

Parenthood and Family Life in the United Kingdom

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Abstract Within the context of Europe, the United Kingdom has had one of the highest and most consistent total fertility rates over the last twenty years. This paper examines the demographic, policy and cultural dimensions that may form part of the explanation for this relatively high level of fertility. The demographic impetuses identified include the comparatively youthful pattern of childbearing and more importantly the strong adherence to a two-child norm. The paper reviews economic activity patterns, childcare and parental leave provision, attitudes toward mothers working and toward family life more generally, as well as the division of labor in the home. It highlights how in the absence of state support for childcare, families in Britain have reached their own pragmatic solutions to combining work and family life, which has at its core mothers working part-time and the family (including grandparents) being the chief providers of childcare.

1. Introduction

The majority of British men and women become parents at some stage in their lives, but in recent times they have been becoming parents at older ages than their recent predecessors; more of them are becoming parents outside the legal framework of marriage; and a growing minority of men and women are eschewing parenthood altogether. Within the context of Europe, the United Kingdom¹ has had, along with France, one of the highest and consistent total fertility rates over the last twenty years: since the mid-1970s, with the odd exception, the rate has been within the range 1.7 and 1.8. This can be clearly seen in Table 1. For example, in many European countries the total period fertility rates (TPFR) have fallen below the 1.5 level and in some of the southern European countries to as low as 1.2: whereas the nadir of British fertility was in 1977 when for one year the TPFR fell below 1.7 to stand at 1.66. Furthermore, Britain has not experienced the oscillations to be seen in, for example, Sweden with swings from 1.68 in 1980 through 2.13 in 1990 and down to 1.61 in 1996 (Council of Europe, 1997).

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¹ The United Kingdom includes England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Great Britain includes England and Wales, and Scotland. Most of the data we use refer to Great Britain.

Table 1 Total fertility rates in EU member states, 1960–95

	1960	1965	1970	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995
Austria	2.69	2.70	2.29	1.82	1.62	1.46	1.46	1.39
Belgium	2.56	2.62	2.25	1.74	1.68	1.51	1.62	1.54*
Denmark	2.54	2.61	1.95	1.92	1.55	1.45	1.67	1.80
Finland	2.72	2.48	1.83	1.68	1.63	1.65	1.78	1.81
France	2.73	2.84	2.47	1.93	1.95	1.81	1.78	1.70
Germany	2.37	2.50	2.03	1.48	1.56	1.37	1.45	1.24*
Greece	2.28	2.30	2.39	2.38	2.21	1.68	1.39	1.40
Ireland	3.76	4.03	3.93	3.40	3.25	2.50	2.12	1.87*
Italy	2.41	2.66	2.42	2.20	1.64	1.39	1.30	1.17
Luxembourg	2.28	2.42	1.98	1.55	1.49	1.38	1.61	1.68
Netherlands	3.12	3.04	2.57	1.66	1.60	1.51	1.62	1.53
Portugal	3.17	3.14	3.02	2.58	2.18	1.72	1.57	1.41
Spain	2.86	2.94	2.90	2.80	2.20	1.63	1.34	1.18
Sweden	2.20	2.42	1.92	1.77	1.68	1.74	2.13	1.74
United Kingdom	2.71	2.87	2.45	1.81	1.90	1.79	1.83	1.71*
Europe 15				1.96	1.82	1.59	1.56	1.43*

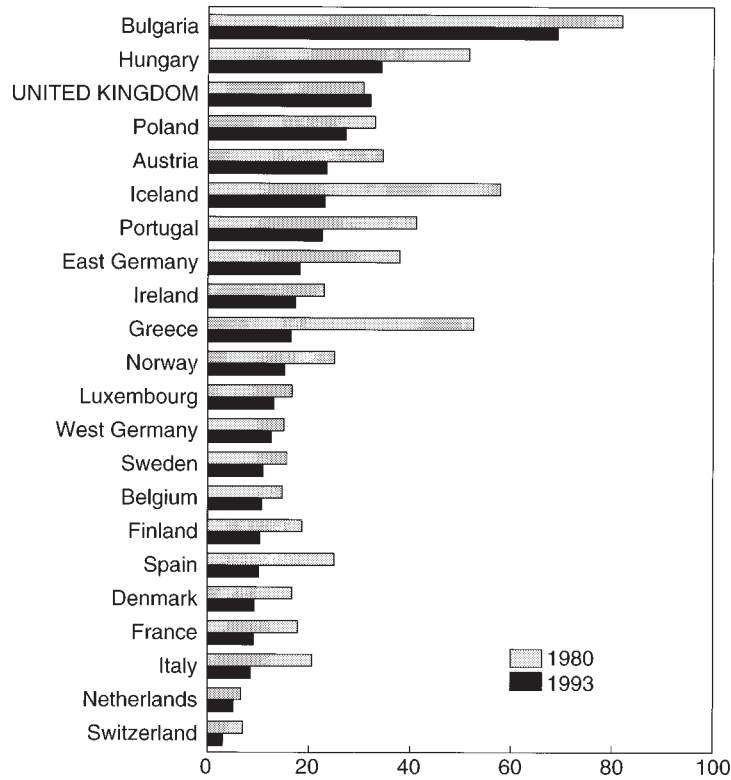
Source: Eurostat, *Demographic Statistics*, 1995.

* Eurostat estimate.

2. Fertility Behavior

2.1. The timing of childbearing

Insights into what demographic impulses may lie behind the United Kingdom's relatively high TPF_R come from an examination of the timing of childbearing. An important feature of European fertility patterns since the 1980s has been the decline in childbearing at ages in the twenties and a rise for women in their thirties (Craig, 1992). However, until very recently the United Kingdom had a smaller swing to older age fertility than in most other European countries, but this has changed in the last few years with noteworthy increases in the fertility of women in their thirties and older ages. In 1991, 31% of all live births were to women aged 30 and over whereas in 1996 the proportion was 41%. This change in timing may well be contributing to the declines in TPF_R seen since 1991: in 1991 the TPF_R stood at 1.82, whereas in 1996 it had fallen to 1.74. Additionally, the United Kingdom has the highest teenage fertility rate in Western Europe and is the one country where there was no decline in this rate over the 1980s (see Figure 1). This youthful childbearing may well have contributed to the maintenance of our relatively high TPF_R. For example, if we take an extreme assumption that there had been no teenage births in 1981, then the TPF_R for England and Wales would have been 1.65 instead of 1.80 and the TPF_R in 1991 would have stood at 1.66 as compared with 1.82, and the analogous rates in 1996 would have been 1.59 instead of 1.74.



Source: Council of Europe: 1994.
1993 rates or latest available.

Figure 1 Teenage fertility rates

Women who become mothers in their teens are also the most likely to proceed to higher order births and are more likely to have larger family sizes than women who commence childbearing at older ages (Kiernan, 1995). The contribution of teenage parenthood to the maintenance of higher levels of fertility in the United Kingdom needs to be off-set by the evidence that these young ages are the least auspicious for embarking on parenthood. These young parents compared with those who become parents at older ages are likely to have accumulated less education or occupational capital prior to becoming parents and thus are likely to be more disadvantaged. This is the case: a substantial proportion of these young parents depend on state welfare to support themselves and their children. The British government regards the current level of teenage fertility as being too high and is committed to reducing the number of teenage pregnancies. However, timing is not the whole story in explaining the relatively high TPF_R's observed for Britain.

2. 2. A Strong Two-Child Norm

In the United Kingdom there is a strong preference for two children as espoused in attitude surveys and can moreover be clearly observed in family size distributions.

As can be seen in Table 2, two-thirds of the United Kingdom respondents to the 1989 Eurobarometer Survey (European Commission, 1990) stated that two children was their ideal number per family and that compared with many other European countries one child is not a favored number. As well as stating a preference for two children, a majority of British couples also attain their ideal. In Table 3 we show the family building patterns up to age 35 and age 45 for the most recent cohorts to have attained these ages (Armitage and Babb, 1996). It is clear that the proportions of women remaining childless has increased among the more recently born cohorts. It is also clear that the proportion of women with only one child has remained relatively steady among those born since the 1940s. The most common family size is two children, followed by a three-child or higher order family. Hobcraft (1996) has estimated that during the fertility decline of the 1980s among married couples who had a first child that 86–88% of these couples went on to have a second child, and this percentage was very similar to the proportions that went on to have a second birth during the period of the baby boom during the 1960s. Overall, about 80% of mothers who have a first child have a second child. Thus, in the United Kingdom it is normative for couples who have one child to proceed to a second child, but why there is such a strong preference for at least two children has never been satisfactorily explained.

Thus demographic explanations for the United Kingdom's relatively high level of fertility probably lie in the youthful pattern of childbearing and particularly to

Table 2 The ideal number of children per family, 1989

Country	0 (%)	1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 or more (%)	Mean
Belgium	5	18	52	21	3	2.01
Denmark	3	9	65	20	4	2.13
West Germany	7	14	58	18	3	1.97
Greece	2	13	42	33	11	2.42
Spain	4	22	55	15	3	1.94
France	3	19	47	28	4	2.13
Ireland	2	9	33	30	27	2.79
Italy	2	9	61	24	4	2.2
Luxembourg	3	21	56	19	3	1.99
Netherlands	3	5	65	22	5	2.23
Portugal	3	21	55	16	4	2.01
United Kingdom	2	10	67	15	6	2.14
EC 12	4	14	57	21	4	2.1

Source: European Commission, *Eurobarometer*, 32, 1990.

Table 3 Family building of women in successive birth cohorts in England and Wales (%)

Women born in:	Women with various exact numbers of live-born children											
	At age 25				At age 35				At age 45			
	Children				Children				Children			
	0	1	2	3 or more	0	1	2	3 or more	0	1	2	3 or more
1924	45	33	17	6	18	25	30	27	16	23	28	32
1929	45	31	17	7	17	22	30	31	15	20	29	36
1934	39	31	21	9	12	17	33	38	11	16	32	41
1939	35	28	24	13	12	14	36	38	11	13	36	40
1944	34	27	27	13	12	14	42	32	10	13	42	34
1949	40	25	25	10	15	14	43	27	13	13	43	30
1954	48	22	22	8	20	13	40	27				
1959	55	19	19	8	23	14	35	28				
1964	60	17	16	7								
1969	61	16	16	6								

Source: Armitage and Babb, *Population Trends*, No. 84, 1996.

the strong adherence to a two-child norm. We now proceed to examine the social, economic and policy context of parenthood in Britain.

3. His and Her Transitions to Parenthood

In the public sphere of the labor market and private sphere of domestic life, the implications of becoming a parent can be markedly different for men and women. Women working after marriage has been normative in Britain since the 1950s. Women’s increasing attachment to the labor market during motherhood is a more recent development, and the increasing attachment to the labor market when children are very young is an even more recent phenomenon (McCran et al., 1996). Mothers are tending to return to the labor market sooner after the birth of their babies and increasingly unlikely to take extensive periods out of the labor market to care for their children on a full-time basis. Nevertheless there continue to be differences in the employment profiles of men and women. The typical employment profile for men could be described as arch-shaped: employment rates rise as young men complete their full-time education and enter the labor market. Having entered the labor force, most men remain there more or less continuously (in the absence of unemployment and sickness) until they retire. In contrast, the employment pattern profiles of women are more varied primarily arising from the advent of motherhood and its repercussions. Mothers compared with fathers tend to have lower participation rates, are less likely to have continuous employment careers, and as

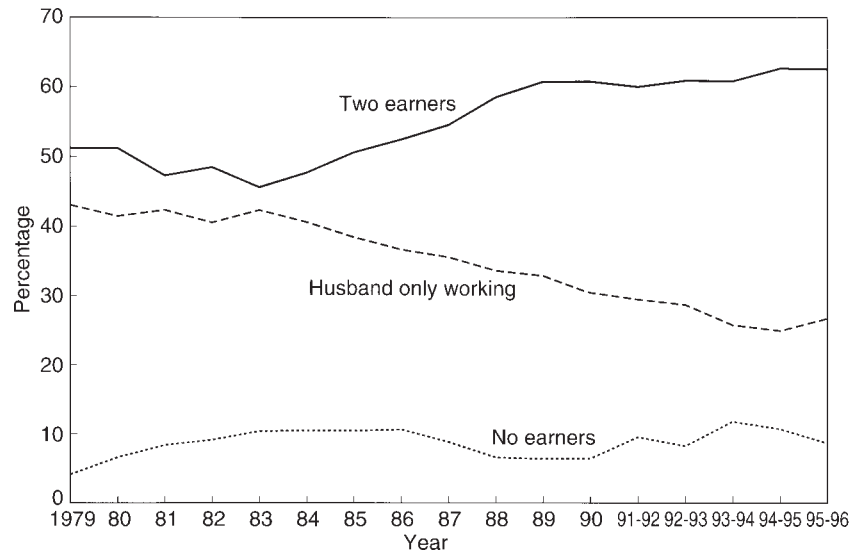


Figure 2 Married couples with dependent children by number of earners

we will see are also more likely to work part-time.

3. 1. Rise of Dual-Earner Couples

In Britain, an increasing proportion of women entering the labor market, continuing to work after marriage, and returning to employment after having had a child has meant that the traditional model of “breadwinner husband and homemaker wife” is much less common (see Figure 2). In fact one of the most significant changes in the working patterns of families has been the fall in the number of families living solely on the man’s salary, and the rise of the dual-earner couple families. In 1995–1996, 62% of married couple families of working age with dependent children were in employment compared with around 50% in the early 1980s. In sharp contrast, the proportion of families where only the husband was working fell from around 40% in the early 1980s to 26% in 1995–1996.

3. 2. Economic Activity

One of the fundamental changes in the structure of the British labor market over the last few decades has been the increased participation of women, particularly the extent to which they have taken up part-time work. In 1979, the proportion of women of working age (16–59 years) was 59%, and in 1996 it was 67%. Moreover, in 1996, women represented 44% of the labor force of working age.

Women’s employment patterns in the United Kingdom are largely explained by their responsibility for young children. As we see in Table 4, mothers of children aged under 5 are far less likely to be in paid work than women without young children. Furthermore, when mothers of young children are in paid work they are

Table 4 Economic activity status of mothers¹: by age of youngest child, spring 1996 (%)

United Kingdom	Age of youngest child			
	0-4	5-10	11-15	All mothers*
Working full-time	17	22	34	22
Working part-time	31	43	41	37
Unemployed**	5	5	4	5
Inactive	46	30	21	35
All mothers* (= 100%) (millions)	3.1	2.2	1.5	6.8

* Mothers aged 16 to 59 with children aged under 16.

** Based on the ILO definition.

Source: Office for National Statistics, Labour Force Survey.

more likely than other women to work part-time.

In the United Kingdom, it is the age of the youngest child rather than the number of children that is the major factor as to whether a mother participates in the labor market. As the youngest child becomes older, particularly when the youngest child reaches age 5, which is the compulsory school starting age in Britain, mothers are increasingly likely to be in employment, and in particular, are more likely to be in full-time work. Women with young children, those under school age, are the least likely to be in paid work, but interestingly it is this group of women where the biggest growth in labor participation has occurred over the last decade.

3. 3. Returning to Work Faster

Mothers in Britain have been returning to work sooner after the birth of their first child (see Figure 3). Of the proportions of women in older generations, for example those aged 60-64 in 1994, only 14% had returned to work within a year of the birth of their first child, compared with 37% of those aged 25-34 years in 1994.

Women who return to work within a year of the birth of their baby in the majority of cases (around 60%) returned to work for the same employer. The more highly educated was the mother the more likely she was to return to the same employer: with 70% of mothers with high-level qualifications doing so, compared with around 50% of mothers with no qualifications. Women reported that they mainly returned to work for financial reasons. Over one in two mothers said that they returned to work because they needed to earn money to pay for essentials, or to pay for extras, or stated that one income was insufficient to support the family. But financial reasons was not the whole story with respect to mothers returning to work. At least, one in four of the mothers said they returned to work for reasons related to their own self-fulfillment: such as enjoying work or wanting to pursue

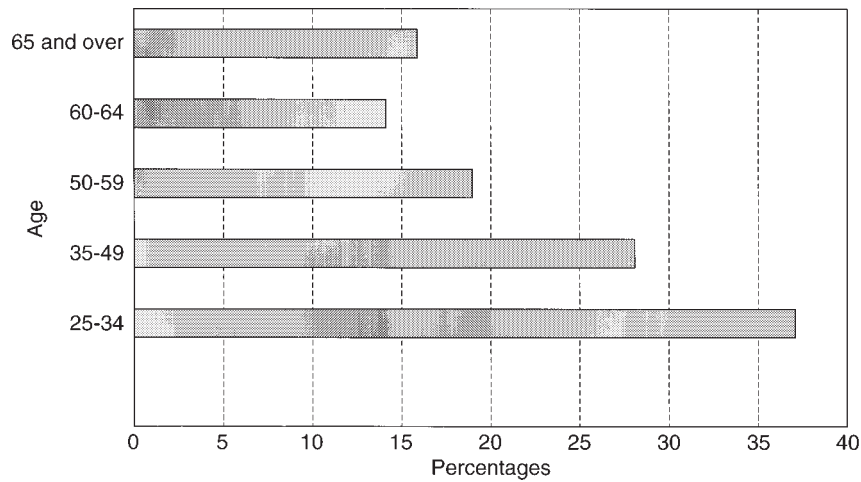


Figure 3 Mothers who returned to work within one year of the birth of their first child in Great Britain, 1994–95

their career (Office for National Statistics, 1997).

Paid employment is the main means by which families support themselves financially and plays a crucial role in how they conduct their lives. The worlds of work and the family are often interdependent. Work can impact on family life by limiting the time available for being with other family members and for carrying out family tasks, duties, and responsibilities, and conversely, family responsibilities may act as a constraint on labor market participation. Women more so than men, for a variety of reasons including historical and cultural, tend to be constrained by family responsibilities from fully participating in the public sphere.

The Family and Working Lives Survey carried out by the Department of Employment in 1994–1995 asked couples with children whether the presence of their children had affected their working arrangements. Around two-thirds of mothers, but only one-sixth of fathers said that it had. Mothers said that their hours of work and type of work had been affected and 10% expressly mentioned that they felt they had missed out on promotion. Fathers also mentioned some constraints, such as having to take the children to school or not being able to work away from home. However, the impact of having children for them was small compared with the impact on mothers (Office for National Statistics, 1997).

3. 4. Hours of Work

British men compared with other European men in the EU have the highest average number of working hours (see Table 5), whereas British women have below-average number of hours in employment than other European women. Moreover, British fathers also work longer hours on average than men who do not have

Table 5 Average weekly hours worked by men and women in EU member states, 1995

	Men	Women
Austria	39.1	34.5
Belgium	38.3	32
Denmark	36.8	31.9
Finland	38.2	35.7
France	39.7	34
Germany	39.3	32.6
Greece	40.9	37.8
Ireland	40.5	33.5
Italy	39.5	34.6
Luxembourg	40.5	33.6
Netherlands	36.1	25
Portugal	42.6	37.8
Spain	40.7	36
Sweden	40.1	34.1
United Kingdom	43.6	30.7
Europe 15	40.1	32.8

Source: Eurostat, *Statistics in Focus*, 1996.

Table 6 Average hours* worked per week: by parental status and gender, spring 1996

United Kingdom	Parents**		Non-parents***	
	Males	Females	Males	Females
Working full-time	47.9	41	45.9	41.2
Working part-time	19.8	18.1	16	17.7
All in employment	47.1	26.9	43	33.7

* Total usual hours including paid and unpaid overtime and excluding meal breaks worked by males aged 16 to 64 and female aged 16 to 59 in employment.

** With dependent children.

*** With children.

Source: Office for National Statistics, Labour Force Survey.

dependent children. For example according to data from the 1996 Labor Force Survey (shown in Table 6), fathers worked on average 47.1 hours per week as compared with an average of 43 hours among non-fathers. This may be due to the fact that men with dependent children are at a stage where career advancement is critical (men in their thirties), or they need to work longer hours in order to earn extra money to support their children. Women on the other hand were more likely to work less hours on average per week if they had children: 27 hours as compared with 34 hours among those without children.

4. Childcare

If mothers of preschool children return to work, they need to arrange some form of childcare. When children start nursery school (typically at age four) or primary school (compulsory from age five), there still remains the problem of covering school holidays and the gaps between the start and end of the adult's working day (school hours typically runs from 9 : 00 hours to 15 : 00–16 : 00 hours). Moreover, young children aged three and four typically attend state-provided nursery schools on a part-time basis.

4. 1. Provision

In contrast with the centralized and universal system of childcare found in Scandinavian countries, the system in the United Kingdom is a mixed set of provision provided by a variety of different agencies. Ninety % of childcare is unsubsidized (Employment Committee, 1995). Parents either pay for private childcare; receive some support from employers (in practice this is a very small number); use relatives (the most common arrangement); or adopt working hours that ensure that there is always a parent at home, usually the mother, to look after the child.

In the 1994 British Social Attitudes Survey, mothers of children under age 12 who were in the labor market were asked how they arranged for their children to be looked after while they were at work (Thompson, 1995). As we see in Table 7, most working mothers used other family members, in the main their spouse or parents, to care for their children while they were at work. In the case of those with a preschool child: 69% did so. The use of other forms of childcare varied according to the age of their youngest child. Among mothers with preschool children, the next most common form of care after family care was the use of childminders. Childminders are typically mothers of young children who care for the children of

Table 7 Childcare used by working mothers, 1994 (%)

	All	Age of youngest child	
		under 5	5 to 12
A relative looks after them (including husband/partner)	62	69	57
Mother works only while children are at school	23	7	37
Child minder	15	25	7
Children look after themselves until mother gets home	4	—	8
A friend or neighbor looks after them	13	3	23
Day nursery	6	14	—
Mother's help or nanny looks after them at home	6	9	3
Mother works from home	4	2	6
Work-place nursery	2	2	1

Source: British Social Attitudes Survey 1994.

other parents in their own homes. Most are registered with the local authority and have to meet certain statutory requirements with respect to space and facilities. Among mothers with school-age children, the second most popular option after care by a family member is confining work to the school hours.

The growth in employment among women with dependent children has occurred without government intervention in support of childcare. Most European Union countries have at least a policy objective of universal, publicly funded nursery education for children under age three. The United Kingdom is one of the few countries, along with Ireland, Luxembourg and the Netherlands, that does not (Hantrais and Letablier, 1996). In the United Kingdom, government funded childcare for those under age three is very low (less than 2%). Public provision of childcare is limited to deprived families, while the provision for other parents has been regarded as the private responsibility of those individuals themselves.

Not only are there issues of access to childcare; there are also issues of costs. Childcare, relative to earnings, is expensive. Some estimates suggest that among parents who pay for childcare the costs represent at least 25% of the mother's earnings (Marsh and McKay, 1993). There is no tax relief for childcare expenditure and none planned as it is deemed to be prohibitively expensive. There is some tax concessions to employers who provide work-place nurseries but this only covers 1 in 300 children (Employment Committee, 1995).

4. 2. Maternity Leave, Parental Leave and Care of Sick Children

Until the advent of the Labour government, the United Kingdom was opposed to European Community legislation on policies for statutory maternity leave, parental leave, working hours, and childcare, and at the time of writing the British government had not signed up to the Community Charter for the Fundamental Social Rights of Workers and the Agreement on Social Policy. During the 1980s and 1990s, the British government argued against the introduction of directives on the rights of part-time workers, parental leave, and state provision of childcare on the grounds that regulations would impinge on the private lives of individuals and also impose a heavy burden on employers. Since the 1950s, the family-employment relationship has largely been seen as a private matter for individuals to manage by themselves or in conjunction with their employers (Hantrais and Letablier, 1996).

The United Kingdom was the only member state without universal right to maternity leave for women in paid employment when the directive on pregnant women was adopted by the EC in 1992. This changed in 1995, and from then all mothers had a statutory right to 14 weeks maternity leave and those who met certain requirements were entitled to 18 weeks Statutory Maternity Pay. There is no statutory right to paternity leave, although the House of Commons Employment Committee (Employment Committee, 1995) recommended that the government

introduce one, preferably paid and of the order of five days.

There are other supportive leave arrangements, which have been implemented to a greater or lesser degree in other countries within the EU, to allow parents to combine responsibilities of employment and childcare. Parental leave following the birth of a child allows both parents to share in the care and up-bringing of their children. The United Kingdom is one of only three countries in the EU without a universal system of parental leave: the government stance has been that this should be an area for negotiation between employers and employees.

The other form of leave initiated by several EU countries is Family Leave: a short-term leave to enable parents to take time off work when their children are sick and when the usual care arrangements breakdown. There is no statutory entitlement to such leave, but the Trades Union Congress is urging its members to negotiate family leave with a target of five days paid leave per annum. The Equal Opportunities Commission sees the advantages of family leave as not only helping parents, in the main mothers, who are called away from work at short notice to look after their children, but family leave also has the advantage for employers in reducing the tension between employer and employee on such occasions. It may also prevent employers taking unauthorized days off or misusing their own sick leave entitlement.

There are, however, a number of universal payments or credits made to mothers. All mothers receive child-benefit which is a single flat rate paid per child with an additional increment for the first child in recognition of the expenses incurred in having the first child. This benefit is normally paid to mothers with children aged 16 or under or aged 16 to 18 and in full-time education. This benefit is not subject to tax. Nowadays, there are no specific tax allowances for children in Britain. As well as child benefit payments, women with caring responsibilities who take time out of employment to bring up children or to care for disabled adults are provided with Home Responsibilities Protection which provides pension credits for the years they are out of the labor market, up to a maximum of 20 years.

5. Gender Roles

The majority of British men and women under retirement age are in the labor market and contribute to family incomes. Yet the belief that men should be the breadwinner, on balance, still persists.

5. 1. The Homemaker-Breadwinner Model

For example, respondents in the 1991 British Social Attitudes Survey were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statement; "A husband's job is to earn the money; a wife's job is to look after the home and family" (Kiernan,

1992). As we see in Table 8, women are more likely than men to disagree with the statement, but female dissenters are still a minority. One in three men and women support the traditional homemaker-breadwinner model, while around one in four are neutral. Whether such neutrality represents ambivalence, uncertainty, or indifference is unknown. There is no strong evidence from earlier surveys in the series to support the notion that men and women are increasingly likely to disagree with the statement. In 1991, 43% of both men and women disagreed with it, compared with one in three in 1984 and 1987.

The average picture does however, disguise large sub-group differences. Broadly as Table 9 shows, younger people and those with more education were more likely to reject the traditional roles of men and women. Although women are slightly

Table 8 Attitudes to the breadwinner/homemaker model by sex

A husband's job is to earn the money; a wife's job is to look after the home and family. (%)

	All	Men	Women
Strongly agree/Agree	33	35	31
Neither agree nor disagree	21	23	20
Strongly disagree/Disagree	44	41	47

Source: British Social Attitudes Survey 1991.

Table 9 Attitudes to breadwinner/homemaker model by age, qualifications and employment status

A husband's job is to earn the money; a wife's job is to look after the home and family. (%)

	Disagree or strongly disagree	
	Men	Women
Total	41	47
Age group:		
18-34	65	68
35-44	54	54
45-54	30	53
55-59	29	31
60 or older	13	19
Highest educational qualification:		
Degree/Professional	53	63
A'level	57	61
O'level/CSE	34	54
Other/None	28	32
Man works and . . .		
Women works full-time	58	72
Women works part-time	49	45
Women not in paid work	33	40

Source: British Social Attitudes Survey 1991.

more likely to disagree with the statement than men, the differences between the responses of men and women of different ages, with one exception, are broadly similar. Women under age 55 years and men under age 45 are less traditional than their older counterparts. Highly educated women and men, those who completed their education at age 18 or later are two to three times as likely to disagree with the proposition.

5. 2. Attitudes to Women Working and the Family Life Cycle

As we saw earlier, women's employment patterns are largely explained by their responsibility for young children. Mothers of children under age five are far less likely to be in paid work than women without young children. And when mothers of young children are in paid work they are far more likely than other women to work part-time.

In Table 10 we consider men's and women's attitudes to women working according to their life-cycle stage: namely, between marrying and having children; when there is a child under school age; after the youngest child starts school; and after the children leave home. Respondents were asked whether women should work full-time, part-time, or stay at home during these phases.

As we see from Table 10, there was general agreement among both sexes that women should go out to work full-time before the advent of parenthood and after their children are grown up. But when there are children at home, attitudes change. Only a minority (around one in five) thinks that mothers with school-age children should work full-time, and there is near universal agreement that women should not work full-time when they have preschool age children.

5. 3. The Domestic Domain

In Britain and most other European countries over the last decade or so there has been a clear change in sex role attitudes, with men and women increasingly espousing more egalitarian views (Kiernan, 1996). Given such changes, is there any evidence that in the domestic domain, where it is seemingly a simple matter of private negotiation between men and women, that couples nowadays are sharing more

Table 10 Attitudes to work at different stages of the family life cycle

Women should work . . .	(%)		
	Full-time	Part-time	Not at all
After marrying and before there are children	82	7	1
When there is a child under school age	5	33	52
After the youngest child starts school	21	63	6
After the children leave home	72	14	1

Source: British Social Attitudes Survey 1991.

domestic responsibilities and tasks? In couple households where wives are not employed or work part-time, it would seem logical in terms of maximizing household efficiency that the wife should specialize more in domestic tasks. By the same logic, we would expect full-time homemakers to perform more domestic tasks than women who work part-time. However, in households where both partners work full-time one might expect the division of labor to be more equitable, unless one partner works much longer hours than the other. Here we examine the extent to which the division of labor within the household varies according to the employment status of the wife.

Respondents were asked who was “mainly responsible for general domestic duties” in the household (see Table 11). In married couple households (including cohabiting couples), the great majority, 76%, stated the woman was responsible and 19% said the duties were shared equally between them. Men were more likely to say that duties were shared equally, 23%, compared with 15% of women. This discrepancy between the sexes may arise for a variety of reasons, for example, a genuine unfamiliarity with how much work is done and who actually does it, and perceptions that may be colored by stereotypical views of who does what or ought to do what. The responses according to employment status are also shown in Table 11.

Households where both partners work full-time are relatively more likely than other couples to share responsibility for domestic tasks, but the situation is still far from equitable, as only one in four of such households share such duties. There are indications that the proportions of shared responsibility for domestic tasks in these dual worker families may be increasing; in the analogous survey for 1987 survey, only one in five couples did so (Witherspoon, 1988). Women who work part-time hold an intermediate position between the full-time workers and homemakers in the extent to which their partners share responsibilities. The majority of couples in the “other” category are mainly retired, two out three contain a partner aged 60 or older. These partnerships are more akin to full-time working couples in the extent to which they share in the domestic sphere.

Table 11 Responsibility for domestic tasks by sex and employment status

Who is responsible for general domestic duties? (%)					
Respondents living in households where . . .	All	. . . man works, woman works full-time	. . . man works, woman works part-time	. . . man works, woman not in work	Other households
Mainly woman	75	67	83	89	66
Shared equally	16	24	13	6	21

Source: British Social Attitudes Survey 1991.

5. 4. Who Performs Household Tasks?

The 1991 British Social Attitudes Survey also asked about the division of household tasks in married couple families. From Table 12, we see that in 1991 men were more likely to do the household repairs and that women did the cooking, cleaning, and laundry; while shopping, dishwashing, and financial matters were relatively more unisex. The pace of change in the sharing of individual household tasks has changed very little since the beginning of the 1980s, when this type of information was first collected.

A more detailed breakdown of the 1991 responses for families in which the

Table 12 Responsibility for household tasks by type of task

	(%)			
	All households	... woman works full-time	... woman works part-time	... woman is not in paid work
Who:				
does household shopping?				
mainly man	8	4	5	5
mainly woman	45	42	51	57
shared equally	47	53	44	37
makes evening meal?				
mainly man	9	7	5	3
mainly woman	70	60	75	81
shared equally	20	32	20	16
does evening dishes?				
mainly man	28	28	20	18
mainly woman	33	24	41	37
shared equally	37	46	38	42
does household cleaning?				
mainly man	4	5	—	—
mainly woman	68	63	82	82
shared equally	27	30	18	17
does washing and ironing?				
mainly man	3	3	—	1
mainly woman	84	78	91	91
shared equally	12	17	9	8
repairs household equipment?				
mainly man	82	84	85	81
mainly woman	6	3	7	8
shared equally	10	10	8	10
organizes household bills and money?				
mainly man	31	27	29	40
mainly woman	40	44	41	36
shared equally	28	28	30	23

Source: British Social Attitudes Survey 1991.

husband worked and the wife worked full-time, part-time, or in the home provided additional insights into the interior of family life. We see from Table 12 that men are more likely to share and participate in virtually all the tasks if their wives works full-time. Although one might have expected women who work part-time to fall midway between women in full-time work and the homemakers, it turned out they were much closer to the homemakers. This may be partly because part-time work can refer to a wide range of hours worked per week. Women who work fewer hours are likely to have more time to devote to domestic tasks than those who work longer hours. There is one important feature of domestic life where employed women differ from women not in paid work, namely in the organization of household finances. In families where women are not earning an income, husbands are more likely to take responsibility for financial matters. The similarity of responses for women in part-time and full-time employment would seem to suggest that it may not be the level of earnings that affects the control of financial resources as much as whether or not the woman earns at all.

Survey data from a range of European countries suggest that looking after children is frequently a more popular activity among fathers than the more routine housekeeping tasks (Kempeneers and Lelievre, 1992). For example in Britain in 1991, as can be seen in Table 13, one in three fathers said they shared equally in the care of sick children, rising to one in two among families where both parents work, and child discipline was shared in the majority of families (Kiernan, 1992).

6. Attitudes toward Family Life

In Britain, although family structures may have undergone some change, it is

Table 13 Responsibility for sick children and discipline of children

Households where man works and . . .	(%)			
	All households	. . . woman works full-time	. . . woman works part-time	. . . woman is not in paid work
Who:				
looks after sick children?				
mainly man	1	3	2	—
mainly woman	60	44	51	80
shared equally	39	52	48	20
teaches children discipline?				
mainly man	9	13	9	9
mainly woman	17	13	15	22
shared equally	73	74	76	70

Source: British Social Attitudes Survey 1991.

Table 14 Attitudes* toward the family, 1995 (%)

	Strongly agree/ agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree/ strongly disagree	Can't choose/ not answered	All
I'd rather spend time with my friends than with my family	13	23	59	5	100
On the whole, my friends are more important to me than member of my family	7	12	76	4	100
Once children have left home, they should no longer expect help from their parents	12	13	72	3	100

* People aged 18 and over were asked how much they agreed or disagreed with each statement, on a 5-point scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree".

Source: British Social Attitudes Survey.

noteworthy that families continue to play a prominent part in people's lives. We saw earlier the important role played by relatives, in the main grandparents, in childcare, and the responses in Table 14 highlight the importance of family ties in other realms. For example, we see that only 13% of people said they would rather spend time with their friends than with their family, and only 7% said that their friends were more important than members of their family. Moreover, parents expect to continue to help their children even when they have grown up and that the family is still regarded as an important source of assistance. This evidence suggests that family remains a central focus of people's lives in Britain.

7. Conclusion

In the United Kingdom, even in the absence of state support, as we saw above, mothers have been increasingly joining the labor market. However, they have tended to leave the workforce when they have young children and return part-time, making their own arrangements for childcare; mainly within their families either by working when their husbands are at home, or making use of grandparents to care for children. Part-time working may be a pragmatic solution under such circumstances, but it also has implications for promotion, access to social security rights, and occupational pensions. Although some employers, particularly large international companies or the public sector, may offer arrangements for career breaks, job sharing, part-time working, and workplace nurseries, the level of provision does not compensate for the lack of public facilities and guarantees. Moreover, a recent review of attitudes toward work (Thompson, 1995) shows that whether or not mothers go out to work is a social choice that reflects their own values about the roles they play as mothers and workers rather than necessarily the availability of childcare subsidies. Families in Britain have reached their own pragmatic solution

to combining work and family life that could be characterized as having at its heart a strong preference for part-time work which allows the combination of family responsibilities with paid work without the stresses incurred with trying to combine full-time employment with the rearing of children. In Britain, generally speaking, women continue to be mothers first, once they have become mothers, and workers second which may be an important factor underpinning our relatively high level of fertility.

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