

**Family comes first or open all hours?: How low paid women  
working in food retailing manage webs of obligation at  
home and work.**

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## **Abstract**

This paper draws on qualitative findings from a study exploring work-life balance issues amongst female employees within food retailing. Whilst female employment is fundamental to this sector, there is limited evidence on employees' experiences of reconciling relatively low-paid work and the particular demands of food retailing with domestic and caring responsibilities. Managing competing discourses and demands at home and work is a feature many women's lives. For those in low-paid jobs, with fewer material resources to fall back on, such webs of obligation often stretching over the lifecourse may be particularly difficult to navigate or escape. In food retail work, as in caring/domestic emergencies, timeframes may be tight and demands made on workers at short notice and outwith the standard working day. The study showed that sustaining their moral identities both as good mothers/daughters/family members ('family comes first') and as good and reliable workers ('the store must be staffed') was, therefore, an everyday practical accomplishment for these food retail employees. We explore women's accounts against the backdrop of particular familial, workplace and socio-cultural expectations and constraints, identifying overlapping sets of values between home and work as well as points of contradiction and tension.

### **Key words:**

**Work-life reconciliation; food retailing; low-pay; moral identities; qualitative**

# **Family comes first or open all hours?: How low paid women working in food retailing manage webs of obligation at home and work.**

## **Introduction**

In the 1990's most of what we knew about everyday experiences and accounts of work-life reconciliation in the UK was drawn from research with those in higher socio-economic groupings, and particularly focussed on challenges facing women and what were then called 'dual career families'. There were few qualitative studies of low-income households from which insights might be gleaned into not just the effects of work on family life across the lifecourse but also about how ideas of family might affect working life and the consequent potential for mutually transformative effects (Duncan and Edwards, 1999; Perrons, 2000). More recently, however, theoretically and empirically-based work has begun to open up debate in this area, most notably studies of working class identities (Skeggs, 1997; Savage et al, 2001; Reay and Lucey, 2003) and a revived interest in the interconnections between work and the constraints and meanings of household, place and community (Jarvis, 1999; Irwin, 2004; Skinner, 2005; McDowell et al., 2005; Ward et al., 2007). This increased academic interest parallels the policy focus on paid work which, following the trend begun in the US as welfare to work, has underpinned much of the UK Labour Government's approach to ameliorating poverty and social exclusion. Curtailing welfare expenditure, reducing dependency, enhancing 'active citizenship' (through social and economic activity), and reifying the 'work ethic' have all combined as powerful forces that both enable and constrain the choices women make as

they combine caring for their families and paid work. At the same time, strong political discourses have been promulgated around the importance of parenting skills, practices and responsibilities and there has been a shift towards care in the community for elderly and/or infirm family members. In these ways women are now faced with a re-emphasis on clusters of caring and domestic responsibilities across the lifecourse plus a requirement for active, employment based citizenship; these intersecting sets of obligations present everyday challenges to their moral identities as good family members as well as good workers (Backett-Milburn et al., 2001).

Food retail provides an interesting context to address many of the above issues for two main reasons. Firstly, the food retail sector is extremely diverse; although increasingly dominated by the multi nationals there are still a significant number of small, even micro, businesses. These small businesses tend to be located near housing and cater to a local market. As a result they employ staff who live in close proximity to the store and there is a strong sense of community around the business. In contrast the large retailers are more likely to be located out of town or in city centres and have uniform employment policies throughout the business. However, increasingly they are also moving into the local market sector, opening up small stores in similar locations to the small businesses, as was the case in the sample for the present study. Secondly, food retailers now open long hours (in some cases 24hours) and are a 7 day business. There is therefore room for employees to find shift patterns outside of the traditional working day, though an earlier study of flexible working in the retail sector queried 'whether it is employer led, employee chosen, or a complementary combination, and whether flexible working facilitates equal

opportunities , both in the workplace and in the wider sense of promoting long-lasting changes in parental roles and responsibilities’ (Perrons, 2000:1719). The work in food retail is generally unskilled, poorly paid and to some extent seasonal, attracting a high number of part time, female staff with caring responsibilities.

This paper is based upon findings from a recently completed three year study, funded by the European Social Fund, and designed to explore work-life balance issues amongst female employees within the Scottish food retail sector. Whilst female employment is fundamental to this sector there is limited evidence on women’s experiences of seeking to reconcile relatively low-paid work in food retail with domestic and caring responsibilities (Perrons, 1999). Using semi-structured interviews and a questionnaire survey we investigated women’s experiences of work and caring, and their anticipation of future employment and training. Here we present findings from the qualitative interviews. The analysis is augmented by data from interviews with their employers and managers, further to illuminate the work and managerial cultures these women must also negotiate on a daily basis (Hyman et al., 2005; Callan, forthcoming). Where relevant we also make reference to an earlier study of working mothers in non-professional and non-managerial occupations to support and extend understanding of the wider socio-cultural contexts and discourses influencing low-paid women’s everyday practices (Backett-Milburn et al., 2001). Unlike their female counterparts in higher status and income jobs, women in low-income households generally have, by definition, fewer material resources on which to draw. However, as they combine working and family responsibilities, they confront and manage similar logistical, temporal, social and emotional challenges (Warren, 2003).

Here we explore the socio-cultural meanings and contexts which both frame and underpin the reconciliation of low paid work and family responsibilities across the lifecourse. In particular, we focus on how women navigate and account for the intersecting webs of obligation and reciprocity which may both facilitate and pose challenges to their everyday management of work and domestic life/caring.

### **Background**

Recent work in sociology, social policy and geography has situated working class women's employment choices squarely within the socio-cultural and structural constraints framing their lives. It has been argued that, even if social class no longer provides the over-arching organisational framework of working life, the normative and cultural effects and constraints of class position on attitudes and behaviours are remarkably persistent (McRae, 2003). Such arguments are put forward to counter claims that women's contemporary employment patterns, particularly those involving mothers and part-time work, are a matter of individual preference (Hakim, 2000). As Crompton (2006:10) has pointed out: '... changes in material conditions, norms and cultures mean that institutions such as employment, class and the family are being reconfigured, but this does not mean that these institutions are redundant, or have been completely replaced'.

Social scientists examining, for example, education and style (Archer et al 2007), caring (Glucksmann, 2005), employment (Crompton, 2006), health and inequalities (Dolan, 2007), community and locality (Savage et al, 2001) have provided theoretical and empirically based evidence to demonstrate the continuing 'limits of choice' (Reay and

Lucey, 2003) of being working class. Psychosocial and cultural explanations have drawn heavily on Bourdieu's (1986) notion of habitus to argue that shared past and present knowledge and experience of the social world continue to shape individuals' identities and understandings of what is appropriate and possible for 'people like me' (Reay 2004; Archer et al, 2007). As Savage et al (2001:888) have pointed out: 'Class does not determine identity, but it is not irrelevant either. It is a resource, a device, with which to construct identity'.

Within this broader discourse on class and identity, gender is a further dimension. Working class women, it has been argued, have particular structural and cultural circumstances with which to contend. Adkins (2002), for example, has argued that masculine and feminine 'identities' continue to be central to workplace politics, the labour process itself and the organisation of production. Warren et al (forthcoming) analysed how work-family relevant social policy initiatives had relevance for low-waged coupled mothers in England, using British Household Panel Survey data and qualitative interviews. They concluded that these women had restricted choices as they were constrained by a policy context which offered only limited and piecemeal support. Specifically, their survey data showed these women to be in badly paying part-time work at the bottom of the occupational hierarchy; most of their partners were also in low-income occupations but the women's wages still made only a small contribution to household income and they were also doing most of the domestic and caring tasks. As few women had any access to work-based support for combining jobs with childcare, the researchers concluded that even though the qualitative interviews suggested that many

women and their partners might wish the situation to be different, nevertheless ‘working part-time was their only real alternative’.

Changes in labour markets, conditions of employment such as flexible and 24 hour working, welfare to work schemes, and the demise of the male breadwinner model are, then, just some of the wider developments that structure and constrain low-paid women’s work and family choices. Most low-paid women, like many of those in our food retail study, work in small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) where flexibility is very variable, there are fewer formal family friendly policies, and informal arrangements tend to prevail (Dex and Scheibel, 2002; Crompton et al., 2003). Analysts have commented that, in these respects, it is the employee who shoulders the burden of the “precarious nature of the labour market in which low income families must engage” (Dean and Shah, 2002:76). Bauman (1998) has argued that the need to make a living, rather than depend on unearned assistance, brings an acceptance of ‘drudgery’ and unwillingness to make a fuss over working conditions (though empirical studies also find women creating their own space within this drudgery through valuing the social and networking opportunities of the workplace (Pettinger, 2005)). Finally, those reviewing the ‘business case’ for family friendly policies also concluded that this will favour those in skilled, well remunerated, secure jobs during periods of full employment and labour scarcity (Ackers, 2003) and that ‘arguments about work-life balance will in practice be shaped by the perceived benefits to the employer, rather than issues of social justice’ (Healy 2004, 222).

Given these critiques, what do low-paid women say about the meaning of work for them? Paid employment is seen as one means of earning respect, a social right so eloquently critiqued by Sennet (2003). There has also been a ‘remoralisation of citizenship based on labour market participation’ (Innes and Scott, 2003:1). Low income working mothers have themselves spoken about the high value they place on work, not just for economic reasons (Bostock, 1998) but also in terms of personal identity, social contact and giving good messages about working for a living to their children (Backett-Milburn et al., 2001). However, this is far from straightforward as other studies have found interviewees expressing concerns about the perceived financial risks of taking up potentially insecure employment compared with guaranteed welfare benefits (Kempson et al., 1994; McKendrick et al., 2003). Nevertheless, low paid work distances women somewhat from living in poverty and, for some, the stigma attached to this for themselves and their families (Cunningham-Burley et al., 2004). Recounted experiences of living on a low income or in poverty further suggest why paid employment is seen by governments and citizens alike as a route to self-esteem and respect (Ghate and Hazel, 2002; McKendrick et al., 2003; Attree, 2004). Moreover, policy analysis has also shown that women’s financial contribution to low income households is now essential as, “the statement that ‘work is the best route out of poverty’ needs to be modified: ‘having a job and living with other people in work is the most effective way to avoid poverty’” (Millar and Gardiner, 2004).

Consideration of low-paid women’s negotiation of work and family life must also situate their everyday choices in and around gendered roles and household structures. Many

have argued that the persistence of gendered workplace inequalities are grounded in the continuation of outdated assumptions about the male breadwinner or 'rational economic man' models, which impact both at work and domestically (Barlow et al., 2002; Duncan, 2002). In reality the shift has been not to a dual adult earner family but to a one and a half worker model (Lewis, 2002). It has been argued that such shifts mean we may currently be in a transitional situation in which traditional divisions of labour within the family (male breadwinner, female nurturer) are changing but this has not yet been matched by more egalitarian domestic norms (Himmelweit, 2002). Furthermore, as women grow older they may become involved in organising and delivering varied forms of care for friends and relatives across a range of ages and localities, extending their webs of obligation (Arber et al., 2003). The majority of women retain primary responsibility for the household economy and for organising and carrying out care and domestic work across the lifecourse (Gershuny, 2000; McKie et al., 2004).

Low-paid women's choices and lived experiences of work and employment must also be situated in wider geographical and labour market characteristics and constraints as their views of what is possible for them and their families are influenced by particular social and cultural contexts, localities, and practical issues of time and location (Warren, 2000; McKie et al., 2002; Glucksmann, 2005). However, studies have also emphasised that whilst formal policies may signify an organisation's intent to help employees reconcile work and family commitments, these must still be backed up by a supportive informal workplace culture (Lewis, 2001; Callan, forthcoming). In practice, policies can be overruled by business imperatives and everyday decisions are subject to pragmatic discretionary actions (Hyman et al, 2005). In these ways, formal and informal workplace

policies and practices further structure the ways in which work and family webs of obligations may be reconciled; negotiating *informal* workplace practices and cultures remains a central feature of the lived experience of many low-paid women (Backett-Milburn et al, 2001). In this paper we explore women's accounts of how they attempt to manage a range of webs of obligations and fulfil their responsibilities against the backdrop of particular familial, workplace and socio-cultural expectations and constraints.

## **Methods**

Nine businesses across Scotland took part in the study. These comprised two large businesses (250+ FTE staff), three medium businesses (50- 249 FTE staff), two small (10- 49 FTE staff) and two micro businesses (1-9 FTE staff). A combination of individual qualitative interviews and a questionnaire survey were used to gather evidence from just over 300 female employees across the nine businesses. This paper draws on the qualitative data. Interviews were also conducted with employers and human resources staff (n=12) to investigate their views on work-life balance policies and practices, and with representatives from a range of relevant organisations such as trade unions (n=5). In total, 55 women participated in semi-structured interviews. Interviewees ranged in age from 21 to 64 years; most were in their 30s or 40s. Table 1 presents a profile of the interviewee sample.

*Table 1: 'Characteristics of interviewees' about here*

Interviews took place on shop premises, generally in offices, and lasted on average 30-40 minutes. With interviewees' permission, interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. A topic guide was used to ensure consistency across interviews. Topics were identified from the literature and sensitising pilot interviews. The guide included questions about interviewees' current jobs and length of time in the job; caring responsibilities and arrangements and what might help with these; everyday working arrangements and flexibility; knowledge of company policies and legislation; health and well-being; future plans regarding training and employment. Whilst the research did not include a longitudinal element, interviewees were encouraged to reflect on past and future employment and caring activities as well as on their present situations.

Data analysis was on-going throughout the fieldwork phase. Close reading of the interview transcripts by research team members led to the identification of a number of key themes within the data (Lofland and Lofland, 1995). A coding framework was developed on the basis of this initial thematic analysis. Data coding was then undertaken according to this framework, using NVivo (a computerised analysis package) to facilitate data indexing and retrieval. Throughout the process of data analysis, team members continued to re-read whole transcripts in order to maintain a sense of the contexts within which the data were constructed. All interviewees and businesses were given pseudonyms to preserve anonymity.

## **Findings**

There are increasing literatures both on the coordination complexities (Skinner 2005) involved in the practicalities of managing caring responsibilities and paid work and on the ‘family friendliness’ or ‘flexibility’ of work settings (Crompton et al., 2003; Hyman et al., 2005). However, although theoretical attention has been drawn to the everyday practicalities facing low-paid women of managing the work/domestic/caring interfaces and the sometimes competing gendered discourses and webs of obligation framing these (Parry et al., 2005); there are fewer empirical studies to illuminate the everyday social processes involved (Perrons, 2000). Our data enabled us to examine how interviewees spoke about both their home and working lives and, given that many of the businesses had no formal work-life policies, to gain a more nuanced understanding of the taken-for-granted interpersonal processes and everyday decision making in which women were engaged in order to navigate these different, but overlapping, spheres of their lives. Here we start by showing how these interviewees’ accounts echoed other studies, where low-paid women often said that their family was their main priority. However, we unpack this claim to illustrate its practical significance for and enactment by women working in food retail. In the rest of the paper we show how interviewees attempted to reconcile this prioritising of family with the equally pressing demands of being a good and reliable shopworker.

***The everyday management of webs of caring/domestic obligations and working in food retail: ‘Family comes first’***

The majority of the sample said they had sought employment in food retail stores because their proximity and the range of work patterns on offer enabled them to fit paid work around care for family members and other dependents. The importance of fitting their jobs around their domestic and caring responsibilities was a recurrent theme - importantly, this imperative was never expressed in the other direction. Most interviewees indicated that they were satisfied with their current working arrangements, were at least reasonably happy in their jobs, and had no plans to leave. They said they found working in food retailing acceptable and appropriate for themselves and their families. In this our interviewees' views resonated, albeit less critically, with those of low waged women who participated in Warren et al's recent study (forthcoming) and also echoed findings in an EOC report that women working part time are 'working below potential' (Grant et al 2005). It was important for most interviewees to state that 'family comes first', a much used phrase. One way in which many of the sample supported this claim was by saying that they would happily lose some of their pay if they had to take time off for a caring obligation, some recounting instances when this had actually happened. Such values were also readily acknowledged in the interviews conducted with store owners and employers who themselves stressed the importance of flexibility for all concerned.

For most interviewees, family coming first was expressed and appeared to be experienced both as a choice and an obligation; as such, it seemed to be part of the taken for granted framework of normative familial behaviour. Putting family first was also a means of laying claim to a moral identity as a good family member; this was simply something you

did as a good mother or a good daughter/family member. Echoing other studies, this, plus the limited nature and range of job and training opportunities for women, public transport provision, and the availability and affordability of family support and childcare were all identified by interviewees as relevant and interlocking aspects of their geographical localities which shaped their current and future participation in the labour market and made working in food retailing particularly attractive.

So, what does 'family comes first' mean in practice, what did it signify for the management of the sometimes conflicting webs of obligation at home and work, and how was it enacted and belief sustained in its importance?

*Family comes first: for caring*

As in other studies of working class women, interviewees also expressed strong preferences for family to come first as carers, whether for children or other dependents. Such valuing and prevalence of informal childcare in low income working families is not just for economic and practical reasons in a 'flexible' job market, but also because of a preference for familial and known carers (Wheelock and Jones, 2002; Attree, 2004; Land, 2004). There were several dimensions to this choice of family first as carers. Firstly, values were expressed about 'knowing' and 'trusting' in personal relationships built up over time (a wider theme returned to later in the paper). These were contrasted with the expressed risks involved in 'going outside the family' and a mistrust of the shallower ties with strangers, leading some interviewees to claim, for example:

I just wouldn't work if I didn't have my mam. I'm not prepared to leave them with anybody. Not strangers. That's just my personal view.

**Michelle, 32, p/t supervisor, childcare responsibilities**

Secondly, many interviewees described living in close proximity to several family members – siblings, aunts and uncles, and their partner's family, in addition to their own parents. Women frequently reported that these extended family networks meant that they had several people that they could call upon for 'back-up' childcare or support, should their regular arrangements fall through for whatever reason, as the following quotation illustrates:

My in-laws stay in the next street. You can see their back door from my living room window so he [son] has got his gran and granddad to go to, my sister lives opposite them, so he has got this auntie and my auntie lives two doors up so we are in a circle. The family I can see three family houses from my house so I have got that security

**Eve, 39, f/t manager, childcare responsibilities**

Thirdly, and in contrast to formal childcare, many interviewees spoke about how families could be turned to first in times of caring emergencies, for example:

If I had had times like the children have been unwell, I had to get one of the grannies or their uncle Donny who is on his own, just to step in but there has not

been a problem, they have been able to do it so I have been able to just come and do the shift and go home again.

**Donna, 41, p/t assistant, childcare & grandchild care**

Finally, however, although our sample expressed the view that family should come first for childcare, it is important to note that, for these retail employees, choice was limited, practically and economically. Given the restricted and inflexible nature of private and state childcare, interviewees said that they could rely only on family members to provide childcare outside of standard working hours. Indeed, several mentioned the fact that their children routinely stayed overnight with their grandparents, to enable them to work in the shop either late at night or early in the morning. Many commented that the combination of low wages and high childcare costs meant that working in food retailing was not a viable option for women unless they had access to informal (unpaid) childcare.

*Sustaining webs of obligation and moral identities over time: self comes last?*

Family coming first for childcare was, however, only one facet of the webs of obligation described by these low income women. Our interviews showed the complex emotional, organisational and practical efforts expended by many of these women both to organise and reciprocate caring and domestic work for a variety of family members (see Airey et al, forthcoming, for detailed consideration of this). The stress on the importance of

personal labour by and for family permeated women's accounts. This was evidently at the expense of time and rest for many interviewees and, for a few, personal advancement. In this sense 'family came first', not by claiming it took precedence over employment, but by prioritising the moral identity of being a good mother or relative over self and of maintaining belief in the value of direct personal involvement in caring for one's family. In the absence, for most, of an ability to resort to the cash nexus, sustaining these webs of interconnecting familial obligations and beliefs in their importance could extend across the lifecourse. Whilst often involving personal exhaustion this often represented the only way for these women also to be in paid employment. One woman described, as follows, the difficulties in refusing reciprocal requests for help, time or attention from other family members:

Maybe sometimes, you have just sat down, you have done loads of things and somebody comes, 'can you take me here?', and you can't really say no, because they watched the weans (children) the other day there so you have got to do it and you really just don't want to do it because you have been on your feet all day.

**Marianne, 44, p/t assistant, childcare & eldercare responsibilities**

However, webs of obligation are not time-limited; the need to reciprocate can be felt later in the lifecourse or, for some of our interviewees, concurrently (the pivot generation of Brannen, 2006). Of the 19 women with current eldercare responsibilities, 10 also had caring responsibilities for their own children or grandchildren. The extent of elder caring tasks described varied quite widely – from one or two hours every other week, to several

hours a day. For a few interviewees decisions had to be made about which family members should come first, as was illustrated by Audrey when she said:

‘...or some days you are kind of like, I just want to spend it with the girls but then I say to myself, look what your mum has done for you. My mum doesn’t get out very often either’.

**Audrey, 32, p/t supervisor, childcare & eldercare responsibilities**

*Does family always come first?*

Managing webs of obligations at the intersection of work and family could sometimes, however, result in competing priorities and challenges to the belief that ‘family comes first’. Several women explained that their partners or children sometimes expressed negative sentiments about their jobs or the hours that they worked. This might suggest tensions between women putting their families first by providing financially for them, but at the same not providing them with enough time or attention. Interviewees tended to respond to such potential challenges to their claims that ‘family comes first’ by explaining that that they made sure they allocated particular time-slots or did activities with their children. For example, in reply to the probe, ‘does your work schedule ever conflict with things you have got arranged?’, Ruby said:

‘Not really. I try to arrange everything, well, I get a Friday off so usually a Friday is the day I do everything or if my daughter wants anything, to go shopping or

anything it's usually a Friday anyway. It never comes in, no, not with my family, no. They always come first anyway'.

**Ruby, 44, p/t assistant, childcare responsibilities**

Others emphasised the financial importance of their work, such as the following:

I mean, it's some ... it's quite upsetting, you know, if I'm off the weekend or if I've been on holiday, you know, I'm coming back to work she (daughter) normally gets a bit upset and stuff so that's ... you know, that's not very nice but she knows that if she wants the nice things, then her mum has to work, ha ha.

**Jess, 22, p/t supervisor, childcare responsibilities**

Similarly, other women involved in elder care might claim that they still put family first by spending the majority of their time outwith work caring for their parents. They therefore made appeal to the intensity of their involvement with parents, rather than the total amount of time they spent with them, to maintain that they still put family first.

I go first thing in the morning...I normally go in the afternoon before I come to work and then I go as soon as I am home from work and then I am back down at night again to make sure that she has got her meals and bed.

**Beth, 52, p/t assistant, eldercare responsibilities**

*Sustaining belief in family coming first: 'emergencies' as signifiers.*

However, even for the minority of interviewees who claimed a strong worker orientation, potential challenges to the prioritising of domestic and family obligations were never far away, as the following quotation shows:

LA: 'Would you say you ever put your work before your home life?'

Lilian: 'I always put my work first, yes I do, might as well bring my bed here. I do and I don't because if anybody was to phone me about my dad, I would go straight away or my kids or anything like that, I would be away. You wouldn't see me for dust but the housework and things in my house just wait, my work comes first as far as that is concerned'.

**Lilian, 52, f/t supervisor, eldercare responsibilities**

The above quotation also begins to show the main way almost all of our sample sustained belief in 'family comes first'- which was through the example of 'the emergency'. For many of the women in our sample the claim that a family emergency always took precedence over work enabled them to sustain belief in their moral identities as good mothers/wives/relatives as well as good and reliable workers (as will be discussed in the following section). The following quotation was typical:

If push comes to shove, if I was here and something happened at home, I go home, and if I'm at home I don't come in. That's what it boils down to

**Claire, 45, f/t assistant, childcare responsibilities**

Indeed, a few women went so far as to say that they would resign from their jobs altogether, rather than be forced to stay at work during a caring crisis. In this they were largely also supported by the discourse of the organisational culture, exemplified by the expressed reactions from their employers/owners to questions about employees having to take time off at short notice, for example:

the balance is very much that life comes first. Yeah, great, don't worry about us, we'll sort it out.

**Int A**

And

you just have to accept that they can't come in. Basically, you accept it, end of story. You might not be happy with the fact but ultimately we just have to either get somebody else to do the shift or occasionally do without them.

**Int J**

However, the following response, regarding requests for time off at short notice, began to indicate that such claimed reactions had an element of qualification and discretion, dependent on who the worker was and the business constraints:

we have to accept at that point that it's genuine. 19 out of 20 cases we take it as read that it's genuine. There's very little slack in the system.

**Int E**

On further analysis of the women's interviews it became apparent that appeals to 'family comes first' were intimately connected to their efforts to present themselves as good and reliable workers, a finding echoing the earlier study of working mothers (Cunningham-Burley et al, 2006). In this respect these interviewees strove to invoke rather similar values at work and at home, as will be discussed below. Here it is important to note that, whilst maintaining that family needs had to take priority in an emergency, women were keen to point out that they only requested time off work *when absolutely necessary*. Thus, by definition, this way of sustaining belief that 'family comes first' might need only irregular practical proof. Nevertheless, it was important to our interviewees that their managers and workmates recognised that they were committed to their jobs, and that they only requested time off work in a 'genuine' emergency. Indeed, several interviewees emphasised the fact that they were 'good workers' by citing the ease with which they were able to get time off work in a caring emergency. Others pointed out they always made up their hours at a later date; for these interviewees, this was more to do with demonstrating to their managers that they were committed to their jobs, than needing to protect their wages. This is illustrated by the following quotation, from a woman who always chose to make up her working hours:

I just feel that, if it ever happens again I don't feel so guilty, I have covered it so I am not taking advantage, type of thing.

**Ruby, 44, p/t assistant, childcare responsibilities**

However, there were suggestions in the data that some kinds of family came first in some situations more than others. For instance, it seemed that, overall, it was more acceptable

to be off work for a child-related emergency, than it was for other kinds of caring. Even so, in making decisions about taking time off work, what constituted ‘an emergency’ required assessment and legitimation and mothers described instances of evaluating how sick a child really was and how much a parent’s presence was really needed (see also Cunningham-Burley et al, 2006). Interviewees also described informal understandings about which family member might be called upon in an ‘emergency’; one grandmother, for example, said that her daughters would call on each other for their children’s emergencies, commenting, ‘it was clear from the start my work comes first, ha ha,... when I’m at work, you know’. **Angela, age 64, FT manager, grandchildren responsibilities**

It was also apparent that, in the absence of formalised policies in the smaller food retailing businesses, these low paid women had to get to know the informal system and prove themselves as trustworthy and reliable workers and workmates in order for family to be able to ‘come first’. Shifts might be swapped but the shop must be staffed. However, some interviewees gave examples of how negotiating short notice ‘time off for caring’ or for emergencies was not always straightforward, as the following quotation shows:

He had the stroke on a Saturday night which is my night off. I took him to hospital, we were there till three in the morning. I was due at work at 8 in the morning so I had to come into work. Nobody offered to come in for me...so I had no option but to come into work

**Mel, 34, f/t manager, eldercare responsibilities**

(details altered in this quotation to protect anonymity)

***The everyday management of webs of caring/domestic obligations and working in food retail: 'Open all hours'.***

The findings so far have begun to unpack the conditions and constraints framing interviewees' everyday management of the overlapping webs of obligation at home and work and their assertions that, for them, 'family comes first'. However, this was only one aspect of the complexities that women were negotiating in the course of reconciling work and family life. Their management of this interface must be seen against the background of the changing nature of employment in the UK, described by some analysts as involving 'employer led organisation of working time' (Rubery, 2005) which usurps the traditional Fordist 9-5 model and is organised by companies to suit their own specific ways of working and remain competitive. Perrons et al's comments on this 'new economy' also seem particularly pertinent to women in low paid, low status jobs:

All of these changes in the conditions under which people live and labour make it more difficult to realise equal opportunities or family friendly policies as people feel under pressure not to exercise their entitlements to breaks, time off, or holidays. (Perrons et al, 2005:53)

***Managing the interface between webs of obligation at work and home***

So, how did these women working in food retailing describe negotiating their everyday working practices to fit with the rest of their lives? Our interviews with managers and owners in the smaller and medium sized food retail stores in particular revealed a lack of formal policies. This meant that managing the interface between working and domestic responsibilities was a continuing practical accomplishment for both workers and management. Furthermore, none of the owners/employers in our study reported having any formal training around work-life balance issues, with interviewee J commenting that , after 30 years in the business, ‘it comes naturally’.

*Familialism at home, familiarity at work*

It appeared that many of the values expressed by these low paid women with regard to their family lives were carried over into the workplace. Having a network of family who might help out and could be trusted was replaced by a discourse at work that emphasised mutual obligation and pulling together. Interviewees employed in micro-medium food retailing businesses tended to point to the size of the business in accounting for the relative ease with which, for example, staff absences were covered.

It is like a wee family here so everybody does all kind of pull towards to help each other so it is a lot better that way.’

**Ingrid, 45, f/t assistant, grandchild responsibilities**

Because it’s a small business, everybody knows everybody that well and I think you just learn to...you know, help each other out really’

**Ishbel, 47, p/t supervisor, childcare responsibilities**

Shift-swapping within each of the stores was one crucial way in which interviewees reported that they were able to achieve the flexibility needed to reconcile their work and caring commitments. In addition, just as our interviewees' accounts showed how webs of obligation had to be navigated over time in families, so also did the workplace reciprocities of covering sickness and shift swapping. It would appear from comments made by interviewees that employees covered shifts for each other on the understanding that, should they need to take leave at some *future* point, their absence would be covered by other employees. One supervisor, for example, explained how, in arranging cover, she first contacted the employee who had most recently been covered for herself. Others spoke favourably of those employees who had the reputation of being the most willing to help out at short notice. In all this, direct, personalised knowledge and trust was at a premium, echoing values expressed about families coming first.

It could be argued, however, that for such informal processes to work, the familialism at home needed to be replicated by familiarity in the workplace. There was a strong sense in the women's interviews that knowing about each others' personal lives was an important component of managing the effective running of the store. Boundaries were therefore regularly breached between personal privacy and professional competencies. The following quotation illustrates one of the ways in which familiarity might impact on day to day management decisions:

LA: And are you ever asked to work extra hours or different hours?

Nicola: Sometimes, yeah.

LA: How often does that tend to happen?

Nicola: It hasnae happened for a while because, eh ... well, M (supervisor) knows my mum's been ill for a while now and she knows I'm not really ... can't really do any more at the moment. I'm just about coping with what I've got.

**Nicola, 40, p/t assistant, large-sized business, childcare & eldercare responsibilities**

It also appeared that the opportunities for personal knowledge about workmates could be further reinforced by the small town and /or rural location of several of the businesses in our sample. Here the shop as a public, social and neighbourhood space also came into play. Customers were often neighbours or family members, and older relatives as well as interviewees' children might touch base with employees whilst they were working in the shop. Indeed, it was sometimes reported that women had been recruited by word of mouth and had been known as customers before they became employees. Knowledge about each others' lives and commitments was usually referred to in a taken-for granted fashion, for instance:

I think it is good that we have got a good team in the store and we are all quite flexible. In fact none of us have got small kids on the management side of it. We have one part time supervisor who has just got a small kid, only a year, but she is only part time and the three full time ones could still cover every shift if she wasn't in.

**Justine, 39, f/t supervisor, former childcare responsibilities**

There is a few single parents as well, there is people that look after their parents as well and we all try and come and go with each other.

**Audrey, 32, p/t supervisor, large sized business, childcare & eldercare responsibilities**

Similarly, the employers/owners' interviews indicated that knowing their staff and making sure that there was an atmosphere of flexibility around their employees' shifts and workloads as well as their commitments outside work made for a happier and more stable workforce. As Int H commented, 'people that I've helped over the years have remained with the company, so it's obviously helped the turnover figures'. In a slightly different context, Int E said that the ideal worker was someone who had 'enough intelligence and spirit to be able to cope with just about anything that's thrown at them during the working day but with enough understanding of and sympathy for other people's problems'.

*Moral identities at work and home*

These food retail employees were therefore faced with the sometimes contradictory challenge of sustaining their reputations as a good, reliable and trustworthy workers but also divulging just enough information about themselves and their circumstances both to legitimate any personal crises and to indicate the boundaries of their own abilities to respond to those of other workmates. Moreover, just as the moral identity of being a good mother or relative had to be sustained over time and continuously maintained, so too did that of being a good worker. This also involved learning what and how much you could ask for and expect from the workplace, which was summed up in the following quotation as 'as long as you don't push it':

LA: Yeah. And how do you feel it would be here, say if come September or whatever when the kids are back at school if something cropped up?

Carrie: I think it would be fine. They ... they are good here. They are good. They understand that you do have like family commitments and that, so I think it would be OK. As long as you don't push it obviously, ha ha'.

**Carrie, 37, p/t supervisor, childcare responsibilities**

Establishing a reputation for being flexible and supportive was another facet of being a good worker. Here, it was interesting that both employers/owners and the workforce all spoke about flexibility. For the former, however, this focussed on covering the needs of the store whilst for the latter it usually referred to being able to make flexible domestic arrangements, which might involve having to swap shifts. Here, then, although it appears that, through flexibility, the needs of business and family could be seen, in theory at least, to coincide, in practice flexibility means different things to employers and employees. However, the women we interviewed also expressed an understanding that the smooth running of business needed to be maintained – and in order for that to happen, staff had to be flexible. Moreover, several women indicated that they would feel guilty if they refused to cover for another member of staff – which suggests that demonstrating that one is prepared to work flexibly for the sake of colleagues and the business as a whole is one component of what it means to be a 'good worker'. The following quotations illustrate these themes:

It wouldn't work if you had like half...half saying, oh well, I'm not doing overtime. It just couldn't work [...] you'd have to be sort of flexible, wouldn't you or it would just grind to a halt, wouldn't it?'

**Ishbel, 47, p/t supervisor, childcare responsibilities**

It's everybody's store so you have just got to pitch in and do what you have to do, that's what retailing is like. You can't walk about and say that's not my job, I'll just do mine

**Shirley, 56, f/t manager, childcare responsibilities**

*Discretionary practices and breakdowns in reciprocities*

The women's accounts and the employers' interviews gave similar assessments of what constituted a 'good worker' in the food retailing sector (and therefore one whose request for emergency time off would be treated seriously). These included: how flexible employees were; how good their absence record was; how long they had been working for the company; how well they knew their managers; how well their managers knew them; and whether their managers were aware of their family situations. All of these factors came into play when requests around flexibility, time off and emergencies arose. However, reported incidents of when reciprocities broke down illuminated the inherent fragilities of an informal system dependent on sustaining belief in goodwill, trust and familiarity. Indeed, although when talking in an abstract, general way, interviewees claimed their willingness to cover for other staff members, many women admitted that, in

practice, they might not particularly enjoy covering for others, especially if this entailed a very early/very late shift, or at the weekend. The handful of stories told about times when interviewees had been unable to care for dependents in a crisis vividly portrayed the stressfulness of these situations, one interviewee reporting that she had had to phone at least seven workmates before she could leave to attend to a family emergency. Another common theme in these stories was that those women who had been refused leave were subsequently unwilling to help out when asked to cover for other staff members; in other words, their accounts point to a breakdown in reciprocity. So, for example, one store manager working for a large business described, as follows, the experiences of one of her staff members:

If I phone her and say ‘could you [swap]?’ ‘No, I’m no swapping with anybody, Rae’. Which I dinnae blame her for cos nobody would come in and swap with her, you know, to let her be off with her wee girl

**Rae, 39, manager, 39 hours, childcare responsibilities**

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

Both work and family/care are core values within current government policy in the UK. Welfare to work strategies coincide with an increasing emphasis on parenting skills and on care in the community for older people. Given the gendered nature of much informal caring work, competing discourses and demands at home and work have to be managed by many women. However, for women in low-paid jobs with fewer material resources to fall back on, these webs of obligation are particularly difficult to navigate or escape. Our study of women working in food retailing has shown how they are enmeshed in, and

account for, webs of obligation and reciprocity which may both facilitate and pose challenges to the reconciliation of work and home life. In this it was also evident that temporality was important. Family based webs of obligation often extend across the lifecourse, so that reciprocities may be played out at some future point and, for several of our interviewees, may make additional concurrent demands on time and energy. In food retail work, as in caring emergencies, timeframes may be tight and demands made on workers at short notice and outwith the standard working day.

Our study showed the importance for these women working in food retail of sustaining their moral identities both as good mothers/daughters/family members and as good and reliable workers. In this, our interviewees were keen to tell us that ‘family comes first’ whilst also acknowledging that the shop must be staffed. Most interviewees said that they had chosen work in food retail companies because the range of hours on offer meant that they could fit a job around their family responsibilities. Moreover, being able to rely on and fall back on family members as carers, as well as themselves being able to provide reciprocal help, was further proof of the importance of family to the interviewees. In this they were placing value on processes of ‘thick interpersonal trust’ based on similarity and strong emotional relationships (Khodyakov, 2007). However, managing the interfaces between domestic and work webs of obligations was often not straightforward; it was evident from the interviews that sometimes work had to come first, (and that family raised objections), especially in a work setting where flexibility was at a premium. In this, and paradoxically, the claim by many interviewees that they would, and could, put work second in the face of a domestic ‘emergency’ served both to support belief in the

overriding importance of family and to demonstrate that their workplace would acknowledge them as ‘good and reliable workers’ who merited being given ‘emergency’ time off. Our data, then, can be seen to support the important point made by Bottero, (2005), that:

‘All jobs, however, are embedded in wider social relationships, and the meaning of holding a particular occupation is strongly affected by the social identity, networks and life trajectory of the people in that job’ (p 56).

Much of this discourse, can also be seen as supporting the importance of understanding class-based moral identities of, for instance, ‘good mother’ and ‘good worker’ as mutually reinforcing influences on choices and experiences. Irwin (2004) found that poorly qualified working class women with less scope for strategic employment decisions tended to lay greater stress on the moral commitments of themselves looking after children for an extended period. Our research suggests that such mutually reinforcing influences may extend beyond sustaining the moral identity of ‘good mother’ to those of ‘good daughter’ or ‘good family member’, born out of (and created by) the webs of obligation formed over a lifetime of the practicalities of combining caring with low paid work. As many, including Crompton (2006:164), have argued, ‘social classes cannot be adequately conceptualised as economic or material categories alone, but are also characterised by cultural and normative practices that themselves serve to maintain differentiation from other classes’. Here our findings can be seen to echo Skeggs’ observation that, for the working class women she studied, self existed ‘for and in close

relation to others' (1997:163) and that caring behaviours, both 'for' and 'about', generated a sense of dignity and moral worth.

The discourses around 'family comes first' and being a good worker in food retail also made appeal to rather similar values of trust and knowing people. Here the relational elements, particularly within women's classed identities come to the fore (Skeggs 1997). The formation and maintenance of close relationships, both socially and geographically, appeared to play an important part in the habitus of the majority of our interviewees. In the domains both of family and work, knowledge of others counted and was seen as built up over time. As we have shown, caring was viewed as involving personalised reciprocal interactions amongst groups of people who were not strangers, but family (familialism). Equally, negotiating the informal workplace reciprocities in food retailing of shift swapping, covering for others and being reliable involved trust and a degree of personalised knowledge about workmates and their personal circumstances (familiarity). This, however, might be characterised as 'thin interpersonal trust' as it involves weaker social ties but expectations of reasonableness and honesty (Khodyakov, 2007). Family coming first was enacted and displayed (Finch, 2007) in complex ways in each shop – negotiations and relationships with managers and supervisors, the cultures of particular workplaces (shops or sections), and claims to 'flexibility' by management and workers, all played their part. The occasional descriptions of situations when reciprocities broke down and of people who did not uphold these codes of behaviour based on trust further illuminated, by violation, these complex social accomplishments.

The importance of examining everyday social practices and accounts of these practices as constituting and signifying class has also been highlighted in research from both children and adults examining views and experiences of social inequalities (Backett-Milburn et al, 2003; Dolan, 2007; Payne and Grew, 2005). It seems from our research that, against the backdrop of ‘flexibility’ and ‘informal’ arrangements in their workplaces, it was important for these low income women to sustain belief in notions of solidarity and mutual supportiveness. The cash nexus alters relationships in formalised caring relationships, and formally defined, legally protected employment roles, rights and responsibilities theoretically offer some distance from interpersonal negotiation. Our research suggests that, similarly, the general lack of these formalised contexts in the both the family and work lives of our interviewees necessitated a continuing reliance on negotiating and accessing informal supportive relationships. There was a reliance on people rather than money to help navigate life’s obligations. We also found, as have others (Warren et al forthcoming), that this particular kind of flexible working, combined with low wages and high potential childcare costs, tended only to be viable for interviewees if they had access to informal (unpaid) support. In the absence of cash transactions and protected role requirements, direct personalised knowledge had to be accrued and moral identities sustained at home and at work. Our findings therefore also provide further empirical evidence supporting Ward et al’s (2007:313) observation that, ‘working class-ness is about classification *and* about the production of meanings and understanding through interactions between work, place and community’.

Our findings also further illuminate the particular experiences of low-paid women in the UK labour market. Most of our interviewees were working part-time. Like the interviewees in the previous study of working mothers, (Backett-Milburn et al., 2001) they were predominantly women who were committed to and had managed to stay in the paid workforce, even though they might face difficulties. Although we accessed accounts of problems for themselves and others in combining work and caring responsibilities, interviewees' stories from both studies indicated that changing workplaces to address any dissatisfaction had been their course of action in the past, not dropping out of the workforce or retraining. In many respects, therefore, these interviewees could be seen as the stalwarts of the insecure, low paid labour market, even though more than half of them had educational qualifications at O grade, Higher or above. Most expressed satisfaction with their jobs, stating that these were appropriate for themselves and their families. Such accounts again echo Skeggs' (1997) conclusions suggesting that making do with their lot (sometimes at the expense of time for self) and not seeking personal advancement through work characterised these low paid women's approach to combining paid employment and caring responsibilities. Structural and contextual characteristics at work and home, stretching over the lifecourse, seemed to be setting the pattern for their perceived limited choices. It might also be argued that our interviewees were the ones who were successfully navigating these limited choices, having learned about and been able to manage the informal workplace cultures and their interface with webs of family/domestic obligations. We cannot assume, however, that this suits all low-paid women and the accounts of those who had left both food retailing and the low-paid workforce would, undoubtedly, add greatly to our understanding.

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**Table 1 Characteristics of interviewees –**

		<b>Total</b>
<b>Characteristics</b>		<b>55</b>
Age range	20-29	5
	30-39	14
	40-49	25
	50-59	8
	60+	3
Marital status	married/cohabiting	42
	separated/divorced	5
	widowed	2
	single (never married)	6
Caring responsibilities	Dependent children	26
	Eldercare	8
	Multiple: eldercare and own child(ren)	11
	Multiple: own child(ren) and grandchild(ren)	2
	Grandchild(ren)/other caring	3
	Former carer	5
	Educational qualifications	No formal qualifications

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	O-grades or equivalent	20
	Higher grades or above	12
Job grade	Shop assistant	25
	Supervisor/manager	30

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