

November 2024

From *Labour Ward to Labour Force*

A groundbreaking study revealing 8,000 women's experiences of returning to work after a baby, what they want, and how employers adapt to keep them.



THE
FEMALE
LEAD

peanut

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What's the cost

...of losing an experienced woman from your business, in the year after she's back from maternity leave?

Taking factors like notice period, headhunter fees and onboarding into account, replacing a senior figure in some industries could cost in the region of **a quarter of a million to half a million pounds.**

Four out of five women will have a baby at some point in their lives. Returning to work afterwards marks a turning point, especially for first-time mothers. Work and family collide in a way they may have never experienced. We know that things aren't equal: women do at least two and a half times more unpaid household work than men (UN), and after starting their careers on similar salaries, women earn £8.90 less than men per year after 10 years (LEO Graduate Outcomes data).

And while the pandemic made flexible working more common, and had a rebalancing effect between men and women in some homes, we've learnt that returning to work still isn't working for many mothers.

Respondent Demographics



The survey was live for 2 weeks in June 2024



We had 8,000 respondents from over 100+ countries with 22% of respondents in the UK and US each



All respondents were women and 96% were between 25-44 years old



12% of respondents were currently on maternity leave



2% of respondents were pregnant and working



86% of respondents had returned to work in the last 5 years



79% were married, 17% lived with a partner and 4% were single



33% were breadwinners, 33% earned a similar amount and 33% earned less than their partner

Our findings.

The Female Lead and Peanut teamed up to survey over 8,000 women who have returned to work in the last five years after having or adopting a baby.

We know that most women return to work after a baby, and the majority go back to the same employer, but their relationship with work is at breaking point.

A staggering 47% of those who aren't satisfied with the support from their employer will leave their job within a year, and 35% feel their work set-up is unsustainable.

Women are anxious and overwhelmed when they return. They want to be supported and heard, and have time and help to assimilate back into the workforce. Employers and HR can be afraid of asking too many questions or saying the wrong thing, leading them to make the wrong assumptions.

By not addressing this, employers risk female workers stepping back, going part-time, becoming less productive, or quitting altogether. Low engagement costs the global economy an estimated \$8.9 trillion a year, or 9% of global GDP (Gallup).

The mothers who leave won't be making it into your company's senior positions or shaping its culture. And yet we know that businesses with women on their leadership team are 21% more likely to experience above-average profitability (McKinsey).

The point when mothers return is a moment when employers can change the narrative. The facts show that when women are encouraged and feel seen, they have a sense of greater confidence and enjoyment, and are better employees as a result.

Foreword from The Female Lead



In my work founding my agency dunnhumby, and launching the Tesco Clubcard, we found that keeping a loyal customer was 20 times more valuable than the cost of acquiring a new one. The same is true for employees.

We know the cost of childcare is a huge challenge, with fees up to 65% of UK parents' take-home pay according to Business in the Community (BITC), but employers can't fix this. Our study uncovers a host of changes that returning mothers want, and our data shows that getting these prompts huge shifts in their productivity, retention and how they talk to others about their job. **70% of women who feel supported said it made them feel more loyal to their employer.**

But when they don't feel supported, they are likely to leave, speak negatively about their employer, and put in less effort and fewer hours. The 'satisfaction gaps' we have analysed, between what mothers want and what they are offered, are a clear call to action.

And this story isn't only about women. It's about how businesses ready themselves for what is coming: men are being offered more parental leave, and taking more too. They will increasingly face this transition that women have been experiencing for decades.

We want to flip the "motherhood penalty" on its head. We've heard about the disadvantages of being a mother at work, but we believe employers are missing a "motherhood reward": a set of steps to invest in mothers and supercharge them through this difficult transition period, resulting in business wins.

It's a missed opportunity that the data shows is worth it.

Edwina Dunn, OBE, founder of The Female Lead

The Motherhood Penalty

The economic disadvantages mothers face in the workforce, including reduced earnings, limited promotion opportunities, and increased discrimination.

Foreword from Peanut



Throughout our lives, women face expectations mapping out school, career, marriage, and motherhood. For many of us, though, motherhood arrives with unforeseen realities, changing everything—including our careers. We're told we can "have it all" if we work hard enough, but returning to work after maternity leave reveals a new set of challenges, and too often, we face them without support.

What is so tragically overlooked is that, when a mother returns, she brings with her fresh perspectives, resilience, and adaptability—qualities that, when recognised, can transform the workplace. Yet, many workplaces expect us to continue as if nothing has changed. In reality, *everything* has. Companies can turn the so-called 'Motherhood penalty' into the 'Motherhood reward' by embracing these skills and offering real support. Flexible hours, compassionate policies, and simply *being heard* make a world of difference.

Peanut and The Female Lead joined forces to examine this issue closely, surveying over 8,000 women who have returned to work in the last five years after having or adopting a baby. The findings of this study are staggering. We know that most women return to their previous employers after maternity leave, but many do so feeling isolated, anxious, and overwhelmed. Over one-third of women report that their work set-up is unsustainable, and nearly half of those who feel unsupported by their employers plan to leave within a year. It's clear that employers need to do more than just welcome mothers back, they need to actively support and empower them.

Investing in mothers doesn't just help individuals; it builds stronger, more profitable businesses. Supporting mothers as they re-enter the workforce is a win-win, one that empowers individuals and fuels innovation, loyalty, and growth across the entire workforce.

Michelle Kennedy, Founder and CEO of Peanut

Key findings from 8,000 working mothers around the world.

35% of returning mothers feel their work set-up is unsustainable

47% of those who are unsatisfied with work plan to leave within the year

Over half (54%) of women felt unsatisfied or neutral about the support they received at work

The most wished-for benefit was **flexibility around unexpected childcare responsibilities (77%)**

Over half of new mothers simply wanted to be asked what they needed (54%)

Twice as many women feel supported by their colleagues compared to their employer when returning to work

70% of those who felt supported felt more loyal to the company as a result

Mothers who felt most supported said they were **20% more committed and 30% more confident since returning**

Insight Report

08

Insight Report

So, who are our returning mothers?

98% of our panel returned to **full-time employment** and **82%** to the **same employer**

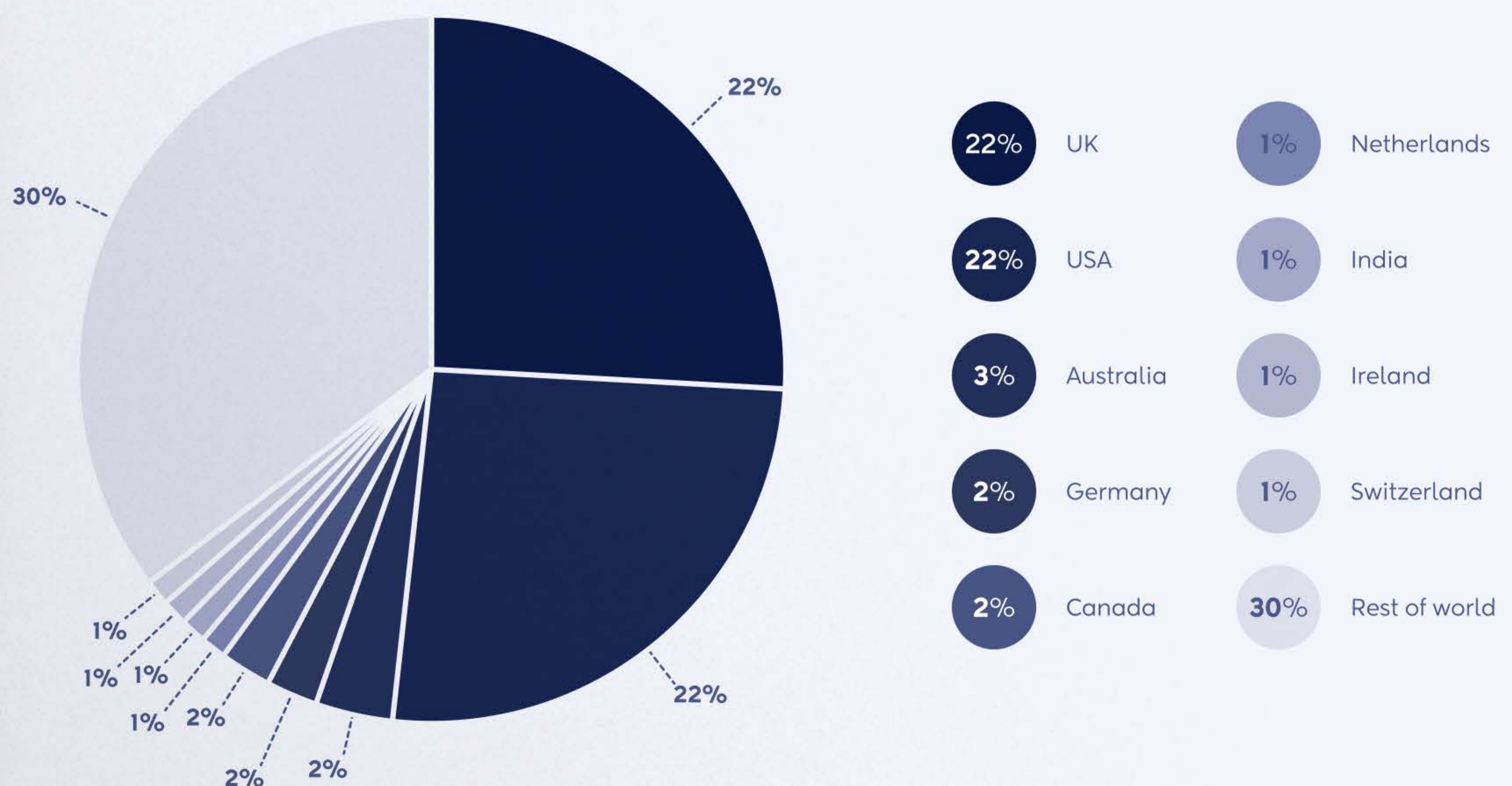
96% were between 25 and 44 years old

79% were married, **17%** lived with a partner, **4%** were single

A third of the mothers were the breadwinner in their household, **a third earned less** than their partner, and **a third earned a similar amount**

The Female Lead and **Peanut** have joined forces to uncover the truth about how women feel when returning to work after having a child. Providing a safe space to share their experiences so that employers can understand what would truly support women in this transitory life stage and build a workplace and culture where new mothers can thrive and grow.

In order to do this, we listened to over 8,000 women in 100+ countries, including over 2,000 women in the UK and 2,000 in the US.





*Pregnant women in our community photographed by **Sane Seven**.

Insight Report

Mothers told us they felt listened to.

"This research is so important and makes me feel seen. Thank you for giving us the platform"

"Listening to us is the biggest opportunity for a successful re-entry into the workplace"

"The adjustment isn't given enough credit and a lot of the time we are expected to slot back in as if we weren't away for a prolonged period of time, as well as having experienced extreme physical, mental, emotional and social change."

"Some employers really see the value and they continue to invest in their staff who are parents, while others penalise parents for wanting to work flexibly and trying to juggle both home and work"

"Employers risk losing brilliant members of staff because they can't accommodate."

The experience:
how it feels for
mothers returning
to work

Insight Report

The experience: *How it feels* for mothers returning to work

We asked women to describe how becoming a mother had affected their career.



"The workforce is not made for working mothers. Often times, it feels like we must choose between being a present parent (especially during the formative years) and performing at an exponential rate to excel in a male-dominated sector and propel our careers."

"For the past decade, I was recognised as talent and a future leader for my company. Since I got back, my previous responsibilities were given to the person that covered my position during mat leave. It hurts that my manager never asked me how I felt about this decision or felt as though he needed to explain. They decided to skip me for a bonus last year - although I had been working for six months. Other colleagues with my profile have been promoted during this time. One year later, **I am still battling to be invited to meetings I should be in.** I have lost most of my network that could work towards a promotion and I am rebuilding it now."

"I had zero support as I was a new employee and the fact I had a young baby was not regarded. **I had to leave owing to the impact on my mental health.** I worked four days a week but there seemed to be negative bias around my 'day off'."

"Smaller cost of living raise because I was out. Not considered for promotion. Reduced my support staff while I was out. **Stagnant.**"

Insight Report

The experience: *how it feels* for mothers returning to work

"Regarding remuneration I'm way behind my male colleagues. **I'm often not taken into account** if there are new projects. On the other hand my workload has expanded even though I'm working fewer hours."

"I am a different person. I feel parents live in the "real" world, which young professionals may not understand. I feel the biggest issue in my head and in society is **how we perceive parenthood - we just don't talk about it enough** and are ruled by stereotypes."

"Run the same race as your colleagues, **but carry a child at the same time** and get half the amount of sleep."

"Always overlooked for promotion opportunities. Not given higher priority projects. Left to get on with my job, quite isolating. So much so I decided to leave my place of work after 14 years. I'm now unemployed and have been trying to get a job for 18 months. **I feel so sad to say this as I wouldn't change my children for anything but since my first child, my career has just plummeted.** Yet prior to this, I was promoted every couple of years."

"I have come back to a different structure and team. **No support to understand those changes** and I was not given the same opportunity as other colleagues to choose which area I went into as part of the restructure."

"In past pregnancies, I noticed that I have had to make career changes after having a baby. Not long after giving birth, **I had to quit due to lack of support.**"

"**Kid gloves are on when you return, but never in the way that you need.** Talking to you like you're a child is unhelpful. I have been passed over for promotion that I was an obvious candidate for with a comment like, 'You have enough on your plate with work and home'."

"My employer sees no difference. **Personally I struggle with mom-guilt.**"

Insight Report

The experience: *how it feels* for mothers returning to work

"Returning to work has made it **more difficult to feel like a good enough mother**. The guilt and constantly feeling like I'm not doing a good enough job in either world is destroying me."

"Missed out for promotion, totally overlooked because I need to finish at 5pm, no support for next pregnancy. **Previously fast tracked, now feel blacklisted.**"

"**I feel like I work twice as hard for the same results** as before I became a mother. I'm more anxious and less confident. But I still love my career and would not give it up."

"Feel like I have to work so much harder to prove my worth. When asking for time off with family, or having to take unexpected leave to care for sick kids, **it feels like I am taking 10 steps back and being perceived as unreliable.**"

"My return to work was a disaster. There was no transition back, I requested to come back part-time, but was denied and had to jump immediately back into my normal role, plus a major project that I was the only one able to do. My supervisor and HR director were personally supportive, but had **no idea how to support me and my return.**"

"My colleagues support me but corporation-wise it feels more like **blanket solutions** meant to help the most people versus offering solutions tailored to each mother's needs."



The UK Landscape

What follows is a detailed look at our findings from returning mothers in the UK

Download our US-focused white paper [here](#) and the global study [here](#).

UK panel breakdown

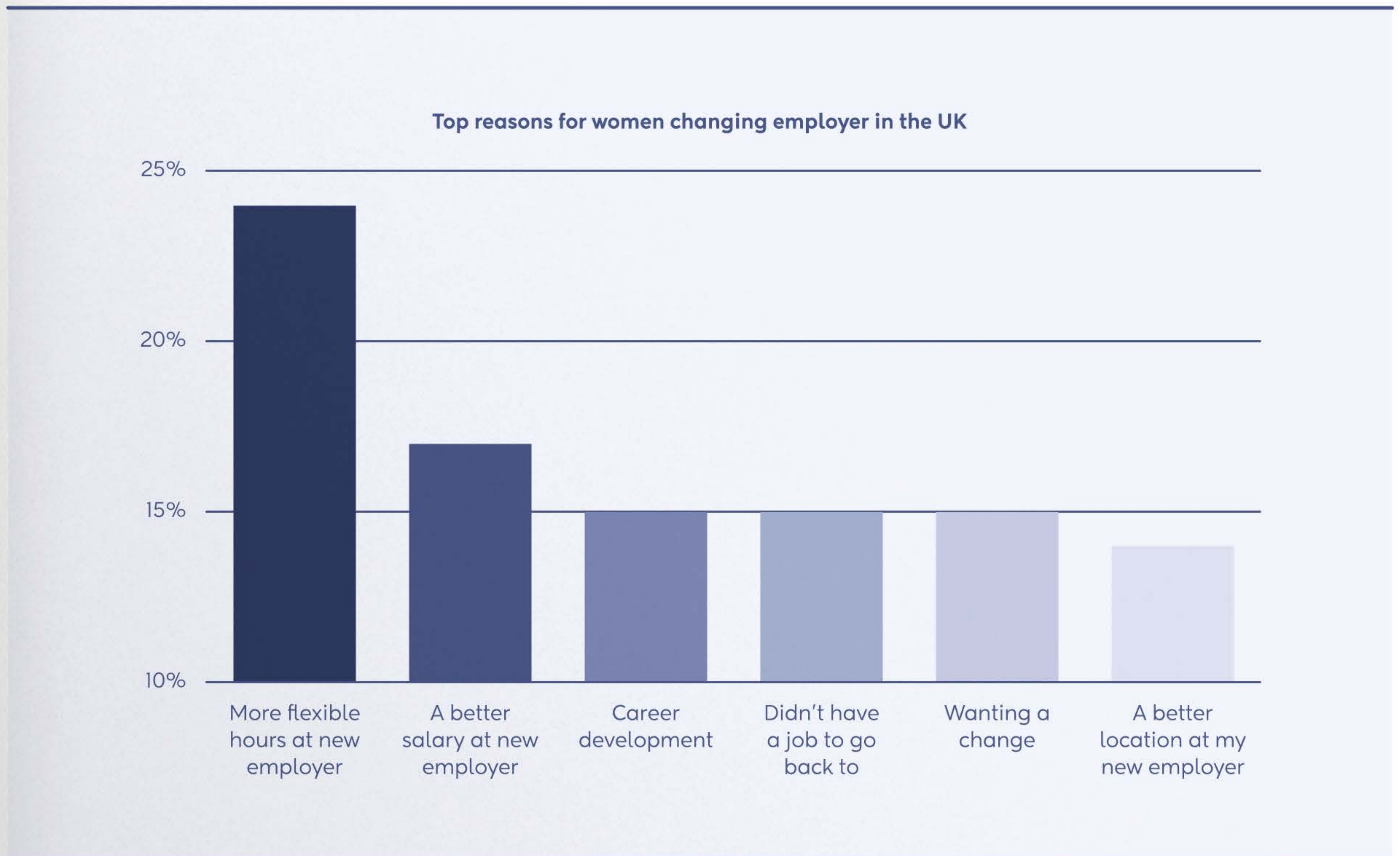
Most women (**77%**) had taken between 6 and 12 months maternity leave.

The most common amount of time they said it took them to adjust back to working life after returning was 3-6 months.

82% of women returned to their original employer.

18% changed employers, primarily for more flexible hours (**24%**) or a higher salary (**17%**).

Most women returned to the same job level as before (**70%**). A quarter (**24%**) became more senior when they returned.



Insight Report

The UK Landscape

Why women returned to work

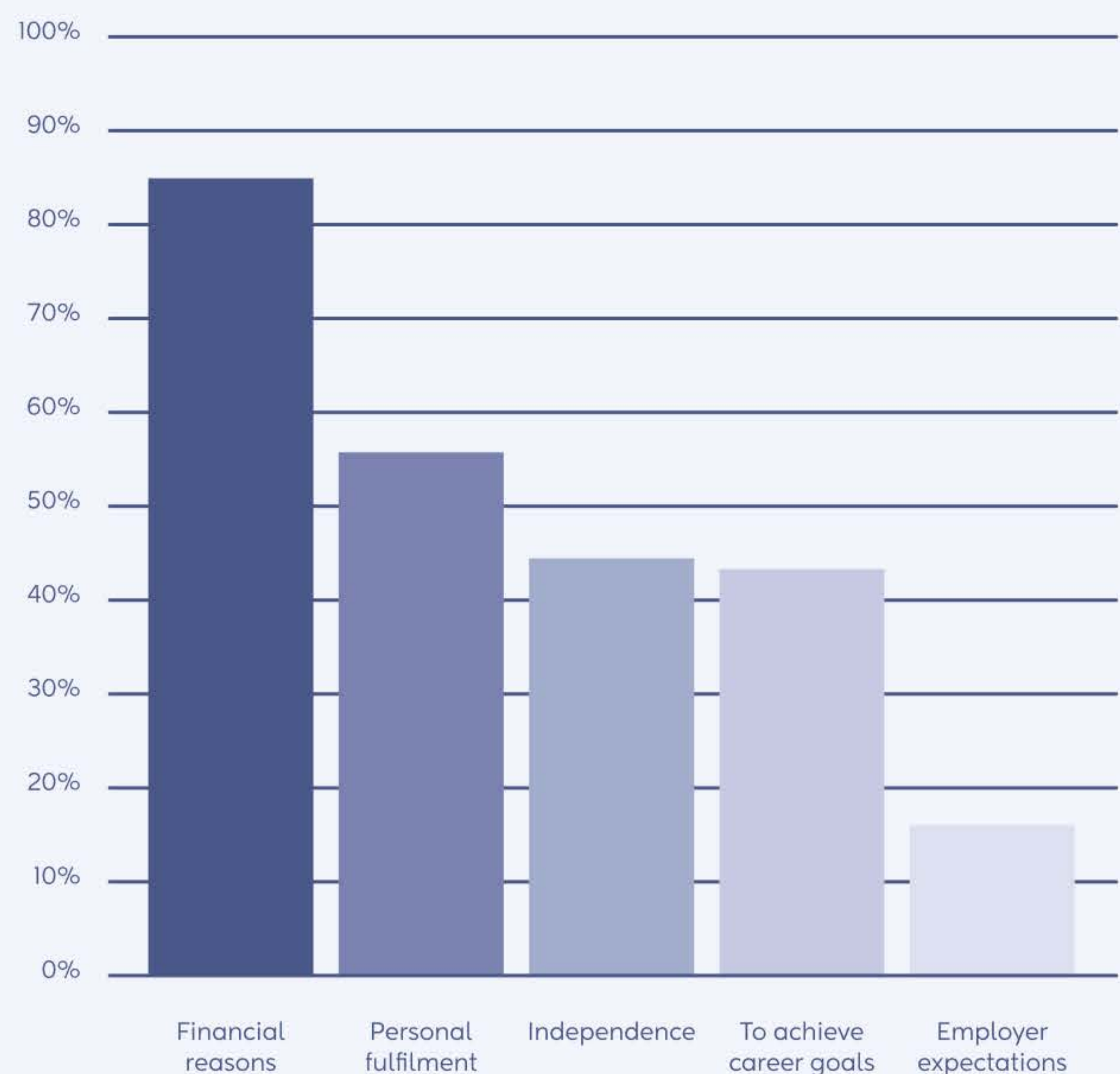
The majority returned to work for financial reasons (**85%**).

But they also came back seeking satisfaction for themselves. More than half said they wanted a sense of personal fulfilment (**56%**), independence (**45%**) or to achieve their career goals (**44%**).

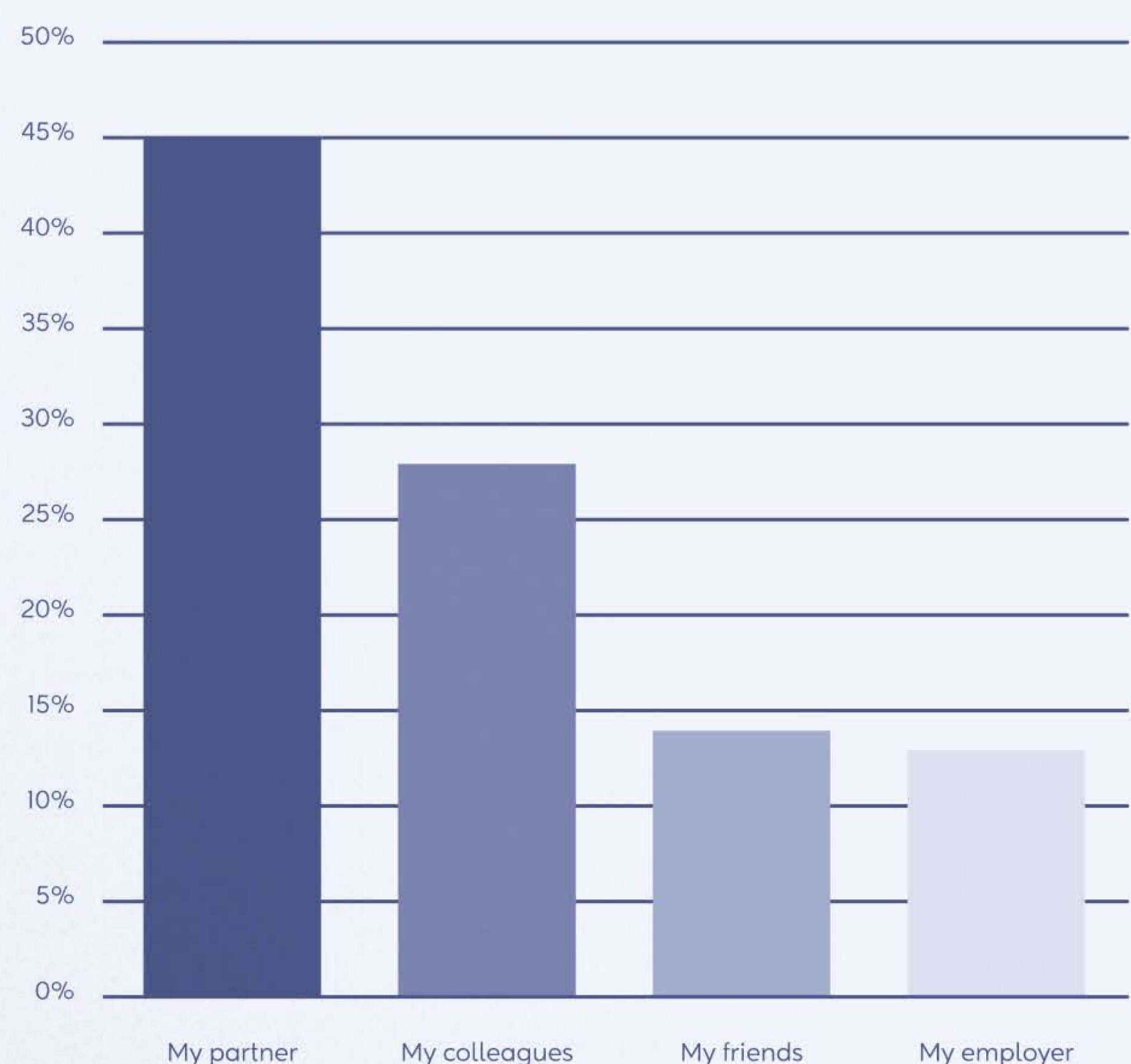
Some mothers volunteered that they needed a **'break from being a mother'** or wanted to work **'for their mental health'**, because of societal expectations, or role modeling for their children.

They were most likely to say their partner had been their main support when they returned, with their employer coming last after colleagues and friends.

Reasons for returning to work in the UK



Who has made you feel most supported when returning to work?



Despite seeking fulfilment, the transition was far from rewarding for many women

Women's feelings when they returned to work were overwhelmingly negative: they were anxious, overwhelmed and isolated.

Anxious	74%
Tired	70%
Overwhelmed	63%
Stressed	54%
Excited	35%
Isolated	30%
Relieved	12%
Energised	11%
Calm	3%

They struggled to balance work and home life, with **73% saying they had feelings of guilt, 72% had difficulty juggling childcare responsibilities.**

Around **a third (32%) felt underestimated at work** and **25% said they were overlooked for development opportunities or promotion.**

Feelings of guilt	73%
Difficulty juggling childcare responsibilities	72%
Perceived as being less committed to your job than before children	34%
Struggling to get up to speed with company changes	34%
Being underestimated at work	32%
Being overlooked for development opportunities or promotion	25%
Being excluded from social events at work	15%
Being penalised for arriving late or leaving early	9%

Insight Report

The UK Landscape

Over half (54%) of women felt either unsatisfied or neutral about the support they received at work.

Consequently, **over 35% of returning mothers** feel like their work set-up is unsustainable.

Of those **a staggering 47% plan to leave** their jobs in the next year.

Overall, **only 12% said that motherhood had positively impacted their career.**

But we can change this.

This is not a woman's problem but a *family* challenge.



The fixes:
*what returning
mothers want at
work*

Insight Report

The fixes: what returning mothers want at work



We asked returning mothers about the most important kind of support their employer could offer for their return to work.

Flexibility around unexpected caring responsibilities - like a nursery closure or a sick child - came out top, closely followed by the offer of flexible hours.

The third most-wished-for request was for acknowledgement and communication: simply being asked what they needed.

Flexibility around unexpected caring responsibilities	77%
Flexible hours	75%
Asking me what support i needed	52%
Hybrid working	49%
Offering child care benefits	40%
Connections to a community of other parents	30%
A space to breast-pump in private	28%
Part-time working	26%
A phased return	22%

Insight Report

The fixes: what returning mothers want at work

When we group these benefits by type, flexibility and communication were the biggest requirements.

Combined, these two factors are more important to mothers than financial or on-site childcare benefits.

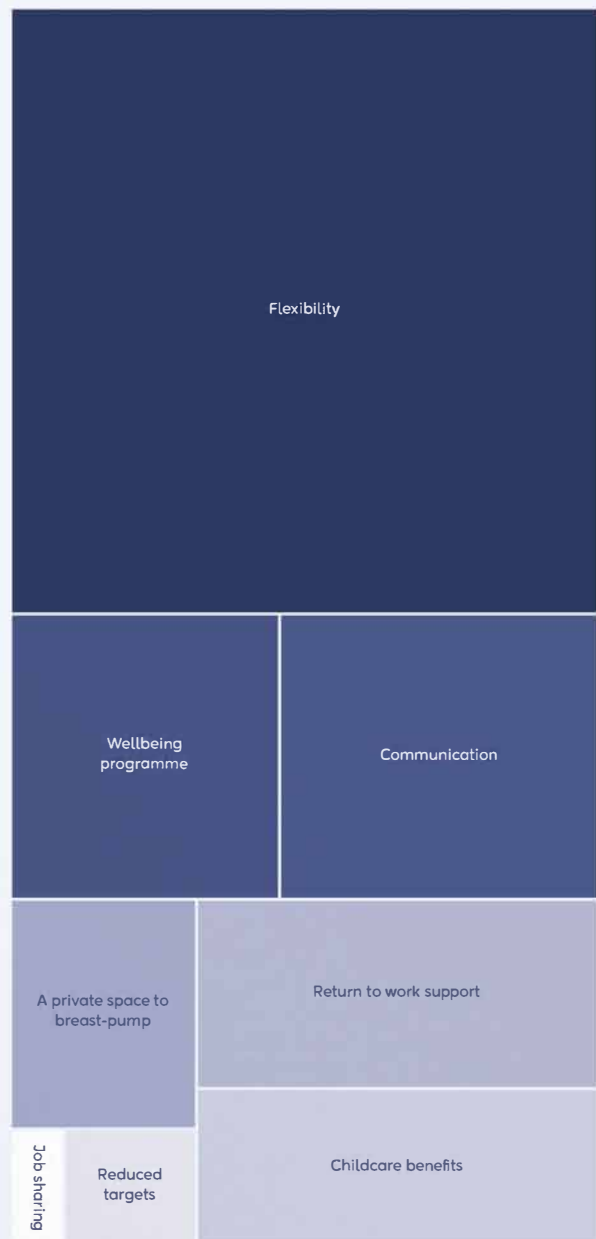
Flexibility: Flexibility around unexpected caring responsibilities, Flexible hours, Hybrid working, Part-time working

Communication: Asking me what support I needed, Connections to a community of other parents

Wellbeing Programme: Mental health support, Coaching/mentoring, Confidence training

Return to work support: A phased return, A "re-induction" programme to help me adjust to returning to work

Most wanted employee benefits



Satisfaction gaps - the missed opportunities

The wishes of returning mothers didn't always reflect the reality of what kinds of support they were offered when they went back to work.

Where mothers' wishes didn't match up to what they are offered, we see a satisfaction gap, which is largest for the support around flexibility and communication which mothers want so much.

75% of UK mothers wanted flexible working, but only 42% were offered it.

52% wanted to be asked what support they needed, but only 21% were.

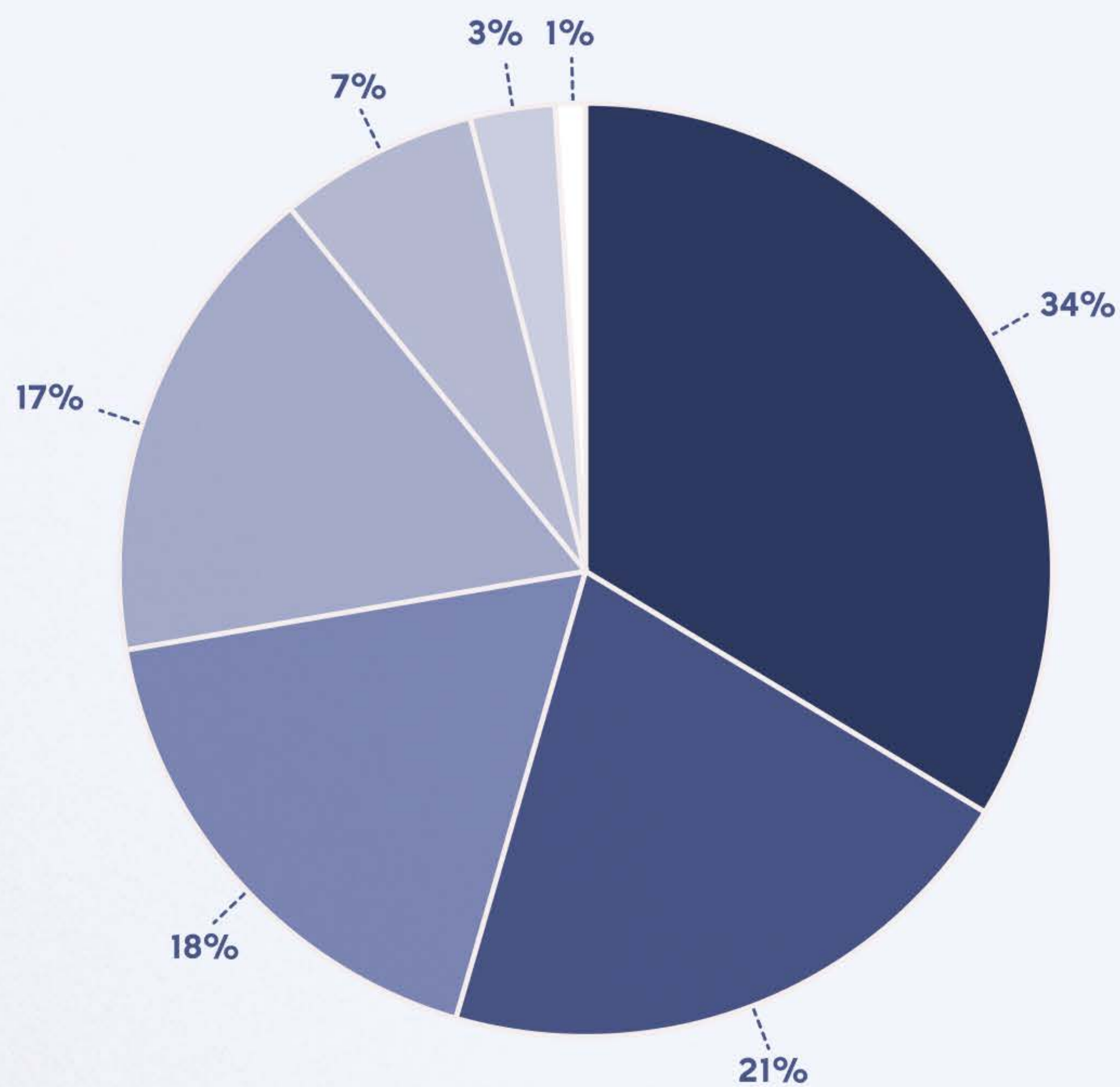
In only one support area did a higher percentage of women receive a benefit than actually wanted it: **13% wanted mental health support and 15% received it.**

Benefit	Wished for	Offered
Flexible hours	75%	42%
Asking me what support I needed	52%	21%
Flexibility around unexpected caring responsibilities	77%	49%
Connections to a community of other parents	30%	6%
A space to breast-pump in private	28%	9%

Insight Report

The fixes: what returning mothers want at work

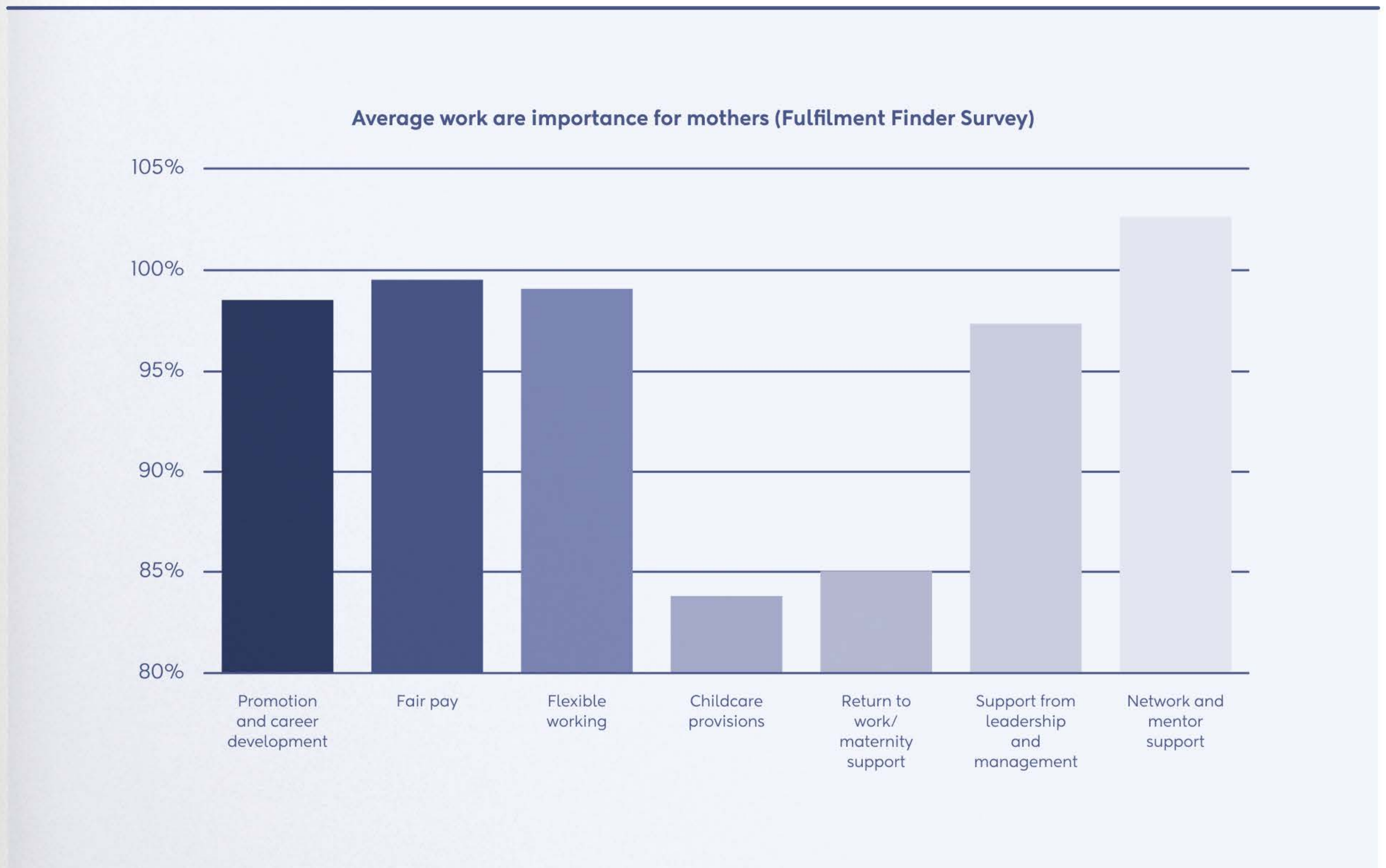
Asked what one action their employer could take to rebalance the situation long-term for mothers at work, their top choice was making flexible working standard practice, followed by encouraging men to take more parental leave - a reminder that men's experience of parenthood affects women's.



- 34%** Make flexible working standard practice
- 21%** Encourage men to take more parental leave
- 18%** Make senior roles available as job-shares and part-time roles
- 17%** Offer on-site children or financial support with childcare
- 7%** Implement a "re-induction" programme for returning mothers
- 3%** Plan someone's 'return to work' activities before they go on maternity leave
- 1%** Provide networking opportunities within office hours

Flexibility and communication

These two factors being a top priority reflect findings in The Female Lead's Fulfilment Finder survey which captures the subconscious motivations of women. Networking and mentor support were rated as the most important area of work, with flexible working also a key focus.



Twice as many women

(28%) feel supported by their colleagues compared to their employer (14%) when it comes to returning to work. This is a missed opportunity for connection.

The wins:
*what happens
when employers
get it right*

Insight Report

The wins: *what happens when employers get it right*

We asked returning mothers what they would do as a result of feeling *supported or unsupported* at work.

Results of feeling unsupported

Moving to a different employer	20%
Working less hard than I'd be inclined to	13%
Speaking negatively about my employer	14%
Working fewer hours	9%
Stopping working entirely	6%
Moving to a less senior roll	7%
Become self-employed	4%

Results of feeling supported

Feel more loyal to the company	70%
Speaking positively about my employer	68%
Feel more confident at work	67%
Stay at the company longer	64%
Be more productive	54%
Put more effort into work	42%

The benefits of *promotion after maternity leave*

A quarter of those surveyed (**24%**) were made more senior at work when they returned.

Women who were made more senior felt higher levels of excitement and relief when returning to work. This meant they were more committed to their jobs.

Women who moved to a more senior role also reported double the levels of ambition than those who were demoted to a more junior role.

Women who moved to a more junior role were the most likely to say that they do not feel comfortable talking about being a mother at work compared to other groups and are the most likely to want part-time working as an employer benefit.

Unsurprisingly, women who were demoted to a more junior role were the most likely to view their motherhood negatively, with **73% of women agreeing that it had a negative affect on their career.**

Insight Report

The wins: *what happens when employers get it right*



Forget the 'motherhood penalty', start focusing on the 'motherhood reward'

70% of those who felt supported felt more loyal to the company as a result, while two thirds would recommend their company and stay longer.

Women who were offered their top choice benefits from their employers were two times as likely to be satisfied in their current job - reducing the chances of them wanting to leave in the next year.

Mothers who felt most supported said they were 20% more committed and 30% more confident since returning to work.

Insight Report

The wins: *what happens when employers get it right*

When mothers feel supported (still the minority)

"I feel passionate and excited to come to work every day and use my brain in a strategic way. It gives me purpose in life beyond being a mom."

"It gives me more motivation than ever."

"Motherhood motivated me to leave a toxic work environment and take my talents to an employer that would value and respect me."

"Since coming back to work, I have been given exciting projects, had two pay-rises and bonuses and been given a promotion. So I do feel valued."

"Having a family restructures your priorities. I am more supportive of my team and their unique family/life needs and helping them achieve work-life balance."

Insight Report

The wins: what happens when employers get it right

"For me personally I feel it has expanded my skill sets and made me a more rounded employee."

"I feel empowered and confident in my professional abilities and position. I no longer sweat the small problems or over analyse situations at work. I am a better decision maker."

"I am a stronger person since becoming a mother. I am a more committed employee with a more clear vision of my life and career goals both short and long term. Due to my responsibilities at home I go above and beyond when at work. Slacking or pushing work off to another day is very rarely an option and I have more conscientious desire to overperform."

"I feel more confident in my role, more empathetic (I work serving other mothers), and feel fortunate that I came back at a reduced schedule."

"I think I have pushed myself harder than I would have had to before children to achieve the same goals. That being said being a mother to 3 girls makes me want to progress and show them I enjoy work and that women can achieve great things."

"It forced me to finally admit I wasn't happy in my previous role and to find something that I enjoyed and that fit around my more important job (being a mum). Going back to work has massively boosted my confidence and I am enjoying a routine again."

"My workplace is more female-orientated and they understand the situation as they've done it all before."

"It gave me the sense that I can do everything."

The 'motherhood reward' in depth

The evidence is clear: if women feel supported, they are happier and better employees

Women who felt most supported by their employer or colleagues had higher levels of positive feelings when returning to work. They felt more excited, energised and calm and less stressed. They were more likely to say that having a child has had a positive effect on their career and needed less time to adjust to returning to work

The top 5 benefits offered that had the most impact on whether a mother felt most supported by her employer were:

Flexibility around unexpected caring responsibilities

Flexible hours

Asking me what I needed

Part time working

Mental health support

Women who felt most supported by their employer had lower satisfaction gaps when it came to the benefits they were offered versus the benefits they cared about and even those who were felt supported but unsatisfied with their current working set-up were still 13% less likely to leave their job in the next year.

In comparison, women who didn't feel supported were twice as likely to feel uncomfortable discussing their role as a mother at work and mainly felt they were underestimated, perceived as less committed to work or penalised for arriving late or leaving early due to childcare.



Register your interest
here for our employer
toolkit to implement
our findings in your
team & business.



Thank you to those who support The Female Lead

SANE SEVEN

And with our deepest thanks to Royal Horticultural Lindley Hall.



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