



# Transcript

## Pregnant then Screwed : campaigning to help mothers who are victims of discrimination Joeli Brearley 13<sup>th</sup> December 2021

[Joeli opened her talk with a short film introducing the organisation Pregnant then Screwed.]  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_3sRsAdqun8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_3sRsAdqun8)

In 2013 I was working on a year-long project for a children's charity in the North East of England. It was a project that I had designed and secured all the funding for. I was really excited about the work because I could see how it was going to directly benefit some brilliant young people and particularly young people in a region that is often forgotten about.

I was university educated, confident and ambitious. Not to toot my own horn too much here, but I was the kind of energetic, socially conscious and imaginative young person that employers need. But in 2013 I also discovered that I was pregnant.

In becoming pregnant I somehow crossed the line from usefulness to liability. Eight years later I still don't have an explanation for my former employer but basically one day I informed my boss that I was pregnant and next day the CEO fired me by voicemail. So there I was, I had rent and bills to pay and I was about to have a baby. Furthermore, not working meant that I would not even qualify for the measly, statutory, maternity pay of £151 a week.

An employment lawyer agreed that I had a strong case for discrimination and they wrote me a letter asking my employer to compensate me for lost earnings. It cost me £300 and I never heard back from my employer. When I asked the lawyer how much it would cost to take my employer to tribunal, I was told it would be about £9000. £9000? Who has that sort of money? I certainly didn't. I could barely scrape together the £300 for the letter.

And that was it. And actually that really was it, because it turned out that the stress of trying to bring an employment claim had triggered some rather serious medical issues for me and my baby. And as you only have three months to raise a claim from the point the discrimination occurs, I couldn't wait until my baby was born safely before I started proceedings. So I was supposed to choose between the health of my baby or accessing the justice I so clearly deserved. I

It was an experience that led me to set up Pregnant then Screwed. The lack of care for children in their early years starts with the brutality meted out to pregnant women.

Here are some of the stories that have been shared with me over the years.

- For a start, I've heard from 100 women who told the boss that they were pregnant and their boss demanded they have an abortion.
- Then there was the woman who was forced by her employer to do a shot of vodka every morning to prove she was not pregnant.
- The woman who announced her pregnancy and from that point on was bullied and harassed so viciously by her colleagues that she went into labour prematurely. When she was in the neonatal unit with her baby, who could have died, her boss called her and made her redundant.
- Then there was a woman who had hyperemesis, the type of morning sickness that can make you so violently unwell that women end up in hospital on a drip. She was going to the bathroom about 7 times a day to vomit. Her boss didn't like this, he felt she was skiving, so he demanded she vomit in a waste paper bin next to his desk in an open plan office of 60 people.
- Then there was the woman who had worked for the same employer for six years. She was performing really well, her boss her she deserved a promotion, she would have to go through an interview but it was just a formality, the job was in the bag. Before the interview, she told her boss she was pregnant. She didn't get the job, and when she asked her boss why, he said he had discussed things with his wife and they had decided that her priorities would change.

This is the start of understanding the motherhood penalty. Yes, penalty is a horrible word, not least because it suggests there is something awful about being a mother. I know that lots of mothers find it very lovely, at least some of the time. Really what this term refers to is the range of disadvantages women encounter in terms of earnings and career progression when they have children. It's a bleak equation made up of sexism, stereotypes, inequality of pay and lack of access to childcare, and all of these things demonstrate how contempt for specifically mothers is a root cause of childhood poverty.

So, frankly, if there is any sort of levelling up to be done across the UK, then pregnant women and mothers have to have a central place in it, because all the roads and bridges and housing projects in the world are not going to sustain growth and equal opportunities for everyone if those projects are not connected to the communities that use them and connected specifically to the women and children who use them and connected more intimately still to the structural inequalities in our communities, society, culture and economy that hold women and children back.

So firstly, let's have a look at the data to lay the ground. This is specifically UK data, although much of it is very similar to America. Back in 2015, the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) released a report on maternity and pregnancy discrimination. It found that 77% of working mums encounter negative or discriminatory treatment in the workplace and that 54,000 women a year are pushed out of their jobs for daring to procreate. 54,000 being pushed out of their jobs every year. That's a woman every ten minutes in the UK, or to put it another way, one in 9 pregnant women lose their job for being pregnant.

It's now nearly seven years since that last report, two of which have been spent in a pandemic that has widened inequalities and forced vast amounts of low paid and unpaid work onto women. Pregnant women are viewed as distracted and uncommitted to their job if they are about to take some time out to care for their new baby. In fact, more than half employers say that there is resentment within their organisation towards pregnant women or those who take maternity leave. Meanwhile, a third of employers resist hiring women of childbearing age.

According to an analysis by UCL that was conducted this year (Vagni & Breen 2021), a mother's earnings are up to 45% lower than the earnings of women without children and, according to the

Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS), by the time a woman's first child is 12 years old her hourly pay rate is 33% behind a man's. By comparison studies show that men's wages rise when they have children because they are seen as more dependable. The TUC estimates that full-time working dads earn 20% more than childless men. So women are fired because they are seen as feckless for getting pregnant while men are given promotions and raises to reward their breadwinner status.

Mothers are also vulnerable because they are struggling with the indirect discrimination of being reliant in the UK on one of the world's most expensive, dysfunctional childcare systems. In Pregnant then Screwed we ran a survey with 20,000 parents this year which found that only 16% of women said that childcare had not affected their seniority or earnings at work. By comparison, 42% of men said the same. A third of parents said their childcare costs were more than the rent or mortgage with half all parents saying childcare is completely unaffordable.

This cost of childcare is forcing women out of their jobs. Research by Save the Children in 2018 found that there were 870,000 stay-at-home mums who want to work but can't, purely because of childcare costs and availability. And research by the Women's Budget Group found that an estimated 1.7 million women are prevented from taking on more hours of paid work due to the childcare issues, resulting in up to £28 billion in economic output being lost every year. The net result of the motherhood penalty is motherhood poverty and that's where we all meet. Because maternal poverty means childhood poverty, which means a dramatic fall in children's life chances, physical and mental health.

So all of the information I've given you so far outlines what the situation was before the pandemic hit and clearly things weren't great. And then, almost overnight, things got dramatically worse. When schools and childcare facilities closed in the first stage of the pandemic, all the data showed us that it was women who were hoovering up the majority of the extra unpaid work, both literally and metaphorically (11.45). Data from the Institute of Fiscal Studies showed that the only time the unpaid work was shared equally between a mother and a father was when a mother was still doing her paid job and a father had been furloughed.

The same research also showed that for every hour of uninterrupted paid work done by mothers, fathers were doing three hours of uninterrupted paid work. And a report published by Price Waterhouse Cooper stated that this second shift was adding 31 hours per week of unpaid work onto women during the pandemic. This unequal share of the domestic load has played out in a variety of ways, namely in terms of women losing their jobs or being forced to reduce their income. But more importantly, it's had a severe impact on their mental health.

At this point I want to play you a recording of some voicemails left on the Pregnant then Screwed Scream or Shout Line that we set up during the pandemic. This was a voicemail service we set up so that mothers could have an opportunity to say exactly how they were feeling during the pandemic, as we felt that no-one was capturing their experiences. I have to tell you that it's quite hard to listen to. It can be quite harrowing, so if you are not feeling very resilient today you might want to turn your volume down. And if you have got any children in the background, there is one person that swears in this. Again, you might want to turn your volume down.

[RECORDING]

*You have reached the PTS SOS line. This is the Pregnant then Screwed Scream or Shout Line. This is your chance to rant, rave, scream or shout about your experiences as a mum during the pandemic. Let rip and tell us what this year has really been like for mums.*

[bleep]

- *I've hit my mummy limit. I told my five-year-old tonight that I'm done with being a mummy for today.*
- *Please please please make this stop. I just can't keep going.*

- *This has been, it's been relentless. Every single one of us pregnant or new mums have been absolutely and utterly failed.*
  - *We told him he could go to school that day. I literally saw the moment when his trust in us shattered. He ran away from us and buried himself in bed sobbing as he had seen me do on the kitchen floor. (14:28)*
  - *You do get to spend lots of time with them, though, don't you? That's really magical. Fuck you. Fuck off. Of course, our children are magical and wonderful but also they are caged-up animals and they are not their usual selves.*
  - *Mum mum mum mum mum. Hold on a second. Wait a minute. And he says, Mummy that's been more than a minute. If he wants my attention and I have to do my bloody job and I have to do everything... it's just not possible.*
  - *Had enough of going to growth scans, had enough of going to consultant appointments, had enough of having reduced movements with my baby and being worried sick and going into the day assessment unit and having to go on my own. It's not good enough.*
  - *(15.11)*
  - *It's depressing and frightening - furious, angry, furious, upset*
  - *I am at a loss financially, yet I raise these tiny humans and do my job on the minimal amount of support.*
  - *No, I'm sorry. Mummy is done. Absolutely done.*
- [Bleep]*

Jodie: It's quite hard to listen to, isn't it? The thing is the needs of mothers were forgotten about repeatedly by the government.

-Firstly, that you had only women scooping up all of this additional labour without any mandatory support from the government, support that existed in other countries, including Germany and Portugal.

-The furlough scheme could be used for childcare reasons, but 71% of mothers who requested to be furloughed had that request rejected, forcing them to choose between their child's well-being and their paid work.

-Their mental health deteriorated. Last October, 1/3 of mothers described their mental health as poor.

Pretty much every financial scheme that the government set up failed to consider the needs of mothers. The job retention scheme initially forgot to consider that if you were paid 80% of your usual wages, then you may not be entitled to statutory maternity pay, as you may not meet the earnings threshold.

The self-employed income support scheme, which was basically the furlough programme for the self-employed, discriminated against new mothers in the way it was calculated. If you had taken a period of maternity leave in the last three years, then you would be in receipt of a payment that was far below that of your childless or male colleagues.

When the scheme was announced, women told the Chancellor straightaway that this was discrimination.

But it fell on deaf ears. In May 2020 we asked Ellie Reeves MP to ask a question directly to Rishi Sunak in Parliament and this is what happened:

[RECORDING]

***Rishi Sunak, Chancellor of the Exchequer:***

*'In that regard... But I will of course continue to keep all things including that scheme under review.'*

***The Speaker: Ellie Reeves.***

***Ellie Reeves MP:*** *Thank you, Mr Speaker. Women that are eligible for the self-employed income support scheme that have taken a period of maternity leave since 2016 could receive up to one third less financial support. This discriminates against women on lower incomes in*

*particular, penalising families with young people, young children and exacerbates the gender pay gap. Will the Chancellor therefore exempt periods of maternity leave from the self-employed income support scheme calculation?*

*The Chancellor of the Exchequer: Mr Speaker, for all sort of reasons people have ups and downs and variation in their earnings whether through maternity, ill health or others. What we have done to deal with this is to provide an average of income over the last three years on a lookback basis to smooth all those ups and downs. In all people's incomes, it was something that at the beginning stakeholder groups were keen to see, it's something we delivered and this relief provides the fairest way to treat everybody on a level playing field, whatever their circumstances, a three year averaging of their earnings to me seems a very reasonable approach to take.*

[Jodie]

As you can hear, Rishi Sunak, the Chancellor the man who controls the purse strings, believes maternity leave is the same as sick leave. In the Government's response to our initial legal letters, they went further and said maternity leave was the same as taking a holiday. That's sent out a very clear message not just to policymakers, but to employers, to service providers, to everyone. We had to take the Government to court to prove that this was discrimination and 18 months later, we proved in the Court of Appeal that it is not okay to compare maternity leave to sick leave and that the way the scheme was calculated was in fact discrimination.

Women were failed by the Government's inadequate planning and their inability to see caring as valuable to society. Government also forgot women in their health and safety guidance and health and safety at work planning. It took them nine months to publish any specific guidance for pregnant women in the workplace.

Our phone lines were ringing off the hook with frantic pregnant mothers who had no idea whether they were meant to go to work and, if they did go to work, what their legal rights were if their employer forced them to work in environments where they could become infected with the disease. This left thousands of women to choose between the health of their unborn child or their livelihoods. While others such as Mary Agyapong, a 20 year old pregnant nurse, or Becky Regan, a 29 year old pregnant healthcare assistant, tragically lost their lives.

Meanwhile childcare providers are on their knees, mainly because of choices the government made both before and during the pandemic. Instead of supporting this vital infrastructure, our Government cut funding to the childcare sector in December 2020, right in the middle of the pandemic, resulting in a net loss of almost 3,000 childcare providers between January and July this year.

What was obvious to most of us was how few women were in the Government making the decisions. We know that the War Cabinet set up by the Government didn't contain a single woman and the daily briefings were only done by one woman, Priti Patel, while 11 men were on quick rotation.

OK. So let's talk about what you're really here for, which is our childcare campaigning. Like many of you, we have been campaigning for greater investment in our childcare sector for what feels like about 300 years. But it became increasingly apparent that no one at ministerial level was listening. In fact, things were getting progressively worse, not better. So, as Albert Einstein once said, insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. And so we started to question how do you get somebody to support an idea?

Well, you make them think it was their idea in the first place, right? So we switched our campaigning to ask for an independent review of the childcare sector, simply a process for documenting what is working and what is not working about our childcare sector and how we

can improve it overall. That review, if commissioned by the Government will ultimately show investing in care is good for the economy and will make different recommendations for change which Ministers will then be able to pass off as their own ideas.

But let's not forget about what the Government really cares about is winning elections. And so to me it's absolutely impossible to get the government to commit to any radical change without them believing that it will win them votes. Up until this point. I think the Government believed that Brits don't really care about childcare. And there would be some data to support that notion. The British Social Attitude Survey [2018] found one of three Brits don't think that women with children under the age of five should not be working. And for those of us who have campaigned for a long time for childcare, we've all heard the line, 'Why should my taxes pay for your lifestyle choice?' As if caring for children is a bit like a visit to the local spa.

I think the difference now is that Pregnant then Screwed, along with other groups like Grazia and some other groups, has managed to harness the anger triggered by the pandemic. We've worked with women, with journalists and with other brilliant organisations to show this is an issue which is just not going away. Unless the Government takes serious action, then women will vote with their feet.

The challenge for us all now is to energetically and consistently counter the idea that this is all very expensive and a drain on public finances. We need to find new ways of maintaining the pressure we have all started and that, as we have seen, has made a big difference to the way childcare has been talked about by Ministers. We need to balance public anger with hope, so we don't all start feeling deflated, and we need to cut through the noise of all the other urgent issues that people are campaigning on so childcare has its day in Westminster.

Government after Government has presented the position that investing in men's jobs and futures is just that, investing, while investing in women's jobs and futures is an expense. We have reached the absurd conclusion that building a hospital, or a childcare centre, or a nursing home, the bricks and mortar of it, is an asset for the future, while spending money on the people who work inside the building is a drain on the Treasury coffers. This lie is everywhere around us and dispelling it is absolutely vital to the work that all of us here have set as a priority. So we need to change the way the Government talks about it in order to make it easy for them to talk about investing in it.

In fact, report after report has for years shown that equality between women and men is a surefire way to add billions to our economies and stabilise our societies, allowing them to flourish. I don't know about you, but I'm a bit sick of the reports saying we should give women equal chances as if it's some marvellous opportunity[check] that still needs to be pointed out and yet the main political parties only add it as a sidenote when they feel under pressure to do so.

Equality for women is a priority nowhere. Our aim as campaigners together must show that valuing care and ending the motherhood penalty is the key driver to tackling child poverty, and ensuring equality of outcome so that everyone has a chance to thrive. Rather than standing in front of signs that say BUILD BUILD BUILD with hard hats and high viz jackets in the background, let's keep reminding the public and the Government that investing in care would deliver bigger employment and economic benefits than the same investment in construction. Indeed, an investment in care creates 2.7 times as many jobs (Women's Budget Group 2020a).

The work we have to do is a long road. I am not going to pretend that we are anywhere near the finishing line because we're not. But the more of us on that road, the shorter the journey will feel and when everyone is working together, success takes care of itself. Thank you.

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All links checked 3.1.2022

## Joeli Brearley

- Joeli Brearley is the founder and CEO of Pregnant Then Screwed
- She is also mother to Theodore and Jack
- Joeli was sacked from her job when she was four months pregnant with her first child
- Ever since then she has been on a mission to raise awareness of discrimination and to help other women who are victims of discriminatory behaviour