

Pregnant then Screwed

Ross Welcome to Renegade Inc. The statistics are shocking. Fifty five thousand mothers are pushed out of their jobs every year for being pregnant or needing maternity leave. Seventy seven percent are actively discriminated against and almost half of all working mums say that they earn less now than they did before they had kids. So how do we end the motherhood penalty?

Ross Joining me to discuss the motherhood penalty is the founder of Pregnant Then Screwed. Joeli Brearley. Joeli, welcome. It's always good to have a founder in who scratches their own itch, as we call it, because you founded Pregnant Then Screwed because of something that happened to you within the workplace. Tell us about it.

Joeli Brearley I was four months pregnant with my first child. I informed my employer that I was pregnant and the next day they sacked me by voicemail. And my employer was a children's charity.

Ross It doesn't get better than that, does it? I mean, insofar as, my God, there's a massive problem on our hands here. I mean, that set of circumstances is quite special.

Joeli Brearley Well, you would think it's very special. And I thought it was very unique. But actually, it isn't.

Ross This wider malaise?

Joeli Brearley Yes, exactly. There is this problem of women being pushed out of their jobs because they got pregnant. It's much wider than people realize.

Ross Did you feel incredibly isolated then when it happened to you? Did you think well, actually, it's me? You know, did you start thinking, well, there's something wrong with me and you know, or did you quickly realise that there is a bigger problem?

Joeli Brearley It took me a while to realize there's a big problem.

Ross So, what you thought it was you?

Joeli Brearley I thought it was an isolated incident. I thought my employer was just particularly bad and hadn't really thought this through. And I thought, you know, the law will protect me. This is completely insane. And I had no idea how difficult it is to access justice and how common this this problem is. And it wasn't until I had my son and started going to other baby groups and talking to the mums about what happened, that I realised that actually this is far more common than I realized. Fifty four thousand women a year are pushed out of their jobs for daring to procreate. That's one in nine pregnant women will be forced out of their jobs. And 77 percent of working mums face some form of discrimination in the workplace.

Ross Did you think, right, there's an injustice here when you started to realize it wasn't just you and it wasn't an isolated incident and actually, there are tens of thousands of women annually that this happens to? Did you think, well, where's my recourse to legal compensation?

Joeli Brearley Absolutely. I mean, I tried to do something about it, and I then discovered I was having a high risk pregnancy. The doctor told me that I could go into labour at any point because of my problem and had I gone into labour at that point the baby would have died. So, you know, I had to drop the case because that was incredibly stressful. But I couldn't drop the case and then pick it up at a later date when I knew my baby was healthy because you have a three month time limit to do something about it, which is a tiny amount of time. But it's also incredibly expensive. It costs, on average, eight and a half thousand pounds for a lawyer to support you to take your case to tribunal. That is a lot of money. And the average amount that you win at tribunal is about eight and a half thousand pounds. So what's the point of taking it to a tribunal?

Ross The irony is, when you think about this situation from an employer's point of view, the employer doesn't realise what women who have had a baby can bring to the workplace when they come back, you know, the set of skills that they can bring. Why are they so short sighted and myopic? Why do they think, gosh, this is a cost centre, this isn't a value add?

Joeli Brearley Well, we believe that it's expensive that women go on maternity leave is expensive and it's not. The government pays maternity leave and some employees choose to enhance that pay, but they have no legal obligation to do that whatsoever. The reason why they would do that is because they want to attract more women into their business in the first place. The research shows that the bias towards pregnant women is that they are of less value than other types of employees, that they will be distracted and not committed to their jobs. So they just see the whole thing is just a bit of a problem, she's going to go off for nine months anyway. Filling that spot is going to be a nightmare. Let's just get rid of that problem and carry on. They're not looking at the long term benefits, which are if you retain that skilled, trained woman, in the workplace, you're going to save thousands of pounds. But also maternity leave, taking time off, is a great training ground. It's actually really brilliant for building skills. You learn about multi tasking, you learn about patience. And there's loads of research that shows that when women have children, they're actually really productive, they're much more efficient than before they had kids.

Ross Now, you can sit here and listen to that and think, why? Because, surely, a more enlightened organisation knows that culture is everything. The more diverse the culture, the better and the better the culture, the more productivity. Very simple stuff this. So why are employers resorting to a sort of default mechanism which sort of belongs in the 1950s? Is it because their businesses are pushed? Is it because they scared about, you know, keeping women on? What is the thing that is driving these businesses to make these decisions?

Joeli Brearley It's because employers believe this narrative that they're told that women who are pregnant are a burden to business, that they're going to be distracted, that they're not going to be as productive when they're at work. Just this whole narrative, and people are still very comfortable to stand around the water cooler going, 'she might get pregnant soon so just watch her', or 'let's not employ that one because....'

Ross Child bearing age.

Joeli Brearley Child bearing age, exactly. A third of employers avoid hiring women of child bearing age because they think they're going to get pregnant on their watch and she's going to become a problem.

Ross And is this sort of enamoured with this idea that women want it all now? They want the career. They want the baby. Is that also prevalent in their thinking?

Joeli Brearley I really hate the saying, 'women want it all' because we don't say that about men. And you know, we do know that women are more likely to ask for flexible working, for example, when they return. And employers are obsessed with presenteeism. They really believe that if you're sat at your desk for 10 to 12 hours a day, that you are a better employee than somebody that comes in four days a week and is producing exactly the same amount of work. The person that's sat there 10 hours a day is messing about on Facebook let's be honest. You know, we're not looking at productivity we're looking at presenteeism, who's warming that seat. And the stereotype works in the other way as well. So men who have children, they get pay rises and promotions. Men with one child have a five percent pay rise compared to men without children. So the stereotypes are prevalent in every form. Women have children. They get demoted. They get their pay decreased. Men have children. They get promoted and they get pay rises because we're still sort of in this 1950s mentality where we believe men are looking after the family and they need the money to take care of the wife and the children and the woman, really, she should be at home and she should be baking cakes and fluffing up cushions and doing the right thing by her kids.

Ross The irony with that thinking is that I speak to a lot of friends and colleagues and you're only about five or six minutes away from them telling you - if you go out for a drink - actually, I find it really difficult because I know I'm a sole breadwinner and the job insecurity that comes with that is impacting my mental health.

Joeli Brearley Yeah, men's mental health is drastically deteriorating because they are working these absolutely ridiculous hours in their job. They're not seeing their kids. Their relationship with the wife is a mess. They're barely seeing each other. They're never seeing their friends. They're working themselves to the bone and they're unhappy as a result. Productivity increases with well-being. And we know that the fewer hours people work, actually, the more productive they are. So if you look across the board at Europe, the fewer hours that that country works, the more productive that country is. There is a direct correlation between the two. And yet in the U.K., we are the overtime unpaid capital of Europe. We are working people to the bone. And it makes absolutely no business sense and it makes absolutely no sense in terms of our mental health and well-being. The well-being in the UK is really, really low.

Ross Let me suggest to you that Pregnant Then Screwed isn't a women's issue organisation. Actually, it's a business organisation and it's a gender neutral organisation, because what we're doing with this 1950s draconian thinking is putting enormous amounts of pressure on women, which in turn sets off a domino effect through a marriage, through a business, through a business culture, and ultimately hits the bottom line.

Joeli Brearley Absolutely. So we don't believe you will ever have equality in the workplace until you have equality in the home. We want men to be facilitated and supported to take time out to care for their children as much as women are. So if we had a system which encouraged men to take him out of the workplace as much as it encourages women so it was equal, you wouldn't see pregnancy and maternity discrimination because in effect, men would be just as much risk as women are because they'd be taking the time out as well. So the first thing we need to solve is give men ring fenced, properly paid paternity leave, and we will see paternity leave drastically increase. We've seen that in other countries such as Quebec. We've seen it in Iceland. We've seen it in Norway. We've seen it in Sweden. We know that what men want is to take time out to care for their kids. They're just not being supported to do that at the moment.

Ross And give us a snapshot at the moment, what happens when a man takes the paltry two weeks off, because that's the recommended, that's the guideline. Two weeks. You've just had a baby, you're just allowed two weeks and you get a hundred and what?

Joeli Brearley A hundred and forty nine pounds a week.

Ross From the government?

Joeli Brearley From the government. It's the same with maternity leave as well. It's what women get. But if you as a family, the woman is taking time out to have a baby so she she isn't getting her full income. It's likely that the man's going to end the most money because of the gender pay gap. As a family you need that money. So lots of men aren't even taking their two weeks. And two weeks, really, you know, is such a tiny amount of time as it is.

Ross With a new baby.

Joeli Brearley With a new baby. In Sweden, for example, they've changed their parental leave system so that men can have 30 days off in the first year whenever they choose.

Ross Flexi.

Joeli Brearley Flexi, completely flexible, and it's fully paid. They can just, you know, say to their boss the next day, I need a couple of weeks off. My wife's really struggling. And what we've seen as a result of that is women's mental health has massively improved. It's enormously improved. They're spending less time in hospital. They're less physically and mentally unwell. And the fathers are also happier because they're not walking out the door, sobbing their way to work, thinking, I've just left my really unwell wife and baby at home.

Ross And sorry to bring it back to the commercials but to use a hard nosed approach to it, the employer is a lot happier because ultimately that man, that family, are more productive and therefore you want them around?

Joeli Brearley Exactly.

Ross Not very difficult this is it?

Joeli Brearley You would think it isn't very difficult. The problem tends to happen in the UK, particularly after the economic crash - and I think we're heading for another problem with Brexit - is that when you see problems with your bottom line, your income, employers tend to revert to conventional ways of working where profit is king and they forget everything else. They start to think maternity leave is a problem. That's a burden to business. Men taking time out to look after their children or care for the family, that's not them being productive in an employer's eyes. So they start to discriminate. That's why discrimination is on the rise. They start to expect really long hours for you to be pulling out all the stops, working 12 hours a day. And actually, that makes no business sense whatsoever. If you look after your staff, your staff will look after your company. Your staff are your company. And if you invest in them, you'll get the returns and improving their member of staff's well-being improves your productivity, improves your bottom line every single time.

Ross Welcome back to Renegade Inc. Before we talk more about the motherhood penalty with Joeli Brearley, let's have a look at what you've been tweeting about in this week's Renegade Inc. Index. First up, we've got a tweet from Harini Fernando: 'The birth of a first child has essentially no effect on a man's earnings trajectory. By contrast, a woman experiences a profound and lasting hit to her pay. The motherhood penalty is easily the largest remaining contributor to gender gaps in labour markets'. True?

Joeli Brearley Absolutely. Harini is a bang on. Women suffer a massive pay penalty when they have kids. Dad's actually, some research shows, get a pay rise and promotion. They definitely don't lose any money and definitely get demotions. Again, the gender pay gap. We talk about the gender pay gap and we just barely talk about motherhood. And that is the cause of the gender pay gap. It's when women have children. That's when it happens.

Ross And that's the motherhood penalty.

Joeli Brearley That's the motherhood penalty.

Ross Next from Anna Whitehouse: 'Things I regret: Thinking parents were slackers for leaving the office at 4.59 pm, taking off my engagement ring in an interview for fear it screamed, "might get knocked up." It fair. It screamed, might get knocked up. Miscarrying at my desk because I didn't want my boss to know I was trying'. I mean, where are we when you read this sort of stuff?

Joeli Brearley It's devastating and miscarriages are a massive, massive problem. Women don't tend to tell people that they're pregnant before the three month mark. And if you have a miscarriage, it's likely before the three month mark. And I've spoken to so many women who've had a miscarriage and have told their employers they're having a miscarriage because they're at work when it happens. And then, they come back and they start being performance managed because their employer knows that they're going to start trying to have a baby and they've got no protection because they're not then pregnant. So they get kicked out of their jobs and, you know, they're just in a complete mess. It's devastating.

Next from Anna Harris: 'I nipped out of work to bring hub home from hospital today and caught some of the Jeremy Vine debate about egg freezing. Why is debate centred on

women's choice to have a career versus not having a career rather than scrutiny on a working environment that doesn't support working mums?

Joeli Brearley Egg freezing is just utter insanity. This is employers trying to literally stop biology so they can get more productivity out of women. We just need workplaces that work for humans rather than trying to mess with biology. It's absolutely insane. It's like a dystopian future.

Ross Bet you can hear shareholders now screaming, 'workplaces that work for humans?'

Joeli Brearley Yeah, what do you mean?

Ross Finally, from Apple News: 'Becoming a mother doesn't mean losing your drive, value or brain function. So why do we still put the blame on "mom brain" and continue to perpetuate the negative stigmas that drive workplace bias and the motherhood penalty? I hear this a lot, you know, this baby brain or mom brain stuff. I mean, it's not rooted in science and it's pretty patronising stuff isn't it?'

Joeli Brearley There is absolutely no scientific evidence for baby brain whatsoever. It's used in other ways to patronise mums. .

Ross It's almost you can see someone patting them on the head.

Joeli Brearley You're clearly useless now you've had a baby, and it's just a way of them feeling that, you know, it's okay to be biased towards you. It just perpetuates this bias, this discrimination, this issue that we have with women being pregnant and having children.

Video clip (Dr. Jeremy Davies) Paternity leave, or rather, what I would prefer to call parenting leave is very important for families because what we need to do if we're serious about gender equality is to provide the time and resource to support dads on their own to get really good and confident at looking after their own babies. What we really want is for dads to have a decent chunk of time paid at a rate where he can afford to take it. It could be later in the first year. It might be tacked on to paternity leave or it could be a bit later on. The crucial thing is that he needs to be able to afford to take it. If he doesn't take it, that's lost to the family. So he can't pass it over to her. He needs to take it. If you are a baby, what you want in your life is a small number of adults who love you to bits and know how to respond to whatever your problem is. You're going to develop what's called secure attachments with those with those adults. And that is very closely linked to better mental health, self-confidence when you get older. Fundamentally, you know, deep down, that you have a very solid base of people who love you. Every single couple I've seen who has described their experience on shared parental leave has had a good experience. The problem is that the eligibility is very limited. The way the system is set up is quite retrograde in the sense that it's actually maternity leave being transferred from the mother to the father and that embeds this idea that all this stuff is women's domain. We haven't quite persuaded the government to make the changes needed, but I think there are more of us calling for that now.

Ross One of the things that strikes me as somebody who is an employer and looks at the business world quite closely and is interested in it and certainly interested in

entrepreneurship, and it is this: It's the waste that goes on because, say, you have a couple of employees, three employees, whatever it might be, and they go off, have a baby. They still have those skills. They still understand your culture. They still have the ability to do their jobs perfectly. But what happens because of a hiatus, which is natural because they go off and have a child, then they are still available to come back and do incredible work. And in fact, having had a baby and all the leadership skills that come with that and all the resources that you exposed to, you actually come back a lot more efficient and with a bigger set of skills. Why aren't we talking about that?

Joeli Brearley Well, it's insane because, particularly with Brexit, we're haemorrhaging skills from the UK. We know that nine out of 10 sectors say they can't get the skills that they need. And yet nobody says, hold on a minute, there are all these women, particularly women, sat at home who want to work but can't who are really highly skilled.

Ross Right.

Joeli Brearley So we know from Save the Children that there are 840,000 women who want to work but can't purely because of the cost of childcare. We have the second most expensive childcare system in the world. It is prohibitively expensive. There are millions of women, parents, sat at home who want to work and they're not able to. When employers get rid of women at this point because they're pregnant or because they've just had children, they don't think about the long term costs, what it's going to cost them to replace that person. If you are going to push women out of the workforce, in that middle management level, you are going to lose just an unbelievable amount of skill. And as you say, those parents that have taken that time off to look after children, they're not just sat watching Jeremy Kyle in their underpants. It's the most effective training course you could ever go on. You learn unbelievable amounts of patience. You learn how to multi-task like a ninja. You learn about the extremes of emotion. There is loads of research to support the fact that when women return to work, they are much better team players. They are much more productive than they were previously. You know, it really is an unbelievable management training course that you go on.

Ross But it is an epic mess, is it not, for these employers. Because of their rigidity of thinking, because of the stereotypes that we talked about in the first half, they are missing a massive commercial goal here?

Joeli Brearley Absolutely, yeah.

Ross So maybe, Pregnant Then Screwed should be really talking hard to the business case, to the CEOs, the chairmen, chairwomen, whoever it might be, and be making that business case to them and saying, actually, you're missing a trick here?.

Joeli Brearley Well, we do. And there are businesses that say they want to employ returners, women and men that are at home taking time out for caring. The problem comes with the fact that you can have great policies in place as a business. But really, what it comes down to is your line manager. And does your line manager really think in a long term or a short term mentality? And the reality is...

Ross I can answer that. No.

Joeli Brearley The reality is that most employers see flexible working as well, you're not doing your job properly and you are pretty useless. So let's not bother promoting you and shove you on the site. They see people taking time out to care for children as just an expensive burden and a problem. And they don't think about this long term. Thinking about wellbeing. Thinking about the skills and retaining skills in the workforce.

Ross And is there ever a case to answer when you speak to an employer, an employer says to you, 'well we actually have tried and we've actually been taken advantage of a bit here because people have come in and, you know, been here for a nominal amount of time and then left, and therefore we feel a bit burned by this now.

Joeli Brearley Absolutely.

Ross Because there have been people who've exploited and been opportunist about maternity leave.

Joeli Brearley Yeah, oh yeah. And we're not saying it's easy. Of course, if somebody is going to leave your business for nine months that is a challenge. But running a business is a challenge. People go off sick. People have lives outside of work. You have a constant challenge if you're managing staff. And if you do this properly, the long term benefits are enormous. So, you know, you just need to work out the best way of doing it.

Ross How do we start thinking differently about this? Because as we said again in the first half it is a sort of 1950s mentality. And actually we're here now. We've agreed that it isn't gender specific. We've agreed that commercially it makes good sense. How do we start thinking differently about the motherhood penalty?

Joeli Brearley The whole structure and system needs to change. The labour market isn't working for anybody. And the labour market, the way it stands at the moment has been set up at a time when women were at home looking after the children and men were going out to work. But actually, it's got even worse because at least back then we were working nine to five. We have boundaries and constraints around the way that we work. What we've got to is an even bigger challenge, almost with flexible working, because those boundaries are blurred and they've gone. So people are working really long hours. They're working into the night and they're not having that respite. They're not having the time with their families that they need. So we're all going a bit mad. So we need to rethink, say, presenteeism which is a massive problem. People think that if you're at your desk for 10 hours a day, that you are a good member of staff. And that's not true. So we need to rethink the number of hours that people are working overall. But we also need to look at all of the systems and structures around it. So childcare needs to be properly subsidised. It needs to be flexible. It needs to be available, because at the minute people can't get childcare in certain cities. We need paternity leave so that men have access to three months properly paid paternity leave that is ring fenced, that is theirs so men start to take time out in their droves. And then we just need to look at this whole culture of presenteeism and the fact that we are working ourselves to the bone and it actually has a negative impact on our productivity as a country.

Ross And on the family and on society?

Joeli Brearley And on the family and on the society.

Ross Because we don't talk too much about that. What happens within a family is that there are all sorts of pressure that children, you know, will feel regardless of their age because of the vibration in that home, which is unnecessary.

Joeli Brearley We know that kids do much better in education and much higher wellbeing if they see their dads, if they spend really good quality time with their dads. We know that if dad spent at least 24 hours with their child on their own in the first year of a child's life, that a couple are 40 percent more likely to stay together. So men need to be released from this relentless long hour working culture so that they can spend more time with the kids. But mums are also going a bit mad because they've been pushed out of the workforce. They're made to stay at home with the child constantly when actually they're full of ambition and skill and they want to be stimulated in other ways besides just looking after their child. So we need a way of utilising those skills in the workforce, because that's good for mums, it's good for the country, it's good for the economy. So the current structure we have is just bad for everybody. It's not working.

Ross I'd vote for it. You should run for parliament.

Joeli Brearley Ah, thanks.

Ross I don't know how much you'd get done looking at the current political situation, but thank you very much for coming by.

Joeli Brearley Thank you.

Ross That's it from Renegade Inc. this week. You can drop the team a mail, studio@renegadeinc.com or you can tweet us at Renegade Inc. Join us next week for more insight from those people who are thinking differently. But until then, stay curious.