

Women at Work in 2024

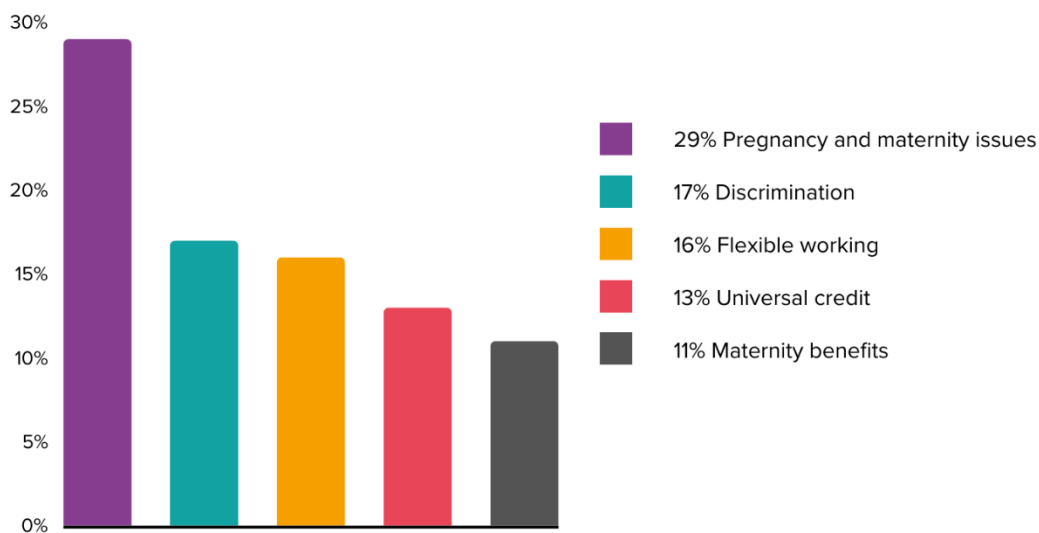
Accelerating progress through flexible and family-friendly working



Parents, and particularly mothers, still face a wide range of issues in the workplace

85% of callers to Working Families' Legal Advice Service helpline are women.

The top issues facing Working Families' helpline callers



We need better leave for new parents

Time and time again, new mothers tell us that they can't take the leave they want to, or they find themselves in financial difficulties, because of the low rate of pay for statutory maternity pay.

"I'm currently on maternity leave and receiving Statutory Maternity Pay. It's not enough to survive on."

Survey respondent (*Working Families Index 2023*)

“I’m currently on maternity leave. I have two children, age nine months and two. My employer won’t offer me part-time work on my return, and I can’t afford full-time childcare for two. My husband earns below £25,000 and we are really struggling financially with bills going up. I haven’t been able to find a part-time job with a family-friendly employer and I just feel really stuck. I don’t get any money for my final three months of maternity leave and I’m really struggling”.

Legal advice helpline caller

On average, lower-income working mothers are taking just 23 weeks off work when they have a new baby (compared to the national average of 39 weeks) (*Working Families Index 2023 (WFI)*)

- ♥ Only 29% of lower-income working parents have access to enhanced leave and pay (*WFI 2023*)
- ♥ 7 out of 10 mothers who didn’t have access to enhanced leave took less leave than they wanted to, due to financial concerns (*WFI 2023*)

But when employers do enhance leave, it can make a huge difference in the amount of leave parents can afford to take in their child’s first year.

The best practice employers who entered the Working Families Benchmark 2024 offered, as a day 1 right, an average of:

- ♥ 20 weeks of fully-paid maternity leave
- ♥ 7 weeks of fully-paid paternity leave
- ♥ 19 weeks of fully-paid shared parental leave

And, perhaps unsurprisingly then, amongst Benchmark employers, there is a relatively high rate of take-up of shared parental leave and equal parenting leave amongst fathers and partners.

While nationally, only 5% of eligible fathers and partners take SPL, amongst our Benchmark employers:

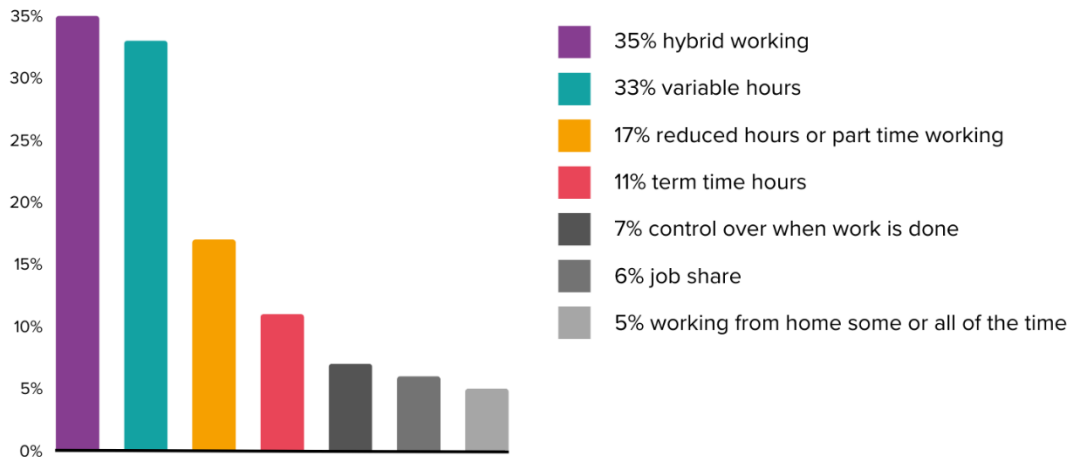
- ♥ 20% of eligible fathers and partners took SPL
- ♥ 32% of eligible fathers and partners took EPL¹

¹ The Department for Business and Trade evaluation of SPL, 2023 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/shared-parental-leave-spl-evaluation>)

Flexible working and career progression for women

- After the pandemic, 70% of working parents report working flexibly - compared with 55% in 2019 (*WFI 2022*)

What types of flexible working are parents doing?



- Between 2019 and 2021, the growth in flexible working was largely driven by home and hybrid working. Over a third of respondents reported hybrid or homebased arrangements compared with 22% pre-pandemic – and hybrid workers are more likely to be male, higher earners and London-based (*WFI 2022*).
- More dads work part-time post-pandemic - but overall, mums still work more part-time to fit work around their caring responsibilities. 37% mothers versus 11% fathers worked part-time in our survey (*WFI 2022*).

Who works part-time?



- Overall, people working reduced or part-time hours were more likely to be women, single parents, younger, and earning under £25k per annum (*WFI 2022*).

- While part-time work can play an important role in keeping parents in work, it might also be considered the 'least flexible flex', as it reduces hours and pay, and results in a 'part-time penalty' that primarily affects mothers – Working Families' research highlights that part-time workers report less career progression than those with location or schedule flexibility (WFI 2022).
- And there is still a lack of access to flex amongst those who need it. Three quarters of lower-income working parents work flexibly (78% of women and 71% of men) – but two thirds of lower-income working parents without a flexible working arrangement would like one (WFI 2023)
- Parents who are on a lower income are twice as likely to have an informal flexible working request rejected than the average parents (WFI 2023)

“When I returned to work my application for flexible working hours was denied, meaning I had to drop my hours, work nights instead of days, and later started a second job for the hours I'd lost.”

Survey respondent (WFI 2023)

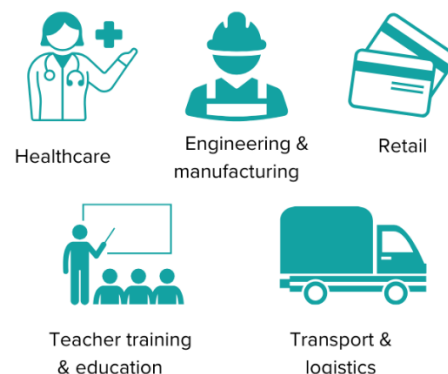
The divide between those parents who have access to flexible working and those who do not is drawn along sector lines, with employees from knowledge-based industries benefitting most from the recent shift towards flex.

The Best and Worst Sectors for Flexible Working

Over 80% work flexibly



Under 65% work flexibly



The five industries with the least flexibility are clearly those in which roles are less suited to homeworking. Three of them overwhelmingly employ women, disproportionately affecting women's access to flexible work.

Case study: SF Recruitment shows how flexible working makes sense for SMEs

Flex works for SMEs as well as larger employers. Having seen the transformative effect of working flexibly during the COVID-19 pandemic, SME SF Recruitment committed a fully flexible model. The effect was both immediate and seismic: in the first 12 months, the workforce grew by 60%, average staff performance doubled sales figures with the average employee earning 29% more than the previous year, and the company saw a 34% boost in income and 96% growth in profit.

Flex from day one

With new legislation coming in this year requiring employers to offer the right to request flexible working from day one, best practice employers are leading the way in offering flex for their employees:

86% of the best practice employers who entered our Working Families Benchmark in 2023 already offer flexibility as a day one right. This shows just how doable it is for employers to implement flexibility from the start.

And we know that having that flexibility in place can make a huge difference to employees' ability to balance work and care, and to stay in work after having children.

Working Families' research shows that lower-income parents whose request for flexible working had been successful were a third less likely than the average for all lower-income parents to have to quit their job to manage childcare (*WFI 2023*).

Addressing the gender pay gap

With the UK's gender pay gap still firmly in place, employers need to take action now to close the gender pay gap in their own organisations, and ensure that women thrive and progress in work.

Working Families' best practice employers are showing how this can be done. They:

- ask senior leaders to publicly role model their flexible working arrangements (100% of employers who entered this year's Working Families Benchmark)
- ensure all job adverts indicate the flexible options available (98%)
- encourage take up of equal parenting leave or shared parental leave amongst fathers (92%).