



Women, Caring Responsibilities and Furloughing During COVID-19 24 April 2020

This briefing sets out concerns that Close the Gap and Engender have on the impact of the furlough provisions of the Job Retention Scheme on women with caring responsibilities. Emerging evidence shows that a lack of access to adequate furlough leave is exacerbating women's labour market equality, and amplifying women's disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care.

The UK Government's Job Retention Scheme enables employers to place employees on furlough leave and claim 80% of their earnings up to £2500 per month. On 4 April, provision was extended to employees who are unable to work because of caring responsibilities.

Women do the majority of unpaid care in the home for children, older people and disabled people. They are more likely than men to take annual leave, sick leave and unpaid leave to do childcare, and twice as likely to give up paid work in order to care. Women's propensity to have a caring role is key cause of Scotland's gender pay gap and women's enduring labour market inequality¹. In the current context of COVID-19, the unequal distribution of care will be replicated during lockdown, and in many cases magnified, following the closure of schools and nurseries. 91% of lone parents are women, and lone parents face particularly stark challenges managing full-time childcare with employment.

Close the Gap and Engender have significant concerns around the impact of the furlough provisions on women's ability to manage their caring responsibilities while also being expected to work from home.

- There is **no employee right to be furloughed, it must be jointly agreed between the employer and the employee**. Widespread inflexible working practice shows that many employers do not support women to balance their work with childcare, and in the current context may not furlough their female employees for this reason. Furthermore, the significant increase in Universal Credit claims indicates that many employers are choosing to make employees redundant rather than furlough them².

¹ Close the Gap (2018) *The Gender Penalty: Exploring the causes and solutions to Scotland's gender pay gap*

² Women's Budget Group (2020) *Crises Collide: Women and COVID-19*

- There is **low awareness among employers of the furlough provision for employees with caring responsibilities**, and as a result many women are facing immense challenges as they struggle to provide childcare for young children while also working from home.
- There is **no provision for part-time furloughing** which would provide a solution for many women who want to continue to work during lockdown while also providing childcare at home. There is also evidence that some women have had an involuntary reduction in hours which adversely affects their pay and puts them and their families at higher risk of in-work poverty. The lack of part-time furloughing may force some women to leave their job creating longer-term impacts to their income, career, and the wider economy as employers lose female talent.

Close the Gap and Engender are currently working to gather information about women's experiences of furlough. The Office for National Statistics has produced a number of publications on the impact of Covid-19 on work, care, and household finances but these are not sex-disaggregated and do not appear to take into account the gendered distribution of care³. Our organisations are working with other women's organisations across the UK to conduct polling that is more gender-sensitive. Engender is also working to gather women's stories through its website and social media⁴. From this come some relevant accounts of women's experiences which are detailed in the annex.

Close the Gap and Engender call on Scottish Government to:

1. Urge UK Government to make provisions for part-time furlough leave in the Job Retention Scheme.
2. Raise awareness of the furlough provisions for employees with caring responsibilities with employers in Scotland.
3. Through Scottish Government business engagement channels encourage Scottish employers to identify where female employees wish to be places on furlough leave in order to manage childcare.

About Us

Close the Gap is Scotland policy advocacy organisation working on women's labour market equality. **Engender** is Scotland's feminist policy and advocacy organisation.

³ See:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandwellbeing/bulletins/coronavirusandthesocialimpactsongreatbritain/23april2020>

⁴ See: <https://www.engender.org.uk/covid-19/>

Annex: Evidence of women's experiences submitted to Engender

"My partner and I have busy jobs and two young primary-age children. My employer hasn't mentioned furlough as an option for me and I am struggling to cope with two children who don't understand what is going on and my workload. My employer is offering flexibility, but there just aren't enough hours in the day for both me and my partner to do all the work we have to do and make sure that our wee people are taken care of. I'm worried about my mental health, but mostly about my children. My partner earns a lot more than me and I'm seriously considering resigning."

"I'm trying to balance working from home and caring for a pre-schooler and eight year old and being unsuccessful at both. I'm feeling resentful towards my partner who is also working from home but does 12 hour days in a home office only surfacing for food and comfort breaks. He works extremely hard but all of the homeschooling and childcare responsibilities are down to me. I am about to be redeployed and have asked to work weekends and a couple of days during the week to make things easier."

"My office has staff working at home for now. I have a toddler who usually attends day care while I work at the office. I'm struggling to balance work and childcare. With a small child present trying to focus on work is problematic. Trying to do my paid work and my main (and my favourite) job as a mother does not combine well at all. My partner is still working, out with the home and I can't help but feel envy that I want to go to work as normal. I can feel the impact this is having on my mental health and the overall health of my small family. When my partner returns from work I try to focus on additional work tasks that I have not completed for that day and can feel the expectation from my employer, but the feeling of constant working from morning to night has me feeling that I am not being the best mother or meeting my work expectations. I have read information online on how to work from home with a toddler, but it is so unrealistic."

"In Facebook groups I see mums asking for advice and they are working until midnight after putting kids to bed so that they can fit in their hours etc. I'm really, really worried about burnout for so many women. Because the majority of cases will be women. They have more flexible employers. They work part time so are expected to do it all. They are more involved with school work etc."