

THE FORTIES: FAMILY BREAKDOWN

Minutes



Date	11 December 2023
Time	15:45 – 17:00
Venue	The Jubilee Room, Houses of Parliament and via Zoom
Chair	Jess Phillips , Co-Chair of the Women and Work APPG and MP for Birmingham Yardley
Speakers	Johanna Rickne , Professor of Economics at Stockholm University Sara Davison , Divorce Coach and Author Vicky Proctor , Chief People Officer at Assystem Mustafa Faruqi , Head of Reward and Workplace Relations for Tesco Sarah Lambert , Interim Head of Policy and Campaigns at Gingerbread
Theme/ Background information	Family breakdown can pose significant financial, emotional and logistical issues for employees, while gendered expectations result in women’s lives being particularly disrupted. This session will consider the overlap between family upheaval, particularly divorce, and women’s professional performance, including how society and the workplace can support them through this turbulence. In particular, it will cover: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Divorce• Separation rights• Women returning to work

NON-VERBATIM MINUTES

Jess Phillips welcomed attendees and opened the session, noting it’s theme of family breakdown. She then introduced the first speaker, **Johanna Rickne**, Professor of Economics at Stockholm University.

Johanna Rickne offered her thanks to the Women and Work group for inviting her to speak. She stated that she was already studying the Swedish labour market, and noticed that being in top jobs made women much more likely to get divorced. They compared women who had got the job with those who did not, and found that the divorce rate for women doubled after getting the job compared to men who also got it. They found very similar patterns among CEOs. When studying why women were more likely to get divorced, they investigated if it was because women had access to better partners on getting the job; however, this was disproved by remarriage rates.

They also don't tend to find better partners. A more likely explanation was that men were uncomfortable with having partners who were higher status than them. Where the partners were more equal, such as with a smaller age gap and utilising shared parental leave, then the divorce effect was significantly reduced to the point of barely existing. Where women started with a lower status and/or less power than their partner, divorce rates rose significantly.

Jess: Do we have data on who instigates the divorce?

Johanna: Women don't have the option to combine marriage and family. There is no effect for the men.

Jess: Is there analysis on the impact of having children?

Johanna: Swedish politicians overwhelmingly have children, so it's difficult for us to compare.

Jess thanked Johanna and introduced Sara Davison, Divorce Coach and Author.

Sara explained that she was married for nearly 3 years before the relationship ended due to adultery. She suffered lots of psychological symptoms from this, so she built tools to help herself and her son cope – this naturally led into her work as a coach. Her company offers support groups and one-to-one coaching. Divorce is the 2nd most traumatic life experience after the death of a loved one. Recent research from the Parents' Promise Alliance showed 95% of parents had their workplace mental health affected by divorce. 39% took time off work. 12% stopped work. Only 9% of employers have a specific separation policy. There's another side, which is how divorcing an abusive partner is different to divorcing a normal partner. This leaves scars and impacts performance at work. In over 25% of cases, colleagues were threatened by an abusive partner during the separation of an abusive relationship. Victims are retraumatised. It can end in depression, illness and job loss. To help, businesses can introduce flexible work, working from home and short breaks, but paid leave is great for court hearings. We need to bring this signposting into businesses, to help employees get back into work for them and for the business.

Jess: Absolutely true, many workplaces don't have enough policies on this – especially where perpetrators and victims work in the same environment. Time off to go to court should be basic – you shouldn't be losing your job for having to go to court. You would recommend workplaces have tailored support?

Sara: Many workplaces have tick-box policies, but do not focus on helping the recovery from divorce. It needs to be specialist, to avoid giving dangerous wrong advice.

Jess thanked Sara and introduced Vicky Proctor.

Vicky: Introduced herself as the Chief People Officer for Assystem, looking after the people function for about 700 employees as well as being a single mum to 2 teenage girls. She commented that it was so good to have different perspectives around the table, and that she had been noting down some of Sara's ideas. The private sector has a really important role, and so she said she would reflect on personal experiences having worked in HR for 25 years – she stressed the need to humanise this function. She said that she avoids "human resources" as a phrase, because it's about people. Every individual has a story, which gives each of us a unique lens on the world. For her, working shortly before the pandemic, 2 weeks before lockdown she separated from her husband. They then lived in lockdown together, in a pressure cooker environment, working with solicitors, raising children and managing bereavement. It was a critical time for businesses. She explained that she was sharing her story in order to humanise the work

of HR, and to stress the importance of support for people going through divorce and separation. There is a stigma around sharing – as a senior woman in a business, it was interesting for her to hear from Johanna about women needing to juggle many hats. She is developing a policy framework to support gender equality called “Life moments that matter”. At work, we need to support people at points where it really matters; this covers miscarriage, IVF, bereavement, and others. Looking at women returners, how do we break barriers down to make the workplace accessible? One thing is to provide the framework to start the conversation. Provide time off for court, but also techniques and resources to help.

Jess: Jess thanked Vicky and introduced Mustafa Faruqi, Head of Reward and Workplace Relations for Tesco.

Mustafa: Most people have heard of Tesco, as the largest private employer in the UK. This gives them considerable influence over working lives. Mustafa’s role encompasses HR policies, and he was approached by Parents’ Promise to help with recognising divorce as stressful as other traumatic life events such as bereavement. Tesco supported this initiative through providing a range of divorce materials, such as signposting to useful groups and therapists, for family members as well as employees. It also provides support for managers who may have a team member going through something similar. Leave isn’t always the answer, because many people enjoy the distraction that comes from the workplace. We try and encourage managers to take individual circumstances into account. We ask managers to be flexible and accommodating. We gave all of our employees the right to request flexible working from day one. It’s about the message sent by managers; we also have a Parents’ Network, and a Women at Tesco network; Tesco extended their pregnancy loss scheme to encompass all of pregnancy, and for fertility leave, they gave time for partners to take leave with the mothers. They offer double the statutory paternity leave and relaunched their menopause guide.

Jess thanked Mustafa and introduced Sarah Lambert, Interim Head of Policy and Campaigns at Gingerbread.

Sarah: Earlier in the year Gingerbread introduced a report on employment, which found that single parents want to be in work but that the numbers experiencing long periods of unemployment is increasing. Underemployment was a big issue for them, with them wanting to work more hours than they currently are. There’s a group of people who could be doing better jobs, but can’t. Single parents could retrain, but this can be a challenge to find time/childcare. In terms of how we can address this, childcare is a massive issue.

Jess: Childcare comes up every session.

Sarah: The Spring Budget involved some positive policies, and paid attention to the interaction of universal credit with childcare. But there are teething problems in how they work in practice because work-coaches aren’t universally approving it. There’s also concern about whether the childcare providers can meet the demand. Single parents also want to retrain, but the childcare offer is only for those who are already in work. If there is a childcare provision in place, the other key thing is, on employers, availability of part time and flexible work at the right level – our research found that single parents found work through informal networks. We need to consider why the adverts aren’t as successful. We would like to see legislation to force employers to advertise roles as flexible. Let’s force employers to think about whether every role has to be in-person. Let’s think about job-share arrangements, and how employers can do this. The government could also introduce specialist single parent work coaches.

Jess: Jess asked Sarah for her thoughts on targeted training schemes for single parents. In her constituency, at the start of Universal Credit, most mothers had never visited the job centre. There was an opportunity for the presentation of lots of women at the jobcentre who had never been seen there before. They set up a scheme for training Asian women, which was really successful. It was an intense training scheme, with almost full time work, but childcare was provided so it all worked fine. Every single woman went on to be successfully employed. A targeted scheme could be really useful.

Guest: We have to document what is successful. These types of projects need more funding.

Jess: The Sure Start centre was a good example – we don't need to reinvent the wheel. Underemployment is a huge problem, and talent is being wasted. You need specialist approaches, beyond work coaches not understanding it – there are geographical issues, cultural issues, expectations on women geographically and culturally. You need specialist programmes by area.

Guest: The guest said that they run a consultancy looking at workplace inclusion, but that they cannot find people from certain groups to improve representation.

Jess: Women don't want to work somewhere where they don't know the maternity policy. There is something about how companies' policies should be available to the job market. You can't ask the question without putting off an employer, but if you asked about paternity policy that may even be a bonus.

Guest: The guest said that when she had a baby, her female partner was asked if she would be going to go down to 4 days a week – there are gendered expectations.

Jess: Jess asked Johanna for her solution.

Johanna: We need to change women's socialisation, so they aren't taught to marry up. Education is vital. Firms could restructure, to become more flexible. Politicians are expected to always be available which is harder on families – if the jobs were more flexible, more women could do well.

Jess: Jess said that she agreed on education, as when she asks in schools "how many people's dads do domestic labour", it's almost none. In one school, one girl's father was a barrister, and she said 'women can't be barristers'. Most of the other girls said that their mothers didn't work as much. Children still have the attitude that dads are breadwinners and mums are homemakers. Where this isn't true, is with single parents.

Guest: Guidance from employers needs to be understandable, as currently the calculations of things like maternity leave are highly technical.

Jess: The problem for women in their 40s at work is that children are needing care as parents are also getting ill, and you are more likely to be successful in your career. It leaves women juggling many things at once. Jess thanked speakers and attendees and concluded the session.