

Bristol Women's Commission
Committed to achieving real equality for women in Bristol

Briefing on Caring and Carers

Across the world women take on the majority of caring and post Covid-19 there has been a significant increase in the amount of caring required across communities - 34,000 people were identified as caring in the 2021 Bristol Census.ⁱ

Nationally 4.5 million people (58% women) took on care responsibilities and 81% of those providing care before the pandemic found that their responsibilities had increased.ⁱⁱ This does not include those who are working in the care sector (see our briefing on Caring and Care Workers). 38% claim that the increased responsibility was due to reduced availability of social care services.ⁱⁱⁱ

Every year, women in the UK are providing 23.2 billion hours of unpaid childcare care worth an estimated £382 billion, while men provide 9.7 billion hours, worth £160 billion^{iv}.

This structural issue has an impact on women's well-being in line with their economic stability, career aspirations, mental and physical health. Such imbalances widen gender pay and employment gaps whilst also worsening the feminisation of poverty.

Disproportionate caring demands have a negative impact on women, their families and societies. Due to caring responsibilities, women are often forced to reduce their hours at work, prevented from working more hours or stopping work altogether^v. Women's labour productivity is therefore decreased, impacting families' and populations' economic progression as well as women's economic emancipation at large.

Investment in the care economy would result in an increase in the employment rate of women between 2.4 and 5.5 percentage points^{vi}. Furthermore, increasing public investment would stimulate employment and economic growth and provide a more effective means of moving out of economic decline.

“Investment in a transformative package of care policies is central to build a better and more gender equal world of work”.^{vii} Caring is a gendered, structural issue which is impacting women's wellbeing and preventing the progression of gender equality. The lack of investment in the UK Caring Economy not only negatively impacts women and their families, but also the economy as a whole.

Research & Data:

‘Women shoulder a disproportionate share of unpaid work around the world, and gender imbalances in the distribution of care work constitute a root cause of women’s economic and social disempowerment.’^{viii} (UN Women, 2018)

Caring: A Gendered Issue

Findings from a 2022 report ‘What Women Want’, carried out by think-tank Centre for Progressive Policy on caring (by which we mean informal, unpaid care work) in the UK found:

- every year women in the UK are providing 23.2bn hours of unpaid childcare care worth an estimated £382bn, while men provide 9.7bn worth £160bn.
- Women do most of the caring for adults, with one out of five women reducing their paid employment hours and 830,000 women unable to work entirely because they cared for an adult.
- Working-aged women contributed an estimated 960 million days worth of childcare and 200 million days worth of adult care each year.

Slow progress in caring economy infrastructure means that the provision of care is gendered by default; in the example of maternity leave and childcare, fathers are granted 1-2 weeks as standard in the UK, whereas mothers can take 52 weeks.^{ix}

Women are more likely to have to make up for inadequate services by increasing the amount of caring they do in looking after elderly, disabled or young family members.^x There are over 6.6m family members and friends providing unpaid care in the UK, the majority of whom are women.^{xi} This increases with age so that almost 25% of women aged 50-64 are carers.^{xii}

Caring and the economic impacts on women

Direct impacts on women’s economic well-being

‘Reductions in formal care services puts a greater burden on carers and threatens to undo some of the progress made in raising female employment rates in the past 20 years.’^{xiii}

Caring responsibilities frequently prevent women from fully participating in the labour market on their terms; in the case of childcare, 1.7 million women would work more hours if decent childcare was more accessible.^{xiv}

In 2022 the Centre for Progressive Policy’s study What Women Want found that 5 million women would want to work more hours if they had flexible working which could boost women’s earnings by up to £28.4bn per year.

Persistent low income has an impact across the life course. In 2019, more than a fifth of women, 22% have a persistent low income, compared to approximately 14% of men. Living in persistent poverty denies women the opportunity to build up savings and assets to fall back on in times of hardship (National Education Union 2019).

The impact of poor caring economy infrastructure is intersectional:

- Black and minoritised women experience considerably higher rates of poverty than white women in the UK.^{xv} This is due in large part to lower pay, higher rates of unemployment and economic inactivity, the likelihood of being a single parent, the likelihood of having a large family,^{xvi} all of which would be addressed through greater investment in the caring economy.

- 70% of young single mums agreed that it is a ‘real struggle’ to make their cash last until the end of the month, compared to 62% of the overall sample of young people.^{xvii} More than half of young mums (51%) stated they sometimes they go hungry so their children can eat.^{xviii}

Valuing the caring economy would increase women’s ability to take up employment and increase the status of work that is traditionally feminised (see our briefing on Caring and care workers) and reduce female poverty^{xix}. “Increasing public investment would stimulate employment and economic growth and provide a more effective means of moving out of recession than current austerity policies.”^{xx} It would result in higher levels of employment overall, higher levels of economic growth and a greater reduction in debt as well as greater reductions in the employment gap between men and women.^{xxi}

Public investment in social infrastructure generates employment whilst also contributing to gender equality and human development.^{xxii}

ⁱ NHS Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire (2023), *JSNA Health and Wellbeing Profile 2023/24*, Bristol City Council.

ⁱⁱ Bedford S and Button D (n 1).

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Centre for Progressive Policy 2022.

^v Centre for Progressive Policy 2022

^{vi} International Trade Union Confederation (2016) ‘Investing in the Care Economy: A gender analysis of employment stimulus in seven OECD countries’ https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/care_economy_en.pdf

^{vii} International Labour Organisation (2022) ‘Care at work: Investing in care leave and services for a more gender equal world of work’ https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/care-economy/WCMS_838655/lang--en/index.htm

^{viii} United Nations Women (2018) <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2018/5/issue-paper-recognizing-and-investing-in-the-care-economy#:~:text=Care%20work%20ensures%20the%20complex,women's%20economic%20and%20social%20disempowerment>

^{ix} Gov UK ‘Employers maternity leave’ (2023) <https://www.gov.uk/employers-maternity-pay-leave#:~:text=Statutory%20Maternity%20Leave,the%20baby%20is%20born%20early>

^x Women’s Budget Group 2017 ‘Social Care: A System in Crisis’: <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/social-care-pre-budget-nov-2017-final-1.pdf>

^{xi} Carers UK (2016) Carers UK submission to Autumn Statement <http://bit.ly/2nrFnAO>

^{xii} Communities and Local Government Select Committee 2017

^{xiii} Women’s Budget Group 2017 ‘Social Care: A System in Crisis’: <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/social-care-pre-budget-nov-2017-final-1.pdf>

^{xiv} Centre for Progressive Policy (2022)

^{xv} National Education Union (2019) ‘Women and Poverty’ <https://neu.org.uk/advice/equality/sex-and-gender-equality/women-and-poverty#:~:text=More%20than%20one%20fifth%20of,on%20in%20times%20of%20hardship>

^{xvi} Ibid. 2019

^{xvii} Ibid. 2023

^{xviii} Ibid. 2023

^{xix} Women’s Budget Group 2017 ‘Social Care: A System in Crisis’: <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/social-care-pre-budget-nov-2017-final-1.pdf>

^{xx} Ibid. International Trade Union Confederation 2016

^{xxi} International Trade Union Confederation 2016

^{xxii} Antonopoulos, Rania and Kijong Kim (2011) ‘Public-Job Creation Programs. The Economic Benefits of Investing in Social Care. Case Studies in the US and South Africa’, Levy Economics Institute of Bard College, WP 671