



# Hidden talents

A study of the role of work in the lives of female job seekers in East London

**A report by Renaishi, September 2015**

We are an award-winning social enterprise that helps people and places to thrive

## About Renaisi

Renaisi is an award-winning social enterprise whose mission is to help people and places to thrive. Our mission is underpinned by three aims:

- **Live:** develop strategies to maximise economic, social and cultural assets to create successful places
- **Work:** equip and empower individuals to find sustainable and secure employment
- **Learn:** enable resilient, confident, cohesive and flourishing communities.

## Acknowledgements

The research team wishes to thank our employment service team for supporting the study and contributing their expertise by taking part in interviews. We would especially like to thank the women who generously shared their stories with us for the study. We wish them well for the future and their careers.

**Title:** Hidden talents: a study of the role of work in the lives of female job seekers in East London

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# Executive summary

## Background to the report

Women who are long-term unemployed often face multiple forms of disadvantage, which present barriers to their ability to find sustainable and rewarding employment. Recent public sector spending cuts, which reduce services and job roles that benefit women, risk exacerbating these barriers<sup>1</sup>.

Renaisi provides employment advice and training services, and has a research team that focuses on employment. We sought to explore how barriers to work manifest for the long-term unemployed women who access our services in East London.

Our study was designed to generate an in-depth understanding of the challenges and opportunities for a small sample of women living in Tower Hamlets, Hackney and Islington. Its aim is to provide insights which can support employment service providers to develop appropriate and innovative approaches for women.

## Methodology

In 2014, life history qualitative interviews were conducted with eight women who were accessing Renaisi's employment advice and training services. All had been unemployed for at least two years. The sample reflects a spectrum of demographics but was not designed to be representative, given the study's small scale. Interviews were also conducted with four staff members who provide advice and training, to understand challenges and opportunities from their perspectives.

## Key findings

1. Our interviews with women suggest that there are eight spheres of life which impact on their relationship with work: childhood; caring for children; intimate partner relationships; health; migration; housing and economic situation; previous experiences of work; and availability of appropriate support. These spheres influence women's feelings towards work, experiences of it, and barriers to accessing it.

2. Women's experiences are shaped by gendered disadvantage, most explicitly in the following areas:

- Childcare: experiences of lone parenthood, which affects women disproportionately, is a significant theme. It has led women to make compromises in their career choices. Caring commitments have limited the types of role available to them. Lone parenthood has prompted women to perceive work as a necessity rather than a source of personal fulfilment
- Gendered norms: perceptions of the role of women within the labour market are apparent in how women related to work and the sorts of roles they have pursued. Their choices often reflect gendered occupational segmentation, which is associated with poor pay and job insecurity for women<sup>2</sup>
- Intimate partner violence: violence has had severe and long-lasting impacts on women's relationships with work. It has affected access to work directly, as well as indirectly through its impact on health, wellbeing and economic situation

3. Women's life experiences are characterised by complex circumstances, gendered and other forms of social

1. Fawcett Society Policy Briefing (March 2012) The Impact of Austerity on Women

2. Fawcett Society (2014) The Time to Act is Now: Fawcett's Gender Pay Gap Briefing

disadvantage. Poor health affects capacity to work; economic and housing instability also affects capacity and job choices; and experiences of migration mean women have had to navigate new systems and learn a new language. These are distinct challenges in themselves, reflecting race, economic and health inequalities; but they are also linked to gendered factors (for example, where health conditions related to experiences of intimate partner violence).

4. Experience of work itself has had an impact on women's confidence and wellbeing. Work can be both empowering and disempowering, depending on treatment at work. Access to work is considered a way to overcome low wellbeing.

5. The labour market is competitive for roles traditionally associated with female employment. A diminishing public sector may be connected to competition for administration jobs, and fewer roles which offer the flexibility and security required for lone parents.

6. Women's experiences of adversity show they possess skills which are beneficial in the workplace. By managing complex and challenging life experiences, including lone parenthood; navigating new cultures and expectations; and overcoming experiences of intimate partner violence, women demonstrate resilience, determination and ability.

## Recommendations

### Individual providers

Mainstream employment service providers can improve access and support for diverse groups of women by:

1. Ensuring staff are trained and equipped to recognise the indicators of violence

against women, such as intimate partner violence, and are able to respond appropriately

2. Ensuring language translation and interpretation services are available
3. Ensuring services understand and accommodate childcare needs through flexible provision
4. Applying person-centred approaches which are based in understanding clients' wider life experiences, and include support for diverse needs

### Joined-up local approaches

Local authorities can provide specialist services which complement and are delivered in partnership with mandatory employment services (such as Job Centre Plus and the Work Programme) to support access to work for women. These include:

1. Additional voluntary employment services which specialise in supporting particular groups of women, such as BAME women
2. Partnerships with organisations which provide specialised support in areas such as violence against women

### Innovative approaches

There are opportunities to challenge gender norms which hinder women's access and progress in work through innovative service approaches, such as:

1. Exploring how skills developed through childcare and managing challenging life circumstances are transferable to work, and communicated to employers
2. Challenging gender occupational segmentation by researching and developing programmes which promote female employment in roles traditional associated with male employment
3. Addressing low wellbeing and confidence amongst women, through positive engagement with work and women's self-employment initiatives

## Next steps

Renaisi plans to build on the study by:

1. Applying learning to our employment advice and training services
2. Stimulating discussion within the welfare to work sector on best practice approaches to supporting women to engage in services and in the labour market
3. Exploring innovative approaches to provision through applying for European Social Fund funding to deliver a specialist service to BAME women
4. Conducting further research which builds on themes identified

**For further information and to stay informed, please contact Tessa Horvath: [t.horvath@renaisi.com](mailto:t.horvath@renaisi.com).**

# Introduction

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This study explores the role of work in the lives of women in East London who are long-term unemployed. It looks at the barriers women are currently facing in seeking work, and how these relate to women's life histories and social influences which have shaped their current relationships with work. The study draws on Renaisi's experience as both a provider of frontline employment advice, guidance and training services, and as research practitioners with a specialism and portfolio in employment research.

Research Renaisi has conducted in the past has highlighted the complex circumstances that disadvantaged women must navigate in order to access work<sup>3</sup>. In addition, women's rights organisations have expressed concern that women's advancement in the workplace is being eroded by public sector spending cuts<sup>4</sup>. This led us to explore how such issues are manifested for the long-term unemployed women who are customers of Renaisi's employment advice and training services. The study concentrated on Renaisi's East London service, which supports people living in the boroughs of Tower Hamlets, Hackney and Islington. These boroughs have particularly high rates of female unemployment and economic inactivity compared to the London average<sup>5</sup>, especially amongst BAME women, and have also been subject to particularly high public spending cuts<sup>6</sup>.

The study was designed to generate an in-depth understanding of the challenges and opportunities for a small sample of women living in Tower Hamlets, Hackney and Islington. Its focus is on contextualising current barriers to work through understanding women's complex life experiences, embedded in gendered and other forms of social disadvantage, and examining how these experiences relate to current labour market trends.

Our study provides insights which can support the development of Renaisi's welfare to work offer, as well as other similar services. We also reflect on the interplay between social norms and conditions and women's experience, as they relate to the world of work.

## Methodology

Our research team conducted life history interviews with eight women in 2014 who were accessing Renaisi's employment advice and training services. All had been unemployed for at least two years. The sample reflects a spectrum of demographics but was not purposively designed to be representative, given the study's small scale. This method enables examination of work within the context of a range of life experiences and meanings. It also ensures participants can construct their own narratives. Interviews were also conducted with four Renaisi staff members who provide advice and training. This enables us to explore the interface between prevalent circumstances of female job seekers and the labour market through the perspective of our service delivery team.

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3. For example, Renaisi (2009) *Careers, Advice, Support and Help: Tackling worklessness in the Village ward of Barking and Dagenham*

4. Fawcett Society (2012) *The Impact of Austerity on Women*; Women's Budget Group (2013) *The Impact on Women of Budget 2013, A budget for inequality and recession*

5. Annual Population Survey 2014

6. Islington Fawcett Society (2011) *Cutting Women Out: A study of how the cuts will affect women living in Islington*

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# Women's stories

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In this section, we present findings from interviews with eight women who shared their stories for the study. We look at eight interrelated, formative life stages and how these have influenced relationships with work. Differences and convergences between women's experiences are highlighted, reflecting systemic patterns as well as unique circumstances.

**Figure 1:** formative life stages affecting women's relationships with work



**The sample:** The women interviewed were aged between 23 and 51. Three women were white British, one was black British and four had migrated to the UK during childhood or early adulthood (two from the Indian subcontinent, one from East Asia and one from Europe). Pseudonyms are used throughout the report to refer to participants.

## My childhood

There are myriad ways that social and cultural norms which women experience in childhood and their immediate home and school environments influence their understanding of the role of work in their lives, decision-making and access to opportunity. This sets the framework for their relationship with work during later life<sup>7</sup>, and is evident in the life histories of women interviewed. They describe varying ways that early life experiences have affected their perceptions and experiences of work.

For some, childhood was characterised by unstable home environments. Linda felt uncared for during childhood, and connected this to parental substance misuse and preferential treatment towards other siblings. This environment had diverse impacts on her relationship with work. It negatively affected her engagement in education, possibly inhibiting work opportunities in later life. However, work also became somewhere she could exert some control, and represented an escape from home life as soon as she was old enough:

“ My mum was more interested in drink and I had nothing. Money was spent on booze instead of food. So in the end I got myself a job at the age of 15 and went from there. I looked after myself, I used to work seven days a week”

*Linda*

Other women grew up outside the UK, describing their countries of origin as places where women were not expected or encouraged to work. As a result, they had limited access to education and did not perceive work to be an important or relevant part of their lives when they were growing up. For Kim, migrating during childhood was an unsettling experience, and had a detrimental impact on her education:

“ I would have preferred to come earlier. I came at GCSE time. I had to catch up at school a lot. It would have been better to come at younger age. I had to sit exams the first year I joined.”

*Kim*

These early experiences, shaped by social and cultural norms and family circumstances, therefore had significant implications for both their educational attainment and how they came to view work:

“ Because I’ve got no qualification, I think that is the biggest downfall for me. So I’m looking in to it, I’m going to college to get my English and Maths GCSEs or at least just to get something.”

*Linda*

## My children

Motherhood, particularly lone parenthood, also had profound impacts on women’s ability to work and develop careers. Almost all the women interviewed had been lone parents. Although not deliberately sampled as such, this reflects national trends in the disproportionate number of unemployed lone parents<sup>8</sup>, who are predominantly women<sup>9</sup>.

All experienced significant pressure as lone parents, which had an impact on their ability to work and the type of opportunities they sought. Flexible and part-time work was often essential as it could fit around caring responsibilities, but many noted challenges in accessing such work today:

“ It’s quite hard because you can’t work the hours you want to work to earn more money [...] He’s in school by 9 and finishes at half past 3 so something to fit in between them hours”

*Amelia*

7. For example, Polavieja (2014) Nurse or Mechanic? The Role of Parental Socialization and Children’s Personality in the Formation of Sex-Typed Occupational Aspirations, Social Forces

8. ONS (2014) Families in the labour market

9. ONS (2011)

Those with experience of working and managing childcare described not only the importance of flexible working, but also the stress involved in managing work and home life. They described a necessity for organisational skills to be able to care for children and engage in the labour market simultaneously:

“ It is a struggle, it’s very hard when you want to work, get the children up, try to get them ready, trying to get them to school or get them to a nanny. It’s really hard but you know you have to do that it’s one of them things.”

*Emma*

“ You just have to be organised and plan and get the right balance – still being there for kids but also giving time to work”

*Anika*

Reflecting the literature on the long-term impacts of managing lone parenthood and work-related setbacks<sup>10</sup>, women described having to change or delay their work aspirations due to caring responsibilities:

“ I would like to go back into [sports] but because of obviously my son and child care I don’t think I’d be able to go back into it. It will take up a lot of my time and I won’t have any time for myself, let alone my son”

*Amelia*

Chandni noted that she could not undertake an ESOL course when she had young children, as she did not have time. As a result, English language continues to be a barrier to accessing a job:

“ I couldn’t do ESOL when I had young children. Not enough time”

*Chandni*

These examples highlight the compromises that women make when balancing lone parenthood and work, and the impacts that such circumstances can have on access to and progression in work and meaning attributed to work (e.g. work as necessity rather than personal fulfilment). They also highlight the character and life skills that are developed through such challenges.

## My partner

Our research reveals that relationship breakdown and abusive relationships have far-reaching consequences for women’s relationships with work. For most women, pressures of balancing lone parenthood with work began with relationship breakdowns. This brought about a completely new way of life for two migrant women, Anika and Chandni, as they had not previously expected to work. As a result, they had to face language barriers and manage childcare responsibilities, while reframing their perceptions of employment as it became an essential prerequisite of their and their children’s wellbeing:

“ He was working and brought in money, I never needed to work. My role was to look after the children”

*Chandni*

“ I had to start from scratch [when separated from partner]. I had no education and work experience, I was raising kids.”

*Anika*

Some women disclosed experiences of intimate partner violence<sup>11</sup>, describing significant ways in which this had affected their ability to seek and maintain employment. Linda had experienced historical abuse that was a significant underlying cause of her present poor physical and mental health. In turn, this undermined her ability to work. Emma described

10. D’Arcy, C. and Hurrell, A. (2014) *Escape plan: Understanding who progresses from low pay and who gets stuck*. London: Resolution Foundation.

11. Intimate partner violence is sometimes referred to as ‘domestic violence’, however ‘domestic violence’ can sometimes refer also to abuse towards children, and therefore ‘intimate partner violence’ is used for accuracy.

a situation where there was continued contact with an abusive ex-partner. He made attempts to sabotage her ability to work, her housing situation and her attempts to have a positive relationship with their child. These cases highlight both the direct and indirect ways that intimate partner violence impacts on ability to work:

“ But I worked any time I could, any time I had, any free time, when my children started growing up. And then the violence got so bad, that my boyfriend battered. Being active would help me, but you can’t because of the damage, what he did to me.”

*Linda*

“ When I was working before and he was like that it did affect me quite a lot. Even when I was studying and childcare. I was doing my exams and he hit me and caused so much trouble in the way his behaviour was and it did affect me in a lot of ways.”

*Emma*

The cases we explored in this study suggest that intimate relationships can significantly shape women’s perceptions and experiences of work, as well as their agency. They show that interaction within the public world of work cannot be separated from personal circumstances. They also highlight the particular importance of recognising intimate partner violence as a significant barrier to access to, and progression in, the labour market.

## My health

Women’s relationships with work were affected by poor physical and mental health, both currently and historically. They explained that ill-health prevented them from looking for work or performing in a work environment:

“ My mobility is not very good at the moment and nobody wants to take me on because it’s insurance. So I’m in a no win situation. I’d love to do something, to give myself a better life, but there’s nothing at the moment I could do.”

*Linda*

They also noted the need for accessible services and workplaces that could meet their health needs:

“ They can’t help with health. I would rather go on a programme that helps people in recovery. I’m not getting this support from anywhere. I’m expected to go out and get a job but I just need to recover first.”

*Elaine*

Elaine described feeling pressured to search for work when she was still recovering from illness, possibly reflecting welfare reforms which have brought about more stringent work capability assessments<sup>12</sup>:

“ It’s like being pushed out a room without being fully clothed.”

*Elaine*

Some women reported that poor mental health, including physical manifestation of mental health symptoms<sup>13</sup>, affected ability to access work. It presented challenges in both looking for and maintaining employment:

“ When you have a bit of depression, everything seems a bit more than what it is. If I get a headache, I can’t move, I can’t lift my head up, but I know it’s just a headache. But it feels like something more.”

*Linda*

12. Litchfield, P. (2014) An Independent Review of the Work Capability Assessment – year five, [www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/380027/wca-fifth-independent-review.pdf](http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/380027/wca-fifth-independent-review.pdf)

13. For information on the link between mental and physical health see: [www.mentalhealth.org.uk/our-work/policy/physical-health-and-mental-health](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/our-work/policy/physical-health-and-mental-health)

Francesca reported that a period of alcohol addiction had affected her relationship with work. Addiction and recovery prevented her from engaging with work, as well as her career choices post-recovery:

“ I said I can’t go anymore, this is killing me. This led me to drink. And that’s why I cannot go back to [that job]. That time I didn’t have a social life and I was already a drinker. I got the necessary help. I haven’t drunk for two years. And change of career.”

*Francesca*

Health, mental health and addiction are central factors which affect a person’s ability to work<sup>14</sup>. Often, they must be addressed in order for a person to become work-ready. However, they may be symptoms of other factors and life events. For example, in one case, poor physical and mental health appeared to relate to experiences of intimate partner violence; in another, to experiences of sexual harassment and mistreatment at work.

Our study also highlights that work itself is an important variable which affects health and wellbeing. As illustrated above, a change in career was essential for Francesca’s positive mental health and ability to move on from addiction. She also constructed a positive sense of identity around work, so a lack of progress at work was itself a factor associated with poor wellbeing. Similarly, Linda described work as a route to improving her mental health, as she felt that not working exacerbated her mental health conditions. This affirms the importance of understanding the dynamic and independent relationship between work and health:

“ I know full well if I go back to work, I would be better in myself. It would give me the kick up the bum. When you’re ill, you see no way out, I see no way out for myself. It’s like being stuck in a wheelchair with no arms to move yourself.”

*Linda*

Our findings therefore show that poor physical and mental health inhibit ability to work, and may relate to other areas of life, including intimate partner violence. They also show that that employment status and job roles themselves may affect health.

## Moving to the UK

Women who migrated to the UK from Asia in childhood or early adulthood described the influence of contradictory cultural norms, which attributed different meanings and expectations to women’s relationships to work. This led them to make adjustments to their understanding of it.

Alongside navigating shifting cultural norms, women described practical challenges associated with migration to the UK. Learning a new language and forming new social ties, for example, inhibited their ability to obtain qualifications or work:

“ I’m looking for childcare courses but English isn’t good enough. I’m ok with basic English but can’t understand complex and struggle on the phone. They say they’ll stop my benefits.”

*Chandni*

These women began their job searches in the UK from a position of relative disadvantage and low skill levels. Doubtlessly, this affected the trajectories of their employment pathways. This reflects wider literature on the multiple challenges that migrant women face in navigating a new cultural environment<sup>15</sup>.

14. For example, Lindsay Blank, J. Peters, S. Pickvance, J. Wilford, E. MacDonald (2008) A Systematic Review of the Factors which Predict Return to Work for People Suffering Episodes of Poor Mental Health, *Journal of Occupational Rehabilitation*, Volume 18, Issue 1, pp 27-34

15. Eaves (2015) *Settling In: Experiences of Women on spousal visas in the UK*

Despite this, they described managing these challenges, alongside lone parenthood, and are working towards developing the skills and qualifications to pursue their career aspirations, demonstrating perseverance and resilience:

“ I did ESOL English level one, also did literacy and maths qualifications with Learn Direct. I would do courses when children went to school”

*Anika*

## My home and money

Some women described unstable housing and financial situations as barriers to accessing work. Meeting housing and financial needs prior to looking for work was, for some, essential to provide the stability and capacity needed for seeking work. Emma, who became homeless, reported that she felt unable to seek work until she was more secure:

“ I said I need to settle here in a place, sort myself out first”

*Emma*

Women in relatively stable housing also reported being unhappy with their living situations. One reported over-crowding and another felt socially isolated in her local area after being relocated by the local authority. Although not directly related to access to work, these situations were experienced as stressful or isolating, factors which may again affect capacity to look for work.

Challenges in finding or maintaining appropriate housing were apparent for both social and private sector housing. In one case, eviction by a private landlord due to a lack of contractual agreement initiated insecurity:

“ Because I had my own place but got illegally evicted because someone complained about something and I was in hospital when they illegally evicted me. The stupid thing I did was paid him cash in hand. I didn't get no receipts so I couldn't really take him to court.”

*Amelia*

In others, women felt that local authority placements did not meet their needs:

“ You know I've gone to the homeless and they said I didn't fit their category – I'm not on drugs, I don't take alcohol. So I have to go and rent so I thought well how do I rent? I haven't got a deposit, no nothing, and that's how I became homeless.”

*Emma*

Housing and financial insecurity were also sometimes connected to experiences of intimate partner violence. Partners controlled income or sabotaged housing situations, or caused women to move to other parts of the UK in order to escape violence<sup>16</sup>. However, a degree of housing and financial security was also a source of freedom and defiance within an abusive relationship. The meaning of work was thus contextualised by the extent to which earnings were a source of empowerment or disempowerment within the relationship:

“ “And to lose my house over him. Considering since I was 18 [I] never owed a penny. I tried to sort out my life and buy my home and he destroyed everything.”

*Emma*

“ “He would take my money. I would go home and he will take my money. I had no control. Only control I had was at work. I did not want to leave but I had to when he done my back really badly.”

*Linda*

16. This pattern of internal migration is discussed here: Bowstead, J. C. (2015), Forced migration in the United Kingdom: women's journeys to escape domestic violence. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 40: 307–320. doi: 10.1111/tran.12085

Financial constraints also affected women's relationships with work. Women described situations where freedom to pursue career interests was superseded by the immediate need to earn money. Childcare responsibilities and associated costs led some women to put career aspirations which involved training on hold in favour of immediate income:

“ I'd like to do more but some courses are too long. The course is two years and I just want a job now”  
*Kim*

At the time of interview, however, most women were working towards a career goal and resistant to insecure roles such as those with zero hours contracts or to remain in industries they were unhappy in. They recognised the long-term benefits that pursuing a career goal might have for both their own wellbeing and that of their children.

Our findings therefore suggest that housing and financial insecurity can impact on ability to work, and are rooted in other areas of life experience, which may reflect systemic factors. They also indicate how financial and housing situations involving dependents and partners can affect the meaning of work and decision-making.

## My experience of work

As highlighted above, direct experience of work affected women's current attitudes to it. Some women described experiences of job instability and a lack of employment rights in the caring and catering industries due to precarious contracts. These included: experiences of being dismissed with little explanation; being unable to take time off and retain a position; having to work exceptionally long hours; and feeling disrespected by managers. Such experiences affected their desire to work in these industries and had a detrimental impact on their wellbeing:

“ This type of profession is horrible and I don't understand why there is no rules about work – to respect human rights and they seem they don't exist”

*Francesca*

“ They asked me to go back on the other job and I said I won't because I don't have to be treated like that. ... the way she spoke to me, I don't have to be treated like that in any job. I don't wish to work with somebody who's gonna try me...be quite rude to me.”

*Emma*

Francesca also described an instance of sexual harassment by an employer. This prevented her progression within the company, and was a factor contributing to her leaving the job:

“ He says why you don't stay? Why don't we stay in a hotel? I find this extremely inappropriate and I said no, obviously. It's considered sexual harassment, I think.”

*Francesca*

In response to experiences like these, some women were looking to set up their own businesses or work on a self-employed basis. This correlates with national trends, which have seen an increase in self-employment for women<sup>17</sup>. It may mean that women are attempting to take greater ownership of work following negative experiences of employment.

It was apparent that women had predominantly worked in roles and sectors traditionally associated with female employment. These include cleaning, catering, nursery work, retail and receptionist duties. They also had future plans to work in midwifery, health and social care, health and fitness, teaching, alternative health, child care, and hairdressing.

17. ONS (2014) Self-employed workers in the UK - 2014



The gendering of job roles has implications for work and pay. Evidence suggests that pay levels are low in sectors traditionally associated with female employment<sup>18</sup>, and public sector cuts and private sector job creation look set to create a labour market more aligned with traditionally male roles<sup>19</sup>.

Despite this, it is noteworthy that some participants felt that there are greater opportunities for women's access to work than ever before, and some were interested in roles more usually associated with male employment:

“ Today there are lots of jobs out there for men and women. I think men and women can do the same job. Women bus drivers, men bus drivers, it's all the same.”

*Emma*

In summary, our findings show that negative experiences of work, such as job insecurity and poor working conditions, can contribute to unemployment. They also point to the social and cultural gender norms that underlie women's experiences of work, manifested through continued job role stereotyping, despite some possible progress in this area.

## My support

Women described valuing person-centred approaches in welfare to work services. This is consistent with previous research<sup>20</sup>. Women noted that they received holistic support from Renaisi's welfare to work provision in areas such as housing and financial support, as well as job search support. However, some women felt that systemic issues and bureaucracy inhibited the ability of staff to offer bespoke support. They also noted the importance of service

provider awareness of less diverse job roles, to ensure provision can be tailored to the individual:

“ They've helped me a lot which I'm pleased you know. When I was a bit down, when I was homeless they was all there for me.”

*Emma*

“ [The previous service provider] propose me to work, in some of the retail jobs. I wasn't interested because that's not my field. I'm not going to get nothing from that.”

*Francesca*

The role of other services and informal support networks was also highlighted by interviewees. Some women described mental health, domestic violence and addiction services as being critical in supporting them to overcome and manage related challenges:

“ If it weren't for domestic violence charities, if I didn't have them, I don't think I'd be here”

*Linda*

It was evident from interviews that women were not receiving all the support they required to overcome barriers to working. For Elaine, access to health-care support was vital but not accessible. For Linda, greater support was required to support mental health needs. These examples suggest that support from mainstream services must be integrated with additional local specialist services, which address more complex needs.

Women had varying degrees of informal support from close family members and friends. The support Emma had received from a family member was essential for managing homelessness, whilst Anika described having no family who could help with childcare. These examples highlight the critical role of appropriate informal and formal support in increasing access to work (both directly through family childcare, and indirectly through mental health services, for example). They also emphasise that

18. Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2014) Improving Progression in Low-paid, Low-skilled, Retail, Catering and Care Jobs

19. Fawcett Society (2013) The changing labour market: delivering for women, delivering for growth

20. Renaisi (2014) Engaging and supporting 18-24 year olds into employment in Barking and Dagenham

**welfare to work provision sits within a wider context of support.**

In summary, it is evident that complex life circumstances and disadvantage have affected women's relationships with work at different points in their lives, and have contributed to the challenges they face in accessing work today. Such circumstances, experienced from childhood through to family relationships and health and housing situations, are deeply interrelated. Relationships with the labour market must, therefore, be understood as embedded within them.

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# The welfare to work story

The background is a solid green color. It features several thin white lines that intersect to form a series of triangles and quadrilaterals. One line runs diagonally from the top-left towards the bottom-right. Another line runs diagonally from the top-right towards the bottom-left. A third line runs diagonally from the bottom-left towards the top-right. These lines intersect in the center and near the corners, creating a dynamic geometric pattern.

In this section, we explore the interface between the needs, circumstances and experiences of unemployed women and the labour market itself, drawing on the perspectives of Rencisi's welfare to work staff. We then outline the challenges to provision in meeting these needs.

## The labour market

Staff link clients into job roles and understand the labour market intimately. They perceived the following labour market trends to present challenges for placing women into work:

**1. Insufficient job roles for lone parents:** staff reflected that it was extremely challenging to find suitable jobs for lone parents. They perceive lone parents to be squeezed between insufficient child care provision and a labour market that does not accommodate childcare needs, with few jobs offering both job security and flexible working hours. In particular, zero hours contracts were perceived to offer insufficient job security to women with dependents, despite offering a more flexible working pattern. They also inhibit women's ability to receive Working Tax Credits, for which a guaranteed 16 hours per week of employment is necessary:

“ Also the hours, the hours are a very big issue. So if you are a lone parent and you are dropping your child off to school at 9 you need something flexible within those hours. And at the moment I haven't found anything like that that isn't zero hours contract”

**2. Recent experience:** staff noted that many employers are not willing to take on clients if they have not worked for a long time. Employers tend to favour recent and up-to-date experience and qualifications. Staff felt that this was particularly problematic for older women, migrant women and women with children:

“ We have some clients with no work experience at all. Maybe due to the fact that you know they stayed at home or to raise their children for maybe five years or six years so, you know they haven't got any work experience. In that case what would help us is provision like work trial, work placements. To give them that opportunity, to show what they can do”

**3. Job role scarcity:** staff reflected that women are predominantly looking for roles in administration, reception, retail and childcare, roles more usually associated with female employment than male. They noted that they had observed an increase in the competitiveness of these roles:

“ I think admin used to be something that ... women will probably go into and you don't necessary need a degree or specific qualification, so lots of people would do it. But where a lot of cuts were made when the recession hit, and now the competition for an admin role now is really huge.”

**4. Private sector:** staff reflected that there are more roles in the private sector and that, consequently, provision is increasingly focused on supporting clients to start their own businesses. This may suggest limitations in the public sector job market, but also opportunities for women to take control and ownership of their work through self-employment:

“ A lot of women, both men and women are looking into starting their own business. Because most people want to be independent financially”

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**5. Complex needs:** staff noted that it was particularly challenging to place women with complex needs into work. Complex needs could include experience of homelessness, mental health conditions, substance misuse and intimate partner violence or other forms of violence against women. In these cases, extensive support may be required from partner organisations as a pre-requisite to entering employment. However, this may also reflect a limitation in employment opportunities which are sensitive and accommodating to such needs:

“ And the customers that are ‘red’<sup>21</sup>, mainly they are the customers that are disabled, you know they have mental health, alcohol problems, substance issues, various different issues. And those ones I would deal with partners. So for instance the customers with mental health [conditions] I would work with Mind.”

**6. Language:** women were perceived to present more commonly with language barriers than men, which is consistent with women’s stories. This was perceived to be related to cultural expectations regarding women’s roles and experiences of relationship breakdown, supporting findings from interviews with women. Only low-skilled, low-paid jobs were perceived to be accessible to women:

“ Language affects a lot of women. Even though I just explained that cleaning is a job that everyone can do. Nowadays it is a bit different as most companies want people to at least speak general English. Even if they are not fluent, general English. And most of our clients, if I include all of our advisers, we have a high percentage of ESOL clients so it is hard to work with them.”

21. Refers to traffic light system used to categorise customers: those who are ‘red’ have the most severe needs.

**7. Age and disability:** Age and disability were also highlighted as stratifying factors affecting women’s ability to work. For example, staff noted that older women were marginalised from the workplace due to out-dated experience and qualifications:

“ I do think employers are less likely to take on older people sometime, if I’m totally honest.”

However, some staff felt this was less acute:

“ If you’ve got experience, got the skills then you’re still employable. But I think people come with ‘I’m too old’ but if you ask people about that it is masking other things.”

## Welfare to work provision

Welfare to work provision is framed by the challenges described above in sourcing job opportunities which are appropriate for individual clients, and in supporting clients to develop the skills, attributes, confidence, health and wellbeing required by the labour market. A number of factors influence the extent to which provision can overcome these challenges:

**1. Response to women’s needs:** staff highlighted multiple ways that female customer needs affect their ability to engage with services. This suggests that providers should be aware and accommodating of these needs. Examples include: the impact of substance misuse and poor mental health on ability to attend appointments; challenges for women who had experienced violence to engage in a mixed sex environment; challenges in accessing venues due to physical disability; challenges in engaging with advisers due to language barriers; and challenges in attending appointments due to childcare responsibilities. Staff described various ways they worked to overcome these barriers and ensure accessible provision:

- “ Most of the time I do phone appointments with her. She gets anxiety attacks when she is in crowds and when she is around men. She was sexually abused when she was really young and that is why she can't be around men.”
- “ Say for example when they have training what we do it might be difficult for women with children, that they don't have anywhere, so for them to be able to attend that training or go to that interview, what we do is we pay for that childcare.”

**2. Emotional support:** staff reported providing emotional support to clients, suggesting that they had built relationships of trust with them. However, they noted that providing emotional support was beyond their role in that they were not qualified to support complex needs. In such cases, they would make referrals to external organisations to support clients with mental health and substance misuse needs. However, they also suggested that it would be beneficial to work more closely with such organisations to be able to deliver support in-house:

- “ If we did have someone from Turning Point or Mind come in I think that would be really good. Especially if we had someone come in to give a bit of advice for those clients. Because those people are qualified. I think that would be really good.”

**3. A business model:** the commercial nature of mainstream employment services such as the Work Programme means that support is based on a system of financial incentives. Staff reported challenges of providing as intensive support as they would like within this system, which incentivises support based on financial returns:

- “ To be honest, sometimes I do get really upset because you know there are some people that you really do want to help them but you can't spend all that time helping that one person. Because you have to think of everyone else as well and hitting your target. So there are some clients, I would love to sit down there and help them all day”
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# The full story



In this study, we have explored issues facing women in accessing the labour market from the perspectives of eight female clients of Renaisi's welfare to work service. We have also highlighted the challenges in supporting women into work. Taken together, there are three over-lapping areas which frame how long-term unemployed women relate to work: gendered social norms and disadvantage; complex life experiences and needs; and the economy and labour market.

## Gendered norms and disadvantage

Our study has highlighted ways in which women's views of work and experiences of it are shaped by gendered social norms and disadvantage.

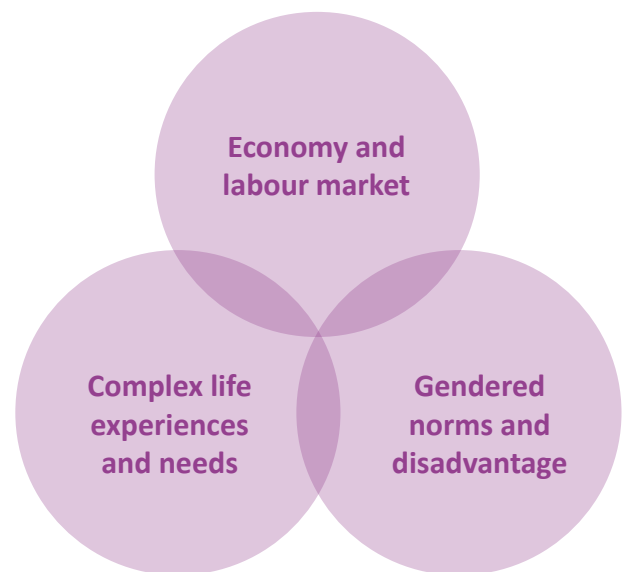
### Expectations and roles

Gendered occupational segmentation was reflected in the work options discussed by women in interviews. Such patterns may continue to entrench stereotyping and the gender pay gap<sup>22</sup>. This suggests a need to explore strategies to ensure female employment is valued and to make more diverse opportunities accessible to women.

The overall role of work in women's lives was also shaped by prevailing gendered and cultural norms women were exposed to. In some cases, women perceived work to have a limited role in their lives; in others, women's sense of identity was built around being successful at work. Both cases affect how women have made decisions and conceptualise work experiences.

### Caring

Gender norms also persisted in the extent of childcare responsibilities women reported, often as lone parents. Childcare needs must be met to enable women to access and progress in the labour market<sup>23</sup>. Encouraging a more equal distribution of



childcare between men and women<sup>24</sup> would also support this outcome.

The skills women reported in managing childcare alongside other responsibilities, also highlight opportunities to value childcare more explicitly, and explore the transferability of skills to the workplace:

“ What I do for my daughter isn't valued at all. She needs support to raise her child. Grandparents need to be valued more and older women in general. In the UK this kind of support is not valued”

*Elaine*

22. Fawcett Society (2014) The Time to Act is Now: Fawcett's Gender Pay Gap Briefing

23. Equality and Human Rights Commission (2010) Working Better, Childcare Matters: improving choices and chances for parents and children

24. Fawcett Society (2014) The Time to Act is Now: Fawcett's Gender Pay Gap Briefing



## Violence against women<sup>25</sup>

Our study highlights the role that experiences of violence against women can play in women's lives, with impacts on health and wellbeing, housing and financial situations and access to work<sup>26</sup>. Although focused predominantly on intimate partner violence, evidence shows that other forms of violence against women, including sexual exploitation and sexual harassment, also affect access to and progression in work<sup>27</sup>. The far-reaching impacts of such experiences highlight the importance of understanding this phenomenon if complex needs are to be addressed.

## Complex life experiences and needs

Our findings highlight that current challenges long-term unemployed women face in accessing work are often rooted in complex life experiences and needs.

## Intersectionality

Women's life experiences were characterised by complex circumstances, informed by both gendered disadvantage and other forms of social disadvantage. Poor health affected capacity to work; economic and housing instability affected capacity as well as job choices; and experiences of migration meant that women had to navigate new systems and learn a new language. These were distinct challenges in themselves, reflecting race, economic and health inequalities, but also intersected with gendered factors (for example, where health conditions related to experiences of intimate partner violence). This shows that

25. The UN defines violence against women (VAWG) as "any act of gender-based violence that is directed at a woman because she is a woman or acts of violence which are suffered disproportionately by women." Forms of VAWG include domestic violence and abuse, female genital mutilation (FGM), forced marriage, honour-based violence, prostitution and trafficking, sexual violence including rape, sexual exploitation, sexual harassment, stalking, faith-based abuse (MOPAC 2013)

26. Refuge (2008) Sharpe, N., 'What's yours is mine' The different forms of economic abuse and its impact on women and children experiencing domestic violence, [www.refuge.org.uk/files/Whats-yours-is-mine-Full-Report.pdf](http://www.refuge.org.uk/files/Whats-yours-is-mine-Full-Report.pdf)

27. For example, Opportunity Now (2015) Project 28-40: The Report

that work-readiness must be supported holistically, addressing both practical and emotional factors across diverse life domains, with the unique circumstances of the individual being central to support.

## Resilience and change

Several women interviewed reported challenging life experiences, and were subject to multiple forms of disadvantage. However, in managing this, the women showed resourcefulness and resilience. Managing lone parenthood and work, successfully navigating new cultures and expectations, and overcoming experiences of intimate partner violence whilst caring for dependents and sourcing stable housing: these require determination and ability, which is often not recognised or valued by employers<sup>28</sup>. In addition, many women are ready to pursue new careers and relationships with work following challenging experiences:

“ One day, I looked at myself and I couldn't deal anymore with this. After all I'm a woman. I mean as grown up and I've been shouted and treated as though I'm a child.”

*Francesca*

## Economy and labour market

Opportunities for work depend on trends in the labour market, which reflect wider economic trends.

## Precarious work

Women and staff interviewed made clear that many current work opportunities are precarious, temporary and insecure, especially those that offer flexible hours that might fit with childcare responsibilities. Low skilled jobs in industries such as catering and cleaning are poorly paid and offer poor working conditions and rights<sup>29</sup>. This may deter women from accepting such roles. Measures to improve status,

28. For example, [www.gingerbread.org.uk/content/1014/The-skills-I%E2%80%99ve-learned-as-a-single-parent](http://www.gingerbread.org.uk/content/1014/The-skills-I%E2%80%99ve-learned-as-a-single-parent)

29. Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2014) Improving Progression in Low-paid, Low-skilled, Retail, Catering and Care Jobs

pay and conditions<sup>30</sup> and the promotion of routes into employment that foster a sense of control, are therefore needed:

“ I saw the work market, and see how am I going to work this. So I create a business plan, it was only in my head in how to do this [...] I need a salary that allows me to live in London, because we all know the minimum salary doesn't allow you to live in London.”

*Francesca*

### A changing labour market

Findings echo research which suggests scarcity and competition for roles traditionally associated with female employment<sup>31</sup>. This may be related to private sector job growth and public sector cuts<sup>32</sup>.

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30. Ibid

31. Fawcett Society (2013) The changing labour market: delivering for women, delivering for growth

32. Ibid

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# Recommendations



Our findings suggest a number of ways that services for long-term unemployed women can be strengthened. This can be done:

- At the level of organisations who offer mainstream services, ensuring gender sensitivity in provision
- At the level of the local authority, by exploring limitations of mainstream provision and how gaps can be filled through local specialist provision and joined-up working
- Through innovative approaches to provision which directly challenge prevailing gendered norms and disadvantage

### **Individual providers**

Mainstream employment service providers can improve access and support for diverse groups of women by:

- Ensuring staff are trained and equipped to recognise the indicators of violence against women, such as intimate partner violence, and able to respond appropriately
- Ensuring language translation and interpretation services are available
- Ensuring services understand and accommodate childcare needs through flexible provision
- Applying person-centred approaches which are based in understanding clients' wider life experiences, and include support for diverse needs

### **Joined-up local approaches**

Local authorities can provide specialist services which complement and are delivered in partnership with mandatory employment services (such as Job Centre Plus and the Work Programme) to support access to work for women. These include:

- Additional voluntary employment services which specialise in supporting particular groups of women, such as BAME women
- Partnerships with organisations which provide specialised support in areas such as violence against women

### **Innovative approaches**

There are opportunities to challenge prevailing gender norms which hinder women's access to and progression in work through innovative service approaches, such as:

- Exploring how skills and abilities developed through childcare and managing challenging life circumstances can be framed as transferable to work, and communicated to employers accordingly
  - Challenging gender occupational segmentation by researching and developing programmes which actively promote female employment in roles traditional associated with male employment
  - Focusing explicitly on addressing low wellbeing and confidence amongst women, through positive engagement with work. This might include promotion and development of self-employment initiatives for women
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# Next steps

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Renaissi plans to build on the study by:

1. Applying learning to delivery of our employment advice and training services
2. Stimulating discussion within the welfare to work sector on best practice approaches to supporting women to engage in services and in the labour market
3. Exploring innovative approaches to provision through applying for European Social Fund funding to deliver a specialist service to BAME women
4. Conducting further research which builds on themes identified, such as: understanding the skills developed by women through activities such as childcare and navigation of complex life circumstances, to understand if and how such skills could relate to work and be communicated to employers accordingly; and exploration of opportunities and strategies to explicitly address low wellbeing and confidence amongst women, through positive engagement with work

**For further information and to stay informed, please contact Tessa Horvath: [t.horvath@renaisi.com](mailto:t.horvath@renaisi.com).**

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