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PROM Project Parent Forum – Harlow UK

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A discussion forum was conducted with six local Harlow mothers around issues related to their roles within their families, their involvement in childcare, and issues related to balancing work and family life. The main findings are outlined below:

Difficulties and pressures in balancing work and family life

Mothers all agreed that balancing working and family life could be extremely difficult. This was a problem for lone mothers as well as those who were living with a partner. Where mothers were married or co-habiting and also worked full-time, most stated that they were still expected by their partners, to take the main responsibility for childcare and looking after domestic responsibilities. As one married woman who works full-time commented:

“I’m married, my husband works full-time, but it’s still my responsibility to sort out the children and work full-time...it’s always left to me to organise the children...it’s hard.”

Mothers with children of all ages stated that they found it difficult to balance work and family life, and stated that although the nature of their responsibilities change as children get older, managing a family as well as working remained challenging for them. Mums discussed feeling guilty when they were unable to fit all aspects of their lives into their hectic schedule and felt guilty at neglecting either work or family life. Mums said that a good work life balance would be reflected by being able to cope with all of the demands that they have placed on them and not to feel ‘guilty’ about neglecting one part of their responsibilities or another.

Participants agreed that, in particular, they were expected to do the bulk of childcare in the home, as well as most of the domestic chores. Participants generally agreed that although there has been some societal change in terms

of men's and women's roles in families and in the home, in reality, caring roles and domestic labour is still primarily the domain of women. As one mum said:

"It's still a woman's role. No matter how much we've supposedly moved forward, it is still a woman's role."

In particular, mums discussed the time pressures that they felt they were under and how little time they felt there was to do all the things that they needed to do. This 'time-squeeze' resulted in pressure and stress in balancing work and family life. Looking after children and doing domestic chores were particularly time consuming, and some mums stated that they were able to find very little time for themselves because of all the other time pressures that they were under. On mum said:

"There's always, feeling like, so tired and rarely having any time for yourself, hardly ever...I sort of get maybe get a couple of hours in the evening...I'm just too tired to do anything productive or stuff that would really be good for me like go out to an exercise class or go out with friends."

Another mum commented:

"You've just never got enough hours in the day..."

Mums agreed that their hectic lives meant that they had to spend a lot of time planning for how they would manage their jobs and family commitments. They generally did not feel that their p[artners had to plan for family responsibilities in the same way, and felt that this was because childcare was seen as the mother's responsibility. As one mum said:

"If my husband's going out he'll say I'm gonna go out and do so and so and I haven't got a problem with it, but if I'm going out, then he hasn't got a problem with that either, but I still have to sort out what they're [my children] going to have to eat, where the kids are going to be..."

Mums agreed in general that even where their partners took some responsibility for housework or looking after the children, they did not carry out these duties very well, or as competently as the mums themselves would have been able to. They felt that at times, there was the expectation that they should feel grateful for their partner's input into domestic chores and childcare, when in fact they felt that it was their partner's responsibility to help with these things.

Some mother also stated that when they were full-time child carers, the work that they did in the home was sometimes not valued by their partners as 'real work' and that their partners would return home from work and expect to rest because they had been working all day. They felt that their partners would not appreciate that the mums had been working all day also, and that domestic work was somehow less 'valued' than work outside the home.

Employers and work-life balance

Mothers had different experience of employers and flexible working. Whilst some stated that their employer encouraged employees to work flexibly, others stated that flexible working practices were not encouraged, or that they were not allowed to work flexibly. One mother who stated that her employers welcomed flexible working said:

"[Employer] are really good at allowing flexitime and I work late and then I come in late...over the month as long as I've done my hours that I need to do I can pretty much do [what I want]."

Sometimes the lack of encouragement for flexible working practices was attributed to the nature of the job that the employee did. Participants felt that flexible working in certain jobs might detrimentally affect service-delivery. In other cases, participants said that managers simply vetoed requests for flexible working. One mother in particular, stated that within the organisation that she worked for, many decisions about flexible working were up to the discretion of the manager, rather than being made on an objective bases. She said:

"A lot o these rules and policies and so on are like, manager's discretion. Like working from home, they don't like you working from home when that would really ease the pressure on me, if I could do that one day per week...they just don't like it."

Some participants felt disadvantaged because even within a certain organisation, some employees were allowed to work flexibly whereas others were not due to the nature of the job that they did, even where a flexible working policy was in place.

Some participants discussed good flexible working practices that they had had with previous employers, such as being able to work from 9am to 3pm, then leave work to pick up children and work at home during the early evening. They felt that allowing this type of flexible working made coping with work and family commitments easier.

Mums discussed the difficulties that they had found negotiating with employers around work-life balance or in trying to gain employment that would allow them to better balance their personal responsibilities with work. Some mums discussed difficulties with unsympathetic or inflexible managers or employers. Some mums were also unaware of their rights as employees, for example, to have their flexible working request considered by their employer. One mother said who was having particular problems balancing working and caring for her children, said that she would like to reduce her working hours, but didn't feel that her employer would be happy for her to do this. She felt that her line manager would be unsympathetic and when another forum participant told her that she had the right for her flexible working request to be

considered by her employer, she said that she felt that her request would simply not be seriously considered and would be declined. She said:

“If I went half-time, I don’t think that would be enough money coming in, but I don’t think they [employer] would go with sort of 25 hours or 30 hours, I don’t think.”

Participants tended to agree that whether or not flexible working was allowed or encouraged was largely due to one’s line manager, rather than simply being about whether or not policies allowing flexible working were in place within an organisation. Where line managers were accommodating and sympathetic to work-life balance issues and flexible working, this could be a great help to working mothers.

Men and work-life balance

Mums tended to agree that men did not have the same problems with balancing work and family life as women did, and particularly that they did not generally have to plan and prioritise childcare as women often took primary responsibility for this. A number of mums said that they felt that their partners and, in some cases their partner’s employers, expected them the mother to take care of childcare responsibilities. As one mum who worked full-time said:

“I’d ring up [my husband] and say ‘the kids have got a dental appointment’ or ‘the kids have gotta go somewhere’ and he’d say: ‘Well I’m at work, I can’t do anything’.”

Some mums stated that dads rarely leave work to take care of childcare responsibilities, but appreciated that that perhaps men’s priorities are in line with the ‘traditional’ breadwinner role, and that they may still see their role as providing for the family and that this is how they show their commitment to family, rather than being hands-on with caring for children on a day-to-day basis.

Mums felt that their partners tended to make decisions about their work, such as taken on additional roles or a new job, without having to necessarily consider the childcare implications as a woman might have to. Whereas the first priority of mums would be to think about childcare, they stated that this was not something that their partners readily considered when making work-related decisions.

Impact on mums’ lives

Mums stated that their children were the priority in their lives, and that this had had an impact on their careers, the type of work that they could do, and the location of their jobs, as they had to think about childcare issues as well as career and jobs. One mum stated that she had turned down the opportunity of a good job with good prospects when she found out that she was pregnant,

and another said that she could never work in London because of the impact this would have on her ability to care for her children. It was clear then, from responses during the forum, that having children had a significant impact on the work and employment decisions made by mums.

For some mums, there was the feeling that once they had children, their opportunities for promotion and career progression was limited, and that they would not then be promoted. Some mums also made the decision to work for a public sector organisation rather than a private corporation, as they felt that a public sector organisation work be more sympathetic to the needs of mothers.

However, some mums discussed the beneficial impacts that working had had on their lives after having children. Some mums said that returning to work after having children, particularly on a part-time basis, was actually beneficial to them, in that it gave them a break from full-time childcare and allowed them to have some adult company and interaction. Mums discussed the problems that they faced through being isolated and alone with a child all day during the day, and said that the opportunity to interact with other adults through getting a job, was hugely beneficial to their well-being. One mum said:

"I was bored at home, so I think that going out and doing something gives you something else to talk about and interaction with other people."