

The impact of COVID-19 on women's learning and employment

Evidence report

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The impact of COVID-19 on women's learning and employment

Overview

Women's employment patterns in the UK have changed beyond recognition in the past 50 years. The proportion of women in work has grown from 57% in 1975 to 78% in 2017. This growth has been seen largely in full-time work, and is strongly linked to structural changes in society. As people choose to co-habit and start families later in life, workplace trends show significant growth in women in their mid-20s to 30s in the workplace and many mothers continuing with their career. Despite this, women still do the majority of care for children and older relatives as well as home industries.

From a health perspective, women have fared better under COVID-19 but structural factors mean that the pandemic has hit women particularly hard both economically and socially. Women make up the majority of the workforce in sectors such as hospitality and the arts - which were shut down for around seven months in total; they make up the majority of the workforce in key occupations such as care work and retail where homeworking is usually not an option. In addition, evidence shows they have taken on the bulk of the home-schooling duties and additional childcare in the past year. The risk is that as the economy begins to recover, many of the gains around equal pay and access to jobs which have been hard fought for over the decades could rescind as employers look to restructure for the recovery.

This paper summarises recent evidence of the impact COVID-19 is having on women in terms of their access to learning, the labour market and which groups have been particularly hard hit.

Analysis

Growth of women in the labour market

Over many decades, like most other countries, the UK has seen an almost continual rise in the proportion of women in employment. The UK is ranked 8th amongst all OECD countries with a female participation rate of 72.1% in 2020, an increase from 62.8% in 1995.¹ [Institute for Fiscal Studies \(IFS\) research](#) shows a significant rise in the proportion of working-age mothers in paid work: up from 50% in 1975 to 72% in 2015. The rise has been particularly high among lone mothers and mothers of younger children.

According to [House of Commons analysis](#) women are less likely to run businesses than men. 17% of SMEs with employees were led by women in 2015 and men are more likely than women to be involved in 'early stage entrepreneurial activity'; In June 2019, 29% of directors of FTSE100 companies were women.

Headlines: Impacts of the pandemic for women

ONS data shows that at the end of 2020, 15.49 million women aged 16 or over were in employment, this was down 117,000 from the previous year. A drop of 0.6% of the female employment rate compared to a drop of 1.9% for men.

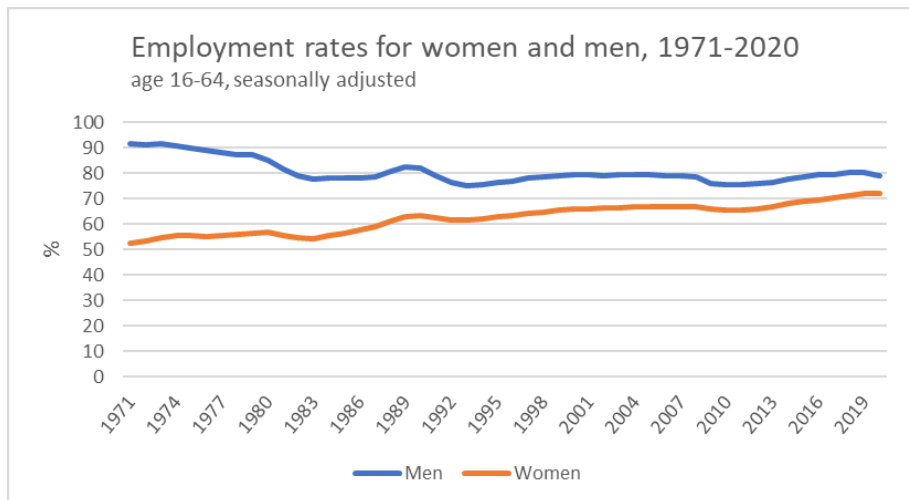
A [CIPD report](#) shows one third (34%) of UK workers were not 'working normally' by the first week in April 2020, with almost a quarter 'temporarily away' from their work altogether, mostly on the furlough scheme. The majority in both these categories were female employees with, for example, 133,000 more women than men furloughed in the first lockdown peak.

Reporting on the gender pay gap was temporarily suspended and official government data from November 2020 suggests the gender pay gap continued to decline in 2020 but CIPD cite several leading analysts suggesting a likely increase in the pay gap when new figures are available later in 2021.

With significant disruption to school and childcare provision during the pandemic, ONS data analysis shows women have been carrying out an average of two-thirds more childcare than menⁱⁱ.

Women's employment trends

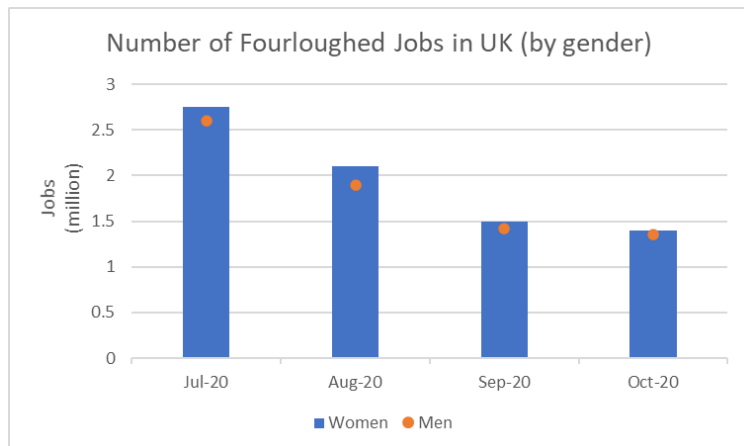
Steady growth in female employment is largely due to structural changes in society and more recently, changes in the state pension age for women.



Graph 1 Source: ONS

Furlough and redundancy during the pandemic

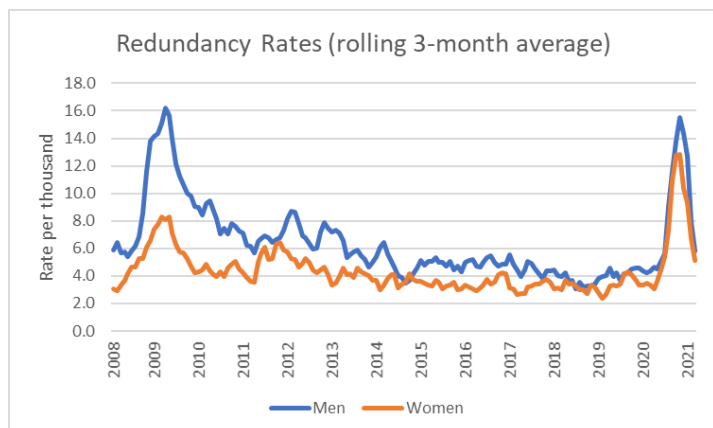
Between July and October 2020, of a total of 15.3 million jobs furloughed in the UK, 52% were women, despite women only making up 48% of the workforce. ([PWC Report](#))



Graph 2 Source HMRC/CJRS (reproduced from PWC 2020)

Analysts anticipate redundancies will continue throughout 2021 with business feeling a delayed shock as Government assistance schemes wind down.

Although redundancy levels between men and women are similar, relative to men, women are experiencing higher levels of job loss during COVID-19 than in previous periods of economic downturn.

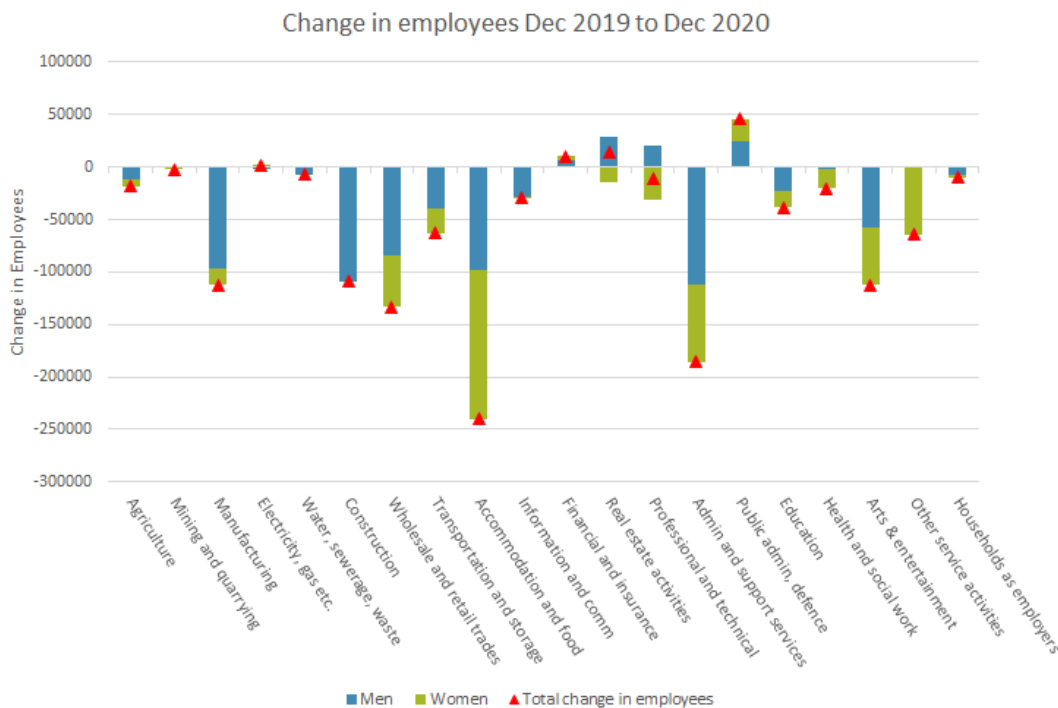


Graph 3 Source ONS

TUC analysis shows female redundancies in the UK hit 178,000 between September and November 2020 – 76% higher than the peak reached in 2008 financial crisis, when female redundancy levels reached 100,000. In the same 2020 period 217,000 men were made redundant – 3% more than the peak of male redundancies during the financial crisis.

Employment by sector: implications for women

Women are employed at a disproportionate rate by the sectors most affected by the pandemic, and most significantly in the food and accommodation sector which has seen the largest drop in employment.



In hospitality (where jobs fell by 243,000 in the 12 months up to December 2020), women accounted for 60% of total job losses. Similarly, in wholesale and retail women accounted for 58% per cent of job losses (88,000 out of 152,000 job losses). These two industries combined account for around a fifth of employment in the UK. ([TUC data](#)).

According to the CIPD report, women make up a greater number of keyworker roles not amenable to homeworking that have seen the highest occupational mortality rates from COVID-19, notably care home workers and retail shop assistants.

Groups most affected by the pandemic

Mothers

The IFS report shows mothers are 1.5 times more likely than fathers to have either lost or left their job since March 2020. [The Fawcett Society](#) found 35% of working mothers have lost work (or hours) due to lack of childcare support during the pandemic.

An [LSE paper](#) claims 20.3% of households with dependent children (aged 15 or below) are headed by single mothers, against 3.3% headed by single fathers. Hence, for single parent households, women are far more likely than men to be the sole providers of the sharp increase in childcare during the lock-down.

Women from minority ethnic backgrounds

The Fawcett Society find 50% of employed women from minority ethnic groups and 43% of women from White ethnic groups were concerned about job or promotion prospects because of the pandemic. This compares to 35% of employed white men.

Carers

The pandemic has put additional pressure on unpaid carers in society. Women's role as unpaid carers makes a significant contribution to the UK economy in a number of ways. [Carers UK](#) estimate that women make up 58% of unpaid carers with the economic value of the unpaid care provided by women in the UK estimated to be around £77 billion per year. Caring falls particularly on women in their 40s, 50s and 60s. 1 in 4 women aged 50-64 has caring responsibilities for older or disabled loved ones.

Gender pay gap is still officially decreasing but analysts suggest this could change

Official [government data](#) suggests the gender pay gap continued to fall during the pandemic (last data release Nov 2020). Among all employees the pay gap was 15.5% in 2020, down from 17.4% in 2019. The gender pay gap remained close to zero for full-time employees aged under 40 years but was over 10% for older age groups.

However, a recent CIPD report cites a range of analysis which suggests that once post-pandemic adjustments are made to the data, the gender pay gap may increase. Whilst the requirement to report gender pay gaps was suspended in March 2020, analysis of the 5,822 individual employer reports already posted show a widening of the gap in 2020.

The [Equality Trust](#) analysis in November 2020 (using a larger sample) found a small average decline in the overall gender gap reported of 0.5%, but the reported average bonus gap was up by almost 200%. Two-thirds of the 20 employers with the largest gender pay gaps in 2019 did not report voluntarily in 2020, which could store up bad news for 2021 reports. With the decline in national employment levels during COVID-19 occurring particularly in lower-paying female-dominated occupations, this reduction could have increased the average pay of those women still remaining in employment and therefore skewed the national figures.

Higher education and graduate careers

[HEPI analysis](#) shows higher education participation level for young women reached 56.6% in 2017/18, compared to 44.1% for young men. However, the detailed picture is mixed. [IFS research](#) states that 85% of women gain 'positive net lifetime returns' from higher education, compared to only around three quarters of men. On average across men and women, a university education leads to an increase in net earnings of about 20%. But the gender difference is stark: the estimated gain to the exchequer of individuals attending HE is around £110k per student for men and £30k per student for women.

There are still significant gender differences between subjects, for example women are much less likely to study most STEM subjects. Recent analysis by [STEM Women](#) show female participation rates in STEM degree subjects remain static.

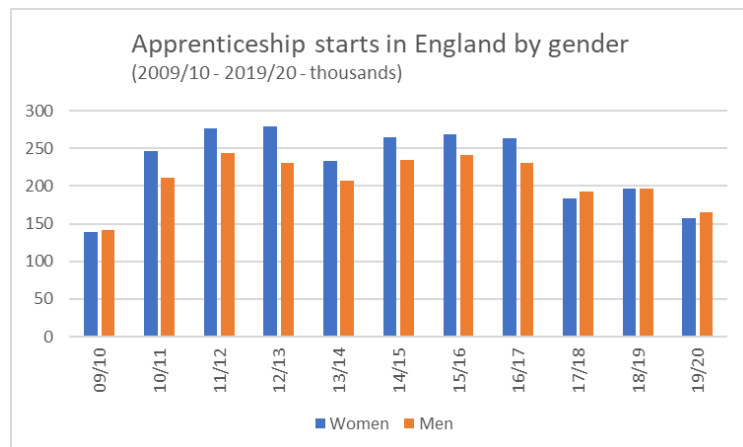
Table 1: STEM subjects taken in HE – female graduates

STEM subjects taken in HE – female graduates		
2015	22,020	25%
2016	22,340	24%
2017	22,950	25%
2018	24,000	26%
2019	24,705	26%

Source: [STEM Women](#)

Apprenticeships

[Department for Education data](#) shows the number of women and men starting apprenticeships in 2019/2020 were similar, with slightly more starts by men. (51.2% compared to 48.8%). Starts for both men and women decreased in 2019/2020 from 2018/19, although the decrease was larger for women (39,710) than the decrease for men (31,070). This reverses a longer-term trend of more apprenticeship starts for women.



Graph 4 Source: DfE

Women and access to workplace training

Data on participation in workplace training is disparate as most work-based training is not accredited. A number of sources of evidence suggest that women fare worse than men in accessing opportunities for training in the workplace or paid for by employers.

- A [report](#) shows only 38% of MBA enrolments in 2019 (at the 37 AMBA accredited business schools in the UK) were 38% women.
- TUC research highlights how access for women workplace training is compounded by ethnicity, age and disability “in our survey of BME women, just under one-third of BME women said they had been unfairly denied access to training and development opportunities. This rose to one in two BME disabled women (52 per cent) and 38 per cent of BME women aged 25 to 34.”ⁱⁱⁱ

References

(In addition to linked research papers in the text)

OECD (2021), Employment rate (indicator). doi: 10.1787/1de68a9b-en (Accessed on 04 June 2021)

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Howlett, E. (2020) Women providing two-thirds more childcare than men during lockdown, ONS 2020 data. People Management. 22 July. Available from <https://www.peoplemanagement.co.uk/news/articles/women-providingtwo-thirds-more-childcare-than-men-during-lockdown> (Accessed on 03 June 2020)

ⁱ OECD

ⁱⁱ Howlett, 2020

ⁱⁱⁱ https://www.tuc.org.uk/research-analysis/reports/bme-women-and-work#_ftn7