

# Women Aged 30-39: why are they the largest demographic to leave teaching every year?

*A 2018-21 study by The MTPT Project*

*The names of the participants in these interviews have been changed.*

## 04. What's Love Got to Do With It?

Of the 28 teachers who had left teaching aged 30-39 who were mothers, 17 referred to husbands or opposite-sex partners when talking about their decision to leave. Of course, having a husband or partner is not exclusive to the demographic of heterosexual mothers aged 30-39, but the overlapping of a number of more general social trends mean that the presence of a partner or spouse is more likely to affect the participants in our study in a way that teachers falling into other demographics may not be influenced.

In 2017 women aged 25-29 represented 29% of the women (the largest group) getting married in this year, and the mean age for a heterosexual woman to get married was 35.7.<sup>1</sup> In 2019, 61.4% of families with dependent children were married or in a civil partnership, and a further 16.3% of parents were co-habiting couples.<sup>2</sup> We know that the average age of first time motherhood in 2017 was 28.8<sup>3</sup> so, in simple terms, a female teacher aged 30-39 is more likely to be a married (or co-habiting) mother, than not.

Of these 17 participants, 9 were stay at home mothers, representing 53% of the teachers that we will be focusing on in this report. This is a much higher figure than the 5% of teachers 'looking after family' cited in the NFER's Teacher Retention and Turnover Research from 2017.<sup>4</sup> It was also higher than the 23% of the 498 respondents to the initial "Leavers Survey", so the correlation between the choice or ability to stay at home, and the partner / husband's role in the decision to leave teaching, is an interesting one to explore.

Participants were *not* specifically asked about the influence of any partner or spouse on their decision to leave teaching. The comments from these 17 participants occurred when they were expanding on the following reasons for leaving selected in the initial survey:

- Childcare logistics
- Needing a break – i.e. you intend on returning to the classroom in the future
- Family commitments (children)
- Wanting to work fewer hours, seeking a better work-life balance, or to pursue other interests
- Mental health or wellbeing
- Logistics of commute or a change of location

<sup>1</sup> ONE, *Marriages in England and Wales, 2017*, accessed at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/marriagecohabitationandcivilpartnerships/bulletins/marriagesinenglandandwalesprovisional/2017#proportion-of-men-and-women-who-have-ever-married>

<sup>2</sup> ONS, *Families and Households in the UK, 2019*, accessed at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/bulletins/familiesandhouseholds/2019#the-majority-of-families-with-dependent-children-were-married-or-civil-partner-couples>

<sup>3</sup> ONS, *Birth Characteristics in England and Wales, 2019*, accessed at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/livebirths/bulletins/birthcharacteristicsinenglandandwales/2017>

<sup>4</sup> NFER, *Teacher Retention and Turnover Research, Research Update 3 – Is the Grass Always Greener?*, 2017, accessed at: <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/NUFS04/NUFS04.pdf>



- Lack of job satisfaction

Partners and husbands were also mentioned in the response to the three follow up questions asked exclusively to interview participants:

- Are there any other reasons that influenced your decision to leave teaching?
- Could you describe your maternity leave experiences to me?
- What conditions, if any, would tempt you to return to teaching in the future?

The influence that husbands and partners had on a teacher's decision to leave teaching fell broadly into two categories: the nature and impact of the husband's job, and the relationship between parents.

We will go into a full analysis of the comments from all 17 participants later in this report, but below is an example of the six subcategories we have organised their comments into:

### **The Nature and Impact of the Husband's Job**

#### **Male Partners as Breadwinners**

"I say lucky, fortunate that my husband has a well-paid job so we could afford for me not to work, even if I did want to." – *Sharon*

#### **Logistics of the Male Partner's Role**

"At the time my husband was working away a lot so most of the childcare and kind of organizing the childcare fell to me." – *Marie-Ann*

#### **Comparison with the Male Partner's Role**

"He was basically in charge of his own hours, his own time. And he was looking at my life for perhaps the last 10 years going, "are you going to do this forever? Are you going to do this forever, where you work every single night?" I could see his life where he was getting paid the same amount as me, but actually working less hours and actually in charge of his time." – *Esther*

### **The Relationship Between Parents**

#### **The Empathetic Husband-Teacher**

"I have a very supportive husband who's also a teacher and he'd help me with staying off." – *June*

#### **Wellbeing in the Relationship**



“My husband just looked at me and he said, “You’ve got to make a decision because you are deeply unhappy.”” – Stacey

### Joint Decision Making with Husbands / Partners

“We had to think, “how can we do this?” My husband wouldn’t’ve been able to do everything five days a week. I didn’t want my husband to do everything five days a week.” – Stacey

### Male Partners as Breadwinners

In the UK, men still out-earn their female partners in heterosexual couples, and although an increasing number of women are now the breadwinners in their partnership, in 72.4% of couples, the man is the higher wage earner.<sup>5</sup> According to the IFS, even though there is ‘a gap of over 10% even before the arrival of the first child’, the most significant gender wage gap begins to occur after women become mothers: ‘by the time the first child is aged 12, women’s hourly wages are a third below men’s.’<sup>6</sup> This is part of what the TUC refer to as the ‘fatherhood bonus’, which includes ‘positive discrimination’ that views fathers as ‘more reliable and responsible’, and an average of a ‘21% wage bonus’ in comparison to men who do not have children, in comparison to the ‘15% pay penalty’ typically suffered by women when they become mothers before the age of 33.<sup>7</sup>

Two of the 17 participants we are focusing on in their reports mentioned that their husbands were also teachers. We know that 24% of teachers are partnered with another teacher, with TeacherTapp speculating the following reasons for this ‘staggering’ figure: ‘people meeting at work; the dove-tailing of holidays and early mornings; similar interests; and straightforward numbers – there are around half a million teachers in England and Wales’.<sup>8</sup> Since we know that in teaching there is a 18.8% gender pay gap<sup>9</sup> – our assumption here is that the male partners out-earned the wives and partners participating in this study, even when both partners work in the same industry. We also know that an average teacher salary is £29,640<sup>10</sup> in comparison to an average UK salary in other industries of £28,677 for full time employees.<sup>11</sup> However, in most cases qualifying as a teacher requires both a degree and post-graduate study, and the median salary for a working-age graduate is £34,000<sup>12</sup>, with employees aged 30-39 earning between £30,308 to £35,169 on average<sup>13</sup>.

When it comes to teachers, Teacher Tapp provided some fantastic insight in 2018. They found that only 38% of female teachers out-earned their partners in comparison to 82% of male

<sup>5</sup> O’Connor, B., *Rise of the Female Breadwinner: Woman earns the most in one-in-four households*, Royal London, May 2020, accessed at: <https://www.royallondon.com/media/press-releases/archive/female-breadwinner-rise/>

<sup>6</sup> IFS, *The Gender Wage Gap*, 2016, accessed at: <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/8428>

<sup>7</sup> TUC, *Fathers working full-time earn 21% more than men without children, says TUC*, 2016, accessed at: <https://www.tuc.org.uk/news/fathers-working-full-time-earn-21-more-men-without-children-says-tuc>

<sup>8</sup> TeacherTapp, *How Being in a Relationship Affects Teaching Workload*, 2017, accessed at: <https://teachertapp.co.uk/single-couple-affects-teaching-workload/>

<sup>9</sup> NEU, *Pay Equality FAQs*, 2021, accessed at: <https://neu.org.uk/advice/pay-equality-faqs>

<sup>10</sup> Payscale, *Average High School Teacher Salary in United Kingdom*, 2021, accessed at: [https://www.payscale.com/research/UK/Job=High\\_School\\_Teacher/Salary](https://www.payscale.com/research/UK/Job=High_School_Teacher/Salary)

<sup>11</sup> TeacherTapp, *The Truth About Teachers’ Salaries: Are They Underpaid?*, 2017, accessed at: <https://teachertapp.co.uk/truth-about-teachers-salaries-underpaid/>

<sup>12</sup> Skidmore, C., *Graduates continue to benefit with higher earnings*, DfE, 2019, accessed at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/graduates-continue-to-benefit-with-higher-earnings>

<sup>13</sup> Statista, *Average gross annual salary in the United Kingdom by level of qualification and age*, 2017, accessed at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/281936/average-salary-by-education-level-in-the-united-kingdom-uk/>



teachers. For just over 20% of female teachers, their partner earned ‘substantially more’ than them.<sup>14</sup> We therefore need to take into consideration that in both teacher couples, and in couples where the husband or partner works in another industry, women may be the lower wage earners in their partnership, particularly if they are mothers.

This was definitely the case for three of the 17 teachers who referred to their husbands as the higher earners, commenting that this wage disparity enabled them to leave teaching:

“My husband had been offered another job and that meant I was going to be able to afford to leave teaching.” – *Rosie*

“I was lucky enough to be in a position where, because I’d take time off and we’d moved, we had been living just on my husband’s salary.” – *Abigail*

“I say lucky, fortunate that my husband has a well-paid job so we could afford for me not to work, even if I did want to.” – *Sharon*

A fourth participant, Olivia, also referred to her husband being ‘senior’ in his company.

The semantics of these comments hint at an interesting conflict amongst participants: on the one hand, there is a sense of relief, that these mothers’ husbands have provided them with the financial means to be a stay at home parent when their children are young. The phrases “going to be able to”, “lucky enough”, “lucky, fortunate”, “afford for me” reveal an acknowledgement of this as a privileged position to be in. After all, 3 in 4 mothers are now in work in the UK, so being not just a stay at home mother but a financially comfortably stay at home mother, is – in many ways – to be in the privileged minority. Of the initial 498 respondents to the “Leaving Teaching”, 23% were stay at home mothers, as were 9 of the 17 respondents in this report and two of those commenting above (Rosie and Sharon).

On the other hand, however, the two phrases “because I’d taken time off” and “even if I did want to” highlight the complexity of mothers’ choices around work, and maybe betray a slight sense of discomfort with this privilege. For Abigail, the decision to move and the realisation that it was possible to live off one salary seems tied in to the fact that she was on maternity leave when these decisions were made – a time of physical absence from a school community that can make big decisions like resigning feel like part of the direction your life is taking. Equally, in negating the desire to return to work, “even if I did want to”, Sharon demonstrates that the thought of returning is still on her mind, even if she doesn’t perceive it to be a possibility. In fact, by the time of the interview, this candidate had returned to work as an Administrative Assistant.

### **Logistics of the Male Partner’s Role**

The logistics of the husband / partner’s role either negatively impacted 10 of the 17 participants’ professional lives in that they restricted the mother’s ability to meet the

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<sup>14</sup> TeacherTapp, *What Teachers Tapped This Week #18-29<sup>th</sup> January 2018*, 2018, accessed at: <https://teachertapp.co.uk/teachers-tapped-29-january/>



requirements of her professional role, or positively impacted the participant by providing them with an additional reason to leave a role they were not enjoying.

Two comments reflect the incompatibility of both teaching, and the husband / partner's careers to family life, as well as the ongoing issue of the domestic load falling predominantly on women and mothers<sup>15</sup>:

“We were in a situation where both me and my partner were looking for work. He's a mental health nurse so he's also working in the public sector and we were in a position where we were trying to find basically a childminder or a nursery setting to match the hours of the jobs or jobs that would match the hours of the nursery setting depending on availability in our area.” – *Rebecca*

“At the time my husband was working away a lot so most of the childcare and kind of organizing the childcare fell to me.” – *Marie-Ann*

Rebecca focuses specifically on the incompatibility of local childcare provision with both the working pattern of a nurse and a teacher. When teachers are required to be in school at 7:30 or 8:00am, and nurses are likely to work rotating shift patterns, it makes finding (and affording) suitable childcare difficult. This is not an issue specific to teaching, and will be expanded on in later reports delving deeper into comments explicitly about the barriers posed by childcare logistics. It seems a travesty, however, that we are putting additional pressure on, or losing employees in the vital industries of education and healthcare simply because the childcare needs created by their work do not 'match' the provision on offer.

Even though Rebecca does not specifically refer to feeling obligated to taking on more of the childcare, the fact that she was a stay at home mother at the time of the interviews implies that when facing the choice between who would continue to work, this couple adhered to our ingrained social expectations around parenting roles. We see this same 'mother as caregiver' and 'father as a worker' dynamic playing out in the comments of Marie-Ann who, even though she was working part time when she left teaching, has still found that working as an Immigration Officer means she has the capacity to manage this childcare in a way that she couldn't when she was a teacher in order to compensate for her husband who 'was working away a lot'.

Stacey referred to similar issues of a potential commute between Brighton and Croydon for her partner, which would place the logistics of childcare on her:

“We had a real risk of my husband was going to have to work in Croydon, which meant he was commuting. We both couldn't commute.” – *Stacey*

“When we weren't sure about what my husband was going to do, it was like, we need one of us to stay in Brighton. I mean, he is actually still in Brighton now. But there's always that risk that he'll have to move off to Croydon to find work.” – *Stacey*

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<sup>15</sup> ONS, *Women shoulder the responsibility of 'unpaid work'*, 2016, accessed at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/articles/womenshouldtheresponsibilityofunpaidwork/2016-11-10>



“Who’s job is more important?” is a familiar and seething argument amongst dual-earning couples with children. The rigidity of the school day, as well as the vocational element of teaching can sometimes mean that mother-teachers may win out against husbands in other industries who may be able to work from home, or have more flexibility around the start and end of their working day and therefore manage drop offs, pick-ups or ill children without generating as much upheaval for colleagues. However, with fathers more likely to be the breadwinners and maternity leave one of the earliest steps towards the ‘pay penalty’ faced by mothers, part of the reason that this debate is so emotive is because it is highly likely that when push comes to shove, it is the father’s job that will act as the deciding factor in big life decisions.

Indeed, TeacherTapp emphasise that ‘if women are more likely to be the trailer in earning terms it has implications for promotions. If a job comes up in a far-flung location, it is easier to move the family when you are the highest-earner.’ TeacherTapp go on to make the connection that ‘This might be one reason why we see women getting proportionately fewer leadership positions than their numbers in the overall workforce would suggest they would get if all else was equal’<sup>16</sup>, but our study shows that such relocations associated with the highest-earning job doesn’t just impact gender equality in school leadership, but also teacher attrition amongst the mothers aged 30-39.

This is definitely the case for the three participants who cite a relocation attached to a new job opportunity for their husband as a reason that they left teaching:

“I was pregnant with my daughter, my husband got a job opportunity abroad and we leapt at the chance.” – *Abigail*

“My husband had got a job and we were about to move.” – *Rochelle*

“An opportunity had presented itself in my family life. My husband had been offered another job and that meant I was going to be able to afford to leave teaching.” – *Rosie*

As we saw with the previous comments around salary, there is a sense of relief and escape in the way that some of these comments have been worded: “opportunity” is used by two separate participants, “leapt at the chance”, “be able to afford to leave”. We will *not* be writing about job satisfaction and workload in this series of reports, as these are factors that affect every demographic when it comes to teacher attrition, and have been written about in far more detail in other reports (see Appendix A). However, later reports in this series *will* explore the topics of mental and physical health, quality of life and sense of perspective revealed in these interviews with women who had left teaching aged 30-39.

There is a sense, in these relocation comments, that far from begrudging a husband or partner for tearing them away from the classroom, these teachers were grateful for an exit ticket that

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<sup>16</sup> TeacherTapp, *How Being in a Relationship Affects Teaching Workload*, 2017, accessed at: <https://teachertapp.co.uk/single-couple-affects-teaching-workload/>



benefitted them and their families and enabled them to leave a working environment that they no longer enjoyed – either to stay at home with their children (Rosie) or find alternative professional roles (Abigail, Rochelle).

### **Comparison with the Male Partner’s Role**

These 17 interviews also revealed that the partner can act as a window into alternative lifestyles. As teachers, we may know no other professional role than the institution of schools and colleges. After all, 50% of our trainees are aged under 25<sup>17</sup> and are likely to have come straight from university with only a few experiences of the working world prior to teaching. When we do get the chance to make the comparison with other industries, teaching can be found wanting:

“When me and my husband looked at it – on paper I earned more than my husband but in terms of flexibility, benefits around my husband’s job, his was more appealing and it meant that it was going to be better for me to look after the child.” – *Kallie*

“It made more sense for me to look to change what I did rather than him to change what he did because it still really works well for our family, what he does.” – *Kallie*

Kallie also referred to her husband having a ‘better package around work’ and value statements like employee assistance packages, enhanced parental leave policies, ‘flexibility’, and even small perks like a decent coffee machine, or Friday drinks, can make teaching seem rigid and stingy, even with the generous holiday allowance that is the envy of many working parents. At the time of interview, Kallie was a stay at home mother, and her comments emphasises the NFER’s finding that ‘teachers are not leaving for higher paid jobs’<sup>18</sup>. Even though she was the breadwinner ‘on paper’ her husband’s ‘flexibility’ and ‘benefits’ became priceless to her when she realised how much they supported him as a working parent. For her, money wasn’t enabling them to ‘look after the child’, their physical presence was what was needed.

This comparison is also evident in comments from Esther who was working as a Photography Studio Director at the time of interview:

“My partner works for himself. And so what I started to see is someone experiencing a different work life balance to what I was having. He was basically in charge of his own hours, his own time. And he was looking at my life for perhaps the last 10 years going, “are you going to do this forever? Are you going to do this forever, where you work every single night?” I could see his life where he was getting paid the same amount as me, but actually working less hours and actually in charge of his time. And he basically spent a lot of time trying to make me look at my life and re-evaluate it. And he also showed me that although I thought I had a good wage for the amount of

<sup>17</sup> DfE, *Initial Teacher Training (ITT) Census for 2019 to 2020, England, 2019*, accessed at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/848851/ITT\\_Census\\_201920\\_Main\\_Text\\_final.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/848851/ITT_Census_201920_Main_Text_final.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> NFER, *Should I Stay or Should I Go? NFER Analysis of Teachers Joining and Leaving the Profession, 2015*, accessed at: <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/media/1924/Ifsa01.pdf>





work I was putting in, he basically showed me that I didn't compared to other people with no flexibility in other jobs." – *Esther*

Esther's partner played a far more active role in her decision to leave teaching than Kallie's husband, in that he questioned her, pointing out the negative aspects of teaching – the long hours, the lack of autonomy, the lack of flexibility. All of these factors have been written about time and time again as reasons that teachers of all ages, genders and stages of their career leave teaching (see Appendix A) but for mothers aged 30-39 the presence of a sounding board in the form of a spouse or long-term partner may have far more influence than their own internal, or other external voices.

Like Kallie, we see the realisation that money isn't buying happiness, and the misconception that teachers may have about how their time and energy is remunerated. The concept of good will, or going above and beyond is familiar in teaching, and when we choose, or are forced to sacrifice our partners and children for the good of our students, it can leave teachers feeling guilty and miserable. However, when an outside influence offers an alternative, as the partners of Kallie and Esther have, teachers can feel empowered to leave the classroom and find something that feels more worthwhile.

### **The Empathetic Husband-Teacher**

As revealed by TeacherTapp, 24% of teachers are in relationships with other teachers. While this percentage wasn't quite reflected in the 17 teachers we have been focusing on in this report, three teachers did specifically state that their husbands were teachers, and two referred to a sense of empathy and understanding from their husbands in response to, or which had supported their decision to leave:

"My husband's also a teacher so he was trying to balance the same sort of issues as well." – *Mylie*

"I have a very supportive husband who's also a teacher and he'd help me with staying off." – *June*

At the time of interview, both participants Mylie and ESV220818 were stay at home mothers. We don't know if their husbands out-earned them, but the statistics from TeacherTapp showing that 82% of male teachers are the higher earners in their relationships, as well as the 18.8% gender pay gap in education, allows us to guess that this might be the case. Even in teacher couples, therefore, fathers seem to be taking on the breadwinner role that enables social narratives around 'mother as caregiver' and 'father as worker' to be perpetuated.

What is poignant from these two comments is that fathers understand and empathise with 'the same sort of issues' that have forced their wives to leave teaching. In fact, their understanding seems to be key in the joint decision-making that has led to the mother leaving. In order to empathise in this way, however, we can assume that these father-teachers have experienced the same unhappy working environments and pressures as their





partners. Most explicitly, Kinga, our third participant with a teacher husband, specifically stated:

“We were seeing massive increases in poor wellbeing and heightened stress levels in children as low as nursery. And so that really impacted on how I felt about the job that I was doing. If I knew it was impacting myself, and my husband is also a teacher and actually impacting him.” – *Kinga*

Whether due to finances or stereotyped assumptions around caring roles, it is fathers who are obligated to ‘balance’, ‘help’ and be ‘supportive’ of their wives by staying in these potentially stressful environments, and research from various studies on male and fathers’ mental health continues to show that men are less likely, and have fewer channels, to talk about their mental health or emotional struggles in comparison to women and mothers.

### **Wellbeing in the Relationship**

6 of the 17 teachers referred to mental health or wellbeing when talking about their husbands. These were split into three distinct topics: the husband reflecting the mother’s poor mental health as a result of teaching, the negative impact of the mother’s teaching role on the husband, and the improvements to the individual or relationship following the mother’s exit from teaching. In one case, Kinga talked about her husband’s mental health in relation to his own teaching role, rather than hers.

“My husband just looked at me and he said, “You’ve got to make a decision because you are deeply unhappy.”” – *Stacey*

Mental health around the maternity leave, return to work period and the poor mental health of working mothers as a push factor for leaving will be discussed in later reports, but the wording of this particular comment – ‘deeply unhappy’, ‘got to’ – is quite upsetting. Like we saw when participants compared their jobs to their husband’s, it has taken an outside influence – almost described as an intervention – for Stacey to realise the negative toll that teaching was taking on her emotional wellbeing. Where younger teachers may experience this from friends or family, it is impossible to hide the impact of our working lives from our partners, who are witnesses to our activity and emotions day in, day out in the same way we might be able to shield our parents or friends from the reality of our lives.

In addition, the mother’s capacity directly impacts the father in that where they are not emotionally, logistically or physically available, the partner, or an alternative support system, has to pick up the slack. We saw this in Stacey’s comments around commuting logistics – ‘we couldn’t both commute’ – and the childcare barriers described by participants Rebecca and Marie-Ann. The emotional or physical absence of the mother places additional pressure on the father’s wellbeing:

“My poor husband. He’s put up with this for, you know, 12 years.” – *Marie-Ann*



“In hindsight it was affecting my husband as well.” – *Josephine*

“My husband works in a senior, or in his – it’s his company that he works for – and with the pair of us just getting more and more stressed, it was just not good for our mental health.” – *Olivia*

The reflection, and maybe even sense of guilt, is tangible in these two comments – ‘my poor husband’, ‘put up with this’, ‘in hindsight’ – and it is interesting that it is only when the mother steps away from teaching and has the headspace to look back on what it was like, that she can see more clearly the impact that her professional life was having on those around her.

Later reports on wellbeing will reveal that not *all* of the teachers who had left aged 30-39 were fully satisfied with their choice (many missed being in the classroom or felt forced out). However, one of the benefits of leaving was the positive impact this decision had on teachers’ relationships with their partner, as seen in two of the comments from the 17 teachers in this report:

“I feel our relationship has improved.” – *Jenny*

“My husband, in fact, commented the other day. He said, “Oh,” he said, “You seem so much happier.” He said, “I haven’t seen you this unstressed for a long time.” – *Nicki*

Interestingly, teaching does not occur on any of the lists of ‘Top 10 Jobs that Lead to Divorce’ shared by solicitors<sup>19</sup> but some dating apps cite both male and female teachers in the most likely professions to have affairs<sup>20</sup> - just two indicative factors of the negative impact that work stress can have on our relationships. It makes sense, therefore, that where partners are ‘much happier’ and ‘unstressed’, relationships will improve, and the inverse will also be true. Husbands and partners who do not want their wives to be unhappy (hopefully most of them!), will instigate the discussions we saw from Stacey and Esther to improve their partners’ wellbeing.

It may also be true that in leaving teaching, mothers also reduce stress previously associated with other areas of their lives – namely childcare and domestic duties – by increasing their capacity and the time they are able to commit to (and enjoy) these obligations. In the comments from Rebecca and Stacey we see the stress that can accompany attempting to balance childcare logistics across two working parents, and removing (Jenny) or changing (Nicki) one parent’s professional commitments is one way of relieving this pressure.

### **Joint Decision Making with Husbands / Partners**

Unlike for single teachers, or for teachers at earlier stages of their relationships, decision-making for mothers aged 30-39 tends to include or at least consider their significant other. Of the 28 interview comments across 17 participants in this report, 13 use an inclusive

<sup>19</sup> Scott, R., *Top 10 Jobs that Lead to Divorce*, Richard Scott, Howells Solicitors, 2015, accessed at: <https://www.howellslegal.co.uk/news/post/Top-10-Jobs-that-Lead-to-Divorce>

<sup>20</sup> Dodgson, L., *The top 12 jobs where you are most likely to cheat*, Insider, 2018, accessed at: <https://www.businessinsider.com/jobs-where-people-are-most-likely-to-cheat-2018-3?IR=T>



pronoun indicating a team or unit mentality – two occurrences of ‘our’ and ‘us’, and 9 uses of ‘we’.

“My first thought when I wanted to leave was I’d rather stack shelves in a supermarket. That’s how fed up with it all I got. But my husband reminded me that that wouldn’t pay the mortgage.” – *Nicki*

“He basically spent a lot of time trying to make me look at my life and re-evaluate it.”  
– *Esther*

“When me and my husband looked at it... it meant that it was going to be better for me to look after the child.” – *Kallie*

The proactive role that we have already highlighted, played by Esther’s husband in her decision to leave teaching is an example of the joint decision making that mothers aged 30-39 are likely to participate in with their spouses. We see this again with choices around employment, finances and lifestyle choices in the comments from participants Nicki and Kallie. For this mother-wife-teacher demographic, no decision is happening in isolation or without consideration of the impact it will have on those in their immediate family unit. We see this very clearly in Jenny’s comment in response to the question, ‘What conditions, if any, would tempt you to return to teaching in the future?’ where she responded, with “I’d have to talk it through with my husband and the impact on the family.”

Comments from two participants also demonstrated that this joint decision making doesn’t just concern practicalities. It also includes an agreed understanding of values within a couple, including parenting approaches:

“I didn’t want my husband to be the one that was looking after him all of the time. It was a joint responsibility between the both of us.” – *Catherine*

“We had to think, “how can we do this?” My husband wouldn’t’ve been able to do everything five days a week. I didn’t want my husband to do everything five days a week.” – *Stacey*

Like participants Kallie and Esther, these comments reveal that the rigidity and workload of teaching often result in a reversal of the traditional ‘mother as caregiver’, ‘father as worker’ model where mother teachers are less available than their partners, who end up taking on more childcare, domestic tasks and – according to ... having more availability for leisure time (at least during the school term). Whilst we have seen that some of the participants in this report have left teaching to take on all, or more of the caring responsibilities than their husbands, for Catherine and Stacey, there is the sense that they have been asking their partners to do it all – ‘the one that was looking after him all of the time’, ‘do everything five days a week’ – and are now seeking greater equality as a couple – ‘It was a joint responsibility between the both of us’.



This reflects the findings of many studies into the attitudes of millennial and generation X parents where ‘caring responsibilities are shared more equally between mothers and fathers’ ‘as a matter of choice’ with ‘less of a gender divide around chores’ amongst couples where childcare is shared more equally.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, neither Catherine or Stacey have left teaching to stop working, but now work as a Regional Programme Manager and Revenues Officer, respectively, roles that presumably offer them the ability to parent more equally.

### **Suggestions for Schools and Individuals**

In most cases, it is highly unlikely that a place of employment will be able to compete with a marriage or long term relationship so it can be frustrating for school leaders to lose excellent members of staff because of factors outside of their control, such as a relocation or a husband or partner’s job. Staff turnover exists in every industry, and mothers are still a vulnerable category to attrition regardless of industry. Sometimes teachers simply don’t want to teach anymore, so there will only be so many factors that a school – or changes to approaches across the education system – can influence.

In general terms, however, the responses from these 17 participants have indicated that the following could sway the balance for mothers aged 30-39 with husbands or long-term partners who are at risk of leaving the profession:

- Higher pay, with schools working to address the gender pay gap and ensure that women and mothers are paid for all of the work they do (including fairly negotiated TLRs) whether they work flexibly or part time.
- Enhanced maternity packages beyond the pay stipulated by the Burgundy Book, and encouragement to use paid KIT days.
- Encouragement to use shared parental leave so that women get full pay over holiday periods.
- Full time working conditions and school cultures that enable staff to have a life outside of work, whether they have children or not.
- The fostering of relationships that provide line managers and leaders with insight into a colleague’s domestic arrangements to understand what their logistical and emotional needs may be and where school can support.
- Flexibility at the beginning and end of the school day to manage childcare logistics for staff at all levels, including the leadership team.
- Support with childcare through school-based nurseries, breakfast and after-school clubs.
- A focus on school culture, including formalized benefits packages and mental health provision for students and colleagues, to create happy working environments.
- A culture that values both mothers and fathers / non-birthing partners as equal parents and offers practical support that affirms this belief.

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<sup>21</sup> Working Families, *Modern Families Index 2020*, accessed at: [https://www.workingfamilies.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Modern-Families-Index\\_2020\\_Full-Report\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.workingfamilies.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Modern-Families-Index_2020_Full-Report_FINAL.pdf)



For individuals who have read this report feeling they are in the same or similar position to our 17 participants, but are not yet ready to leave teaching, there are some ways to improve things before leaving the profession entirely:

- In the case of relocation, use online and regional networks (such as The MTPT Project, LitDrive, WomenEd and BAMEed) to send expressions of interest to schools in your new region ahead of your move.
- Get in touch with organisations such as WomenEd and Flexible Teacher Talent, or your local Flexible Working Ambassador School to explore how flexibility could solve logistical issues, and to approach conversations with your school confidently.
- Explore different models of childcare, including au pairs, nannies, breakfast clubs and childminders to find a set up that works for you and your family.
- Contact Teachers SPL to explore how shared parental leave could increase your pay over the maternity leave period, and talk to your school about KIT days paid at a day rate (your salary / 195 (or your annually contracted number of days, *not* 365)).
- Take action to protect your mental health and put yourself and your family first, including coaching, individual or couples therapy or counselling – use your employee assistance programme or networks such as The MTPT Project and never underestimate the importance of ‘me time’ to nurture your hobbies and get headspace.
- Investigate other schools, and submit an expression of interest to those that match your values and new lifestyle as a mother and partner – a change is sometimes as good as a rest.
- Outsource domestic tasks wherever possible, particularly cleaning, and simplify approaches to cooking during the week.
- Have frank conversations with yourself and your husband / partner about how you share out domestic and childcare tasks, and how happy you are with your relationship, your work and your home life.
- Enjoy stepping out of the classroom if this is the best decision for you! Remember that there are lots of ways to continue to teach, nurture and influence the education system in other industries and other areas of your life.

For male partners / husbands, whether you be teachers or working in other industries keen to support your female partners / wives at this vulnerable time:

- Consider what flexibility there is in *your* role to ease logistical demands as a partnership.
- Consider where incomes can enable help with domestic tasks and childcare so that this does not become your partner’s second, unpaid job.
- Have open conversations about mental health and support services, from simple things like protecting ‘me time’ for your wife / partner in the evenings and weekends, to supporting your partner to seek professional help.
- Particularly for husbands / partners who are teachers or in high-stress roles, remember that *your* wellbeing is important, too. You are also entitled to the privileges





of flexible working, time out and emotional and logistical support that are often perceived to be 'just for mums'.

### **Want to find out more?**

If you have any further questions about this report or our findings about the role that husbands and partners play in female teachers decisions to leave teaching aged 30-39, please get in touch. We love engaging with professional and academic dialogue around things we might have missed, questions we haven't answered or ideas we might not have thought of.

If you are an academic or a student and our work is helping with your area of study, we're more than happy to chat informally, or organise more formal events or presentations to share this work with a wider audience.

Just email Emma Sheppard on [mtptproject@gmail.com](mailto:mtptproject@gmail.com) or find her spending too much time on Twitter @maternityCPD



## Appendix A

Workload, school culture and job satisfaction were the top three reasons for leaving teaching cited in the qualitative interviews with women who left teaching aged 30-39. Workload was the most common reason for women to leave teaching aged 30-39 in the initial survey of 498 participants. However, these reasons are not exclusive to the demographic of our study. Rather, they are recurrent themes in *all* studies around teacher retention and attrition. For this reason, we will not be focusing on them in any of our reports, though their presence will be strongly felt in all of our reports.

For further reading of the specific issues around teacher workload, school culture and job satisfaction, please enjoy the following reading:

- *Stop Talking About Wellbeing*, Kat Howard
- DfE Teacher Workload Survey, 2019. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/teacher-workload-survey-2019>
- The latest findings from the teacher workload survey, Jack Worth and Matt Walker for NFER, 2019. Available at: <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/news-events/nfer-blogs/the-latest-findings-from-the-teacher-workload-survey-2019/>
- The Teacher Wellbeing Index 2020, Education Support. Available at: <https://www.educationsupport.org.uk/resources/for-organisations/research/teacher-wellbeing-index/>
- Improving Behaviour in Schools Guidance Report, EEF, 2021. Available at: <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/guidance-reports/behaviour>
- Understanding Teacher Retention, Peter Burge, Hui Lu, William Phillips for Rand Europe, 2021. Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/958634/Understanding\\_Teacher\\_Retention\\_Report\\_by\\_RAND-February\\_2021.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/958634/Understanding_Teacher_Retention_Report_by_RAND-February_2021.pdf)
- Teacher Labour Market in England Annual Report 2021, Jack Worth and Henry Faulkner-Ellis for NFER. Available at: <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/teacher-labour-market-in-england-2021/>
- Should I Stay or Should I Go? NFER Analysis of Teachers Joining and Leaving the Profession, Ben Durbin, Jack Worth and Susie Bamford for NFER, 2015. Available at: <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/should-i-stay-or-should-i-go-nfer-analysis-of-teachers-joining-and-leaving-the-profession>
- Teacher Retention and Turnover Research, Interim Report, Jack Worth, Giulia De Lazzari and Jude Hillary for NFER, 2017. Available at: <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/should-i-stay-or-should-i-go-nfer-analysis-of-teachers-joining-and-leaving-the-profession>
- Recruitment and Retention of Teachers, Fifth Report of Session 2016-17, for the House of Commons. Available at: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmeduc/199/199.pdf>





- Teacher Retention and Turnover, Research Update 3 – Is the Grass Greener Beyond Teaching? Susan Bamford and Jack Worth for NFER, 2017. Available at: <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/NUFS04/NUFS04.pdf>
- School workforce in England, 2020. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-workforce-in-england>

With thanks to Kat Howard and Ruth Jackson for support with this Appendix.

