

**'I dialled into work and prayed my baby wouldn't wake up'**

Melissa Brooker had been in her job as a senior HR director for 10 years and "loved every minute of it".

Then she had her first child.



5 "Sadly, the year I returned took the shine off for me," she says. "Gradually, it became obvious that my employers still needed a lot of face-time. I could see that I was going to be left out of key meetings and opportunities by rigidly sticking to the hours I was paid for."

10 So she tried to find a way around it. "I accepted meetings and calls on my days off. I dialled into calls while my baby was asleep, praying she wouldn't wake up.

15 "I worked in any snatched moments I could find. No matter what your hours, there was an expectation that if you wanted to progress, you had to be 'always on'. It just wasn't sustainable."

"Sarah" also works in HR. She doesn't want to use her real name because she's worried about losing her job.

20 Although she loves what she does, she says, "The isolation I have felt at work since going part-time shocked me, and has been soul destroying. I feel punished for not being there five days a week."

This is not the way the flexible workplace is supposed to be. Since 2014, the law has been that any worker has the right to apply to work flexibly.

It's no surprise Sarah and Melissa's stories are so similar.

25 A survey by flexible working experts, Timewise, found two-thirds of part-time workers feel isolated and struggle to make professional connections.

Sarah returned to work after a longer gap than usual having had two children close together. "I'm a tough cookie, believe you me, but there have been occasions when I have cried. Friendships I have built over five years have simply dissolved."

As flexible working is the way most of us now work in the UK, this is a major problem.

30 Timewise founder Karen Mattison calls it another form of discrimination: "flexism".

"Much of working culture is still rooted in the five-day 1950s model, with a lack of flexibility around when meetings, training and networking take place - leaving part-time workers isolated.