

# Ali Edney's Speech

This is the text of Ali Edney's speech on the 'question time' panel on "Poverty and motherhood: how society undervalues women's work" at Feminism in London 2009.

Hello my name is Ali Edney, I am a mother, which I suspect is the main reason why I have been asked to be on this panel.

I am also a feminist and believe in the equality of women and men. My mother paid for my Fawcett membership when I was 18 and she is doubtless lurking in the audience somewhere.

When I was first asked to be on this panel my instinct was to say no. I don't find public speaking easy. But my best friend thought this was a feeble excuse.

She is an ex BBC foreign correspondent and is used to talking. She, like many mothers, discovered that her career was not compatible with being a mother after her first child was born.

Feminism in London gives us a chance to think about and debate important issues for women.

I hope we can come up with practical ideas to improve the lives of mothers who do not have the time, energy, practical support or money to voice their thoughts and be here.

## Life Choices... Why be a mother?

For some mothers like me having children was a 'life choice'. I had children relatively late in life compared to the average age in the UK of 26 for married mothers and 31 for unmarried mothers (UK Gov Stats 2002).

This gave me a degree of financial stability, as a feminist and member of Fawcett, I was extremely aware of the potential impact to my career, although with hindsight my income has nose-dived more quickly than I expected.

I have always loved children and I feel very lucky to have a family - even when our youngest son has a temper tantrum over a box of raisins.

Mothers have a vested interest in our children's futures and a sense of hope for us all.

Not all women want to be a mother, some women are not able to have children, whilst other women find themselves mothers through force of circumstance - as a foster-carer, legal guardian or grandparent looking after children second time around.

For other women from different religious or ethnic minority backgrounds in the UK, motherhood is a 'given'.

It is also a "given" for women living in developing countries where free access to contraception and health care is not possible, and where mortality rates for mothers are heartbreakingly high. Each year more than half a million women die as a result of pregnancy and childbirth difficulties, 2 million babies die within their first 24 hours, 2 million more die within their first month and 3 million are stillborn.

I hope the new UN Agency for Women is an indication that governments will start listening to women more and make a positive impact to their lives.

Abi has first hand experience of mothers' lives in Sierra Leone, so I won't be looking at motherhood outside the UK in detail, but I just wanted to remind myself that motherhood and poverty is an international as well

as a national scandal.

- Out of interest raise your hand if you are a mother or are involved in caring for children?
- Put your hand up if you hope to be a mother one day?
- Put your hand up if you believe that the well-being of children is something that we should all care about?

The way we support and nurture our children is one of the most important benchmarks of our society and communities.

Charles McCormack (President & CEO of Save The Children), said recently that; "In countries where mothers do well, children do well,"

## Thinking about motherhood and work

This kind of common sense is refreshing, but as a mother trying to look after children in Britain, it is hard not to feel got-at and worn down by the barrage of statistics and news headlines.

We are damned if we try to work – for example a recent survey found that children of working mothers watched too much television and were more likely to be over-weight.

We are damned if we stay at home to look after our families – we are seen as a financial burden on taxpayers and the state.

If we work and look after our children, we are faced with choosing between working long, inflexible hours with expensive childcare, or taking low-paid, low-status, part-time jobs, which fit round caring for our children more easily.

Sorry about the stats, I'm sure you all know them but they serve as a useful reminder.

- The pay gap between women and men in the UK is the largest in Europe.
- Women who work full-time are on average paid 17% less than men.
- For mothers with two children working full time the pay gap is 21.6%.
- Women who work part time are paid 36% less than men working full time.
- 30% of women have an income of less than £100 a week, compared to 14% of men.
- About 40% of ethnic minority women live in poverty, twice the proportion of white women.

So we can see that women are paid less to start with and are at greater risk of parenting in poverty.

Women of childbearing age are discriminated against perhaps because they are perceived as walking time bombs. This situation is at its most extreme in Britain's financial sector, which accounts for 4% of jobs, where women working full-time earn 55% less than their male equals. Two quotes from the Equality and Human Rights Commission sum it up.

"If you do not attend large drinking sessions, play billiards and speak and act like a man, (that is no crying and never sleeping and never taking days off for yourself or your children), then you have a small chance of success provided you dress like a model and express a wish never to have children."

"Pockets of middle management have an attitude, for whatever reason, that women are more trouble than men. Women are more likely to go off on maternity leave and ask for flexible work, women are more likely to complain about stuff and blame sex discrimination."

In it's report "Keeping Mum", the Fawcett Society identifies that "from the moment they conceive a child, women face immediate penalties. 30,000 women every year lose their job as a result of getting pregnant."

Having had a child, mothers find it hard to compete with their male counterparts, because of our culture of 'Presenteeism'. Mothers find it hard to go back to working the long hours expected of full-time workers in the UK, while trying to look after their children.

Flexible working hours have been legislated for, but many mothers are aware that asking for flexible hours undermines their job prospects.

"Flexible working requests were less likely to be considered favourably for more senior employees and those seeking flexibility often had to opt for demotion to obtain it."  
(Financial Services Enquiry: Sex discrimination and gender pay gap report of the Equality and Human Rights Commission).

From Fawcett's "Not Having It All" report the "motherhood pay penalty" starts when you leave full time employment. Mothers are far more likely to take a break from paid work, or work part time than fathers.

- For example mothers are nine times as likely as fathers to arrange not to work over school holidays.
- Just over half (57%) of mothers with children under 5 are in paid work compared to nine tenths of fathers.

I imagined I would want to go straight back to work after my children were born. I had worked hard at building up a career and it came as a shock that practical stuff like breast-feeding and nappy changes were more rewarding than I had anticipated.

I valued the time with my children more than worrying about the next job. However, I am self employed, which means you are too frightened to say 'no' when asked to work - in case you are never asked again, so I returned to work when my children were around three months old. Some of my work is flexible and I was able to take my children with me when they were very little, but the trade-off for many women in part-time, temporary or freelance work, without a contract, is that you have a very insecure life, without pension, sickness benefit, holiday entitlements and proper maternity pay.

Again from "Keeping Mum" by Fawcett;

"When mothers move back in to work, the loss of benefits and expense of child-care can mean they are left less well off, and in some cases this can be a trigger for mothers to move into debt. It is a striking fact that only 50% of lone mothers feel they are better off financially shortly after a move into work."

Rates of mothers living in poverty are at their highest when mothers are on their own, particularly for young mothers.

"Early parenthood for young women is likely to have many more direct implications of lack of opportunity and choice than for young men."

(Childhood Poverty, Early Motherhood and Adult Social Exclusion report).

Sue will cover this area in much more detail.

But let's remember that:

- 90% of lone parents are women.
- 43 % of Black African mothers and 50 % of Black Caribbean mothers are lone parents.
- Four out of ten children in poverty are in single mother households.

## Poverty

The poorest paid workers in the UK are not meant to earn less than the National Minimum Wage of £5.73, which equates to around £11,000 per year for a 37-hour week.

- There are 3 and a half million people living on the National Minimum Wage in London alone. 1.65 million of those are women.
- The Greater London Authority has calculated that someone paid less than £6.65 an hour in London will be living in poverty, even after benefits and tax credits. (This is 92p per hour above the Minimum Wage).  
37 % of London's part-time workers receive less than this, according to the Annual Population Survey for 2007. The majority of whom are women in jobs such as cleaning and catering.
- The Living Wage is the minimum rate of pay a worker needs in order to provide a decent standard of living. This has been put at around £7.60 per hour.
- Combining figures for full and part time workers, about one in seven of London's workforce earns

less than the poverty threshold of £6.65, and one in five earn less than the Living Wage of £7.60 per hour.

A coalition called London Citizens has been campaigning to make all employers in London pay workers a Living Wage.

## What the government thinks about motherhood and poverty

Interestingly work is seen as the only route out of poverty by our government. The welfare-to-work agenda has become a cornerstone of British public policy in the last decade. "Our welfare commitment remains: tackling poverty through full employment..." (Peter Hain ex Secretary of State for Work and Pensions).

A mother describing her experiences of working in this recession said;  
"My daughter hates it at the moment because she's doing (after school) choir, she's doing knitting club...but it's the only way I can juggle. We're relying on my 16 year old son for being my childcare provider as well."  
(Government Equalities Office 'the economic downturn – the concerns and experiences of women and families' - March 2009)

## What would help

For those mothers holding down more than one part time job in order to earn a decent wage, or for those struggling to work long hours and juggle a patchwork of childcare, full employment is not the answer. It also undermines the value of unpaid work that women carry out.

The welfare reform White Paper, similarly, places a very heavy emphasis on entering paid employment. But government research by the Department for Work and Pensions has found that some women will choose not to work if they feel it hinders their abilities to care for their children. Faced with a trade off, these women will prioritise the needs of their children over their desires to work.  
(Fawcett Society)

The fact that there are only 126 women MPs in comparison to 519 male MPs is not just a reflection of how much discrimination women face in politics, it's also because women don't have the time to get involved at the ground level, let alone routinely work the 18 hour days that Jack Straw and Gordon Brown work.

The Lib Dems for example acknowledge that out of a total of their 63 MPs, 9 are women, the 4 youngest are childless and the other 5 are over fifty with reduced childcare demands.

## Let's think out of the work ethic box?

Sweep away complex benefits and introduce the equivalent of a Living Wage for mothers and fathers. It could be flexible enough to support women and men who take time off to care for their children in the first few years of a child's life.

When asked by The South London Fawcett Group at Lewisham People's Day women said;

- "1 year maternity allowance for all".
- "An allowance paid to women who choose to look after their children at home". "Find more ways to support single mothers to be able to work & have children without either suffering".
- Value and encourage fathers.

I wonder if more fathers were as likely as mothers to take a career break when they had a baby or young children, whether women would be seen as less of a "bit of a psychological negative thought", as Sir Alan Sugar put it?

"A society where it was just as likely for a father as for a mother to take a career break during their children's early years would be a society where the pay gap might start to narrow."  
(Jen Lexmond, The Guardian)

Introduce a flexible pension and benefit system that acknowledges women take more breaks in their careers to care for children and relatives. Set it up so that when women reach pension age they are not destitute.

Why not automatically earmark 50% of men's pensions to be given to a partner?

Re examine the lives of single mothers, especially ethnic minority women.

Figures I tried to use were incredibly detailed or impossible to find. Simply assuming that single women will work their way out of poverty is not realistic.

The government will not meet its 2020 targets on child poverty unless it takes a more informed and imaginative approach to the individual needs of these mothers.

## At work - Equal Pay

When it comes to working David's job always takes priority over mine. He earns at least double the amount I do per day. No financially savvy family would choose to make the lowest earner its bread-winner. As a consequence women in my situation invariably adapt their work to fit round their partner. Men end up working long hours and are involved less with their children.

If David were to leave us I would struggle to support myself, let alone our children.

- Pay women and men equally, so that women are less likely to start out as poor mothers and are less likely to end their days in poverty too.
- Make pay audits including bonuses, legally binding. We need pay transparency in order to get equal pay.  
Introduce Mandatory Flexible Working for mothers and fathers of young children at least until they reach 13 and are settled at secondary school.
- Set up an enquiry in to Part Time Working

The government needs to look at the whole area of part-time work, temporary work and home-work and the low wages and status that seem to come with it.

Better, flexible and cheaper childcare, that does not swallow up all of a woman's wages.

Overhaul the patchwork offer of childcare, for example give tax breaks to employers who offer crèche/nursery facilities for pre-school children at work, and address the shortage of flexible nursery schemes and lack of choice for parents. For example some primary and secondary schools have removed their sibling policy, I wonder how many politicians have tried to drop two or three children off at three different schools by 8.40am?

"Better and cheaper childcare" was a repeated comment at Lewisham People's Day.

Lastly my mother who lived through the feminist revolution of the 70s has this to say; " When you were small, very few women with children worked. Without any money to call their own women were trapped, totally dependent on husbands, (there were very few partners in those days).

To some extent, the feminist movement of the 70s was a reaction against this and gradually attitudes changed and women with small children returned to the workforce, either from choice or necessity.

This has not, however, been the answer to women's problems that some thought it might be. In many cases, women are more stressed than ever before – and almost as trapped as 50 years ago.

At the basis of the problem is money.

Women with young children need opportunities and support for part-time work. It is also as important as ever that the Family Allowance is paid to the mother – working and middle class.

Childcare should be allowable against Income Tax (I don't think it is – Lilah. It is if you are freelance, but I don't know about other income tax – Ali). Otherwise the mother might as well be at home on benefit or, if not eligible for benefit, at home with no money to call her own.

50 years – full circle!

Ali Edney, October 2009