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**Family, Employment and Social Change in  
Britain: Accounts of women with multiple  
commitments**

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women with multiple commitments**

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# INTRODUCTION

Most research on stress in managing work and family roles has focused on dual earner families or mothers with young children (Lewis and Cooper, 1988;1989; Brannen and Moss, 1991; ) overlooking other family caregiving roles. This provides a restricted view of work family issues. Employed people, especially women, are also involved in a range of other caregiving activities, including caring for older children, adult children with disabilities, spouses and elderly parents (Finch and Groves, 1983; Hicks, 1989; Qureshi and Walker, 1989). Considerable pressures are involved in informal caregiving to disabled and sick family members of all ages (Clifford, 1990; Glendenning, 1992). Few studies have focused on the experiences of women combining paid employment with more broadly defined informal family care.

It has been noted that the ease or difficulty with which work and family are balanced is partly determined by unique social and ideological contexts (Lewis et al, 1992). Socio-cultural context is reflected in state and organisational policies which inevitably shape and constrain the lives of individual women and families. Social contexts influence the way in which work and family issues are appraised (Izraeli, 1992 ). As coping behaviour is highly contextual (Lazarus, 1993) aspects of the wider social context may also influence the management of complex lives by determining strategies which are available and legitimate.

This study explores the ways in which professional women with a range of caring responsibilities manage their complex lives in the context of the current demographic, ideological and socio-political climate in Britain. This paper first delineates relevant aspects of the contemporary UK context. We then draw on women's accounts to examine the strategies used to manage work and family demands in this context. Finally, we discuss factors which have the potential to help women to manage these pressures, and the factors likely to impede progress in this context, and discuss some implications for social change, again drawing on women's own accounts.

## THE UK CONTEXT

In Britain, as elsewhere the number of women in the labour force has increased during recent decades, fuelled mainly by economic need, and to a lesser extent, women's desire for a life beyond domesticity. However, despite equal opportunities legislation, including maternity leave rights introduced in the 1970s the majority of women's careers remain discontinuous, with periods of part time and full time work interspersed with periods of full and part time caring, for children and also for adults and elders (Labour Force Survey, 1992). In the light of recent demographic trends, particularly a decline in the birth rate and an aging population, women with caring responsibilities are targeted as an underutilised workforce to be drawn upon if and when skills

shortages become apparent (NEDO, 1988). Despite these trends, and the increasing diversity in family structures in Britain, the traditional, and now minority family pattern of breadwinner husband and homemaker wife who is available for unpaid care of children, adults and elders, remains the model on which most public policy is based (Pascall, 1992; Dale and Foster, 1986; van Every, 1991/2 ).

There have been significant shifts in the ideological, political, economic and demographic context in Britain during recent years. More than a decade of Conservative government has been characterised by a general growth in individualism, encapsulated in the now famous words of former prime minister Margaret Thatcher, "there is no such thing as society" (Kingdom, 1993). This period has seen large cuts in public expenditure, a gradual privatisation of public services, an erosion of local government powers and an emphasis on individual and family self reliance (Cochrane, 1990; Hill, 1993). Traditional family values are emphasised and those who rely on welfare benefits are widely regarded as "scroungers" (Alcock, 1990/91; Alcock and Lee, 1988). There has been a gradual redrawing of the boundaries between state and family responsibilities, with a greater emphasis on the latter. Childcare has always been treated as a private concern. The already meagre public childcare provision was cut in the 1980s and the provision of nurseries or other childcare is now left to market forces. The government's role is confined to encouraging business led initiatives.

Public policy and practice on the care of adult dependents including those with disabilities and the elderly endorses the ideal of helping people to retain their independence as long as possible in their own homes. Government publications acknowledge that care in the community relies heavily on informal and unpaid care by families and friends (NHS and Community Care Act, 1990; Langan, 1990; Levick, 1992 ). The debate about community care issues however, has been considered in isolation from employment issues and policy and particularly ignores debates on equal opportunities in employment (Laczsko and Noden, 1993).

Most women in Britain work part time, but the growth of part time work has not been simply a response to women's needs. Economic trends together with a Conservative backed "enterprise culture" have brought about significant changes in employment. In the context of high unemployment and a decline in the notion of a secure job for life, enterprising employers have sought a more flexible and dispensable workforce through subcontracting, privatisation of public services to the lowest bidder, and an increase in temporary and part time work, with few employment rights.

Nevertheless, some employers are responding to the lack of public provisions of support for working parents and other carers by implementing "family friendly" policies. In the public sector this is motivated partly by concern for social justice, but cuts in public expenditure are reducing the numbers of employees involved. The provision of benefits to enable carers to work in

the private sector depend on market needs and not on the needs of family. Family friendly initiatives where they do occur tend to be directed at women and the male model of full time continuous work unimpeded by family remains the ideal (Lewis, 1992). Fathers in Britain working longer hours than elsewhere in Europe (Moss, 1992). The British government is resisting pressure from the European Community to introduce a maximum working week, which along with other provisions of the Social Chapter of the Maastricht Treaty, would help in the reconciliation of work and family. This resistance is on the basis of cost, and freedom for employers.

Thus women in Britain manage multiple commitments in a context which emphasises self reliance and privatised, individualised solutions. Market forces are relied upon to enable women, who remain the major carers at all life stages, to combine caring with employment in areas of the labour market where their skills are needed.

## METHOD

In order to examine the ways in which women manage multiple roles in this context we identified 6 women from a larger sample of women combining professional work and caring. The 6 cases have been selected to reflect a range of caring and employment experiences. Three participants are employed part time and 3 full time in a range of public, private and voluntary sector organisations (see Table 1 ). They include women with caring responsibilities for elderly relatives, young children older children including those with disabilities, and adults. They include single and married women and one woman who is herself disabled. All the women are white.

In depth semi structured, conversational interviews were conducted with the women, to explore the ways in which they have adapted to social change in the Thatcher years, the ways in which they manage their lives in this context and their views on potential aids and barriers to the management of work and family in the future.

Accounts from the women were collected. In line with previous feminist approaches to research with women on their life experiences, the womens' accounts were taken as valid and legitimate (Roberts 1981; Stanley and Wise 1983;). Whilst their experiences were probed in the conversational interviews, the researchers did not attempt to interpret the accounts beyond the meanings the women, themselves included. Thematic analyses were carried out in order to draw links and discontinuities between (not within) the accounts.

**Table 1**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Married (or Single)</b>	<b>Caring Responsibilities</b>	<b>Employment</b>
Sandra	M.	One daughter 18 yrs. One daughter 16 yrs -with severe learning difficulties	Part-time in small voluntary organisation as citizen advocacy organiser. Previously adult education organiser with responsibility for special needs
Ann	M.	Two grown up children, each married with small children. Husband retired early because of ill health: Intermittent hospitalisation for heart surgery. Husband's mother and aunt.	Part-time in a team of public sector development consultants. Seconded to be development of parent led agency for alternative supports for people with learning disabilities within familiar. Previously assistant director, Social Services.
Jane	S.	One son 16 yrs. Elderly frail mother with dementia who previously suffered a stroke.	Full time management development consultant in a local authority.
Elaine	M.	One daughter 19 yrs. One daughter 17 yrs, with learning disabilities, plus partially sighted.	Recently taken early retirement from post as teacher in the prison service, now part-time teacher.
Mary	M.	Elderly, sick father. Mother very recently died. Two adult children.	Part time welfare assistant in a multinational private sector organisation.
Carol	M.	One child under one year.	Chartered Accountant. Full time.

## RESULTS

The women have developed cognitive and behavioural strategies for managing their complex lives. They have ways of thinking about their circumstances that are positive, strengthening and that enable them to retain a sense of positive self esteem and have found different practical activities that are helpful.

The strategies they identified are:

### COGNITIVE STRATEGIES

#### Positive Appraisal

- Luck and good fortune
- Personal characteristics
- Personal satisfaction
- Defining what is personally important

#### Personal Values

- Importance of the family

#### Enhancement of Self-Esteem

- Recognition
- Status

#### Self Nurturance

- Meditation
- Buying things

### BEHAVIOURIAL STRATEGIES

#### Practical Activities

- Organisation and Planning
- Doing more than one thing at a time
- Reorganising family life

#### Assertiveness

- Involvement in the community

#### Use of additional services

- Finding and using personal support

- Using family support

- Using support from others in similar positions

### COGNITIVE STRATEGIES

#### Positive Appraisal

A number of different strategies were used, all linked to positive ways of appraising life circumstances, and reflecting a continuum of external to internal locus of control. The strategies included appraisal in terms of luck and good fortune; personal characteristics; personal satisfaction; positive thinking about current circumstances; and personal definitions of what is important in life.

#### Appraisal in terms of luck and good fortune - Positive Comparisons

Feeling of being lucky and fortunate emerge in different contexts. Sandra thinks she is lucky to have the job she has.

I certainly have the feeling that, well, I'm quite lucky that I have found a job that is reasonably well paid and I can fit in more or less with (my daughter).

Sandra also feels fortunate in her particular family circumstances.



We are fortunate that there are two of us in the household..We could actually get by if I wasn't working..(which) is obviously different from a single parent family or a family where they both needed to work..

Liz considers herself lucky her daughter does not have more severe disabilities.

..in a way I have been lucky - if you can call it that - that (my daughter) is manageable and sensible and socially correct..She is able to pick up the phone and have a conversation..she's not difficult to handle..You are really in trouble (with a person) who is non-mobile.

Liz also considers herself fortunate to receive the services she does.

I am quite happy with the respite care that we get now. I consider ourselves very fortunate in what is available, so I am not complaining about that.

Whilst she thinks she is lucky to have the jobs she has, Liz also recognised the hard work she has put in.

I had the right job. I was lucky that I had a job that fitted in..I was lucky enough to get that. Not everybody has that opportunity so I count our blessings in a way, because I managed to achieve quite a lot. I feel that I have worked for it. I feel that I deserve it. I managed.

Jane, too, recognises how hard she has had to struggle, but still considers herself fortunate to have had few difficulties with her son.

It's been a hard struggle - to keep my son - and to keep my work...But I've been really fortunate, he was an easy child.

Ann considers herself fortunate in the way her family and her work situation have worked out.

I think I have been fortunate (in having my background)..but the opportunities have been there as well..it's a combination of (circumstance, luck and my own approach to things).

Mary considers herself lucky to work for a benevolent organisation which supports employees with eldercare and to have a supportive family. She measures her good fortune in comparison with others she meets through her work, but fears that those less fortunate than herself will find it even more difficult in the light of recent changes.

(My father) loved it in (the respite home) and that respite was wonderful for me. So I'm lucky. I know I'm very lucky with having worked in the community, but I don't really

know, especially with this Community Care Act..... I've seen the stress on carers as being horrendous in some cases.

#### Appraisal in terms of personal characteristics

Ann thinks her age and experience are positive advantages.

I have been working a long time and I think that makes a difference..you feel comfortable with what you do and established relationships, and you don't think about it any more..you probably don't feel as devastated when things don't work out right as you do when you are younger..

Liz, on the other hand, thinks parents of the next generation will have it easier as they are generally more assertive and will not accept as much as she and her contemporaries did.

The younger generation coming up now will not do what the older generation have done and lie back and say there is nothing happening. They are definitely going to go for it. They are more assertive..independent..they have got the voice..the younger ones are more powerful

Mary acknowledges that the way she appraises situations, particularly seeing the funny side of things, protects her from stress.

Mary. I actually have a good sense of humour. I always see the funny side first. I've got that way of seeing, but I mean if I was serious, if I dwelled on things, thought about them too much, you could sink really into a very nervous situation like that.

#### Appraisal in terms of personal satisfaction

The general outlook women have on life can sometimes help them cope. Sandra has always felt satisfied with her life at any particular point in time. She has not hankered after different things.

I always seem to have been relatively satisfied with the way I have been at the moment. ..Things have just kind of fallen out the way they have fallen out...quite a lot of people have things happen in their families..and life isn't fair anyway..at the end of it you just get on with it..the bottom line is that's how your life has turned out.

Similarly Liz is satisfied with how her life has turned out.

..you struggle on..I don't feel resentful (about her husband being absent a lot)..there was nothing I could do...There was nothing he could do about it so I don't feel bitter...I never felt envious of anybody else...we have always taken one day at a time.

Appraisal in terms of positive thinking about current circumstances

Thinking positively about the life circumstances they find themselves in is a way of coping. Ann positively enjoys being busy and living a complex life.

I love (the continual changes)..it's always busy..I've always worked in that way..I've always had pressure..(such as) moving house..I actually enjoy it.

Liz is positive about changing jobs recently, even though this has meant she has had to make a number of adjustments. Her past experiences help her adjust.

I can learn to cope..without the certainly and regularity..because we have gone through all the hard years..I think I am ready, and I think this last year I've really felt quite tired and everything's getting that little bit more of an effort. It was the right time to move on so I don't regret that.

Appraisal in terms of defining what is personally important

Defining what is important, or unimportant to them in life as a whole, is one way of managing the competing demands on women's lives. Ann has always lived in the same locality: although she has moved house, this has never been for career purposes. She considers her lack of materialism a good thing.

It's good being local. I don't think we've ever been particularly materialistic..I can see people around now who are in it for the money..it's a different breed of people now..more career conscious..there's less of a willingness to bit extra in.

Carol can see what life is like for those at the top of her profession. She has no ambition to get to the top, and has, indeed, revised her priorities now she has a baby.

I don't want to be a partner. I definitely don't want to be a partner..the pressures they a=work under..would not suit me at all..I wouldn't mind getting to senior manager....I probably have a different perception of things (now)..(My career) is not the be-all and end-all..I've got..something far more important now.

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little bit more of an effort. It was the right time to move on so I don't regret that.

## Personal Values

We have seen that the personal values women hold about what is and is not important to them in life contribute to the ways in which they positively appraise their circumstances. Other values underlie their life experiences, in particular values relating to the family.

### Importance of the Family

Their families are important to the women, and this helps them continue to support their more vulnerable members. Ann sums up the importance of her family:

..my family has always been very important to me and my marriage has always been very important to me..maybe because I haven't got any relatives and..have had to build a family from getting married

Mary performs all the domestic work in her family, but she is clear that her parents are now a priority in her life.

I must admit the house does get left, I'll be honest with you its just a Saturday morning storm...It's a question of priorities, and obviously your parent, well to me anyway, my parents are a priority.

Sandra remains unsure of extent to which families should sort out their own problems.

(my husband) has an even stronger sense than I have..that it's kind of our problem so we just have to sort it out..a big bit of me thinks services should be better, and we should have all sorts of things..but there's a big bit of me too that says..at the end of it all (my daughter) is a part of our family and..you do just have to get on with it...

This latter view is shared by Jane who says

You do though don't you. You cope with your own family..you've got to do something..you've got to get on with your own life.

Ann is able to talk her work through with her husband who understands what she is doing at work and why.

..it's not just about sharing the cooking..but it's sharing either the need for you to work or appreciating what you are doing, valuing what you do...sharing the same kinds of values that you do, in terms of what you want for the

world..Yes, I think that those things are terribly important

## Enhancement of Self Esteem

The women all understand the importance of feeling good about themselves. This comes in part from the recognition that they get from others, and in part from the status they get from different aspects of their lives.

### Recognition

The recognition and status gained from both work and caring is important, and makes the women feel good about themselves. Liz appreciated the recognition her daughter's school gave her when she found a creative solution to the problem of after school care.

I told them what I was planning to do. They wrote back and said 'wonderful, great'. So I felt good. I felt very guilty, but I got school's recognition..That was very important.

Clients at work give Ann a boost, as well as appreciation from her grandchildren.

Knowing that the work is done (gives me a sense of achievement, support and recognition)..(I get) work support from colleagues and (my husband). t's always been him..You get a nice lot of feedback from the grandchildren and the rest of the family for the things we do..it's nice sometimes when what you do is appreciated, when someone turns up with a bunch of flowers of something completely out of the blue. That's nice.

Jane's mother finds difficulty showing her appreciation but Jane is grateful of it.

My mother's very appreciative..she doesn't always show it and things..and yes, she's used to it..she's always saying ' I don't know what I'd do without you'.

### Status

Sandra mentioned that although she does not experience it herself, some other mothers of children with disabilities get status and a sense of achievement from the caring they do.

In some ways (the caring) has been their status..they have sacrificed their lives..When you meet women who are carers of much older sons and daughters you hear them say 'I've dedicated my life'..they viewed that as their career.

Sandra, herself gets a sense of status from work, whether this is paid or unpaid.

If you have a child with a disability you can be reduced to the level of that child. ...I wouldn't differentiate between paid and unpaid (work)..I've been involved for a long time ..in all sorts of things..to do with learning disabilities..some for which I get paid..it is a method of coping..(because of the) status.

## Self nurturance

Attending to their own lives and their own needs is quite low on the agenda, although some of the women talked about specific things they enjoy and for which they make time. These are mostly activities that they do because of the belief in self nurturance.

## Meditation

There was little mention of physical relaxation. Jane, however, copes with her own pressures by meditating.

I'd never manage if I didn't..I do meditate, that helps...Because I'm aware of stress levels and the way I could easily be dragged in too deep and down

Ann finds other things help her to relax, but has little time to spend on them.

I find gardening relaxing and I find reading things that are nothing whatever to do with work relaxing, or even watching a bit of television..and I can say 'no' sometimes (to my daughter).

Mary also relaxes with activities unrelated to work and family. She finds it difficult to make time for herself, but is aware that it is important to try to do so.

I have a hobby, I teach dancing. It keeps me sane. Other than that I find that now the only time I have for me is maybe some time about three o'clock on a Saturday. I can sit in the bath for half an hour.....I do consciously try to find time for me. I know that from the job I do, from my training.

## Buying things for herself

Feeling good about themselves is a way that women can manage complex lives. Sandra recognises that she must make space for herself. She spends some of the money she earns on herself.

(the money) helps in not having to think twice about what you do...Spending more on myself I suppose..makes me feel better, a few more clothes than I had before, perhaps to counteract the times when you get a bit down..I tend to buy more convenience foods than I did.

## BEHAVIOURAL STRATEGIES

### Practical Activities

The women have learnt to do a number of different things that enable them to manage. They are good at organising, planning, and doing more than one thing at a time.

#### Organisation and planning

In order to manage everything they have to, the women have learnt to be good organisers. Sandra tries to organise her work so that she can be home on time.

(If a meeting was running on) I'd have to leave, but I usually try to schedule things, plan in advance so that if you think things are going to go on late, you try to make them for the days (my other daughter) can be home... Things are not simple to arrange - they normally would be with a daughter in her teens -..it tends to be me that does it I think..me that devises the plan.

Part of being good at organising is to be good at planning. Jane, too, has to plan in advance.

I've got plans for the weekend, and will have arranged people to come in..I have to make sure one doesn't drop out as she needs two people to lift her and things..it takes some doing.

Carol is having to plan in advance for a month when her mother is going to America and will be unable to look after her son.

I said..'Off you go and enjoy yourself'..I don't know (what I will do)..That is more difficult..At the moment I'm going to have a week off and look after him, my sister's going to have him for a week and then I've got two weeks where I'm not particularly sure what I'm going to do.

On an ordinary day, Carol has some juggling to do early in the morning.

I just bung him in a jacket and stick him in the car and take him to (my Mother's)..I used to have to get him fed and dressed and spruced up for the childminder..Then I have to drive the car back to the house and leave it there and walk to the station.

Mary's complex plans to take a weekend break involve bringing in other family members.

I'm going away this weekend...not very far but all the same I'm thinking I've got to make sure Dad's all right. I've got to rely on the children. I had to see what they were

doing. My son is seeing him on Saturday and my daughter on Sunday.

The women make use of flexible work arrangements to cope. Liz arranged to work evenings, as part of her full-time job in order to take time during the day.

..there was a lot of flexibility in those days..I used to work an evening duty and I would have Friday afternoon off, which was great as I was able to meet (my daughter) at the station when she came home for weekends...I was very good at wangling extra time off because I used to do extra evening duties..There was no way I could have worked 9 to 5....The whole thing worked because of the flexibility.

Ann works part time but is able to re-organise her work to give her blocks of time off.

(the flexibility of the work means that) I couldn't really ask for anything better. I wanted two weeks off at Easter (because the family was coming)..I really sort of cleared the decks and did get through an awful lot of work (the week before) ..all aright I don't get two weeks off because of the phone calls..but..if it were a set job..it wouldn't be so easy.

Sandra taking annual leave enables her to be away from home when she has to with her work.

I can usually come up with a combination of (my eldest daughter) getting home, and (my husband) can leave for work slightly later, so he can see her off to school. And a combination of (my eldest daughter) coming home, and my mother helping out - both of which aren't going to go on for ever -..That's worked, with maybe taking a days leave, it's possible.

#### Doing more than one thing at a time

The flexibility in Carol's work enables her to contemplate taking work home and doing it whilst looking after her son: the work still has to be done on time.

..if I needed to and I had the work I could do it at home..I mean it's up to you to actually get it done..if I had a problem whereby my Mum couldn't look after him for a day and there was no-one else, I could say (to my manager) ..I'll take something home and 'll work round him).

If it was not possible to do more than one thing at a time, Sandra's arrangements might not work.

You can be at work or in a meeting and you are also thinking about 'what are we going to have for tea, and is there anything I need to get for that, and oh dear, we can't have that, so this is what we are going to have'..



Ann makes good use of the time she spends babysitting for her daughter.

(My grandsons)..settle down (quickly)..I always know that I can take work up with me..I can have two or three hours of actually rattling through a whole load of work that at other times might be difficult to get through.

She gets considerable pleasure from doing lots of things at once.

Probably I work better when I have got a lot to do..it's a case of going systematically through all of a load of things that need to be done, including sort of things with the family. Then I feel more alive and more able to tackle things than if I've..not got much to do..then that's when things tend not to get done...So yes, I think the actual pressures of all the other bits of things you have to do make up a sort of ball and it ..drives you on..it keeps you going.

### Reorganising Family Life

With a family member who has disabilities, the caring never stops. Liz and her husband now lead quite separate lives in order to ensure there is someone available to care for their daughter.

We..take separate holidays. (He) goes to Germany and I've been to Israel separately, which is not the way it should be..We have separate nights out I've built my own life with my girl-friends, he's got his friends...maybe we have built up slightly separate different lives so that somebody is at home with (our daughter).

Carol moved house when her son was born which meant that her family had to make adjustments and her husband had to get a new job. However, this was mitigated by the fact that they moved near their old friends and her parents.

..we'd always decided we were going to move back..because that's where all our family and friends are..and we eventually sold the house..So now my mother (lives nearby) and is looking after (my son).

### Assertiveness

Ann has found assertiveness and clarity about what she wants to be helpful

..an important thing as well is knowing what you wanted and being able to ask for it as well as combining it with the attitude that if it doesn't work out, there are other ways..I've always felt that if you know what you want and you're very clear about what it is..and you have some idea

as to what it's going to cost...I've always felt very comfortable asking for things that I have wanted.

## **Involvement in the Community**

Both Sandra and Liz have been actively involved in community groups connected to the disabilities their daughters have. Sandra thinks this has helped insofar as she has a lot more information, although this in itself may have contributed to greater pressure.

(Doing those things in the area of disability) helped in terms of information and useful contacts, definitely..(i have) a broader view of what might be expected later on..we'll go on trying..I sometimes think..life would have been easier (with less involvement) because I would have been less frustrated.

Liz, on the other hand thinks such involvement is useful as it gives her the edge over others in the future.

I feel that I am more involved in the community - know more of what is going on - than a lot of mothers. You speak to this one, you get friendly with that one..Everyone is going to get a bite of the cherry (in the future). Liz is going to get the first bite..because Liz will be working damn hard for the next few years and has done all these years.

Liz puts an lot of energy into her community work, and sees that in the long run she may benefit.

Selfish it may be, but I have to look after myself at the end of the day, and maybe that's what I have achieved over the years. I've become more selfish...I've got to look after me, I've got to look after (my daughter).

## **Use of Additional Services**

On the whole the women have made relatively little use of services. After considerable difficulties, Liz organised some informal help for her daughter in the after school hours when she was still at work.

I needed somebody for that hour. It's very difficult to get somebody for an hour. Who are you going to get? In the end I got a very nice lady..a pensioner....she had her own transport..that worked very well.

More recently formal services have improved and Liz has made good use of them.

I don't know what I would do if I hadn't had support...I

think (we) are pretty well provided for.. (my daughter) is very lucky (she is able to visit) a lovely family with three young daughters and they live in a converted farmhouse..they have (my daughter) about once every five weeks..that gives us a break.

Sandra had to be encouraged by professionals to use respite care services, although she did query their motivation.

(they did it) because they have a view that someone with disabilities, irrespective of behaviour,, is kind of hard to cope with and that's what (they) are there for..

Getting the right people to help has been difficult even when, as in Jane's circumstances, she has always had to rely on help of some sort.

I didn't need much help for me at the time..I had volunteers - community service volunteers - round to help me to start with, and then I had real difficulty..there was a period when it wasn't the right people.

Mary is unable to take up some of the help offered to her by her employer, because of resistance from the elderly person herself, and traditional assumptions about a daughter's role.

I had the offer of support because I work for (her employer), but my mother was determined that she had two daughters and no support was going in.

## Finding and Using Personal Support

### Using Family Support

Carol's parents help her out considerably. Not only does her mother look after her baby son when she and her partner go to work, but her mother and father give them other kinds of practical help.

..my Dad's just bought us a dishwasher which is lovely..and Mum ..cleans up for the weekend for us. And then after we've made is a complete tip again she comes in and tidies it up again..we share it all between the family really.Flexibility of work, whether this is part time or full time work enables women to cope. Liz experienced flexibility in being able to work evenings in order to take time during the day.

Ann relies on the support from her husband and from work colleagues. She recognises that she has always needed to feel supported in her work and home.

..I think I have always needed to have people around me that I could talk things through..and I can do that with

(my husband)..I always seem to have colleagues as well that you can (talk things through with)..I think the way we are in a team, we can do it.

### Using support from others in similar positions

Getting support from people who are similar positions to themselves or who share an understanding of their difficulties has been particularly important for Sandra and Liz. As Liz pointed out:

I have great admiration for (other) Mums, I always have done..through (my daughter) I have met some of the best Mums and parents in the world..they are the genuine people so I have had the support and I hope that I have supported them (too).

When Jane can find no other way of managing, she has called on other people to help. At a time when she had no-one to turn to about her own baby,

Fortunately I knew the wife of (a friend)..she rang me up..and I was able to ask her..'Oh God', she said, 'What is the matter with you? Why are you asking me all those stupid questions?'.but she helped me out.

## DISCUSSION

Our data present a snapshot of a small group of women combining employment and a range of caring activities at a particular point in time in a specific social context. We have seen that the women are managing their complex lives in different ways. They draw on their own resources, strengths and capacities to manage the situations they are faced with and to derive positive satisfactions from their lives. They employ various cognitive strategies in construing their lives as fulfilling, valued, and of importance. They employ various behavioural strategies to handle day to day practical demands and to harness other resources to help them do this. We get a picture of the 'crazy quilts' notion that Balbo uses to characterise the way women piece together, juggle with and co-operate over time resourcefully and creatively (Balbo, 1981; Balbo and Nowotny, 1986).

Much of the women's time was spent mediating between members of the family (partners, dependants, sons and daughters, other relatives), between the household and the state (in the form of welfare agencies, schools etc.), or between the household and work. This meant that they had relatively little time for themselves or for integrating the time spent on their different activities. They are the managers of their families, and manage their own lives (Brannen and Moss, 1991;1992; Mederer, 1993). They do not have the resources to also manage further social