

Renée and family: Work, work, work

[Hackney, Inner London]

Renée: I'm a qualified, registered mental health nurse but due to the structuring of the hospitals all the posts were frozen, so I am not actively working as a registered mental health nurse – I'm working as a support worker. As a support worker, it's very, very difficult on the money that we're earning. You've got to pay your rent. You've got the gas, electricity, telephone, television. I am always in the minus.

[Renée earns around £8.50 an hour, supplemented by tax credit. She doesn't receive child maintenance for any of the children.]

Tyrone: I'm running the bath for my big sister.

Renée: My normal contracted hours are 37.5 but with the wage I get with that, it's not enough for the household finance. As soon as the rent is paid, council tax is paid, I'm left with little to nothing to survive on. There's not even enough money to buy food for the household. I have to scrimp and buy little bits here and little bits there until I get my next pay. So I have to work agency work to help bring up my wage. If I didn't work nightshifts and just did flat rates the money wouldn't be enough, not at all.

[It's half term and the children are off school. Renée has to go to work.]

Renée: I am on a late shift so I start work from 12.30 until 8.30 at night. So I get in after 9, 9.30.

Renée: My mum, she helps me out with the children when I'm at work. She's a good network.

[Edith came to the UK in the 1960s. She worked as a hospital domestic on low pay until her retirement on the state pension.]

[Black and white family pictures of Edith and Renée.]

Renée: My mum wanted to study as a nurse but she didn't fulfil that dream. So my aspiration was to do better. I said what my mum didn't achieve, I would achieve for her.

Edith: If I wasn't here she wouldn't be able to work. I don't know how she would manage. I mean she would fight her way out, but it is tough now and it would be worse.

Edith: Sometimes the little ones say, ‘Where is mummy?’ I say Mummy is at work, she’s working hard to buy you some nice shoes ...

Zennisha: She’s not there – she’s gone to work ...

Tryone: It’s half term and we don’t have to go to school for a week. When my mum’s not around I don’t get to do stuff because she is working.

Girvan: I don’t think it’s good that my mum is working most of the time because she gets very tired because of the shifts she is doing to earn money. Because she is the only one working in this house.

Tyrone: I don’t get to see her a lot because she has to feed us and pay the rent.

[Kids greeting Renée as she gets home.]

Renée: It’s been a long, long day. I’m surviving. I’m getting down to shut down mode now. My brain wants to switch off but I’ll do a little housework before I retire to my bed. And then Sunday I’m back at work on a late shift.

All children: Night night mummy

Renée: Every day is a worry with regards to the new cuts coming in because if they cut the working tax credit, the child tax credit, how are we going to survive as parents? We’re out there, we’re fighting, we want to work. It’s not that we don’t want to work. We do. The government has look into it very, very seriously. It’s not like we’re here to be grabbing, grabbing, grabbing. Because that’s where some people may think like we want to take, take, take from the government. It’s not like that. We’re not asking too much, just for that little bit of help. It will bring us up above the inflation level and our children will have a better lifestyle as well.