

Working mums and Covid-19: Paying the price

TUC Gender Equality Briefing

Working mums: Paying the price

Summary

The Covid-19 pandemic has hit working-class communities hardest, with the worst effects borne by women. The decision to move to remote learning for primary- and secondary-aged children in January 2021 has had a huge impact on working families, affecting over a third of working households.¹ The safety of school staff, children, parents and the wider community must come first, and it was right to close schools. But the burden for juggling work and care is falling predominantly on mums, as it did in the first lockdown.² Between 5th and 8th January, the TUC put out a survey to find out how the disruption to usual schooling arrangements had affected working mums. Over 50,000 responded.

Our new research has found significant impacts on working mums' wellbeing, income and job security.

- 7 in 10 requests for furlough turned down for working mums
- Nine out of ten mums say their mental health has been negatively impacted experiencing levels of stress and anxiety
- One-quarter of mums (25 per cent) are worried they will lose their job, either through being singled out for redundancy, sacked or denied hours

Key recommendations

The TUC is calling for a temporary legal right to access the furlough scheme for parents and those with caring responsibilities who have had these significantly disrupted due to coronavirus restrictions, and people who cannot work because they are required to shield.

The main purpose of the furlough scheme is to support jobs where there is no demand due to Covid-19 restrictions. However, because we don't have a parental leave system that is fit for purpose, the government made furlough scheme available in April 2020 to parents who cannot work due to Covid-19 restrictions on schools and childcare.

It would be preferable if we had a proper system of paid parental leave and better flexible work rights but in the meantime the furlough scheme is a financial lifeline that temporarily resolves a situation that is making life impossible for parents.

The temporary right would apply in situations in which workers can show that:

¹ ONS (2020) [Coronavirus and employment for parents in the UK - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/childpopulationandchildcare/articles/coronavirusandemploymentforparents/2020-01-27) Definition of working household: Over a third of working households (36 per cent) are households with dependent children under the age of 16.

² TUC (2020) Forced Out: The cost of getting childcare wrong

- Existing childcare or other caring arrangements have been substantially altered because of coronavirus related restrictions, for example, school or nursery closures. While workers in this situation can request furlough, at present they have no right to any form of paid leave other than existing holiday entitlements; Or,
- They are required to 'shield' because they are clinically extremely vulnerable, and cannot work from home, or they live with someone in this situation. Shielding workers can currently access sick pay, but at just £95.85 a week the level is too low to make this a realistic option for many workers.
- In all cases, before the right to furlough is exercised, employees must have a conversation with their employer about possible alternative forms of work during this period, for example working from home, temporarily reducing workload or changing work times.

Discussions on alternative forms of working should be had with both dads and mums to ensure stereotypical assumptions on who provides care are not inadvertently reinforced. Likewise, furlough should be offered equally on a flexible basis to mums and dads so that they can both share care. Newly self employed parents should have immediate access to the self employment income support scheme (SEISS).

What has the immediate impact been on working mums?

With no system of paid parental leave and a lack of flexible work for much of the workforce, mums have been left in an impossible situation, at risk of losing their jobs or facing a catastrophic loss of income.

A quarter (25 per cent) of mums who replied to our survey were using annual leave to manage their childcare – but nearly one in five (18 per cent) had been forced to reduce their working hours and around one in 14 (seven per cent) are taking unpaid leave from work and receiving no income.

Using annual leave to plug the gap is only a short-term solution. Three in ten (30 per cent) are worried about the impact of using all their annual leave at the start of school year. Parents only have a finite amount of annual leave, usually stretched thin across the school year. Using it in the first six weeks of term puts tremendous pressure on families during the school holidays throughout later parts of the year.

How have employers supported working mums?

While the government has been clear that the furlough scheme can be used to support those who cannot work because of childcare responsibilities, too many parents are not aware of this: 40 per cent of mums stated that they are unaware they are eligible for furlough. And 78 per cent of mums affected by school closures have not been offered furlough by their employer.

Even where mums are aware that parents can be furloughed for childcare reasons, the TUC has found that some employers are refusing to use the scheme. Seven in ten eligible mums who have asked for furlough (68 per cent), have had the request refused by their employer.

Respondents described being rejected for furlough and expected to use unpaid leave and other arrangements to try and manage childcare and home schooling. Many highlighted the financial and other difficulties that this approach would cause them.

I asked for furlough and they [employer] told me to try make other arrangements. My only options have been use annual leave or take unpaid leave, both of which I don't want to and can't afford to do. I have a year's school holidays still to cover with my annual leave. I cannot understand what the issue is as to why furlough isn't being offered.

Private sector worker, working full time, two children under ten

I'm caring for a two year old full time and now my four year old [is] being home schooled on top of a 32 hour working week and no support from my husband as he can't work from home. I requested furlough and it was refused. [My manager] feared opening the floodgates, feared the wider business will think our team can manage without [me] and be subject to headcount reduction. Told to take unpaid leave which I can't afford. I work for a global multi-billion pound business. It's insane. Many others are in a similar situation.

Private sector worker, working part time, two children under five

How are mums coping?

Working mums told the TUC they were struggling with the strain of being expected to carry out their jobs as normal, while balancing childcare and home-schooling. 65 per cent said they are juggling working from home with caring commitments – and nine in ten said the disruption had a negative impact on their mental health, with increasing levels of stress and anxiety.

While the move to working from home for around half (48 per cent) of the workforce has allowed many mums to juggle work and care, however a flexible work approach of adjusting working hours or patterns does not entirely solve the problem.³ If employers' expectations of parents remain the same and their approach is 'do the work when you can' instead of 'do what you can in the time you have', mums will be forced to work very long days and unsociable hours.

A TUC survey of mums during the first lockdown found that 30 per cent regularly worked early in the morning (pre-8am) or late at night (post-8pm).⁴ This need to work deeply unsociable or long hours was reflected again in respondents' comments on their current working situation in January 2021. Women were working flexibly, many because they could not afford to drop hours or take unpaid leave. They described the impossible task they faced in balancing paid work and childcare/home schooling and the huge toll that this was

³ ONS (2020) [Coronavirus and employment for parents in the UK - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](https://www.ons.gov.uk/news-and-analysis/coronavirus/coronavirus-and-employment-for-parents-in-the-uk)

⁴ TUC (2020) Forced Out: The cost of getting childcare wrong

taking on their physical and mental health. Many stated that they did not know how long they could keep up current arrangements given the exhaustion and stress they were experiencing.

I've a three, six & seven year old and work 9-5 from at home. My husband usually works a 60-70 hour week. It means he cannot help with the children. They need constant encouragement and support [with home schooling]...then there's a three year old wanting everyone to play too. At 5pm when I technically finish work, its then starting dinner, bath & bedtime. Then cleaning up. By 8pm I was exhausted but had to start working again. I finished at 1am and was up at 5.30am (as usual) with my three year old. I'm facing weeks, maybe longer of this. I cannot sustain this. I just can't.

Public Sector worker, working full time, three children under ten

A number of respondents highlighted the fact that although they felt exhausted by trying to combine paid work and childcare, they were nervous about asking for furlough or even for further flexibility because of a fear of being discriminated against, for example being singled out for redundancy, losing work or receiving a negative appraisal. Nearly half of mums (48 per cent) fear they will be treated negatively by their employer as a result of difficulties with childcare.

I have three children studying across three key stages and trying to work full time [because I'm] in fear of losing my job. I am exhausted, I am stressed, I am anxious and I am only just about keeping myself and my children on track. I feel like I can't afford to ask to be furloughed, so literally have no choice but to carry on.

Private sector worker, working full time, two children under ten, one over ten

Being able to share the burden of care with a partner or co-parent is really important. 42 per cent of mums said they were sharing care with a partner or spouse. In order to do this, both parents must be able to share furlough on a flexible basis. Dads in senior positions can lead the way by taking furlough, setting an example for other dads in the organisation.

How do we turn this around: Access to the furlough scheme

The government must act immediately to stop the reversal of decades of progress women have made in the workplace, an increase of the gender pay gap and a damaging impact on our national economic productivity. Women are losing viable jobs that they would otherwise be employed in if it were not for Covid-19.

Employers have a role to play. If they fail to support working mums now, they stand to lose an experienced and talented workforce, costing them dearly in the long run. Employers should explore with both dads and mums and those shielding whether other measures – such as changes to working hours, offering alternative work, temporarily reducing workloads, working from home, or offering additional paid leave – could help the worker

balance their responsibilities, but as a last resort workers should have the right to be furloughed.

Families urgently need support to ensure they are not forced into poverty, debt and hardship.

The main purpose of the furlough scheme is to support jobs where there is no demand due to Covid-19 restrictions. However, because we don't have a parental leave system that is fit for purpose, the government made furlough scheme available in April 2020 to workers who cannot work due to Covid-19 restrictions on schools and childcare.

It would be preferable if we had a proper system of paid parental leave and better flexible work rights but in the meantime the furlough scheme is a financial lifeline that temporarily resolves a situation that is making life impossible for parents.

The TUC is therefore calling for a temporary legal right to access the furlough scheme for parents and those with caring responsibilities who have had these significantly disrupted due to coronavirus restrictions, and people who cannot work because they are required to shield.

The right would apply in situations in which workers can show that:

- Existing childcare or other caring arrangements have been substantially altered because of coronavirus related restrictions, for example, school or nursery closures. While workers in this situation can request furlough, at present they have no right to any form of paid leave other than existing holiday entitlements; Or,
- They are required to 'shield' because they are clinically extremely vulnerable, and cannot work from home, or they live with someone in this situation. Shielding workers can currently access sick pay, but at just £95.85 a week the level is too low to make this a realistic option for many workers.
- In all cases, before the right to furlough is exercised, employees must have a conversation with their employer about possible alternative forms of work during this period, for example working from home, temporarily reducing workload or changing work times.

Government must reiterate that workers who take up furlough cannot be discriminated against because of this, and should have the right to be offered suitable alternative employment (without having to apply for it) in a redundancy situation.

While it introduces this right, government must do everything it can to encourage employers to use the existing capacity of the scheme to support parents and those required to shield. It should:

- Write to all employers to telling to use the furlough scheme to support parents, carers and those required to shield. Government should emphasise that workers taking up or requesting this type of furlough, who are disproportionately women and disabled people, must not be discriminated against.
- Run a public advertising campaign telling parents, carers, and those required to shield about their eligibility to use the scheme.

Public sector workers and those working in publicly funded organisations are not able to access the furlough scheme. Public sector and publicly funded employers should therefore make every effort to support workers who cannot access their normal childcare arrangements and those required to shield. They must urgently explore potential solutions such as changes to working hours, offering alternative work, temporarily reducing workloads, working from home, or offering additional paid leave. As a last resort, employer should offer workers paid parental leave, going beyond existing entitlements where these do not exist. Government should provide additional funding to financially stretched public services who may be coping with staff shortages as a consequence of school closures.

Support for working families: Immediate actions for government

The government must go further. The crisis has revealed the fragility of the arrangements that enable mums to maintain employment: for many it is a careful balance of schooling, wraparound care, informal childcare support and annual leave enable mums to balance work and care from family and friends, and formal childcare and school holiday provision, accompanied by the careful arranging of the hours and times worked of the adults in the household.

Other countries have taken emergency steps to support parents. For example, in Germany, parents have been given an additional ten days to support children, and single parents an additional 20 days.⁵ In March, Italy approved 15 days paid parental leave for both parents, while schools are closed.⁶ The UK government must do the same.

The government must help working families balance paid work and childcare, by reforming the system of parental leave and sick pay; including bringing in:

- **Ten days' paid carers leave, from day one in a job, for all parents.** Currently parents have no statutory right to paid leave to look after their children.
- **A right to flexible work for all parents.** Flexible working can take lots of different forms, including having predictable or set hours, working from home, job-sharing, compressed hours and term-time working.
- **An increase in sick pay to at least the level of the real Living Wage,** for everyone in work, to ensure workers can afford to self-isolate if they need to.
- **All newly self-employed parents to have access the self-employment income support scheme (SEISS).**

Meanwhile, government need to maintain its focus on policies that drive progress in equalising care between mums and dads so that women are not disproportionately affected by the economic fallout of the Covid-19 crisis. The Government Equalities Office should review and where necessary redraft the gender equality roadmap to reflect the current

⁵ <https://www.dw.com/en/coronavirus-germany-extends-covid-lockdown-until-january-31/a-56134498>

⁶ <https://www.lexology.com/library/detail.aspx?g=b950fdd7-fe64-465d-8860-fb33a200a3fe>

context and challenges working mums face, including a clear timetable for taking action on the findings.

The government should also carry out and publish equality impact assessments on all of its policies, as it is required to do – but seems rarely to do in practice. The pandemic does not affect men and women equally. The Covid-19 crisis has led to a disproportionate impact on women, as seen in the differential rates of job losses, increased levels of maternity and pregnancy discrimination, exposure to unsafe working practices, heightened risk of domestic abuse. The government must assess the possible impacts of its policies and decision-making prior to implementation and monitor the impacts thereafter.

Methodology

TUC ran a self-report internet survey in partnership with Mother Pukka 7-10 January 2021. There were 55,630 respondents. Participants were self-selecting and overwhelmingly female (93 per cent).