

UK working mothers are 'sacrificial lambs' in coronavirus childcare crisis ^[1]

Exclusive: Survey reveals lack of childcare played role in almost half of female layoffs

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EXCERPTS

Women are being treated as “sacrificial lambs” as the UK economy contracts, with half of working mothers unable to access the childcare they need to return to work, according to a survey exposing the scale of the UK’s childcare crisis.

As the government was accused by MPs from both sides of the political divide of ignoring and sidelining women in its response to the coronavirus pandemic, the survey revealed a lack of childcare played a role in the job losses of almost half of the women made redundant since the pandemic hit.

It also reveals that, in the last four months, 67% of key workers were forced to reduce their hours because of a lack of access to childcare, 60% struggled with childcare provision, and 45% did not have the childcare in place they needed over the summer. Of the 1,756 pregnant key workers who responded to the survey, 30.5% had been suspended on incorrect terms, such as being told to take sick leave or to start maternity leave early.

The failure to put access to childcare at the heart of government policy risked sending women back to the 1970s, said Caroline Nokes, the Conservative MP who chairs the women and equalities select committee. She called the lack of a single reference to childcare in the summer mini-budget “shocking”.

“The specific needs of women are not on anyone’s agenda right now,” she said. “In order to even stand still on gender equality at this moment you would need real drive and ambition, but we are not seeing anyone grasp that.”

That lack of focus could have dire consequences for women’s future earning power, said Tulip Siddiq, the shadow minister for children and early years. “It’s like a throwback to the dark ages,” she said. “It feels like I’m banging my head against a brick wall. This is not a cabinet that listens to women.”

The questionnaire - which gathered detailed responses from almost 20,000 working women in 48 hours - was a “cry for help”, said Joeli Brearley, the founder of the campaign group Pregnant Then Screwed, which carried out the work. Half of the women questioned said a lack of childcare had had a negative impact on how they were perceived or treated at work.

“The needs of working mothers have been completely ignored during this pandemic and, as many others have warned, we are now seeing that they are the first to go when jobs are cut – mothers are the sacrificial lambs for the economy contracting,” she said.

“The crisis in the childcare sector has been growing for years, but now it is at breaking point - and without this vital social infrastructure in place we will revert back to the 1950s very, very quickly.”

A report from the Office for National Statistics this week showed that parents were nearly twice as likely to be furloughed (13.6%) as those without children (7.2%), while women spent an average of an hour longer each day on childcare duties than men during lockdown.

According to the Pregnant Then Screwed survey, which questioned working mothers:

- 72% worked fewer hours due to lack of childcare.
- 15% had been made redundant or were facing redundancy, with 46% of those citing a lack of childcare as the reason.
- 81% needed childcare to be able to do their paid work, but only 49% had the childcare they required.
- 11% of pregnant women were made redundant or expected to be - of these, 57% were pregnant black women.
- 74% of self-employed women had their earning potential reduced because of a lack of access to childcare.

With experts warning that millions of female workers could be shut out of the coronavirus recovery because of a crisis in childcare, a group of campaigners, unions, thinktanks and providers have formed the Coalition for Better Childcare in an attempt to force the government to produce a major rescue package for the industry.

The struggles in the sector even before the pandemic struck are well documented. According to the Early Years Alliance, one in four early

years providers fear closure within the year, a figure that increases to one in three in the most disadvantaged areas. While early years childcare at first appeared to be included in the government's £1bn "catch-up fund" for the education sector - it was removed from a revised press release.

The new survey also reveals a downward spiral – 33% of employed mothers had forfeited a childcare space because of costs since March, while the number for self-employed mothers was 44%. That put childcare workers, the vast majority of whom are women, at risk of dropping out of the workforce, said Neil Leitch, the chief executive of the EYA.

"This is a manmade crisis which has a huge disproportionate effect on women," he said, adding that "97% of the early years workforce are women and it is their livelihoods and futures at risk because of the government's failure to take leadership and provide the transitional and long-term funding the sector needs to survive."

The threat to nurseries came as parents faced a shortage of summer clubs, wraparound care and informal care from grandparents, said Mubeen Bhutta, the head of policy at Working Families.

"There are 13 million working parents in the UK, and they need affordable childcare they can rely on to play their part in the recovery," she said. "Quite simply, childcare needs to be considered as economic infrastructure, with the investment to match."

The government's furlough scheme - which was widened to allow companies to furlough workers for childcare reasons - will end in October. However, employers will be expected to pay a greater share of workers' wages from August, which will leave female workers particularly vulnerable to the axe this summer, said Sian Elliott, the women's equality policy officer at the Trades Union Congress.

"We are looking at the reversal of decades of progress in women's equality in the workplace, a widening of the gender pay gap and the gender pension gap – we are just storing up huge problems for the future," she said.

A Department for Education spokesperson said the government was providing security to nurseries and childminders by "block buying" childcare places for the rest of the year at the level funded before coronavirus, regardless of how many children attended. "This will provide financial security to nurseries and childminders, meaning they can continue to provide the high quality childcare needed by parents as they return to work," the spokesperson said.

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