

# CLOSE THE GAP BRIEFING

## An Unequal Burden: How Covid-19 has affected women's employment, financial security and unpaid work

June 2022

### 1. About this briefing

Women's inequality has been exacerbated by the social, economic and labour market implications of the Covid-19 crisis. This underscores the need for a gendered approach to labour market and economic policymaking in the Covid context. To date, however, women's needs have been largely invisible in Scottish Government policy responses and the lack of gender-sensitive, sex-disaggregated data has created barriers to achieving a full understanding of women's experiences of the pandemic. Moreover, intersectional data relating to the experiences of disabled and Black and minority (BME) women during the crisis is almost entirely lacking.

In response to these issues, Close the Gap joined with other women's organisations across UK including Engender, the UK Women's Budget Group, the Fawcett Society, Women's Equality Network Wales and the Northern Ireland Women's Budget Group in a polling project to collect quantitative survey data on the impact of Covid-19 on women. As part of this project, funded by abrdn Financial Fairness Trust and the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust, three rounds of polling were conducted from November 2020 to July 2021. Each round of polling focused on a particular theme:

- The experiences of women with caring responsibilities (November and December 2020);
- Women's wellbeing, mental health and financial security (February 2021); and
- The impact of the pandemic on young women in Scotland (June and July 2021).<sup>1</sup>

Close the Gap worked with Engender to produce three briefings utilising the Scottish-level survey data, which assisted in addressing some of the critical data gaps that existed around women's experiences of the crisis. This briefing collates the key findings from the three rounds of polling data to provide a summary of the project findings in the realm of employment, training, skills and poverty.

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<sup>1</sup> In Scotland, wave 1 gathered data from 721 parents; wave 2 gathered data from 509 adults and a booster sample of 401 Black and minority ethnic adults; and wave 3 gathered data from 501 young people aged 18 to 30 and a booster sample of 266 Black and minority ethnic young people.

## 2. Key Findings

The survey data gathered as part of this project provided additional evidence to illuminate how the economic and labour market consequences of the pandemic were impacting women's financial security, wellbeing and experience of employment. It also provided information on the specific experiences of young, disabled and BME women during the Covid-19 crisis. Key findings regarding women's experiences of the pandemic include:

### Young women are more likely than their male counterparts to report barriers to accessing training, development and employability opportunities<sup>2</sup>

Among respondents who wanted to undertake job related training:

- Young women were six percentage points more likely than their male counterparts (37% to 43%) to say that they have not been able to access in-work training, government funded training and development, or government funded employability support.
- Around half of young disabled women (51%) reported not being able to access training, development or employability support compared to 40% of non-disabled women and 31% of non-disabled men.
- Almost half of female respondents (45%) said that the reason they could not access these opportunities was that they could not afford it. While not being able to afford opportunities was also the main reason cited by young men, the numbers were significantly lower (30%).
- One in 10 female respondents said that they could not access these opportunities because of their caring roles. No male respondents cited caring responsibilities as a reason for why they could not access training, development and employability opportunities.

### BME and disabled women felt they were unfairly chosen for furlough as a result of their race, sex, age, disability or health condition<sup>3</sup>

- Around a fifth of BME women (21%) felt they were unfairly selected for furlough because of their race, sex, age, disability or health condition compared to 1% of white women.
- Almost a fifth (19%) of disabled women felt they were unfairly selected for furlough because of their race, sex, age, disability or health condition compared to 1% of non-disabled women.

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<sup>2</sup> Close the Gap and Engender (2021) *Joint briefing on young women's employment, financial security and mental health* available at <https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/Joint-briefing-on-the-impact-of-Covid-19-on-young-womens-employment-financial-security-and-mental-health—October-2021.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Close the Gap and Engender (2020) *Joint briefing on the impact of Covid-19 on women with childcare responsibilities in Scotland* available at <https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/Close-the-Gap-and-Engender-Joint-Briefing-on-the-impact-of-COVID-19-on-women-with-childcare-responsibilities-in-Scotland.pdf>

## Young women, particularly young BME women, were less likely to have their furloughed salary topped up by their employer<sup>4</sup>

- Just over one-third of young women (35%) had their furloughed salary topped-up by their employer, compared to over half of young men (53%).
- Just over one-quarter (27%) of young BME women had their furloughed salary topped-up by their employer compared to 37% of young white women.

## Women, particularly young women, disabled women and BME women, are more likely to report rising financial insecurity as a result of the pandemic

- Women were more than twice as likely as men to be worried about how they will pay their rent or mortgage in February 2021 (24% of women compared to 10% of men).<sup>5</sup>
- Young women were seven percentage points more likely than their male counterparts (41% to 34%) to say their financial situation had worsened since the start of the pandemic.<sup>6</sup>
- Disabled young women were 20 percentage points more likely than non-disabled young women (56% to 36%) to say their financial situation had worsened since the start of the pandemic.<sup>7</sup>
- In July 2021, more than two-thirds (37%) of young disabled women were not confident that they would have enough money for the next 12 months, compared to just over a quarter (27%) of non-disabled young women and 18% of non-disabled men.<sup>8</sup>
- More than a third (38%) of young BME women were not confident in July 2021 that they would have enough money for the next 12 months, compared to 27% of white women and 24% of white men.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Close the Gap and Engender (2021) *Joint briefing on young women's employment, financial security and mental health* available at <https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/Joint-briefing-on-the-impact-of-Covid-19-on-young-womens-employment-financial-security-and-mental-health—October-2021.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Close the Gap and Engender (2021) *Joint briefing on the impact of Covid-19 on women's wellbeing, mental health and financial security* available at <https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/Close-the-Gap-and-Engender-Joint-briefing-on-the-impact-of-COVID-19-on-womens-wellbeing-mental-health-and-financial-security.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Close the Gap and Engender (2021) *Joint briefing on young women's employment, financial security and mental health* available at <https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/Joint-briefing-on-the-impact-of-Covid-19-on-young-womens-employment-financial-security-and-mental-health—October-2021.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

## Women continue to do the majority of unpaid care and domestic work in the home

- Almost three-quarters (72%) of mothers reported that it is mostly them who do housework, such as cleaning and laundry. By contrast, only 4% of mothers stated that housework was mostly done by their partner and 24% said it was done by ‘both equally’.<sup>10</sup>
- 61% of women stated that they mostly do shopping for groceries and essentials. Only 10% of women said shopping was mostly done by their partner and 28% said it was done equally.<sup>11</sup>
- Less than half of young women with children (49%) are confident that they will have enough childcare support over the next 12 months.<sup>12</sup>

## 3. What have we learnt about women’s experiences of the pandemic?

Women and men had different levels of economic wellbeing before Covid-19 that have been deepened by the crisis. Indeed, UN Women estimated that the pandemic risks setting women’s equality back 25 years.<sup>13</sup> The data gathered over the course of this project has reinforced this analysis, highlighting that women have been impacted in multiple and specific ways by the social, economic and labour market impacts of the pandemic.

While the gendered nature of poverty in Scotland pre-dates the pandemic, the crisis has exacerbated these trends. This polling data highlights that women are more likely than their male counterparts to be reporting higher levels of financial insecurity as a result of the pandemic. The data shows that the rising tide of poverty has been particularly acute for BME and disabled women, groups who were already more likely to be experiencing poverty prior to the crisis. These trends are likely to be compounded by the ongoing cost of living crisis which is disproportionately impacting women’s financial resilience.<sup>14</sup> As a result of the inextricable links between women’s poverty and child poverty, women’s rising financial precarity has stark implications for Scotland’s child poverty rates. Our analysis highlights that tackling women’s labour market inequality remains critical to tackling women’s poverty, and child poverty.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Close the Gap and Engender (2020) *Joint briefing on the impact of Covid-19 on women with childcare responsibilities in Scotland* available at <https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/Close-the-Gap-and-Engender-Joint-Briefing-on-the-impact-of-COVID-19-on-women-with-childcare-responsibilities-in-Scotland.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Close the Gap and Engender (2021) *Joint briefing on young women’s employment, financial security and mental health* available at <https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/Joint-briefing-on-the-impact-of-Covid-19-on-young-womens-employment-financial-security-and-mental-health—October-2021.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> UN Women (2020) *Whose Time to Care? Unpaid care and domestic work during Covid-19* available at <https://data.unwomen.org/publications/whose-time-care-unpaid-care-and-domestic-work-during-covid-19>

<sup>14</sup> Women’s Budget Group (2022) *The gendered impact of the cost-of-living crisis* available at <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/The-gendered-impact-of-the-cost-of-living-crisis.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Close the Gap (2022) “The Child Poverty Delivery Plan maintains a strong focus on work and earnings, but the need to address women’s poverty is less visible” available at <https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/news/blog/the-child-poverty-delivery-plan-maintains-a-strong-focus-on-work-and-earnings-but-the-need/>

This data provides further evidence of the substantial challenges for women with caring roles during the pandemic. Pre-pandemic time use data shows that women in opposite sex couples did 68% of the housework and 68% of the childcare.<sup>16</sup> Prior to the outbreak of the crisis, the Scottish Government's Gender Equality Index revealed that 85% of people who were 'economically inactive' due to caring were women.<sup>17</sup> These pre-existing gendered patterns of unpaid work and care were only exacerbated by the Covid-19 crisis, particularly during periods of school and nursery closures. During the pandemic, increasing unpaid caring responsibilities impacted women's ability to do paid work, further threatening women's financial security.

As a result of Covid-19 job disruption and the impacts of wider labour market shifts including Brexit, the drive to net-zero and automation, there is likely to be increased demand for upskilling and reskilling support in the coming years. However, these findings highlight the gendered barriers young women experience in accessing training, with barriers such as financial cost being more pronounced for women than men. This aligns with wider evidence on women's experience of training.<sup>18</sup> Gender-blind skills initiatives entrench the occupational segregation that characterises Scotland's education and skills pipeline, funnelling women into low-paid, undervalued jobs and sectors. It is therefore vital all skills policymaking and service design developed in response to the changing labour market in Scotland addresses occupational segregation and the under-utilisation of women's skills as a central aim.

Overall, these findings underscore the importance of gathering and utilising intersectional gender-sensitive sex-disaggregated data in policymaking. Moreover, while gender mainstreaming approaches are key to the development of policy responses that meet women's needs, this is not yet visible Scottish Government policymaking. There has been a particular failure to mainstream gender equality considerations into policy responses to the pandemic. As we emerge from Covid-19, it is vital that Scottish Government and its delivery agencies embed gender mainstreaming approaches and improve the range of intersectional gender-disaggregated data used in labour market, skills and anti-poverty policymaking. Without such action, policymaking will continue to cement women's economic and labour market inequality.

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<sup>16</sup> Wishart R, Dunatchik A, Speight S, Mayer M (2019) *Changing patterns in parental time use in the UK*. NatCen. Available at: [http://natcen.ac.uk/media/1722408/Parental\\_time\\_use\\_report.pdf](http://natcen.ac.uk/media/1722408/Parental_time_use_report.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Scottish Government (2020) *Gender Equality Index*

<sup>18</sup> See House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee (2016) *Inquiry into the gender pay gap* and Aldrige, Fiona and Corin Egglestone, (2015) *Learning, Skills and Progression at Work: Analysis from the 2015 adult participation in learning survey*, UK Commission for Employment and Skills

## About the research

The data used in this briefing is based on research 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.

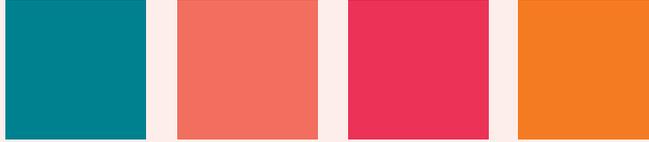
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Responding to the growing crisis of democracy and erosion of trust in the political class and institutions, JRRT's priority area of work for both grant-making and external activities is democratic and political reform.



abrdn Financial Fairness Trust 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 trust registered in Scotland (SC040877).



Close the Gap is Scotland's policy and advocacy organisation working on women's labour market participation. We work with policymakers, employers and unions to influence and enable action that will address the causes of women's inequality at work.

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