

LSE Festival 2021 | Where are all the women?

*The UK government promised ‘everyone would play a crucial part’ in planning for life after the pandemic. Yet the Budget offered nothing on social care or childcare. **Lucy Thompson (LSE)** asks why an equal and fair recovery is not possible.*

At the beginning of 2020, 71% of women in the UK were in some form of employment. Within three months this had dropped by 5%, and is yet to recover. This attrition is not confined to the UK: [women in the US were four times more likely](#) to lose their job than men during the pandemic, in Italy five times more likely. While the situation in low- and middle-income countries goes largely unreported, it is known to be far worse there – as many women work in the informal economy, which has been decimated by the pandemic.

At an LSE Festival event on the UK’s Budget day, [COVID-19 in the UK: where are all the women?](#), speakers took the opportunity to consider how the government is falling short in its support for women.



“During times of crisis, we see an intensification of conservative social norms” – Clare Wenham, Assistant Professor of Global Health Policy, LSE

Women did more unpaid work before COVID-19, but they are now doing even more. Recent research by Clare Wenham highlights the three major reasons women have absorbed the bulk of unpaid labour during the pandemic. Firstly, women are more likely to be furloughed. Secondly, they are more likely to be employed in those sectors that have been shut down during the pandemic – hospitality, retail and beauty. This means women are more likely to be out of work and at home to manage day-to-day household chores. Thirdly, women have absorbed the labour associated with health security policy. The policies introduced in the UK to contain the spread of the virus have incurred a great deal of unpaid and unseen labour, including but not limited to extra caring responsibilities for children, and older and disabled adults cut off from regular care services. Women have borne the brunt of this: globally, women have taken on an addition 6.1 hours of domestic care every day.

“Equality is not an integral part of policymaking” – Bell Ribeiro-Addy MP, Women & Equalities Committee

Inequality in pandemic response is grounded in policies that do not account for gender. In February 2021, the Committee on Women and Equalities released a report accusing the government of failing to consider women in its response to COVID-19, which has been [“repeatedly skewed towards men”](#). The report argued that, if the moral case to support women was not enough, there is a business case to support women to engage in the formal economy if they want to. The government seemed to recognise this in its [response](#) to the report: “As we seek to build back better following the pandemic everyone will play a crucial part and we will reflect that in our policy development,” it promised.

Accordingly, expectations were high that the UK budget would address some of these inequalities. But while Rishi Sunak’s extension of the furlough scheme and promise of £90 million to support the violence against women sector were, of course, welcome, the devil is in the detail. Critical omissions to his plan included childcare and social care.

“Childcare, like social care, has had virtually no voice in this pandemic” – Mandu Reid, Leader of the Women’s Equality Party

Childcare is the cornerstone for women’s ability to engage in formal employment once their maternity leave has come to an end. It has been overlooked by the government since the beginning of the pandemic: the sector was not prioritised for PPE or vaccines, and has received limited financial support. This is not a new issue. There have been many calls in recent years to change the funding structure of childcare, which must be topped up by parent- or guardian-paid private fees. There are no fee caps in the UK compared to our European neighbours, increasing the already significant barrier to access for less wealthy parents. Those who require childcare in England typically spend around 33% of their income, compared to 9% in France and 5% in Spain.



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The pandemic has also been catastrophic for providers, who have lost business as parents have lost jobs and income in turn. [One in four](#) childcare providers could permanently close in 2021 – a loss of 150,000 places and hundreds of thousands of jobs, 92% of which are done by women. It is difficult to predict what this may mean for childcare provision when the country returns to relative “normality”.

A bailout has been mooted for the aviation industry, but the same must be done for nurseries and early years education. Mandu Reid suggested we should follow the example of our European neighbours and move the sector into public stewardship, protecting salaries and lifting them to at least a living wage. The government could also consider extending the 33 free hours of childcare to women who are training and seeking employment, as well as those in work. This would support women at their most vulnerable.

“It is a mistake not to invest in social care, as this is an obvious way to stimulate recovery” – Mary-Ann Stephenson, Director of the Women’s Budget Group

Social care has also placed a disproportionate burden on women. Before the pandemic, there were [1.25 million “sandwich carers” in the UK](#), who care for an older or disabled relative as well as bringing up a family. Sixty-eight percent of them were women. We know that number has risen since March 2020. We also know that the number of unpaid female carers has increased dramatically.

Research by the Women’s Budget Group suggests an economic argument for investing in social care that goes beyond allowing unpaid carers to rejoin the formal labour market. Their findings suggest that investment in care would create 2.7 times as many jobs as the same money invested in construction. Four in five paid carers are women; the sector’s poor pay is a large contributor to the gender pay gap. Investment in a more sustainable care system would better support and value their work, and combat gender inequalities.

In his budget announcement, Sunak spoke at length about the level of UK debt as the justification for government’s cuts to public spending. Indeed, COVID-19 relief has [driven debt close to second world war levels](#). But is that an excuse? Despite huge national debt after the war, the government chose to invest in the welfare state and build the NHS. We are at a similar moment of crisis, and we need interventions on a similar scale of ambition that support the entire population, regardless of gender.

“Future pandemic response plans must be gender-mainstreamed – they must recognise these inequalities across all marginalised groups, not just women” – Clare Wenham

This is a moment for us to reflect. The COVID-19 pandemic has not only exacerbated inequalities in society, but has shone a light on them. The ‘build back better’ mantra relies on an equal and fair recovery. Now is the opportunity to commit to rebuilding the economy in a different way, which provides equal support to all.

Find out more about Clare Wenham’s research on [gender and COVID-19](#).

This post is about the LSE Festival event, COVID-19 in the UK: where are all the women?. It represents the views of the author and not those of the COVID-19 blog, nor LSE. The event recording is available on [YouTube](#), or you can listen to the [podcast](#).