

Women's Budget Group Gender Equal Economy Commission Briefing
By the ESRC International Centre for Lifecourse Studies in Society and Health (ICLS)
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Evidence suggests that achieving gender equality in work makes sound economic sense, in addition to being fair and just. The [OECD has stated](#) that a 50% reduction in the gender gap in labour force participation would lead to an additional gain in GDP of about 6% by 2030, with a further 6% gain (12% in total) if complete convergence occurred. However, it adds that evidence emerging from business is that progress on this has completely stalled. Research from our centre, outlined below, supports this. Much of the UK Government's attention has been focused on the gender pay gap, with recommendations being made to businesses around 'What Works' to help women progress in the workplace. But there is more to gender inequality than the issue of remuneration. Persistent gender inequality in childcare responsibility, adult caregiving and housework continue to create an uneven playing field.

Our research

ICLS has conducted research looking at the extent to which gender divisions in work persist. We found that women remain much more likely than men to reduce their working hours or take a career break in response to parenthood. Our work has found that, so far, generational change in this area is almost entirely the result of a greater proportion of women adopting traditionally 'male' employment patterns (i.e., continuous full-time employment), rather than of any discernible trend towards men reducing hours or taking time off work to accommodate parenthood. [1] Even amongst young couples without children where both work full-time, women do on average 10 more hours of housework each week than their male partners [2].

There is also a gender imbalance in the provision of informal care to adults and its impact on paid employment. We know from previous work that working-age women are more likely than working-age men to take up care provision for someone outside the home, and to spend more hours providing care among those who do take up care provision. Our work has also shown that women with weaker long-term ties to paid employment are more likely to provide care to a parent-or-parent in law [3].

At ICLS we look at how people's social circumstances influence their health and wellbeing. Research undertaken over the last 10? Years shows evidence of links between:

1. Employment and health: Women who spend long periods of time out of employment to look after home and family end up less healthy in mid-life, including being more overweight/obese and having higher levels of inflammation, a biological risk factor linked with chronic disease and stress. [4,5,6]

2. Long work hours, weekend working and health: There is a growing body of evidence documenting the health effects of long work hours. Our work suggests that links between long work hours and depression are stronger for women than for men, and that weekend working is associated with depressive symptoms in women. [7] The greater risk for women may be linked with their double burden of combining long hours with caregiving or domestic responsibilities, and women working long hours may be working in male-dominated sectors.

3. Flexible work and health: Men and women who make use of flexible work arrangements show lower levels of biological markers of stress than those who do not. This is particularly true for mothers who have two or more children under the age of 15 at home. [8]

4. Parental employment and child wellbeing: Children whose mothers are employed during the early years display fewer socioemotional or behavioural difficulties by the time they reach school than children whose mothers have not been employed in the pre-school years. Much of this is due to employed mothers having higher educational qualifications and better

mental health, as well as working households having higher income. But the benefits of maternal employment are stronger for girls than for boys and aren't entirely explained by these other factors for girls. [9] Others have found these associations to persist well into school age.

5. Adult caregiving and health: Our work has shown that care provision is more likely to have a negative influence on the health of women than men, particularly if women are combining care provision with full-time employment, and particularly younger women under the age of 45 [10-11].

What we learn

This body of research indicates a need to extend paid paternity leave so that fathers establish patterns of involvement from the beginning. Our work suggests that fathers who are involved in parenting early-on remain more involved over time. [12] Yet UK fathers have access to only two weeks of statutory paternity leave, and shared parental leave, which became available in the UK in April 2015, can only be accessed if mothers opt to give some of their provision to their partners and uptake remains very low at two to eight per cent. Evidence from Nordic countries suggests that provision of adequately-paid, 'use it or lose it' paternity leave provision and high-quality affordable childcare are pre-requisites for achieving uptake of paternity leave and greater gender equality in employment.

While improvements in maternity leave provision in the UK, such as the extension to twelve months leave in 2006, have been a welcome contribution towards supporting mothers to maintain employment and perhaps avoid career damaging work breaks, the gender imbalance in domestic labour has perhaps not been helped by privileging of maternity leave over paternity leave.

Evidence gaps

We don't yet know whether gender differences in paid and unpaid domestic work will remain for millennial parents. There is a narrative of millennial men wanting to be more involved in family life; however, there is little quantitative evidence to support this narrative. We suffer from a lack of life course data to capture social change amongst the most recent generations. One reason for a lack of work and family data on millennial parents, is that they are forming their families later than previous cohorts so many have not yet become parents. We also do not currently have a birth cohort study in the UK that captures millennials.

The current covid19 lockdown has meant combining homeworking with homeschooling and childcare for many parents, as well as a greater need to support vulnerable people in our communities. Given what we know from pre-covid evidence, we might expect that these increased demands for unpaid care work are falling disproportionately on women, with knock on effects to working patterns and wellbeing. Population data on how couples are combining employment work and unpaid care work are currently being collected so we expect to have high-quality evidence on gender (in)equality for working parents in the covid lockdown context soon.

The data we use

Understanding Society - the largest longitudinal study of its kind interviewing around 40,000 households annually since 2009 collecting information on a wide range of economic, social, health, biological and psychological factors.

The four British birth cohort studies - these follow the same individuals from cradle to grave: people born in 1946, 1958, 1970 and 2001. Each of these studies includes thousands of individuals from across the UK collecting information on a range of economic, social, health, biological and psychological factors.

About ICLS

[ICLS](#) is a unique collaboration of leading epidemiologists, sociologists, biologists, statisticians, psychologists, clinical scientists and demographers based at UCL, the University of Manchester and the University Hospital Orebro in Sweden. Our research uses the [latest techniques in social science and biology to address some of the most pressing social and health problems facing us today](#). Using the UK's wealth of longitudinal studies which follow thousands of people, collecting information about their health, education, work, family and life experiences, ICLS work looks at how the social circumstances in which people live translate into poor health and unfavourable social outcomes across all stages of the life course - 'how life gets under the skin'.

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