

Women Working Through the Pandemic: Lockdown life for women workers

Introduction

From the start of the pandemic, women working in healthcare, local councils, social care, education and other public services have been providing a lifeline to their communities. Often while caring for their own families and sometimes for other vulnerable people too.

UNISON's study takes a snapshot of the emotional, physical and financial impact of the pandemic on women key workers – almost a year on from the outbreak of coronavirus. Some have had to deal with the trauma of losing family members, friends and colleagues while continuing to work. They have made sacrifices, taken risks and put others' needs ahead of their own. And they continue to do so.

UNISON's report sets out first-hand accounts of these women's experiences and their feelings, whether they continued to work at their usual workplace or from home.

About UNISON

UNISON is the UK's largest union with more than 1.3 million members, around 1 million of them women. It is also the UK's largest women's membership organisation.

Members work in public services and for private contractors providing public services, including essential utilities. They include frontline staff and managers working full or part time in local authorities, the NHS, the police service, colleges, schools and universities, the electricity, gas and water industries, transport and the voluntary sector. Many are also low paid, working in care, catering, security and cleaning.

About the survey

UNISON analysed responses from almost 47,000 women key workers surveyed between 8 and 10 February 2021. Among these are women who work in schools (29%), NHS/healthcare (29%), social care (11%), local government (14%), police, justice and probation (3%), higher education (4.5%) charities, voluntary organisations or housing associations (2%).

One third (34%) are low paid, earning £15,000 or less a year, and around one in eight (13%) earn between £15,000 and £18,000. Overall, almost half (47%) of the women who responded earn £18,000 a year or less.

Just over half (54%) are aged 50 or older, 26% are 40-49, 16% are 27-39 and 3% between 16 and 26.

The findings

Family/work circumstances

More than half (57%) of the respondents are working at their usual workplace all or most of the time. This rises to almost three quarters (74%) for NHS workers, 70% for those working in schools and also 70% for social care. In contrast, more than three quarters (77%) of local government workers are working from home.

Almost a third (32%) of respondents are working at home all or most of the time. One in 40 (2.5%) said they are working flexible hours and home-schooling children.

Around one in seven (15%) of respondents live on their own.

Three in five (61%) have children, and an additional 0.4% are pregnant. More than nine in ten (91%) have children living with them. Of these, almost half (49%) have one child at home, 39% have two, one in ten (10%) have three, 2.4% have four or more. Three quarters (76%) of those with children at home had at least one aged 18 or older.

One in five (21%) said they had a caring role for an adult. These included partners, elderly parents, siblings, aunts/uncles, neighbours and offspring with health conditions. It shows how many women have the added responsibility of looking after vulnerable adults on top of having to work. Some mentioned those in their care have serious conditions such as dementia, mental health issues, obesity, diabetes, autism, Alzheimer's, Asperger's, physical disabilities, cancer, asthma and lung diseases.

Emotional impact

Half of respondents (50%) don't have time for themselves to reflect and de-stress – for women with children and/or vulnerable adults at home this rises to more than three in five (62%).

Almost two fifths (38%) don't talk to friends, family or people they trust about their feelings as much as they would like.

40% don't feel connected and supported with their work.

54% say don't spend enough quality time with their family.

57% feel stressed most of the time. This rises to 64% for women with children or adult dependants at home.

46% feel isolated from work colleagues. For women working from home most or all of the time this rises to 63%.

37% said they are lonely. For women living alone this rises to 57%.

67% say they fear they might bring the virus home to their family. For those who travel to their usual workplace this rises to 78%; for those with children and or adult dependants at home it is 79%.

93% miss catching up with close friends in person.

Many women expressed concern about their own self-care. More than half (52%) said not being able to get their hair cut or coloured regularly affects how they feel about themselves.

Additionally, three in five women (61%) were worried about the mental health of their children. More than two fifths (45%) reported concerns about the impact of the pandemic on their children's education.

Physical impact of the pandemic

More than two in five (46%) of respondents said they have not been exercising regularly during the pandemic

Almost two thirds (65%) say they haven't been sleeping well at night.

Three in ten (31%) say they haven't had a properly balanced diet, although 44% say they do.

Half (51%) say they don't take regular breaks at work; over a quarter (28%) say they do.

Almost a third (32%) haven't had enough time and energy to cook nutritious meals for themselves and their family.

Financial impact of the pandemic

- More than two fifths (45%) said their spending has increased – with energy, food, technology, transport and housing being the areas of spending mentioned most.

- One in ten (10%) said weekly spending had increased "substantially", a third (33%) said quite a lot more and two in five (41.5%) said their spending has increased a little.

- One in 50 (2%) said they had been forced to apply for universal credit.
- Two fifths (42%) said they don't have enough money each month to put aside as savings, this rises to 49% for those earning £15,000 or less.
- Three in ten (31%) have had to use their savings to help with financial difficulties related to Covid-19.

- More than a quarter (29%) said they could not afford to replace a broken appliance if one stops working.

Some women mentioned applying for credit cards, family tax credit, council tax support and a personal independence payment. Many described how they 'keep spending to a minimum'. Some mentioned having to pay all the bills after losing their partner to Covid, while some said their partners had a reduced income as a result of a job loss or furlough.

One woman said she has been spending £280 on transport, when she used to spend £70 a month.

Some have had to buy stationery, desks, monitors, printers, shredders and chairs to work from home.

'I am using a lot more energy. Food expenditure has also gone through the roof. Subscriptions for online services have increased. We have had to resort to online shopping, which I have found a lot more expensive.'

'I have to take care of most of the household expenses. I have been working overtime, and I have borrowed money and begged from family and friends.'

'My partner has been furloughed on a zero-hours contract so hardly gets any money. So, I am having to pay all the bills. We have massive rent and council tax arrears.'

'I had to purchase a caravan to live in to protect my vulnerable family members.'

'I paid over £400 for protective safety kit (PPE), wipes and hand washes over the course of the pandemic.'

As a result, one in seven (14%) reported having more debt during the pandemic, although three quarters (75%) said their debt had not worsened.

Coping through lockdowns and the pandemic

To break the routine of lockdown, women said they have been going on walks with their families or by themselves, watching films and TV, cooking and baking, gardening, cycling, dog walking, knitting and doing jigsaws.

Almost a quarter (24%) had said they had turned to family walks as their chief coping mechanism, followed by films/TV (19%). Some have been making face masks and scrubs for charity, but many mentioned being too busy or stressed to do anything, working six out of seven days or grieving after losing people close to them to Covid-19.

Conclusion

UNISON is collecting evidence for an inquiry into the government's handling of the pandemic. This report shines a light on the emotional, physical and financial impact of the pandemic on the women who have been working so hard to keep our public services going.

It tells a story of loneliness, disconnection, and isolation. It highlights a deep-seated fear of catching the virus and giving it to a relative. Not having a holiday, not being able to meet and talk with friends and colleagues, and not being able to get a haircut really matter. They add to stress levels and affect mental health.

The report also highlights the physical toll. Almost two thirds (65%) of respondents are not sleeping well and half (51%) are not taking regular breaks.

In addition to the emotional and physical impacts, many women are struggling to cope with additional spending due to the pandemic. Three in ten (31%) have had to use their savings to help with financial difficulties related to Covid-19. More than a quarter (29%) said they could not afford to replace a broken appliance if one breaks.

Nearly 1,000 women – 2% of our respondents – have been forced to apply for universal credit. The long-term financial implications for these women look tough but there are also implications for the economic recovery.

Women are exhausted and worn out from the demands of working through the pandemic. The women keeping society going at home as well as at work are undervalued. Almost half (47%) of the women who responded to the survey – nearly 25,000 – earn £18,000 a year or less. Those who can least afford it are paying the biggest price.

Women deserve better. Economic recovery will depend on women continuing to provide essential public services, support their communities and care for their families. It is difficult to see how women who are mentally and physically exhausted and in debt will find the energy to keep going.

There is action that the government and employers too could take now that acknowledges the commitment and contribution of women workers; that would offer them hope that their working lives will get better and that would remove worries about their finances and reassure them about their livelihoods.

And that's why UNISON is calling for:

More flexibility in working arrangements – a day one right to flexible working arrangements and two weeks paid parental leave. These formed part of UNISON's response to the consultation on parental leave in the autumn of 2019 ahead of a new Employment Bill, which was to be debated in Parliament during 2020. However, the pandemic and Brexit put paid to the timetable.

Better funding for childcare and particularly, accessible and affordable childcare, available at the times that essential workers need it. Communities need health and social care at nights and weekends.

Maintaining the £20 increase to the universal credit allowance – since March 2020, the number of people claiming universal credit has doubled to around six million, while job vacancies remain below pre-pandemic levels.

Employers must not take working long hours for granted. They, as well as the government, need to step up to the plate and check staff are taking rest breaks, re-hydrating and are not isolated. They need to do their bit to provide flexible working.