

Pushed to More Precarity:

The uneven impact of lockdowns on mothers and lower-income parents

Summary

The lockdown efforts to contain the spread of coronavirus have affected everyone's lives. But the financial and economic impact of lockdowns has entrenched pre-pandemic inequalities.

Our survey shows that the uneven impact of school closures, shutdown industries, furlough, and flexible working arrangements are marked between mothers and fathers, those on lower incomes and higher incomes, white and Black, Asian, and ethnic minority groups and those who are not disabled compared to those who are disabled. While the lives and work of everyone has been affected by COVID-19, the jobs and livelihoods of mothers, including low-income, BAME and disabled mothers, have been particularly adversely affected.

The present briefing focuses on the experiences of all parents. Two upcoming briefings will focus on Black, Asian and ethnic minority parents and on disabled parents.

Financial impact of COVID-19

- **Over a third of respondents said they were struggling financially** to make ends meet since the start of the pandemic.
- **Mothers were more likely to say that they were struggling financially** (40%) compared to fathers (35%).
- **Over half (53%) of single mothers said they were struggling financially**, compared to 35% of married mothers and 46% of cohabiting mothers.

Employment impact of COVID-19

- Approximately **one in ten parents reported losing a job** since the start of the pandemic (10% mothers, 9% fathers).
- **Parents on lower incomes were more likely to be affected by losses of job and hours.** Nearly a third (31%) of parents with household incomes below £20,000 lost hours, compared to 23% of those with household incomes above £40,000. 13% of respondents on lower incomes lost jobs compared to 9% of those on higher incomes.
- **Parents with 4 or more children were twice as likely to report losing their jobs** since March 2020 compared to parents with one or two children. **A third of families with over 3 children reported losing work hours** compared to a quarter of 1 or 2 children families. The differences are even larger for fathers.

- **A much higher proportion of parents in London were worried about their job prospects** (69% compared to half of parents in England). Three in four fathers and two in three mothers in London are concerned about their jobs.
- **Younger parents were more likely to say they lost hours (31% to 22%) and job (11% against 7%).** Unsurprisingly, younger parents were also more worried about their job prospects: 53% of younger mothers and 57% of younger fathers, compared to 46% and 44% of older mothers and fathers respectively.

Impact of School Closures

- Prior to the January lockdown, **parents on low incomes** (household annual income under £20,000) **were nine times more likely to report risk of losing their jobs if nurseries/schools/childminders closed** or their child was sent home for self-isolation, compared to more advantaged parents (household annual income over £40,000).
- **Nearly twice as many mothers (15%) report believing they would have to take time off work with no pay due to school closures** or a self-isolating/sick child compared to fathers (8%).
- Of those furloughed, **mothers were more likely to be put on furlough to look after their children** (27%) than fathers (23%).
- **One in five mothers were made redundant or lost hours because of caring responsibilities**, compared to 13% of fathers.

Introduction

It seems a lifetime ago that COVID-19 was portrayed the “The Great Equaliser”, but the reality of the pandemic nearly one year on shows us that the impact of the pandemic is anything but equal: we may all be facing the same storm, but we are not in the same boat. This is what the impact of the first lockdown in March showed us.

Our latest joint survey between UK Women’s Budget Group, Fawcett Society, Engender and Close the Gap (Scotland), Women Equality Network Wales, and Northern Ireland Women’s Budget Group (NIWBG), conducted during the second lockdown in November, shows that mothers, Black, Asian and minority ethnic parents (BAME), parents on lower income levels, disabled parents, and parents in part-time work in particular have been detrimentally impacted by school closures, shutdown in particular sectors, furlough, a lack of flexible hours and an increasing burden of unpaid (care) work.

Our research presents the findings of a COVID-19 survey carried out by Survation with 1,003 parents with children aged 14 and under between 18 November – 2 December 2020 across the four nations in the UK. The results of the survey are analysed by different income levels, employment status, age, and number of children in households in order to get a better understanding of how COVID-19 has impacted people in different contexts.

Our survey shows that COVID-19 has not only brought pre-existing gender inequalities into sharp relief, it has made things worse – particularly for mothers on lower incomes and more precarious employment contracts. This is because of a mixture of pandemic restrictions, such as shutdown in particular female-dominated industries (e.g. retail, hospitality and food industry) and more severe restrictions, such as closed schools that have shifted the burden of unpaid care to women. Even before COVID-19, women carried the disproportionate responsibilities of unpaid care; our research shows that the pandemic has widened this gap between men and women.

Two upcoming briefings will analyse the specific economic impact of COVID-19 on Black, Asian and ethnic minority parents and on disabled parents.

Financial and employment impact of COVID-19

Since the pandemic crisis developed, the impact on all workers has been enormous, but the financial and employment consequences have varied across groups.

By November 2020, almost a third of fathers and a quarter of mothers had lost working hours.

ONS figures highlight a significant increase in full-time working among women over the course of the pandemic, which is attributed to the increase in demand in female-dominated sectors such as health and social care, as well as wider public sector roles.¹

One out of 10 both fathers and mothers had lost their jobs since March 2020.

The employment impact of COVID-19 has been drawn along class lines.

Parents on lower salaries were nearly twice as likely (14%) to still be on furlough in November 2020 compared to higher income parents.

Parents on lower income had also been hit hard by a reduction in work hours. 31% of parents with a household income below £20,000 had had their working hours reduced compared to 23% of parents with a household income over £40,000.

13% of lower income parents had lost jobs since the beginning of the pandemic compared to 9% of their higher-earning counterparts.

A higher proportion of mothers are struggling financially.

Over a third of parents said they were struggling to make ends meet since the start of the pandemic.

Mothers were more likely to say that they were struggling financially (40%) compared to fathers (35%).

Younger parents were disproportionately hit economically by the pandemic.

Young people are disproportionately represented in the workforce of the sectors that were shut down by the lockdowns and social distancing measures: a third of all young women work in retail, hospitality, leisure and tourism.²

Younger parents were more likely to say they lost hours (31% to 22%) and job (11% against 7%).

Unsurprisingly, younger parents were also more worried about their job prospects: 53% of younger mothers and 57% of younger fathers were more likely to be worried about losing their job, compared to 46% and 44% of older mothers and fathers respectively.

Caring responsibilities play a large role in mothers' job and hour losses – particularly for single mothers.

One in five mothers lost hours or their job due to caring responsibilities compared to 13% of fathers. This reflects the uneven division of unpaid work within families that mean the disproportionate burden of care is carried by women.

¹ UK Women's Budget Group (Oct 2020) Latest ONS data labour market overview (October 2020) (<http://bit.ly/39K9Ktt>)

² UK WBG and Young Women's Trust (Nov 2020) Covid-19 and Economic Challenges for Young Women (<http://bit.ly/3awEaOZ>)

The survey also revealed that 35% of single parents had been put on furlough at one point or another during the pandemic to look after their children. Single parents were also more likely to have lost their job (12%) compared to married parents (8%), which likely reflects the heightened difficulty of reconciling childcare and employment for one-parent families, and the more precarious working conditions of a larger proportion of single mothers.³

A significant proportion of parents, especially mothers, have been put on furlough to look after their children.

Around a quarter of fathers (23%) and mothers (27%) reported having been put on furlough to look after their children, and the likelihood of being on furlough increased with household size. Nearly half of parents with 4 or more children in the household had been furloughed at some point since the crisis began compared to a third of parents with one child.

The survey also showed that a higher proportion of parents working part-time (57%) were put on furlough compared to 43% of full-time working parents, with mothers slightly more likely to be put on furlough to look after their children than fathers.

Impact of school closures and shift to more unpaid work

Our survey shows that in November 2020 school disruption was having a disproportionate employment impact on low-income parents and on mothers in general. Research during the first Spring lockdown⁴ revealed that mothers' paid work was suffering due to increased housework, childcare and home-schooling. At a time when schools are once again closed, it is very likely that the current lockdown is having a similar effect, aggravated by the compounding nature of successive disruption.

Disproportionate class and gender impacts of school closures

Mothers on the lowest incomes (household income below £20,000) were eight times more at risk of losing their job due to school closures than their higher-income counterparts (household earnings of over £40,000).

Mothers were also two times more likely than fathers to report that if their child had to isolate or was sent home because their nursery/school/childminder was closed, their time off work would not be paid. This puts a strain on women's finances, whose average earnings are lower than their male counterparts.

Unequal division of care and housework still a reality – with mothers taking the brunt

We asked parents who was responsible for different household tasks and found that a far greater proportion of mothers perceive they are mostly responsible for housework (66% of

³ Gingerbread (Feb 2018) One in four: a profile of single parents in the UK (<http://bit.ly/39O170Z>)

⁴ Institute for Fiscal Studies (May 2020) How are mothers and fathers balancing work and family under lockdown? (<http://bit.ly/3epeQuw>)

mothers said “mostly me” compared to 25% of fathers), for shopping (57% mothers vs 42% fathers), for caring for children (58% mothers vs 23% fathers), supervising children (57% mothers vs. 25% fathers) and for caring for other adults (30% mothers vs 19% fathers).

This pattern of the burden of unpaid work has not shifted from before the pandemic, although it is notable that there was a slight shift in fathers taking on slightly more responsibility with housework and childcare, which varied somewhat according to income levels (with more equal sharing of housework, such as cleaning, in higher-income households).

It is also important to consider that during the pandemic, almost two thirds of unpaid carers have not been able to take breaks from their caring role.⁵ This will inevitably have an impact on their physical and mental health; other research has shown that over two thirds of unpaid carers have reported caring had had a negative impact on their physical and mental health.⁶

Conclusion

The coronavirus pandemic is a devastating health crisis; but it is also a social and economic crisis with consequences for equality.

Even before the pandemic, gender inequality was an issue across employment and financial circumstances, unpaid work and caring responsibilities. While employment rates for women were at record levels, they were still in a disadvantaged and more precarious position in the labour market: women were overrepresented in part-time (74%) and involuntary part-time employment (57%),⁷ as well as temporary and zero-hours contracts (54% for both).⁸

Mothers are more likely to say they are struggling financially, which is a testament to how the pandemic is having a regressive impact on gender equality, exacerbating pre-existing inequalities.

With the closure of schools and other childcare settings, as well as grandparents being encouraged to self-isolate and socially distance, childcare is posing an additional challenge on working parents. The extra caring responsibilities are falling disproportionately on mothers' shoulders, who were already bearing a greater share of

⁵ Carers UK (Oct 2020) Caring Behind Closed Doors: Six Months On (<https://bit.ly/3aVdFD1>)

⁶ University of Birmingham (Aug 2020) Covid-19 leaves unpaid carers without physical and mental health treatment (<https://bit.ly/3rNfUiH>)

⁷ Involuntary part-time is defined by the ONS as people who fail to find a full-time job but would like to work full-time.

⁸ UK WBG (Mar 2020) Women, Employment and Earnings (<https://bit.ly/2Xque4e>)

unpaid care work prior to the pandemic. This is the most stark for single parents, around 90% of which are women.⁹

It is not unexpected that the burden of childcare and domestic work should go up during this pandemic (and especially during national lockdowns), but what is worrying is that this is having a negative impact on women's employment and financial circumstances, more precarious to begin with,¹⁰ and on women's mental health.

This crisis has also hit low-income parents and young people particularly hard. The impact of redundancies and furlough have fallen disproportionately on parents on lower incomes, who are less financially resilient compared to their higher-income counterparts. They will have had less time to build up a savings safety net. Young parents' employment prospects also face a scarring effect with long-term consequences for their earnings and job progression.¹¹

We need policies that truly support women and parents economically at home as well as in the labour market, including a strong social security safety net and investment in a care economy.

Key Recommendations

More representation: The government needs to include more women at the decision-making table and create strong structures to engage with the women's and wider equalities sector.

Stronger safety net: This pandemic highlighted the importance of social security to alleviate and prevent poverty. The holes in this safety net were also put to stark relief. Child benefit, a crucial source of women's and children's income, should be increased and support for low-income families and unemployed people improved to provide better living standards.

Sectoral support: Post-COVID recovery needs to include support for hardest hit sectors like retail, hospitality, leisure and tourism, sectors that are important employers of women and young people.

Investment in care: Urgent funding is required for the early years sector to avoid widespread closures which would have a huge impact on mothers' employment. Sustainable funding and longer-term major reform is sorely needed for both the early years and the social care sectors.

⁹ Gingerbread (Sep 2019) Single parents: facts and figures (<http://bit.ly/3oPxoJp>)

¹⁰ UK WBG (2019) DWP data confirms: women and children continue to be worse affected by poverty (<https://bit.ly/2xHdxHj>)

¹¹ Resolution Foundation (Oct 2020) 'Covid has created a U-shaped crisis as majority of young adults and pensioners stopped working' (<http://bit.ly/3jpTAbW>)



About us

This research was conducted by the [UK Women's Budget Group](#), [Fawcett Society](#), [Northern Ireland Women's Budget Group](#), [Women's Equality Network Wales](#), [Close the Gap](#) and [Engender](#).

This research was funded by [Standard Life Foundation](#) and [Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust](#).

Thank you to Dr Zubaida Haque who wrote a first version of this report.

For more details contact Dr Sara Reis, Head of Research and Policy at the UK Women's Budget Group: sara.reis@wbg.org.uk.