

**INTERVIEW** BY JANNAT HOSSAIN, BARING FOUNDATION PROGRAMMES OFFICER



## JOELI BREARLEY PREGNANT THEN SCREWED

**Pregnant then Screwed (PTS) is the brainchild of Joeli Brearley, a former innovation specialist in the arts and culture sector. After announcing her first pregnancy, her boss sacked her via a voicemail the next day. Ironically, at the time, she was working for a children's charity. This experience and events which followed, led Joeli to do something about the widespread discrimination pregnant women and mothers still face today. PTS were awarded a grant from our COVID-19 Legal Action Fund.**

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The ‘motherhood penalty’ sums up the systematic disadvantage pregnant women and mothers face in the workplace, compared to their childless counterparts. For example, by the time a child is 12, their mother’s pay is 33 per cent below that of a male peer. There are a lot of things government and employers can do to ensure mothers have equal access to the workplace. And in doing so, they will decrease both child poverty and the gender pay gap; the latter, as Joeli points out, being largely about motherhood.

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The forced switch to digital-only this year has been interesting for PTS and they were able to quickly adapt. They have been able to engage more people at less cost, and have had great feedback on their work. Like most organisations, strategic plans went out of the window back in March. Initially, PTS focused on improving workplace health and safety for pregnant women. Calls to their free advice line rose by 450 per cent in the first six months of the pandemic, so they needed to reorganise to deal with this increase swiftly and efficiently.

After campaigning over the summer, PTS won an exemption to coronavirus regulations to allow parents to use informal childcare during the pandemic.<sup>22</sup>

It did not make sense to allow ongoing use of formal childcare but not informal. Not only did this disproportionately impact poor people but it also impacted tight-knit families, especially in the North East, where Joeli lived for 16 years. There is still a lot of work to be done, with Joeli worrying about the tough position parents will find themselves in if schools close again. PTS have also been responding to redundancies, as the pandemic put mothers at the top of the firing line.<sup>23</sup> PTS are supporting a Bill<sup>24</sup> re-introduced to Parliament this summer which seeks to enhance and extend legal protections against redundancies for pregnant women and mothers. They have also pulled together their own programme – Redundancy Rehab<sup>25</sup> – to offer support to women made redundant to rebuild their confidence, understand their rights, and prepare them for the job search ahead.

Since this initial response, PTS shifted their attention to scrutinising emergency legislation and the adverse impacts on pregnant women and mothers. This includes challenging the government’s Self-Employment Income Support Scheme,<sup>25</sup> which discriminates against women who have had a period of maternity leave in the last three years. After the

<sup>22</sup> [www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-54240681](https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-54240681).

<sup>23</sup> [www.yahoo.com/news/why-working-mothers-are-the-first-on-the-firing-line-for-covid-19-redundancies-050045295.html](https://www.yahoo.com/news/why-working-mothers-are-the-first-on-the-firing-line-for-covid-19-redundancies-050045295.html).

<sup>24</sup> [www.peoplemanagement.co.uk/news/articles/pregnant-women-new-mothers-receive-greater-redundancy-protection-proposed-bill](https://www.peoplemanagement.co.uk/news/articles/pregnant-women-new-mothers-receive-greater-redundancy-protection-proposed-bill).

<sup>24</sup> [pregnantthenscrewed.com/redundancy-rehab](https://pregnantthenscrewed.com/redundancy-rehab).

<sup>25</sup> [labourlist.org/2020/06/why-pregnant-then-screwed-is-taking-the-chancellor-to-court](https://labourlist.org/2020/06/why-pregnant-then-screwed-is-taking-the-chancellor-to-court).

government refused to back down on this policy, PTS began legal proceedings to challenge the lawfulness of the policy and were recently granted permission to take the case forward.

Joeli's own experience of pregnancy discrimination motivates her to keep going with the work. She found being fired traumatic and it triggered issues with her pregnancy, discovering that she was having a high-risk pregnancy and could lose her baby if she was under too much stress. Employment tribunal rules limit the time an individual has to bring a case – three months less one day since the last point of discrimination – leaving women in Joeli's position with little chance of getting any sort of justice as they are forced to choose between the health of their child or challenging their employers through a highly stressful court process. This essentially means employers can get away with discriminating against mothers.

After giving birth, Joeli started attending parents' groups and found herself regularly talking to women who had similar experiences of discrimination, including as they returned to work. It was also happening to her friends, pushing her to question why she did not have greater awareness of widespread pregnancy discrimination before it happened to her and her loved ones. PTS was born, initially intended to be a blog for women to anonymously share their stories, but it just grew and grew. Clearly, there was a need for it.

Joeli spent a lot of time contacting everybody she had met in her life to tell them what she was doing and asking for any support they could offer.

She wrote about the issues on any media platform that would have her. She used social media to talk about the issues too, messaging every journalist she came across to get them interested in the issue. She learnt that you need a magic mix of stories, people's real-life experiences, and data to help you along the way. You need to keep on top of what is happening on your issue and react to the news. People slowly started to listen, realising that PTS had access to everything a journalist needs to write a really interesting story.

### **Women's stories kept her going.**

The hardest part of the job is the stories she is sent which are often devastating and traumatic and can take their toll. She occasionally finds herself sobbing at her desk as she reads about women experiencing debilitating depression, and most heartbreaking of all, stories about babies dying. Though the hardest part of her job, these stories are also a big part of what has kept her going. There is nothing like being reminded of what you are fighting for on a regular basis.

With the world a relentlessly messy place, it can be hard to keep up with the franticness of the news. Joeli credits her volunteer group with helping her keep up with what is going on in the wider world. They have a WhatsApp group which is not just limited to PTS updates, and with politically engaged and well-read people in the group, it is hard to miss posts and commentary on current affairs. In addition to this, Joeli will often have podcasts on while she does the housework. Radio 4 is a regular feature in the background, she follows some great people on social media,

and her partner works in the arts, so she can keep up with what's happening in that sector through him.

Joeli confesses that before having children, she could easily work until 10pm, but now it's not something she would ever consider – besides, as she says, her children wouldn't let her if she tried! Joeli is notoriously bad at taking breaks and relaxing, but having kids forces you to take breaks from work (though of course parenting is a different type of work!). She can go from doing a TV interview to reading the Hungry Caterpillar in mere minutes, it forces her to switch things up and relax a little more.

Joeli touches on founder syndrome and how it can hold organisations back. She is very aware of her own impending obsolescence; she knows that eventually PTS will grow beyond her and she will need to let go and make space for new energy. Fortunately, she's not there yet as PTS is just coming out of what she calls their 'scrappy start up mode' phase.

PTS would not be able to show up for mothers in the ways they do, if it were not for the numerous volunteers that support their work. Volunteering a skill is one way you can support them, or if you can't give time, there is always the option to donate a little money. PTS have a big Instagram following, a platform they use regularly to share updates and rally people to take campaign actions. It helps them to make the collective noise needed to win change – we really recommend a follow, the content is also some of the best we've seen from a campaigning organisation!