

Getting (Back) into Work: Women's Experiences of Employment, Unemployment, and Self-Employment

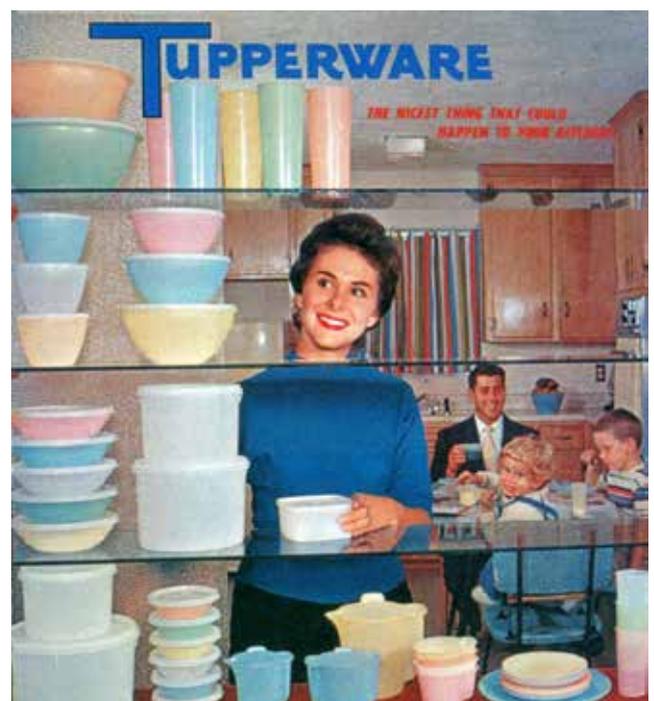
Dr Amy Edwards, University of Bristol and Dr Aleena Din, University of Manchester

For decades, politicians and business leaders have promoted self-employment as an effective way for women to secure flexible working arrangements, a better work-life balance, economic independence, and a sense of fulfilment outside the home. However, the findings of two recent research projects suggest that women often choose self-employment as a survival strategy and that it could perpetuate gender-based expectations around childcare and domestic work within family units. Understanding women's experiences of employment, unemployment, and self-employment – and what leads them at different points in their lives to opt for the latter – sheds light on the gender-based challenges facing women in search of decent work.

About the research

This report highlights the need for change in how we view women's self-employment and makes recommendations for policymakers, businesses, and activist groups. It is based on two research projects. 'The Secret of My Success': Women and Self-Employment in Britain (1970-2000)' is led by Dr Amy Edwards at the University of Bristol. 'Women in Britain's Pakistani Diaspora and their Relationship with Formal and Informal Labour, 1962-2002' was led by Dr Aleena Din while at the University of Oxford. Both projects explore the history of women's working lives to highlight the barriers that lead women to turn away from employment in their search for a decent living. Although the quotes featured in this policy briefing relate to the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, they could just as easily describe experiences of job markets in the 2020s. Historically informed policy can help identify strategies that have succeeded or failed in the past, while also taking a retrospective view that allows us to understand women's entire career trajectories.

"I'd be like putting stuff on the stove, go back and do a couple of emails, check it, go back and sit down and have tea with [my daughter]... then when she went to bed...I'd just start work again... So that's how I made up the hours. Just working weird hours"
– former business owner and now freelance consultant



Joseph Janney Steinmetz (c.1958)
State Archives and Library of Florida

Key findings

Free to Choose or Strategy for Survival?

Participants in the studies rarely described wanting to become 'entrepreneurs' or 'start a business' as their reason for choosing self-employment. They began working for themselves having had children, using self-employment as a gendered strategy for managing work-life balance. Women also opted for self-employment because of lack of viable employment options when trying to rejoin the workforce after periods of unemployment. They discussed lack of access to retraining and support when starting (or restarting) a career. For racialized minority and migrant women, the difficulty of accessing waged employment was compounded by discriminatory hiring and management practices, such as employers devaluing foreign qualifications and employing women in low-paid, 'unskilled' positions. Employment options were further constrained for women who spoke limited English.

"Here you can't do any job without English. To be a dinner lady, I asked and she said no you need English." – self-employed samosa seller

"Working was getting food on the table and making money so I didn't differentiate between whether I worked for somebody or for myself...A lot of jobs, I would think I didn't have the relevant skills, and they wouldn't employ me...Or the constraints of family life meant I needed to be very flexible and the best way of being flexible is if you're doing it for yourself."

– former direct sales agent, fitness instructor, and freelance PR consultant

Flexible Working: A Double-Edge Sword

Participants reported that self-employment appealed because it offered flexible hours and homeworking, particularly if they had caring responsibilities. But they also described the negative impact this had on their working capacity and business growth. Historical data thus suggests that self-employment and flexible hours raised, not lowered, the expectation that women carry out the unpaid care work that has historically been their primary role.

Hidden Lives

Women's entrepreneurial skills were often 'hidden'. Participants described undertaking a wide array of voluntary work, activism, and unpaid contributions to family businesses. During these periods, they would not have appeared in survey data about entrepreneurs or waged work. What's more, participants often struggled to find work as employees because they did not have formal qualifications or career breaks meant their skills were no longer 'up to date'. Nonetheless, during periods out of waged work they often developed skills that became the bedrock of their success as business owners. Acknowledging women's entrepreneurialism in all its forms (including unpaid work) is an important step towards rewarding it.

It was a women's [health] group...there were four of us that really took on the work...We researched what was happening in other areas of the country... we made the appointment to go and see the people at the District Health Authority...And they did agree that we could do it on a voluntary basis...we [also] approached the Workers Educational Association. And we set up this course...and wrote all the content – former women's health organiser and self-employed podiatrist

Policy Implications: For Government

1. Local Support for Small Business:

Policies that tackle discrimination against women in businesses needs to target micro-businesses as well as large organisations. Participants' businesses tended to be small and local, yet they reported problems with securing finance, access to skills training, low levels of confidence, and sexism by suppliers and customers. Their experiences mirrored the gender- and race-based discrimination they had experienced in larger organisations.

2. Giving Women a Choice: Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and local authorities should invest in training, mentorship, and apprenticeship schemes for women returning to work, supporting groups like [Women's Work Lab](#). This is important to help close the education and experience gap that periods of unemployment or non-standard work can produce. While women in employment can access support for continuing professional development, those out of work have fewer opportunities. Giving women avenues into paid employment enables them to decide whether self-employment is the right choice for them, as opposed to the only choice.

3. Generating Better Evidence: Bristol City Council and local organisations should consider commissioning further research on the experiences of women in the region, including research that can account for the impact of social class, race and ethnicity, ability, and sexuality on employment choices. By understanding what motivates women to leave the workforce and choose self-employment, employers can identify where their organisational structures, retention policies, and hiring practices exclude job applicants and alienate existing employees.

Policy Implications: For Local Businesses

1. Mentoring and Sponsorship:

Supporting women in business means supporting women who forge careers within large organisations and those who start their own small businesses. Access to networks, mentoring, and training is essential. [Women In Business Charter](#) (WIBC) could work with existing signatories to create pathways for small women-led businesses and sole traders to engage with the local business community. This could include sponsored WIBC memberships, giving them access to consulting, data analysis, and peer-mentoring services. Larger employers should also consider providing skills workshops, training courses, and mentoring schemes for unemployed or self-employed women as part of their wider social value and responsible business work.

2. Hiring Practices: Employers should recognise a wide range of experiences as relevant work experience. By reimagining what constitutes necessary work experience, employers can adopt more inclusive hiring practices and avoid remarginalizing those who have fallen out of work.

3. Retention: Employers should identify 'flash points' when women workers are likely to leave employment and provide additional support. Offering flexible working arrangements is an important step, but is not enough to make workplaces inclusive and ensure the retention of women workers.

Methodology

This report is based on the research findings of two projects.

The Secret of My Success: The data collected and analysed by the project includes newspaper reports, company documents from key industries that encouraged women's self-employment between 1950 and 2000, as well as rich, in-depth oral history interviews from a sample of over 25 women from around the country. In approximately 1-2-hour long interviews participants discussed, in their own words, their lived experiences of employment, unemployment, career-breaks, and their motivations for undertaking self-employed work. They also reflected on the challenges of balancing family needs, personal needs, and the requirements of the labour market.

'Women in Britain's Pakistani Diaspora and their Relationship with Formal and Informal Labour, 1962-2002': This DPhil project analysed the migration, settlement and labour experiences of working-class British-Pakistani women who settled in northern England. Drawing on 29 original life history interviews and wide-ranging archival materials, this research demonstrated the effects of place, generation, class, race and gender on women's paid and unpaid labour, including voluntary work, waged employment, self-employment and domestic responsibilities.

Contact the researchers

Dr Amy Edwards is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Bristol and historian of twentieth and twenty-first century Britain. Her research focuses on cultures of capitalism, investment, and enterprise. Her first book, *Are We Rich Yet?* (UCP, 2022) explains how financial markets became central to British society, not only economically and politically, but socially and culturally, too. She is now leading an AHRC-funded project titled 'The Secret of My Success: Women and self-employment in Britain, c.1970-2000' about the life trajectories of women who worked for themselves. You can hear her talking more about the project [here](#).

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Dr Aleena Din is a Simon Research Fellow at the University of Manchester, where she runs a project on the labour histories of migrant, working-class British-South Asian women from c.1948-2005. This builds on her PhD research, which was completed at the University of Oxford and focused on the migration, settlement, and work experiences of British-Pakistani women in Middlesbrough and Oldham between 1960 and 2002. You can read more about this research [here](#). She was also part of the research team for a multi-institutional AHRC-funded project, 'Remaking Britain: South Asian Connections and Networks, 1830 to the Present'.

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