered involved a lot of travel. Having a baby is an incredible journey, but you go back into the workplace and all of a sudden you go from this senior role to a career full stop."

Powell left Thomson Reuters and launched [Mama Jeanius](#), a maternity jeans business, in 2011. She also has a small interior design consultancy and runs them both around the needs of her two children.

"Affordable childcare and flexibility are clearly the big issues. Giving women the right tools. I think we need to embrace working from home. Childcare costs too can cripple households. There's a lot of women who are working literally for nothing by the time they've paid for childcare."

But equally, said Powell, employers needed to do more. "As an employer myself I am not bothered where people will be as long as they do an exceptional job. Women need to be flexible and workplaces have to help." Our generation of women are very much those who hold the notion that we can have it all but we have our own problems too in that we have to be on the go 24/7. It takes a lot more effort and discipline and organisation."

She warned too that going it alone after having children wasn't always the right move: "The answer isn't always to set up your own business either, as that is incredibly demanding and you may have to put in far more hours than as an employee. You can plough everything you have into something but many startups go out of business in the first couple of years. I was very driven to continue my career, to have another outlet to my life that wasn't just children, so that is a key motivation and women need to think carefully about whether or not they have that."

Lorraine Candy, editor-in-chief of UK *Elle*, a mother of four and another of those supporting the WorkFest, echoed Powell's sentiments at the event, tweeting that flexible working was "invaluable to your business".

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