



BRIEFING PAPER

March 2021

PUSHED TO MORE PRECARITY

The uneven impact of lockdowns on mothers
and lower income parents in Wales

1. INTRODUCTION

One year on from the first lockdown our polling research shows that the financial and economic impact of lockdowns has entrenched pre-pandemic inequalities for women, particularly where women have intersecting identities.

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 incomes¹; white, and Black, Asian, and ethnic minority (BAME) groups; and the disabled compared to the non-disabled. While the lives and work of everyone has been affected by COVID-19, the jobs and livelihoods of mothers, including mothers on low-income, mothers from racialised communities and disabled mothers, have been particularly adversely affected.

The health crisis is beyond doubt an inequality crisis, laying bare the structural racism and ableism at the heart of our country. In terms of the economy and jobs, our polling found that disabled people and BAME people were more likely to have lost working hours (BAME 48% v 23% of white people and for disabled people 31% v 23% non-disabled people). The polling also found that women in Wales were more likely than men to have lost their jobs due to a business closing (18% v 11%) and BAME people were more likely than white people to feel that they were unfairly chosen for furlough (28% v 6%).

To stop many more women leaving work or falling into poverty, and to stop the rapid reversal of decades of progress on gender equality, we must invest in the childcare sector, invest in the childcare offer and ensure that we see an Economic Action Plan for Women specifically in Wales' recovery. Many people have said there needs to be a Green Recovery but this is likely to exclude half the population. We must see a Green and Caring Recovery.

The survey was conducted in partnership with the Women's Equality Network (WEN) Wales, Women's Budget Group, Fawcett Society, Engender, Close the Gap, and Northern Ireland Women's Budget Group. The UK-wide results can be viewed [here](#). This briefing focuses on the Wales-specific results.²

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¹ When comparing data based on household income, all references to lower income households equate to those with household earnings of £0-19,999 a year. Those referred to as higher income households are those earning £40,000+ per annum.

² The population sampled were parents – both mothers and fathers – in Wales with children under 14 years old, with a sample size of 613.

The survey took place between 18th November-4th December 2020. At this time, the UK had emerged from the first UK-wide lockdown and many counties in Wales had been in localised lockdowns, followed by a second Wales-wide lockdown – a fire break lockdown for 17 days from October-early November.

While schools had remained open during these Wales-specific lockdowns, many additional restrictions remained in place.

2. ANXIETY

Women in Wales reported that they are experiencing higher levels of anxiety than men.

When asked the question, 'how anxious did you feel yesterday?', 43% of women and 26% of men chose at least 6 out of 10 on a scale where 10 is 'completely anxious' and 0 is 'not anxious at all'. Single parents experienced higher levels of anxiety than married parents; 41% of single parents ranked their anxiety above a 6 out of 10 compared with 33% of married parents and 31% of cohabiting parents.

Both women and men in Wales are worried about job prospects: 49% of women and 46% of men strongly or somewhat agreed that they were worried about their job prospects. This figure is higher amongst disabled and BAME respondents with a score of 53% and 50% respectively.

WEN WALES RECOMMENDS:

- Welsh Government must invest in mental health provisions for those disproportionately affected by the pandemic, from front-line staff to the general population

HOW ANXIOUS DID YOU FEEL TODAY?

0 = not anxious at all
10 = completely anxious

43% WOMEN
26% MEN
Rated at least 6 out of 10

41% SINGLE PARENTS
33% MARRIED /
COHABITING PARENTS
Rated at least 6 out of 10

3. EMPLOYMENT, FURLOUGH AND FLEXIBLE WORKING

The higher figures of anxiety amongst women could be attributed, amongst other things, to job loss, a distinct lack of flexibility at work, alongside caring and household responsibilities which are explored below.

3.1. JOB LOSS AND REDUCTION OF HOURS

Women in Wales were more likely to have lost their job due to a business closing down with 18% of women experiencing job loss compared to 11% of men.

LOSS OF WORKING HOURS

48% BAME PEOPLE
Compared to
23% WHITE PEOPLE

31% DISABLED PEOPLE
Compared to
23% NON DISABLED PEOPLE

The data also showed that BAME people were twice as likely to have lost working hours compared to white people (48% of BAME people vs 23% of white people). Disabled people too faced greater levels of job loss than non-disabled people with 31% of disabled people losing working hours compared to 23% of non-disabled people.

When asked for reasons that contributed to this loss of employment or working hours, 10% of respondents from lower-income households said it was because they were shielding for medical reasons and 22% stated it was because of their caring responsibilities. By comparison, of those from higher income households, 6% stated they were shielding and 2% attributed job or work loss to caring responsibilities.

3.2. FLEXIBLE WORKING

The option to have flexibility at work is considered desirable amongst both women and men. Of those who are not currently able to work flexibly, 58% of women and 49% of men agree that they would like to. Of those who do work flexibly, 84% agree that they would like to continue.

Households with higher earnings were twice as likely (38%) than those earning less to have been working flexibly through regular home/remote working prior to the pandemic. At the time of the survey, these figures increased to 51% of those in the higher earners' bracket, and decreased to 33% in the lower earners bracket, with those in the higher bracket 9% more likely to have flexible start and finish times (39% compared to 30% of those in lower earning households).

However, when asked to what extent respondents who did work flexibly agreed or disagreed that flexible working options in their job suited their needs, those in lower-earning households were much more likely to strongly agree (54%) whilst only 45% of those in higher-income households strongly agreed with this statement.

Based on those who did not have flexible working, just 16% of those from households on lower incomes stated that they strongly agreed that they would like to have the option of working flexibly. This was significantly higher amongst higher-income households, at 51%.

3.3. FURLOUGH

A higher proportion of men surveyed (44%) were either currently furloughed or had been previously compared to women (35%). 65% of disabled employees were furloughed, which is staggeringly 25% higher than non-disabled workers at 40%. BAME employees were also disproportionately furloughed at 45%, compared to 38% of white workers. Surprisingly, just 16% of single parent households were furloughed, compared to 39% of married and 54% of cohabiting, two-parent households.

When asked why they believed they had been furloughed, those from low-income households were less likely to see this as an effort to save money on salaries (15%). This answer was given by 50% of those earning £40,000+ per year. Those on lower-incomes were over twice as likely to attribute being furloughed to their shielding status or other medical reasons (14% from low-incomes compared to 6% from high-income households). Worryingly, 15% of those on the lower incomes, compared to 2% on the higher incomes, stated that they felt that they were unfairly chosen for furlough because of their race, sex, age, disability or health condition.

Overall, those with higher household incomes were 8% more likely to have been placed on furlough (37%), compared to those with lower incomes (29%). 9% of those in the lower income bracket stated that they had lost their main job, compared to 4% in the higher bracket.

FURLOUGH

Either currently or previously

44% MEN

Compared to
35% WOMEN

65% DISABLED PEOPLE

Compared to
40% NON DISABLED PEOPLE

45% BAME PEOPLE

Compared to
38% WHITE PEOPLE

16% SINGLE PARENTS

Compared to
39% MARRIED PARENTS
54% COHABITING, TWO-PARENT

WEN WALES RECOMMENDS:

- Job retention schemes and self-employment schemes that work for all – including single parents and part-time workers
- Investment needs to provide jobs in a wide range of industries, not just favour heavily male-dominated industries like construction
- Welsh Government must ensure that the Green Recovery is a Green AND Caring Recovery by investing in Care
- Welsh Government must put in place an Action Plan for Women in the Economy, as Canada has done

4. FINANCES

The survey also revealed that 49% of women said they were struggling to make ends meet, compared to 38% of men. This sentiment was felt more strongly by single parents compared to married parents, as 52% of single parents felt they were somewhat or completely struggling to make ends meet compared to 38% of married parents and 44% of cohabiting parents. Though fewer respondents identified as such, 70% of divorced parents and 75% of widowed parents were somewhat struggling to make ends meet.

Over half of respondents with household incomes of less than £20,000 a year strongly agreed (24%) or somewhat agreed (31%) that they were currently struggling to make ends meet. Just over a quarter of households with an annual income of £40,000+ said the same, with 8% strongly agreeing, and 19% somewhat agreeing.

A third of those surveyed from households with lower annual incomes (below £20,000 per annum) stated that they strongly disagreed that in financial terms they were better off than they were at the start of 2020. This was 11 percentage points lower than those in the higher income household bracket. 8% of those from the lower income households strongly agreed that they were better off, compared to 11% of those higher earners.

The survey clearly shows that women and single parents have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic and if steps are not taken urgently, many more will fall into poverty. Welsh Government must rebuild the economy with care, inclusivity, and women at its heart.

WEN WALES RECOMMENDS:

- Financial aid during the crisis needs to support parents equally, and not favour two-parent households
- The £20 Universal Credit increase should be maintained beyond September 2021
- Child benefit should be increased as an immediate way to direct money to struggling families

FINANCES

Struggling to make ends meet

49% WOMEN

Compared to

38% MEN

52% SINGLE PARENTS

Compared to

38% MARRIED PARENTS

44% COHABITING, TWO-PARENT

70% DIVORCED PARENTS

75% WIDOWED PARENTS

- Welsh Government should use Gender Budgeting from the beginning of any budgetary decision, as laid out in the Gender Equality Review, and ensure all policies and laws, as well as budgetary decisions responding to the pandemic do not disproportionately impact women, or favour men
- Universal Basis Income should be piloted with a view to using it as a Wales-wide tool to eliminate poverty and reduce stigma around benefit claimants

5. CARING FOR CHILDREN

When asked what their employer was likely to do if they were forced to take on extra childcare responsibilities; 23% of women and 11% of men said the most likely response would be that their employer would give them time off without any pay. This is an especially concerning response considering that women are still undertaking proportionately higher levels of childcare than men. Before March 2020, 63% of women stated that they did most of the childcare, compared with 14% of men. Men were more likely than women to state that they felt both parents did an equal amount of childcare (57% of fathers compared to 31% of mothers). Mothers were 8 times less likely to state that their partners did most of the childcare (3% compared to 26% of fathers). There is a clear disparity between the perceptions of equal caring responsibilities between women and men: mothers are far more likely to consider themselves the primary carers and fathers are more likely to see themselves as equally responsible carers of children.

CHILDCARE PERCEPTIONS

Before March 2020

63% WOMEN
said they did most of the
childcare compared to
14% MEN

31% MOTHERS
said they did equal amount
of childcare compared to
57% FATHERS

3% MOTHERS
said their partners did most
of the childcare compared to
26% FATHERS

In December, women were still doing more of the childcare; 63% of women compared to 17% of men. This trend was also apparent among BAME people where, prior to the first lockdown in March 2020: 65% of women indicated that they did most of the childcare compared with 5% of men. In December 2020, 60% of BAME women were doing the majority of the childcare, compared to 10% of men.

The same is true for supervising children: amongst all respondents, before March 2020, 60% of women and 17% of men did most of the child supervision while they were doing something else (for example playing, watching TV). This is currently 58% of women and 24% of men. Among BAME people, 53% of women and 20% of men are currently doing most of the child supervision. Before March 2020, 48% of BAME women and 17% of BAME men stated that they did the majority of child supervision.

When respondents were asked 'If your child's nursery/childminder/school closed, or your child had to self-isolate due to COVID-19, and you had to take on additional caring responsibilities, which of the following do you think would be the most likely to happen?'³ 30% of households earning less than £20,000 a year stated that 'I currently work from

³ Options included: 'I currently work from home and would continue to do so'; 'My employer would give me time off without any pay'; 'My employer would give me time off with full pay'; 'I would be expected to take annual leave/sick leave'; 'I don't currently work from home but would be able to do so'; 'I would not be allowed to take time off work and would lose my job'; 'Other'; 'Don't know'.

home and would continue to do so'; this figure rose by 10 percentage points for those households earning more than £40,000 a year. 13% of those in the lower earning bracket stated, 'I don't currently work from home but would be able to do so', while 8% of the more affluent households stated the same.

WEN WALES RECOMMENDS:

- Welsh Government's childcare offer should allow all parents to have access to affordable childcare provisions from 6 months, regardless of employment status of parents
- Welsh Government must invest in the childcare and nursery sector to create new jobs and ensure a committed and diverse work force in the sector
- Extra annual leave should be given to single parents, as has happened in Germany, so they can fulfil their childcare responsibilities

6. CARING FOR ADULT DEPENDENTS

Women's caring responsibilities increased during lockdown. Before March 2020, 29% of women and 11% of men did most of the caring for adult relatives or friends and at the time of our survey, 35% of women and 12% of men did most of this care. Before March 2020, 27% of BAME women, compared to 13% of BAME men, were responsible for the care of adult dependents; now 26% of BAME women are doing the majority of adult care compared to 13% of BAME men.

When we asked those who had been furloughed what they thought contributed to their employers' decision to place them on furlough, households with lower incomes were three times as likely (12%) as those with higher incomes (4%) to state that they were furloughed so they could look after an adult. Comparatively, those who were furloughed to look after their children were almost equally represented across household incomes at around a third of respondents (30% for those from lower income households, 34% from high income households).

WEN WALES RECOMMENDS:

- Employers need to recognise that Wales has an aging population that requires workers to be carers, often for elderly relatives and children at the same time
- Welsh Government should invest in a caring economy that values and rewards currently unpaid care, in line with the recommendations in the Women's Budget Group's report *Creating a Caring Economy: A Call to Action*⁴

⁴ <https://wbg.org.uk/analysis/creating-a-caring-economy-a-call-to-action-2/>

7. HOUSEHOLD RESPONSIBILITIES

Alongside childcare and caring responsibilities, women are still doing the majority of the housework. We surveyed those in two-parent heterosexual households and they said that before the pandemic, 72% of women and 17% of men did most of the housework (i.e. cleaning and laundry). During the pandemic this did not change with 71% of women and 22% of men saying that they were doing the majority of this work.

However, 46% of fathers stated that this work was currently being done equally by themselves and their female partners, compared to just 24% of mothers saying the same about their male partners – before the pandemic, these figures were similar at 43% and 22% respectively. These statistics show that almost half of fathers think they are doing an equal share of the housework, while mothers have said that household labour is equally shared between partners in just a quarter of households.

Among BAME respondents, there has been an increase in the amount of housework undertaken by women; before March 2020, 57% of women and 7% of men did the majority of the housework and at the time of our survey 71% of women and 13% of men were responsible for this work. As with the wider population, there is a disparity of perception as to whom does most of the housework. 7 out of 10 BAME women stated that they did most of the housework and 1% of women stated that their male partner did the majority. Just a quarter of women stated that this work was equally shared. By comparison, 55% of men stated that this work was equally shared, with 13% saying it was mostly them, and 30% saying that much of the housework was done by their female partner.

Finally, the survey showed that women were still doing most of the shopping for groceries and essentials; before March 2020, 62% of women and 30% of men said they were solely responsible for the shopping. At the time of our survey, 60% of women and 37% of men are responsible for groceries and essentials. Among BAME respondents, this figure is more equal: before March 2020, 52% of women and 53% of men said they were responsible for the shopping and during the first wave, this figure was 58% of women and 60% of men.

WEN WALES RECOMMENDS:

- Gender stereotypes need to be tackled in schools and not reinforced
- A continued effort to condemn gender stereotyping in the media, such as with the Advertising Standards Commissioner, needs to continue, with toys that do not encourage girls to 'keep house' and boys to have 'adventures'
- Welsh Government launch an awareness raising campaign to fight against gender stereotyping

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.

Standard Life Foundation

Standard Life Foundation has supported this as part of its mission to contribute towards strategic change which improves financial well-being in the UK. The Foundation funds research, policy work and campaigning activities to tackle financial problems and improve living standards for people on low-to-middle incomes in the UK. It is an independent charitable foundation registered in Scotland (SC040877).

Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust

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