



Engender Parliamentary Briefing: Impact of COVID-19 on Women in the Economy

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BACKGROUND

Engender is Scotland's feminist policy and advocacy organisation, working to secure women's political, economic and social equality with men. The Covid-19 pandemic has upended the social and economic wellbeing of citizens around the world exacerbating pre-existing inequalities. UN Women now estimate that the pandemic risks setting women's equality back 25 years.¹ Women have been left managing additional demands on home and family life as they are confined to homes with significant increases in housework, caring and schooling work and reductions in services and external support that enables them to participate in paid work and public life.

Engender estimates that the impact of lost productivity because of mothers' additional childcare while schools are closed amounts to a loss £15 million a day in Scotland.² There is an urgent need to reassess the approach to gender within recovery and for Scotland to properly understand and respond to the impact of the pandemic on women's economic and other rights as we enter the next phase of the pandemic and begin to fully focus on recovery.

SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS

The Gender Equality Index

The Scottish Government published the Gender Equality Index in December 2020.³ The Index is the result of years of research and engagement by the Government and gender experts, including women's organisations, and charts progress towards equality in a series of policy domains with the aim of measuring progress over time. While the Index is an extremely welcome tool that will improve the collection and use

¹ See BBC (2020) 'Coronavirus and gender: More chores for women set back gains in equality'. Available at <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-55016842>> citing data from UN Women (2020). Available at <<https://data.unwomen.org/publications/whose-time-care-unpaid-care-and-domestic-work-during-covid-19>>

² Engender (2020) Gender and Unpaid Work: The Impact of Covid-19 on Women's Caring Roles. Available at https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/1594974358_Gender--unpaid-work---the-impact-of-Covid-19-on-womens-caring-roles.pdf

³ Scottish Government (2020) Scotland's Gender Equality Index 2020. Available at <<https://data.gov.scot/genderindex/gender-equality-index-2020.html>>

of gender-sensitive sex-disaggregated data⁴ in Scotland there remains gaps or poor-quality data in several areas.

Gender equality is represented with a numerical value from one to 100 in each domain, with an overall score of 73/100. The 'work' domain sits at 76 and it is noted that "there was most inequality in 'labour market inactivity due to caring'". In the 'time' domain, the biggest drivers of inequality were 'housework and cooking' and 'non-developmental childcare'.

Women's rights, Covid-19 and the economy

Since March 2020 we have observed increased unpaid work, loss of paid work, greater reliance on state support and increasing levels of gender-based violence.⁵ Women were already more likely than men to experience poverty, and the increases in applications to UK social security indicate that many more women are being and will be being exposed to its most egregious impacts, including the two-child limit and five-week wait. Polling from Fawcett and Ipsos Mori has found that six in ten women were "finding it hard to stay positive."⁶

Scotland's gender pay gap is 13.3%⁷ and is larger for women who face multiple structural inequalities. Occupational segregation means that women – especially women of colour and younger women – are more likely to be employed in a sector which is shut down or affected by social distancing restrictions.⁸ Additionally 77% of workers in "high risk" roles are women, work which is frequently undervalued and underpaid, and of the million workers in high-risk roles during the covid-19 pandemic response paid less than 60% of median UK weekly wages, 98% are women.⁹

Women are less likely to have access to savings to rely on if hours are reduced or they are made redundant,¹⁰ and while furlough has put a much-needed break on unemployment, it leaves many facing a 20% reduction in incomes if their employer

⁴ Gender-sensitive sex-disaggregated data is broken down by sex, so that it is possible to compare and contrast differences between men and women and collected with an understanding of gender as a social difference phenomenon.

⁵ Engender (2020) Women and Covid-19. Available at <<https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Engender-Briefing---Women-and-COVID-19.pdf>>

⁶ H. Siddique (2020) UK women bear emotional brunt of Covid-19 turmoil – poll. The Guardian.

⁷ Close the Gap (2020) Gender Pay Gap Statistic 2019. Available at <<https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/Working-Paper-21-Gender-Pay-Gap-statistics-2019.pdf>>

⁸ Close the Gap (2020) Disproportionate Disruption: The impact of Covid-19 on women's labour market equality. Available at: <https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/DisproportionateDisruption---The-impact-ofCOVID-19-on-womens-labour-market-equality.pdf>

⁹ UK Women's Budget Group (2020) Crises Collide: Women and Covid-19. Available at <https://wbg.org.uk/wpcontent/uploads/2020/04/FINAL>.

¹⁰ Close the Gap (2020) Disproportionate Disruption The impact of Covid-19 on women's labour market equality. Available at: <https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/DisproportionateDisruption---The-impact-ofCOVID-19-on-womens-labour-market-equality.pdf>

does not supplement the Government scheme. Across the UK 1.19 million women were furloughed on 31st October 2020 compared with 1.14 million men.¹¹

These most recent figures reflect the situation in October 2020 and represent a substantial - 73% - fall in the number of furloughs from the peak of the first lockdown in spring 2020. With the new restrictions, the current situation is likely to be closer to the first peak in terms of the impacts. We do not yet know what the situation will look like when furlough is ended, when economic disruption may affect further sectors, such as public administration.

The impacts of unpaid work

The degree of care work households – and therefore women - have been expected to pick up due to Covid-19 restrictions has been largely presumed and under-supported, with schools closed for weeks, social care packages disrupted and access to formal and informal childcare limited. Survey data from Carers UK suggests there may now be as many as 1.1 million unpaid carers in Scotland, 61% of which are women.¹² In 2018, 85% of people aged 16-64 who were ‘inactive’ due to caring were women. The Gender Equality Index score on care is just 30.¹³

According to previous Scottish time-use data, women did approximately 68% of the housework and 68% of the childcare,¹⁴ and in 2020 women spent 266 minutes on unpaid work per day, compared to 211 minutes for men.¹⁵ Data from the first UK lockdown showed a marked increase in childcare undertaken by both women and by men, but also that women were interrupted by children while doing paid work 50% more than fathers.¹⁶ Even where mothers were the higher earner, they still did more childcare and the same amount of housework as their male partner.¹⁷

Women have described to Engender the impossible pressure they face, with many indicating that their only option is to leave the labour market altogether. One woman told us:

¹¹ UK Government (2020) Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme statistics: December 2020. Available at <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-job-retention-scheme-statistics-december-2020/coronavirus-job-retention-scheme-statistics-december-2020>>

¹² Carers UK (2020) Carers Week 2020 Research Report The rise in the number of unpaid carers during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak. Available at https://www.carersuk.org/images/CarersWeek2020/CW_2020_Research_Report_WEB.pdf

¹³ Scottish Government (2020) Scotland’s Gender Equality Index 2020. Available at <<https://data.gov.scot/genderindex/gender-equality-index-2020.html>>

¹⁴ Scottish Government (2019) Centre for Time Use Research Time Use Survey 2014-15: Results for Scotland. Scottish Government. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/centre-time-use-research-time-use-survey-2014-15-results-scotland/>

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ A. Andrew et. al. (2020) How are mothers and fathers balancing work and family under lockdown? IFS.

¹⁷ A. Andrew et. al. (2020) How are mothers and fathers balancing work and family under lockdown? IFS

“[I] had to give up my job (most likely career) as a midwife as the final straw was no childcare if no school, and if I was working I'd then have to work alternate days to my partner, reducing his ability to work when he earns more money for the household... Myself and my children are now left completely reliant on my new partner for money. Since giving up my NHS job, I have applied for universal credit however it has been several weeks and I have yet to hear anything.”

‘Mother of 3’, January 17, 2021¹⁸

Employers have been asked to “work with” Scottish Government advice¹⁹ and employers may furlough employees due to childcare. However as many as 71% of working mothers who asked for furlough due to childcare had their request denied.²⁰ Figures also show that 25% of parents were using annual leave to manage childcare, and that 10% of men had been forced to reduce their hours, compared to 18% of women. As annual leave and unpaid time off are exhausted, we are extremely likely to enter a new phase of women’s economic instability.

New data from Engender and other women’s organisations shows that mothers who work part-time are more likely to report they would have to take time off on no pay due to school closures (20% compared to 12% of mothers who work full-time).²¹ It is therefore clear that the worst economic impacts will be felt by mothers on the lowest incomes.

Gendering the economic recovery

Thus far, Scotland’s approach to recovery has not put gender equality or pre-existing inequality at its core. The report of the Advisory Group on Economic Recovery was not well gendered, failing to focus on the decimation of female-dominated sectors or unpaid work and there is little evidence of them in the recommendations. Economic recovery which focusses on traditional beneficiaries of investment such as those in Scotland’s economic strategy²² will only increase inequality between women and men even further.

¹⁸ All stories submitted via our ‘Covid-19 and Women’s Equality’ page can be found at <https://www.engender.org.uk/covid-19/>

¹⁹ Official Report. 13 January 2021. Available at

<https://www.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/report.aspx?r=13046&i=118021&c=2310086#ScotParlOR>

²⁰ Alexandra Topping (2021) Furlough refused to 71% of UK working mothers while schools shut - survey. The Guardian. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/jan/13/furlough-refused-to-71-of-uk-working-mothers-while-schools-shut-survey?CMP=share_btn_tw

²¹ Women’s Budget Group (2021) Mothers on the lowest incomes are nine times more at risk of losing their job due to school closures in the UK. Available at <https://wbg.org.uk/media/press-releases/mothers-on-the-lowest-incomes-are-eight-times-more-at-risk-of-losing-their-job-due-to-school-closures-in-the-uk/>

²² Scottish Government (2015) Scotland’s Economic Strategy

There is a real risk that the perception that gender equality sits separately or secondary to economic recovery will lead to more unequal outcomes in the medium and longer term. Recent research by the Commission on Gender Equal Economy has shown that investing 2% of UK GDP in care sector roles would produce “2.7 times as many jobs in the economy overall as an equivalent investment in construction.”²³

The recent publication of the Social Renewal Advisory Group’s report ‘If Not Now, When?’²⁴ makes clear the need to consider gender, economic and social recovery as indivisible aspects of the response to Covid-19. The report makes a number of recommendations vital to ensuring women’s equality is not reversed and instead further enhanced as part of a redistribution of power, resources and labour within Scotland. Key ‘Calls to Action’ include:

- Childcare and social care should be designated as key growth sectors in future economic strategies;
- Improved employability programmes for women, including single parents and carers and clarity for women with No Recourse to Public Funds; and
- Developing a Minimum Income Guarantee which takes full account of the gendered nature of financial insecurity and increases aggregate demand in local economies.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Contact: Eilidh Dickson, Policy and Parliamentary Manager, Engender

Email: eilidh.dickson@engender.org.uk

ABOUT US

Engender is a membership organisation working on feminist agendas in Scotland and Europe, to increase women’s power and influence and to make visible the impact of sexism on women, men and society. We provide support to individuals, organisations and institutions who seek to achieve gender equality and justice.

²³ Creating A Caring Economy: A Call To Action <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/WBG-Report-v10.pdf>

²⁴ Social Renewal Advisory Group (2021) If Not Now, When? Available at <
<https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/independent-report/2021/01/not-now-social-renewal-advisory-board-report-january-2021/documents/not-now-social-renewal-advisory-board-report/not-now-social-renewal-advisory-board-report/govscot%3Adocument/not-now-social-renewal-advisory-board-report.pdf>>