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# **COVID-19 Report**

**Lockdown in the UK: Why women  
and especially single mothers are  
disadvantaged**

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## Key Points

- Women remain the main homemakers and caregivers. The 'lockdown' could lead to a resurgence of traditional gender roles and negatively impact women's labour market access and performance in the long-term.
- Women form 80% of the health and social care workers who are more exposed to the virus, among people aged between 20 to 49,
- Single mothers fare the worst in the labour market, are the least likely to own a house, and have a car in the household, and has the highest risk of depression, which makes them particularly vulnerable in the current circumstances.
- Employed single mothers have the same chance of working in the key sectors in response to COVID-19 as partnered mothers. Safer and more versatile transport solutions are necessary for key workers and especially those who need to rely on public transport to get to work and ensure their kids to attend nurseries/schools.
- Childcare support is critical when the usual support networks, such as grandparents, friends, and neighbours, can no longer help with childcare, especially for single mothers.

## Introduction

The COVID-19 outbreak has been growing at an alarming pace worldwide and has resulted in large negative social and economic consequences for populations across the globe. Like many East Asian and European countries, the UK has recently introduced a

number of "lockdown" measures, such as the closing of schools, enforcing social distancing and requesting employees to work from home, in order to slow down the outbreak. Previous research has shown that men's income tends to recover faster than women's after natural disasters (Bradshaw 2004; Neumayer and Plümper 2007), and the long-term gendered consequences of the current COVID-19 pandemic are yet to be revealed.

This report focuses on the potential negative consequences of the lockdown measures on women and single mothers in the UK. We aim to highlight factors that could exacerbate the gendered consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and propose policy interventions that could tackle or preempt them.

In what follows, we will analyse the gender gaps in paid work, housework, childcare, and income. We will show that women are already disadvantaged in the labour market, do far more housework than men, and are the main carers for children. Women are also more likely to work in the front-line as key workers and make important contributions to fight against the pandemic. Single mothers, as a subgroup of women, are particularly vulnerable during the current pandemic because they are the only earners and carers in their families, and they fare even worse in the labour market.

The lockdown measures are likely to exacerbate the existing gender gaps in paid work, domestic work, and income and affect single mothers particularly hard. It is also highly likely that the longer-term negative economic consequences will affect women more than men, and these gendered negative consequences will persist even after the lockdown is lifted.



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We will conclude by suggesting the government to take gendered impacts into account when implementing policies to tackle the COVID-19 outbreak and making recommendations on policies that the government should take to support women and single mothers.

## What are the Gender Gaps in the UK?

The aftermath of the coronavirus crisis will exacerbate the already existing gender gaps in wages, employment, and housework. The gender gap in the labour market remains substantial, with women disproportionately employed in lower-paid and less secure jobs. **In 2019 across the UK, 6.3 million women were recorded to work part-time** (Devine and Foley 2020). These are the numbers of women who could be at risk of losing their jobs as a result of the pandemic.

We select people aged between 20 to 49 from the recent waves of the UK Household Longitudinal Survey (UKHLS) and present the results below (see the final “Data and measures” section for more technical details). The selected group is of their

prime working and childbearing age (or with young children) and are likely to experience the highest work-family conflict.

**Figure 1** shows four indicators of the gender gap in the UK. Currently, the educational attainment levels for women and men are similar. However, women are more likely to be out of the labour force or employed part-time. In 2016/17, almost 80% of men were employed full-time, but only 50% of women had full-time employment. Approximately 30% of women were employed part-time (including zero-hour contracts), and 20% of them were not working.

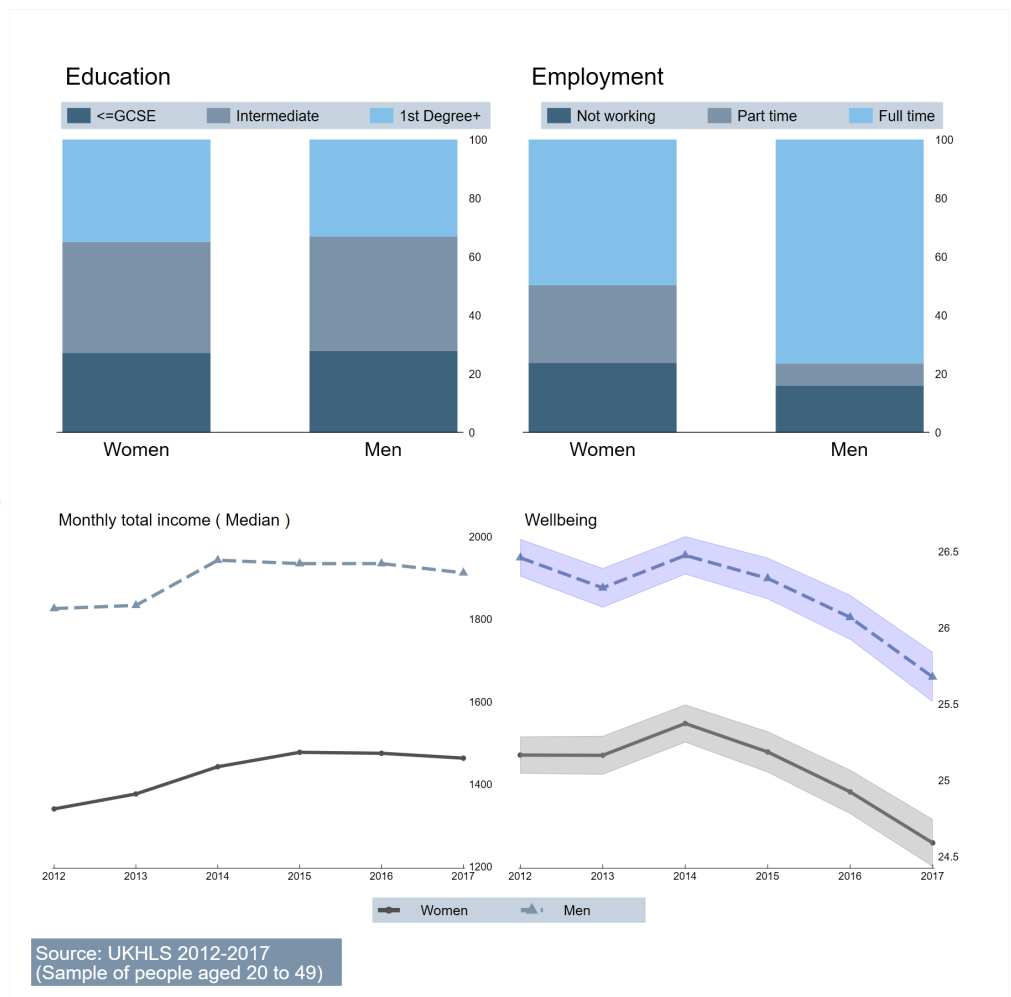


Figure 1. The gender gap in the UK

**Figure 1** also reveals a substantial gender income gap. Over recent years, women in the UK consistently earned approximately £500 less than men per month. In the long run, women who lost their jobs during the crisis are more likely to experience long-term consequences of job loss and income disruption. The lockdown measures may further enlarge the gender gap in well-being, where women reported consistently lower levels than men.

As well as being disadvantaged in the labour market, women are also experiencing gender inequalities at home, where men spend considerably less time on housework and care work compared to women (Kolpashnikova 2018; Kan 2014). This inequality is especially pronounced in families with children under 15 years old (Zhou and Kan 2020). **Figure 2** reports the daily time (measured in minutes)

spent on three main work activities - housework, care work, and paid work. In two-parent families with children under 15 years old, mothers spend more than 3.5 hours daily on all types of housework (routine housework, like cooking, non-routine housework like car servicing, and shopping), while fathers spend under two hours. This already large gender gap becomes worse when we add care time. In 2014-15, women in two-parent households with at least one child younger than 15 years old spent more than 2 hours daily on care work, while fathers spent around an hour. Echoing the inequality in the domestic sphere, men's paid work time has more than doubled of women's paid work time. In the UK, women remain the main homemakers and caregivers.

Earlier research in Germany has shown that an extended maternity leave could enhance women's caregiver role and discourage mothers' commitment to the labour market (Gangl and Ziefle 2015). Our own findings also show that British mothers who stay at home are subject to a change in their gender attitudes to be more supportive of women's traditional caregiver roles (Zhou 2017). Therefore, policies and social contexts that promote women to stay at home further strengthen women's caregiver role.

As a consequence, the closure of nurseries, schools, and non-key sector jobs, the work from home guidance, together with the societal expectations of women as the primary caregivers, is likely to increase the domestic burden on women disproportionately. The 'lockdown' could lead to a resurgence of traditional gender roles and negatively impact women's labour market access and performance in a long-term.

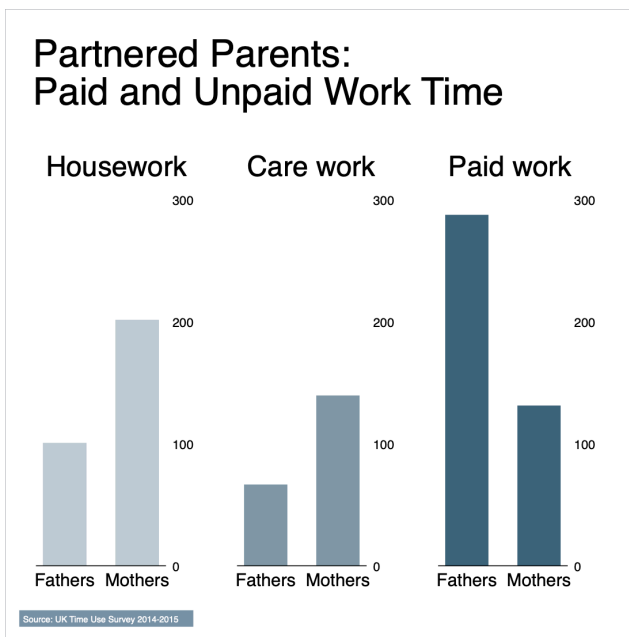
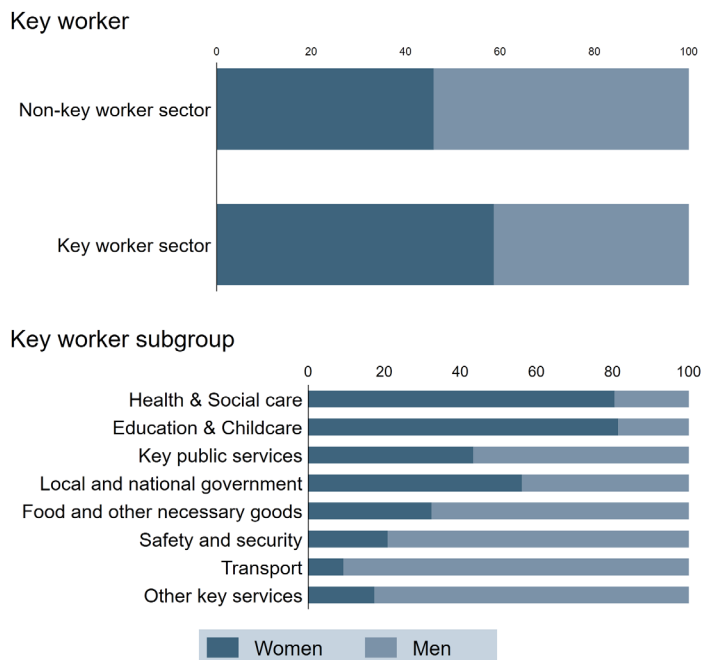


Figure 2. The gender gap in time use among parents (Unit: Daily minutes)



## Gender composition of the frontline workers



Source: UKHLS 2016-2017  
(Sample of people aged 20 to 49)

Figure 3. Gender composition of the frontline workers

Despite women's disadvantage in the labour market, women form a critical mass of the current frontline workers to fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.

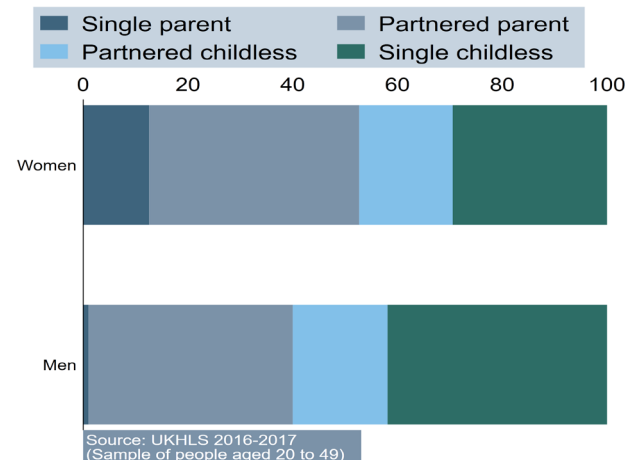
Looking at the gender composition of key worker occupations based on their ISCO code in **Figure 3**, following [a list of key worker occupations](#) released by the government on 19 March 2020, we estimate that 30% of people aged between 20 to 49 work in the sectors that are critical to the COVID-19 response.

The percentage would be lower if the selected population is older (Farquharson, Rasul, and Sibietta 2020).

Women occupy a higher percentage in the key sector: approximately 60% of the key workers are women. This is driven by a substantial amount (~80%) of women working in health & social care and education & childcare occupations. This pattern is observed across the globe (Wenham, Smith, and Morgan 2020; Boniol et al. 2019). Thus, women are not only more likely to be discouraged from actively participating in the labour market with their growing domestic load during the lockdown, but when they do work, they are more likely to be in those professions more exposed to the virus, putting themselves and their families at the risk of long-term lung disease and bereavement.

## Single Mothers are particularly vulnerable

### Household type



Source: UKHLS 2016-2017  
(Sample of people aged 20 to 49)

Figure 4. Gender difference in the proportion of single and partnered parents

Across the UK in 2019, there are **around 2.9 million single parents, of whom approximately 2 million are with dependent children, and 86% of the single parents are women** (Office for National Statistics (ONS) 2019; Clark 2019). In our sample, **Figure 4** shows that approximately 60% of women and only 40% of men live in households with children under the age of 15. Nearly 20% of mothers are single parents.

Having to raise children on their own puts an enormous strain on women's ability to participate in the labour force. It can take one time off with a sick child to imperil a single mother's job, especially if she is paid hourly and is employed in a precarious job.

- Mothers are defined as those who have children below the age of 15 in the household in the figures and text.

Single mothers are much less likely to be employed, have a lower income, and probably already come from a disadvantaged background (Gregg, Harkness, and Smith 2009). **Figure 5** below summarises the

distribution of socioeconomic status for single mothers, partnered mothers, and others (men and non-mothers).

Single mothers are least likely to pursue higher education. Only about 10% of single mothers have a 1st degree or higher, whereas, for partnered mothers and fathers, the

numbers are around 40%.

A higher proportion of single mothers compared to partnered mothers are already not in the workforce. **Figure 5** shows that almost 40% of single mothers were not in the labour force, whereas about 20% of partnered mothers did not work. Both partnered and single mothers were at higher proportions

working part-time than men. These mothers are more at the risk of losing their occupations because of the precarious nature of their employment.

Among those who are employed, single mothers concentrate in semi-routine & routine jobs and are least likely to be in professional occupations. As a higher proportion of occupations that allow telecommuting during the coronavirus crisis are the professional

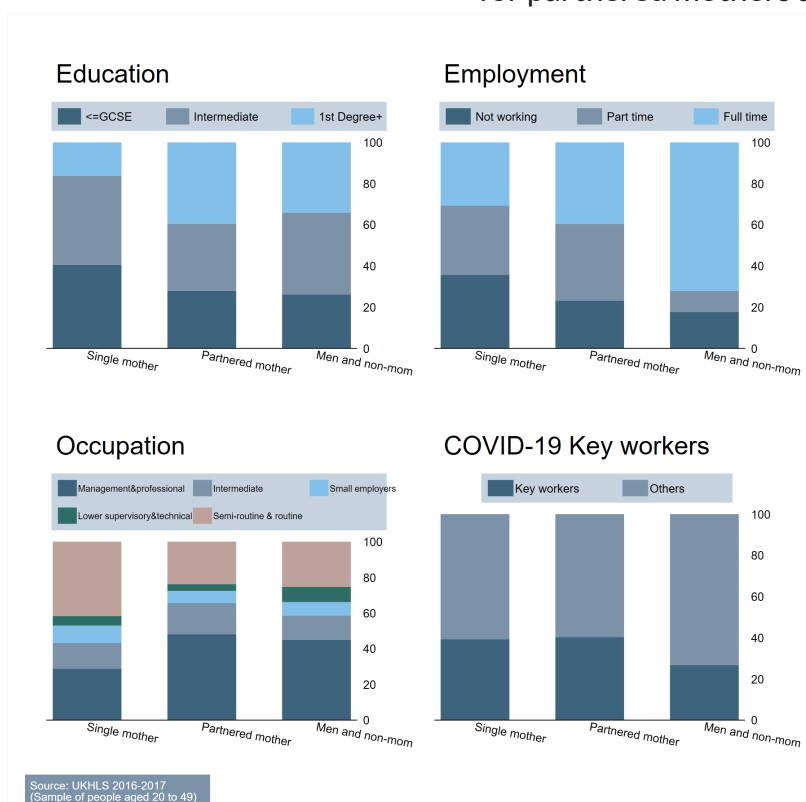


Figure 5. The socioeconomic status of single mothers and the rest



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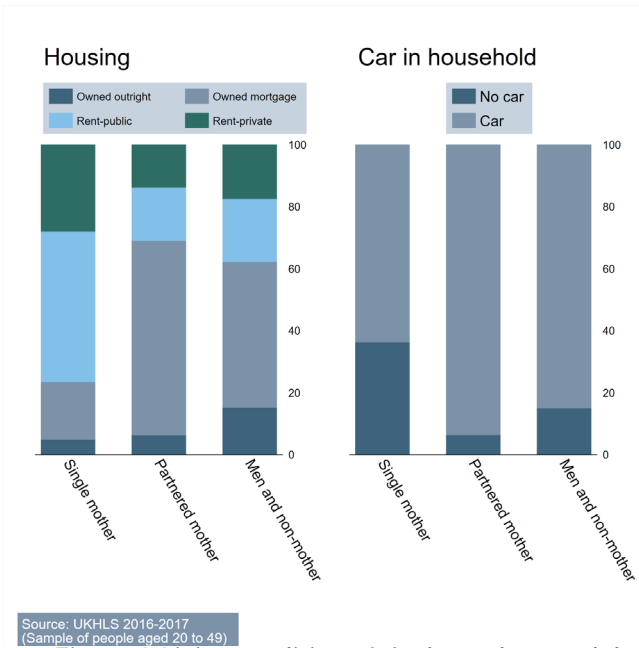


Figure 6. Living condition of single mothers and the others

occupations, single mothers are least likely to be employed in occupations that allow working from home. They face an unenviable choice between having to quit their job, to fulfill their care responsibilities, or leave their children unsupervised to continue providing for their families. For those with younger children, there may be no choice at all.

**Figure 5** also shows that among those who work, **single and partnered mothers have similar chances of being key workers** and fighting at the frontline of the COVID-19 pandemic.

We go one step further to show differences in living conditions between single mothers and others (**Figure 6**). Among the three groups, single mothers are least likely to own a house and are the mostly likely to rent with support such as housing allowances. They are also **least likely to own a car**, thus heavily relying on public transport. This would increase their risk

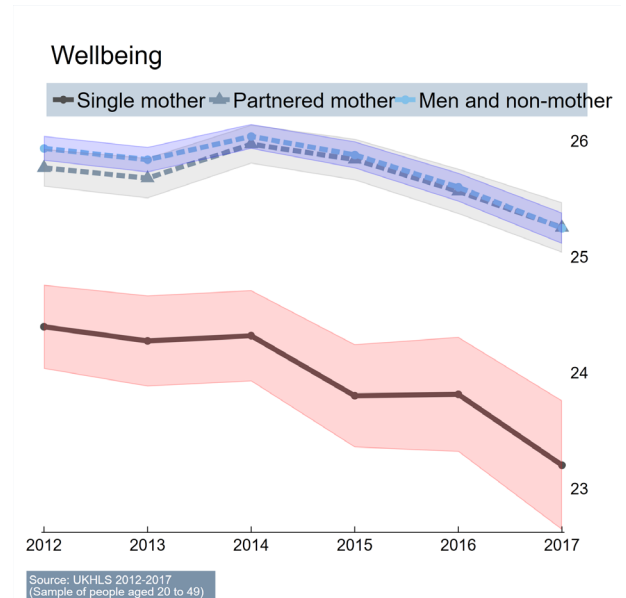


Figure 7. Wellbeing score, the higher score represents better wellbeing

of exposure to the virus.

Another thing we noted is the significantly **lower well-being of single mothers**, as shown in **Figure 7**. Supporting mental health and well-being of everyone, but especially single mothers, would be vital.

The current 'lockdown' measures, including nursery and school closures, will affect mothers and, especially, single mothers, more. Single mothers are at a much higher risk of losing their jobs due to their disadvantaged educational attainment and occupations, and they do not have another adult with whom to share the childcare responsibility. It is even more relevant in the context of the pandemic when physical isolation is encouraged. As interactions outside households are kept to a minimum, the usual support networks, such as grandparents, friends, and neighbours, can no longer help with childcare.



## Conclusion

In a crisis, it is paramount to ensure the safety and livelihood of all. Women, and particularly single mothers, will be severely affected in the economic downturn as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak. It is important that policy makers consider possible gendered impacts when implementing measures to tackle the outbreak.

The vulnerability is amplified by the current 'lockdown' measures when no comprehensive childcare support is available for non-key worker mothers who need to work (at home) to support themselves and their families. Single parents may be particularly vulnerable because, in addition to the closure of nurseries and schools, they can no longer rely on their social networks and grandparents for childcare, because of the prevention concerns and physical distancing. For many people, the question boils down to 'How can you work from home and look after your children at the same time?'

Single mothers are more at risk of losing their jobs because they are less likely to be in those occupations that allow employees to 'work from home'. Moreover, even if allowed to work from home, they are less likely to be able to do so efficiently because they are the only ones to take care of children at home. As even before the crisis single mothers were at a higher risk of depression, this calls for more attention to this particular group at this challenging time.

We also note that women are more likely to work in occupations that would make them 'Key Workers' under the current definition used by the UK government. Single

parents (most of whom are mothers) and their families may be particularly at risk. As the sole carers, these parents are not able to isolate themselves from their families during the time that they are putting themselves at an increased risk of infection.

In order to prevent the long-term decline in women's economic power, spikes in poverty among single parent households in particular and the resulting child poverty, and in addition to protect health and well-being in the aftermath of the COVID-19 outbreak, we recommend the following goals and measures:

### Measures proposed, to be acted on in three weeks' time

- **Provide 'out-of-hours' childcare for critical key workers:** Currently, schools remain to open during normal school time and days. Given the high percentage of women in the health and social care sector and the current load on the NHS system, solutions for key workers with school-age children, including out-of-hours or out-of-school-day childcare are important to allow the full participation and ability to take a rest for key workers. Government should also consider working with commercial childcare providers to offer subsidised emergency childcare arrangement for key workers in need.

- **Resolve the transport needs of critical key workers:** This is particularly relevant to single mothers who commute to work, who are least likely to have a car and currently could not rely on grandparents for childcare and help with ferrying children to and from nursery/school. They have to spend a significant amount of time using public transport to drop off and pick up their children and go to work/home. Local government authorities should consider partner with commercial transport providers



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to offer temporary services for key workers in need.

- **Provide childcare for single parent families in need:** The current government policy on school childcare is that children of key workers or vulnerable groups could attend schools. The central government and local councils should extend this option to single parent families who have no other options for childcare but need to maintain their jobs.

- **Distribute information regarding support for mental health and support for victims of domestic abuse:** Women and especially single mothers' low wellbeing condition highlight the potential of the unequal impact of lockdown. Women's disadvantaged position could prompt domestic violence and sexual abuse when women are with their partners for an extensive amount of time or rely on their previous partners to look after the children. Local authorities should find various ways including both digital approach and postal mails to advertise available resources at the current time.

- **Distribute information regarding available free resources for food, education, and entertainment of children:** Schools and local authorities should find various ways including both digital approach and especially postal mails to contact parents regarding those resources. Single parent families may have little time or resources checking multiple websites and emails at this difficult time.

Our recommendations aim to

- **Secure women's employment:** More childcare resources and transport options would enable women and critical key workers to perform their paid work tasks in a more efficient way.

- **Priorities single parent families:** The extra vulnerability of single parent families who struggle between work and childcare with their high risk of poverty and depression, should be reflected in COVID-19 responses.

- **Improve well-being of women and especially single mothers:** Secured employment with resources available to support women in need is crucial to minimise the disproportionately negative impact of COVID-19 on wellbeing, especially for women who are more likely to be frontline key workers, with limited economic resources, and become victims of domestic and sexual abuse during lockdown.

## Data and Measures:

**Understanding Society data.** Age between 20 to 49 for both women and men interviewed during 2012/13 to 2017/18 are selected for analyses.

**Monthly total income** is the gross personal income including labour income and other income, adjusted for inflation using the 2015 income value.

**Paid work hours** are the weekly hours spent on paid employment, which include normal weekly hours and normal overtime hours, for those who are currently working.

**Housework hours** are the weekly hours spent on housework, typically routine housework such as cooking, cleaning, and laundry.

**Well-being score** is a measure of current mental well being reported by respondents. It is measured by summing 12 items scored on a Lickert scale from 0 to 3. These items are:



'ability to concentrate', 'losing sleep', 'playing a useful role in life', 'capability of making decisions', 'feeling under stress', 'overcoming difficulties', 'ability to enjoy activities', 'ability to face problems', 'feeling unhappy or depressed', 'losing confidence', 'believing in self-worth', and 'feeling generally happy'. The overall scale ranges from 0 (most distressed) to 36 (least distressed).

**UK Time Use Survey data.** Age between 20 to 49 for both women and men interviewed during 2014 to 2015. In this report we restricted our sample to men and women co-residing in nuclear families with children under 15 years of age.

**Paid work, Housework, and Care Work** are measured in minutes spent daily on a given activity.

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