

Women and Equalities Committee

Oral Evidence: [Unequal impact? Coronavirus and the gendered economic impact](#), HC 385

Wednesday 8 July 2020

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 8 July 2020.

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Members present: Caroline Nokes (Chair); Nickie Aiken; Sara Britcliffe; Angela Crawley; Alex Davies-Jones; Peter Gibson; Kim Johnson; Bell Ribeiro-Addy; Nicola Richards.

Questions 1–44

Witnesses

I: Professor Abi Adams-Prassl, Senior Research Fellow, University of Oxford; Dr Mary-Ann Stephenson, Director, Women's Budget Group.

II: Victoria Benson, Chief Executive Officer, Gingerbread; Rosalind Bragg, Director, Maternity Action.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Maternity Action](#)
- [Women's Budget Group](#)
- [Women's Budget Group](#)



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Professor Abi Adams-Prassl and Dr Mary-Ann Stephenson.

Q1 Chair: Good afternoon and welcome to the evidence session of the Women and Equalities Select Committee. This is our first evidence session as part of the inquiry into the gendered impact of Covid. I am going to ask the panellists to very briefly introduce themselves, but to specifically let us know how the work they are currently working on will enable us to inform our inquiry and help us with the work we are doing on the gendered impact of Covid.

Professor Adams-Prassl: I am Professor Abi Adams-Prassl, an associate professor and senior research fellow at the University of Oxford. Since the start of lockdown, I have surveyed over 28,000 workers in the UK, the US and Germany, alongside colleagues at the University of Cambridge and the University of Zurich, to better understand the labour market impacts of the crisis. This includes any inequality in impacts between men and women.

In pre-corona times, I have done work on zero-hours contracts and the rise of the gig economy, gender differences in online work and working from home, and individual incentives to enforce labour rights in the UK employment tribunals.

Dr Stephenson: I am Mary-Ann Stephenson. I am director of the UK Women's Budget Group. We have been analysing both the gendered impact of Covid and the impact of the Government's policy response to Covid-19 since March. We have produced a series of reports. We have also done polling with the Fawcett Society and academics at Queen Mary and LSE, which we have submitted in evidence to you.

Q2 Sara Britcliffe: Prior to the start of the coronavirus pandemic, we were already aware of a number of economic inequalities between men and women, including the gender pay gap, occupational segregation and continuing issues around equal pay. How well do you think the reasons for those inequalities were understood by Government and major stakeholders?

Professor Adams-Prassl: That is a great question. As you say, we have a huge amount of evidence that documents, across a range of different employment outcomes, differences between men and women. At least in the academic literature, quantifying the different reasons for those inequalities, be that discrimination, differences in childcare responsibilities and potentially differences in preferences or different kinds of constraints, is still a matter of debate. We know a lot about the inequalities, but there is still an active debate out there on precisely what drives them and what that means in terms of policy.

One of the interesting things that at least I have found in my work is that, even in gender-blind labour markets, for example online labour



markets, where gender is not directly visible to employers—there has also been work done on Uber—or heavily unionised workplaces, where there is no difference in the choices or remuneration schemes that are offered to men and women, you still see men and women making different choices, with corresponding implications for pay. The work I have done suggests that you can think of that still being related to this inequality in domestic care and domestic responsibilities between men and women. This is going to be really important when we start talking about the crisis. You cannot see the labour market as separate from inequalities in the home. Especially thinking forward about what we do about that in a proactive sense, there is still a lot of work to be done.

Dr Stephenson: I would very much agree with Abi that inequality in the private sphere, in unpaid care, domestic work and other unpaid work, is one of the significant underlying factors for inequality in the workplace and the wider economy. We know that women were differently situated in the workplace before the pandemic: women were the majority of low-paid earners, the majority of those in part-time employment, the majority of those on zero-hours contracts and the majority of those in involuntary part-time employment, so working fewer hours than they wanted to work. This has had an impact since then in the way the coronavirus crisis has affected them.

These statistics are well known. They are certainly well known within the women's sector. They are well known within academia. They are constantly being promoted to Government and parliamentarians. I am not sure of the extent to which the Government were aware of it, because one thing that is missing is that the Government do not publish many detailed equality impact assessments of their policies. We cannot really tell the extent to which those different situations of women and men are taken into account when policy is made, unless equality impact assessments are published so that we can scrutinise them. I know that is something the Committee has raised in the past, for example in relation to Budgets.

Q3 Sara Britcliffe: It is something that I want to touch on as well. We have mentioned the Government policies. You have spoken briefly about that. How would you rate them pre-lockdown and the progress they make in tackling those inequalities?

Dr Stephenson: Over the last 10 years, we have seen significant cuts to public services and spending on social security. That has had a massively differential impact on women, disabled and black and minority ethnic women in particular. We have seen an increase in poverty and child poverty in particular, and obviously child poverty is highly linked to women's poverty. Children are not poor by themselves; they are poor because their mothers are poor. We have seen cuts in the services that many women rely on.

We have also seen an increase in the number of women in employment. Unfortunately, the jobs that many women have gone into have been



these insecure zero-hours contract jobs. This made them more vulnerable to losing work when the lockdown started, because they are the easiest group of workers to get rid of, or the group of workers that employers do not have a vested interest in furloughing. If somebody is on a zero-hours contract, you can simply not give them hours; you do not have to go through the administrative bother of trying to furlough them.

This crisis has collided with a set of pre-existing crises and inequalities for women that had not been properly addressed. Although the gender pay gap was narrowing slowly, the gender earnings gap, which is the difference in the amount people get paid at the end of the week, which is most significant when you look at pounds in peoples' pockets, is really large now. That is about women being more likely to work part time, which is about the gender division of unpaid labour between men and women, but also lack of childcare and support for working mothers.

Professor Adams-Prassl: I could not agree more with that. Adding briefly, a lot of the employment growth since the financial crisis has been in low-paid, insecure work. It has been in solo self-employment, which we know that women are clustered in. These jobs are associated with lower training and potentially fewer employment and career prospects going forward. In terms of a dynamic, ambitious women's employment agenda, going into the crisis we were in quite poor shape.

The other thing I would like to add is on enforcement of labour rights. Given that women are on zero-hours contracts and on lower pay, and there are these unexplained components of the gender pay gap, thinking about how female workers are able to enforce the rights that Government have already provided for them is quite important to tackle. At the moment, things are generally done on an individual enforcement basis through the employment tribunals. There exists very little incentive for individuals to actually go through those and enforce their rights to not be discriminated against and to be paid for the work they have done. Moving forward into the new labour market that we are going to find ourselves in, space should be given to think carefully about enforcement.

Q4 Sara Britcliffe: Still on Government policy, pre-pandemic, how effective do you think it has been for women who have other protected characteristics?

Dr Stephenson: Black and minority ethnic women, for example, are particularly likely to be disproportionately represented in low-paid jobs, in insecure work and on zero-hours contracts. They are particularly likely to be poor and to have been affected by cuts to social security. That poverty can make it harder to get into the labour market. If you are struggling with the day-to-day costs of poverty, particularly with sanctioning of benefits for example, there is evidence that reduces your ability to find work rather than increasing it. Black and minority ethnic women and disabled women were in a worse position than other women going into this crisis—more likely to be poor and on insecure contracts, less likely to be in employment and more likely to be in debt, for example.



Professor Adams-Prassl: Relating to Mary's point about the equalities impact assessment, something we lack, at least in areas I have worked in before, is a lot of detailed data to be able to answer those types of questions. For example, I have done work on the justice system. It is very difficult to understand how particular reforms are going to affect different groups in society, because we have inadequate data on who is using particular services and the outcomes they actually achieve.

One thing that is quite interesting about the gender pay gap reporting legislation is that, by creating an imperfect—we can potentially talk about that later—evidence base, we now have much more evidence on pay across different employers and representation of women in different pay quintiles, which did not exist before. Being ambitious about measurement and data collection, to track inequalities across multiple groups, could be done if sufficient resources were put behind it.

Q5 **Chair:** Can I follow up with Mary-Ann? You referred to the administrative bother of furlough. What specific work have you done to establish how much of a bother that has been to employers? Anecdotally, we have heard that the vast majority have found it very simple and straightforward.

Dr Stephenson: I am not saying it is a difficult administrative process. I mean that, if you have somebody on a zero-hours contract, there is no work for them and you are faced with a choice between either paying them and claiming the money back from the Government or simply not giving them hours, it is a lot simpler to not give them hours. The point of large numbers of sectors where people are employed on zero-hours contracts is that you have high staff turnover. This is not about sectors where people are worried about recruiting and retaining staff. This is about sectors where people assume there will be a high level of churn. Otherwise, they would give people more secure and permanent contracts in order to keep them.

I actually think the job retention scheme has been really good. I am not saying that there is an onerous burden on employers. I am just saying that there is more of a burden than simply not giving somebody hours.

Q6 **Chair:** Do you have evidence to back up the assumption that that is what has happened?

Dr Stephenson: We are waiting to see the full evidence on job losses for people on zero-hours contracts. That is something where we are still trying to collect evidence. There has certainly been reporting through diary schemes and projects that have been interviewing people at a local level where people have simply been told not to come in. That needs proper monitoring.

Professor Adams-Prassl: I will quickly tell you about the data we have collected for the UK. We have run three surveys in the UK, funded by UKRI and geographically represented. The first one was two days after



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the lockdown began, the next one in mid-April and the final one to date in May. We found that those people on zero-hours contracts, insecure contracts, are more likely to have lost their job, but actually are more likely to have been put on the furlough scheme. We are still trying to get to the bottom of that.

We have also been asking about things like employers topping up wages, the terms on which individuals are furloughed and to what extent people are, for example, being asked to keep working or forced to take holiday while on furlough. We found that those on insecure contracts are less likely, perhaps unsurprisingly, to have had their wages topped up beyond the 80% and more likely to have been forced to take any holiday leave that they were entitled to on those contracts.

Q7 Chair: I now have a fairly long-winded question, I fear, on employment agencies and whether you have done any specific work on the likelihood of employment agencies furloughing their staff. Is there any differential between the rates at which they will be prepared to furlough men versus women? I ask specifically and this comes from a constituency question. Across the three employment agencies I found in my constituency that have refused to furlough workers, 100% of those workers have been female. Have you done any research on that?

Dr Stephenson: We have not. I do not know if Abi has.

Professor Adams-Prassl: It is not on employment agencies specifically. We have looked into this point about gender differences and the likelihood of being furloughed in quite some detail. Would that be of interest? It is not related to the employment agencies.

Chair: We are conscious that people working via recruitment agencies may well be in temporary employment, moving jobs regularly, and of course the furlough scheme allowed them to be furloughed. The evidence I have locally is that, of the people agencies would not furlough, all were women, which I thought was striking, but you do not have any facts you can give us on that.

Professor Adams-Prassl: No.

Q8 Peter Gibson: At this early stage, have the witnesses had a chance to digest any of the Chancellor's statement from this afternoon? Apologies for putting you on the spot. I know it has only occurred in the last hour. Have you had a chance to digest any of the announcements?

Dr Stephenson: Yes, up to a point. I have not read the full detail. I watched the speech and we had a discussion within the Women's Budget Group about it. The kickstart scheme for young workers is very welcome. We know that young people are at particular risk of redundancy in this crisis because of the sectors they work in and the sectors that are likely to be affected, and young women in particular. I know the Young Women's Trust has done a lot of work on this.



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The amount of money going into the scheme and going into the green jobs scheme is not sufficient to deal with the crisis of employment we are facing; nor actually is the money in the green jobs scheme sufficient to deal with the environmental crisis we are facing. The £3 billion spent on green job creation compared with £13.5 billion spent in France or £36 billion spent in Germany gives you a sense of the scale of the difference of spending.

I spoke to one local authority that said that the scheme to retrofit housing works out at about £6 million per local authority. They calculated that fully retrofitting housing in their borough by 2030 would cost £140 million a year. If you are looking at the scale of the environmental challenge we are facing, that money is not sufficient.

We have been arguing for a care-led recovery and we have produced evidence showing that investment in the care sector, in childcare and social care, would create significantly more jobs than investment in other sectors. We are just about to publish a table sector by sector, which I am very happy to share with you after this meeting; it is being edited at the moment. That could create over 2 million jobs, vastly more jobs for women, but actually significantly more jobs for men than, for example, investment in construction.

While there are welcome first steps in the statement, it does not go far enough to address the scale of the employment crisis we are likely to be facing. The focus particularly on construction does not recognise that the people who are most likely to lose their jobs are women working in retail, apart from food retail obviously, and hospitality. Even though those sectors are now opening up, it is going to be very difficult for a lot of businesses in those sectors to survive with social distancing requirements and others. They cannot get the footfall through the door.

Q9 Peter Gibson: Just to press you a little further in respect of the packages of support, particularly in respect of the hospitality industry, where are seeing "eat out to help out", the reduction in the VAT in that sector, the grants to support young people coming into that industry with £6,500 and the bonuses to employers retaining employees who have been furloughed, are you saying those things do not go far enough?

Dr Stephenson: Yes. It is interesting. Among the various options that were floated in advance of this speech, including the much touted £500 voucher to every adult, the Chancellor has chosen the least ambitious of these schemes. It is important to target money specifically at hospitality and retail, but I do not think the VAT cut is the most effective way of doing it.

Q10 Peter Gibson: May I come back to you there? You do not think the VAT cut is effective? That is a 15% reduction.

Dr Stephenson: I do not think it is the most effective way of spending the money. The proposal for vouchers and money for individuals is



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probably likely to be more effective in increasing demand. The problem is one of demand and how you increase demand in a way that is safe.

With the £1,000 bonus for returners, while that is obviously great for those companies that are able to bring back employees, it is unfortunately not going to do a great deal for those that are on the verge of crisis and do not have the cash flow to survive in the short term. It is not sufficient.

Professor Adams-Prassl: I had three very quick thoughts as well. I have only briefly been able to digest the statement. One relates to the ending of the furlough scheme. The second is about work coaches and getting individuals back into work. The final thing I would like to say touches on some of Mary-Ann's points around health and safety and the need not to see the public health objective and the economic objective as necessarily in tension.

First, on the furlough scheme, we found that women are significantly less likely to want to return to work from furlough, especially those with children. Something that is really important to understand about this crisis being different from previous crises is the fact that the closure of schools has disproportionately impacted women. Not only are women more likely to be employed in more affected sectors, but, even though men have increased the share of childcare that they have done through the crisis, women have picked up, at least in our data, even more. We have seen a slight widening in the gender gap in childcare hours.

There needs to be a lot more sensitivity to the ending of furlough and what is going on with schools. The degree to which women can re-enter the labour market in the same way is going to depend on the degree to which children are going back to school on particular schedules.

I was really pleased to see the significant investment in work coaches. It looks like, in the medium term, there needs to be a lot of reallocation of workers into different types of jobs and different occupations. Even with the policies that you have just been discussing, it seems highly unlikely that employment and spending in hospitality and retail in person is going to quickly return to pre-Covid levels.

There is a question of where the jobs are right now that are still being advertised. If you look at job vacancy data, at least over the crisis, the jobs that are still being advertised typically require more preparation—you need more training to enter those professions. That means that we are going to need well-trained work coaches providing more support to individuals, to increase their skills to be competitive in the labour market, and potentially a bit more handholding in thinking about what types of jobs they are able to go into.

There also needs to be more of a question about the application of conditionality in a world in which women might still have children at home. I know that there are differences—the conditionality means



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something different for people with very small kids—but that is going to be affecting many more individuals now if the childcare schedules continue to be disrupted.

On health and safety, I was pleased to see the reversal on employer testing and tax. Another thing that we have found is that workers without sick pay are especially nervous and especially unwilling to go back to work at the moment, which is perhaps unsurprising. Also, it is in more people-facing sectors, where you see more individuals not having access to sick pay beyond the statutory minimum.

Individuals who do not have access to sick pay beyond the statutory minimum are much more likely to say they would go to work with coronavirus symptoms, and actually have said that they are currently working even if they have a light cold or fever. There needs to be a lot more attention paid to what a joined-up strategy for workplace testing and rotation looks like, providing workers with more confidence to go back to work and that they are safe.

The final thing is this point about people-facing sectors. The falls in spending started before lockdown occurred. Sweden, for example, is seeing slower returns to normal spending than other Scandinavian countries that entered into lockdown. It is not just lockdown that has caused reductions in spending. It appears from the evidence we have thus far that it is also fears about public health. Getting serious about tackling the public health crisis and having a sustainable economic recovery should be seen as complements, and not entering into tension with one another necessarily.

Q11 **Nickie Aiken:** I agree with Professor Adams-Prassl about childcare being a real issue for women. You will notice that I am at home, because I have two children at home, so I am juggling too. I wanted to come back on what Dr Stephenson was saying about the Chancellor's announcement today. In my own constituency, the Cities of London and Westminster, we have massive hospitality and entertainment sectors, as you can imagine. Presently, we are seeing nothing like the previous numbers coming back. I think retail has had about a 25% return since July and it is a trickle. There are reasons for that, but surely the announcements today—the dramatic decrease in VAT from 20% to 5%, which is going to make a massive difference to how much things cost, and the August scheme, “eat out to help out”—are going to help the hospitality industry? I am questioning your pessimism about that.

Dr Stephenson: I am not saying it is not going to help. I think it will help. I am saying it is not sufficient. It is not sufficient to deal with the scale of the crisis. The August “eat out to help out” scheme is for one month. As Abi has pointed out, the problems the sector faces are not just about lockdown. They are about people's fears about what is happening, in terms of both health and their own jobs. To take advantage of these discounts in restaurants, you still have to have disposable income to spend in restaurants. If you are worried that you might lose your job



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when the furlough scheme ends, you may very well decide not to eat out in restaurants in August because you are trying to save as much money as possible.

I am not saying this is not going to do anything. I am saying that, with the scale of the problem we are facing, the level of spending announced by the Chancellor is not sufficient to close that gap.

Q12 Nicola Richards: My first question is to Abi. It has been touched upon but I wanted to clarify. In what ways have different groups of men been disproportionately affected so far during coronavirus?

Professor Adams-Prassl: In terms of the impacts on men, I have two things to say, one about age and one about mental health impacts, which we have also been looking into. In terms of age, we have seen that the young across the board, both young men and young women, have been more likely to lose their job and suffer falls in earnings. I am trying to pull out other interesting facts about particular groups of men who have been affected. I might have to get back to you on more detailed things around that.

On mental health, however, we have seen that women's mental health has been affected more across the crisis than that of men, in terms of answers to surveys. Young men have also suffered quite large declines in their mental health—not as large as young women, but young men are suffering in terms of the mental health impacts.

Q13 Nicola Richards: My next question is to both of you. Looking at the economic package the Government have developed, what has worked for men and women so far and what has not?

Professor Adams-Prassl: It is clear that the coronavirus job retention scheme has had a huge positive impact in preventing mass unemployment at the beginning of the crisis. I am very pleased with the way it is transitioning from this binary all-or-nothing scheme into flexible furlough now. If you compare the UK's scheme to Kurzarbeit in Germany, other European schemes have had a lot more flexibility from the beginning in terms of how many hours workers could do for their employers.

We can think about two things. First, there are investments that firms might be making in the ability of workers to work from home. We have seen that, while, on average, workers are reporting that they can now do more of their jobs from home than they could before, that has been driven by occupations where individuals were already doing a lot of work from home and were somewhat less likely to have been furloughed, which we think makes sense. Why would you invest in different types of technology if none of your workers are actually working? We are thinking about some kinds of remote working becoming part of at least the medium term. It is good that we are moving into more of a flexible scheme.



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What are the other things? I do not want to seem too nit-picky now, but there was a lot of uncertainty at the beginning about how long the furloughing scheme was going to be in place and on what terms. A lesson from other European countries that had short-term work schemes over the crisis is that having schemes set up very quickly, with very clear terms to reduce uncertainty, helps a lot in reducing job loss at the beginning.

I have kind of said my other points. I personally think that this hard end to furlough in October is not necessarily the best strategy. As we are seeing local lockdowns, we might think about a bit more flexibility in the furloughing scheme, both across sectors and to smooth the impact, particularly for working mothers into the autumn.

Dr Stephenson: I very much agree with Abi about the importance of the furlough scheme in protecting jobs. It has clearly had a huge impact and has been really important. There have been people who have missed out from the scheme, but overall it has had a very positive impact. Similarly, there is the support for self-employed workers. Again, there are gaps in that scheme and there were lots of issues around particularly women who had been on maternity leave who were returning from maternity leave. I know you are going to be hearing from Ros Bragg later on, so I will not say too much about that. I am sure she can deal with all those issues.

There have, however, been gaps in the Government's response. The increase in universal credit at the beginning of the crisis, while welcome, is still not sufficient to make universal credit sufficient for people to live on in the long term. We have a massive increase in people going to food banks, for example, and a massive increase of people in rent arrears and at risk of eviction. We had a social security system that was based on the idea that you had to make claiming benefits as difficult a proposition as possible. You wanted to try to push people into the labour market by basically making the social security system very low in terms of European average social security payments. When you are in a situation where people cannot work or you actually do not want people to be going to work, that creates real problems.

Abi raised the issue of statutory sick pay. That has been a real problem because it clearly has created a disincentive for people to self-isolate and will do going forward. If we want to avoid a second spike in infection, addressing both the coverage of statutory sick pay—women are less likely to be entitled to statutory sick pay than men—and the level at which it is paid is really important.

Then there are real issues for people with no recourse to public funds. Migrant workers who are in this country legally working, paying tax and national insurance, could be furloughed, but, if they were made redundant, they would be left without any access to income at a point when it was not possible to do anything other than stay in the country. It is part of the hostile environment, which was about encouraging people



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to leave if they did not have work, but you have people in a situation where they are trapped, including people working in the health and social care sector. There are real gaps there.

Finally, there is the failure to address the emerging crisis in childcare. Childcare providers are warning of large-scale loss of childcare places. This is going to be a real problem as people try to return to work. I have yet to see any coherent childcare strategy around Covid from the Government.

Professor Adams-Prassl: I completely agree on the childcare strategy. The other policy area I would like to have seen more on is the enforcement of health and safety at work, and thinking about proper investment in a more proactive approach to ensuring that workers have safe workplaces, and that they feel they can be socially distanced at work and are not being put at undue risk. That has become quite salient in the last couple of days, with the Leicester garment factories as well, but this is something that has been known for a while. The funding and resources available to both health and safety enforcement agencies and employment rights enforcement agencies more broadly have been massively depleted over, I guess, the last 10 years. Some of that is starting to show now.

Q14 **Nicola Richards:** My next question is to both of you. Do you think the timescales for reopening different sectors have had a disproportionate impact on women?

Dr Stephenson: Certainly for those locked down sectors, hospitality and retail, that will have had a disproportionate impact on women because they are more likely to work in those sectors. As Abi said earlier on, I do not think you can separate out the economic questions from the public health questions. I do not think we would be arguing that those sectors should have been opened up sooner because of the negative impacts. It is more a case of what support is provided for them since they need to be locked down. Going forward, we need to be thinking about what provision is in place if we have to have more local lockdowns, as we have seen in Leicester. If that happens going forward, what support will be in place over the autumn and winter, after the furlough scheme ends, to make sure that people can get support in those parts of the country where lockdown has been reinforced and they cannot go into work?

Professor Adams-Prassl: I say this briefly because I think I have made this point before. The mismatch in timing between the actual easing of lockdown, in practice, across different sectors and across schools and the childcare sector in different areas in the economy has the potential to have a really negative gendered impact. If there is going to be more disruption in the school timetable, with different groups of pupils being rotated in at different times, we need to think really seriously about what that means for working parents if they are expected to be back at work at that point. Elderly parents, for example, and the usual other childcare



providers have been hit very hard over the crisis as well. A proactive strategy to grapple with that is really needed.

Chair: I am conscious that you want to leave us by 3.10, Mary-Ann. If we could have brief answers so that we get through all Bell's questions, that would be very helpful.

Q15 Bell Ribeiro-Addy: We are all aware of the importance of the gender pay gap reporting, the introduction of which was crucial to revealing and addressing the gender pay gap in many organisations. The one example I found is the BBC, which had a median gap of 9.3% in 2017 and has steadily reduced to 6.7% in 2019—obviously it still has some way to go. Following the announcement from the Government in March that we would be suspending the gender pay gap reporting, I want to ask each of you what your response to this was, and your organisation's response, if relevant. What impact do you think this will have on data about economic inequalities overall?

Dr Stephenson: We are very concerned about the suspension of gender pay gap reporting. At that immediate point in March, saying to employers who were also coping with moving to lockdown, "We are going to delay the reporting process," would have been completely reasonable. Employers had lots of other things to deal with, but to actually suspend it is seriously concerning. As you say, it has been a really useful driver of change, both in exposing those gaps within different companies and sectors, and for women in those sectors to be able to start a conversation with their employers, because there is data that they can point to and it acts as a catalyst for those conversations to take place.

It is really important that gender pay gap reporting is reinstated. It is also really important to start collecting data on the ethnicity pay gap. We know that exists and we can see how important this reporting on the gender pay gap has been. It would clearly be equally important for the ethnicity pay gap.

Professor Adams-Prassl: I know of two papers that show, using very credible strategies, that the gender pay gap reporting has had a positive impact on women's pay in affected firms. Delay is completely understandable; suspension makes me worried. It should definitely be reinstated. This could provide an opportunity to add more things to the reporting requirements, including, given who was on payroll at that audit date last time, looking at the employment outcomes, not just of pay but who has been let go, which workers were put on furlough, and gender and ethnicity differences there. That could be added to the reporting requirements. Pay remains important at the moment but, given job loss and hours losses, we might want to look a little more to understand what is going on within firms.

Q16 Bell Ribeiro-Addy: This is to both of you again. Following on from that, despite the gender pay gap reporting being suspended, organisations could publish their data themselves, but I know that Business in the



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Community announced that only 5,081 organisations took the trouble of doing so for 2018-19. Do you think that is an indication of attitudes towards gender equality overall? Do you feel the Government are listening to stakeholders like you in developing strategies and policies to address the gender pay gap?

Dr Stephenson: The reason mandatory gender pay gap reporting was introduced was that companies would not do it otherwise, whether that is because it is seen as a low priority or because it is another piece of work that people do not want to do. We saw at the beginning of the gender pay gap reporting process that there were quite a few companies that really did not understand what they were supposed to be reporting on. They would have all sorts of very odd results, trying to claim a much smaller gap than was actually in existence. That was exposed and highlighted.

In terms of listening going forward, with all this, it is really important that the Government recognise the equality impact both of the crisis and of their response to the crisis, and develop a strategy to address this. We have not seen much discussion at the daily briefings about this sort of impact at all and we have not seen much push from Ministers in raising questions about the importance of equality impact. It is difficult to have a huge amount of confidence about how seriously that is taken. That goes back to my point about equality impact assessments and publishing them. If you do not publish those equality impact assessments, nobody can see what account you are taking of these issues and how it has affected your policy making.

Professor Adams-Prassl: Speaking from personal experience, I have never had so many committees or meetings as over the last couple of months. Lots of organisations have had a huge amount to deal with, so you do not necessarily want to take not reporting as a sign that they do not take gender equality seriously. However, as Mary-Ann said, the inequality in the gendered impact of this crisis should not be ignored by businesses and Government. For example, our finding that women have been less likely to have their pay topped up on furlough and have suffered very different employment outcomes is something that employers need to be made aware of and to reflect on.

Something like the gender pay gap reporting, producing those statistics and reports, as Mary-Ann said, and having a conversation with staff about them, could be a really good way of not just looking back at what happened when the crisis hit, but, moving forward—thinking of the types of policies we need to put in place to have a better workplace environment, where people feel they can remote work, for example, without having their promotion opportunities curtailed, and where they feel secure in their jobs, even if they need more flexible schedules to deal with childcare in the medium term.

Q17 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** At the end of June, the Prime Minister announced the Government's new deal for Britain, which aimed to set out the first



steps in a strategy to rebuild Britain and fuel the economic recovery across the UK. Aside from the reference to the levelling-up agenda, there was no specific reference to equalities in his speech. I wanted to find out what your thoughts were on the new deal as far as gender and equality is concerned. What would you like to have seen included if it was not?

Dr Stephenson: As I said, we have been calling for a care-led recovery that would take account of the fact that women are disproportionately likely to lose their jobs, as well as taking account of the crisis in social care and childcare, and creating more jobs and investment in any other sector. It seemed interesting to me, knowing what we do about the sectors that are going to be losing their jobs, that the focus on shovel-ready projects, hard hats and hi-vis jackets suggests a focus on jobs that historically have been more likely to be done by men. It is really important to provide training and support for women to enter into those sectors and to get jobs in those industries, but looking at what, in the short term, would deal with the immediate crisis of loss of jobs in retail and hospitality, investment in care creates more jobs more quickly. Construction always has a time lag, however shovel-ready the project. It would also have the social benefits that we have talked about. It feels that the failure to recognise that and the focus on very traditional forms of infrastructure investment, rather than thinking about investment in social infrastructure as well, is part of a failure to think about equalities more broadly.

Professor Adams-Prassl: I do not have very much to add to that.

Q18 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** I will move on to my final question, which is in relation to the Budget. In today's announcement from the Chancellor, there were no specific measures aimed to help workers in health and social care, retail and wholesale, childcare or education, all of which are the common sectors of employment for women in the UK. There was also no mention of helping businesses in sectors where women are disproportionately represented and that remain shut down—the main example is the beauty industry. I saw that the Women's Budget Group had commented on the announcement about boosting apprenticeships, pointing out that it would not remedy the gender pay gap problem in apprenticeships. In your opinion, what measures should the Government introduce, in both the short and medium term, to address gendered economic inequality as we come out of lockdown post-Covid? What would you like to have seen in the Budget?

Dr Stephenson: It is back to the same point about investing in a care-led recovery. This has to be the way forward. There were some announcements on hospitality around the discount scheme for August and so on, but nothing on childcare, for example, which, as both Abi and I have been saying, is going to be one of the real barriers to women getting into work; childcare is also a major employer of women. Investment in childcare does not just create jobs in childcare itself but enables women to enter the labour market as well.



Professor Adams-Prassl: Childcare and a joined-up economic strategy to fit in with the public health strategy and the education strategy, in terms of opening up schools, would have been top of my list in thinking about the gendered impacts. I would have liked more detail on that, and money to back it up. For me, that is the key thing. As I had already said before, it is not just lockdown that is responsible for the decline in economic activity. It is also the public health crisis, which goes back to Mary-Ann's point about a care-led recovery. Subsidisation of workplace testing, not just the income tax but increasing testing and workers' security in going back to work is going to be key.

Q19 **Chair:** I am conscious that we do not have much time, Mary-Ann, but I want to be a little bit challenging. I am not suggesting you are wrong on a care-led recovery—it is really important that we invest in the sector, and you are right on childcare. Do you ever worry that you are perpetuating gender stereotypes by focusing on care for women and suggesting that construction and the drive to build is male-oriented? Would it be more imaginative to promote policies that could see more women going into those industries?

Dr Stephenson: You need to do both. As I said, it is really important that construction jobs are open to women. We need construction, we need housebuilding, we also need investment in green technologies and green industries. Again, many of those jobs have historically been male-dominated.

Q20 **Chair:** Can I pick you up on that? Would we be better off promoting incentives for those industries to provide training and retraining for women than saying, "The care industry is already a heavy employer of women"? Would we be better off finding different ways to get women into different sectors than perhaps suggesting that they should focus on care?

Dr Stephenson: There are two things. I am not suggesting that women should focus on care. I am saying that investment in care creates 2.7 times as many jobs as investment in construction. If you are facing a jobs crisis and thinking about return for investment, investment in care has higher levels of return, even if—we modelled this—you raise the salary of care workers to the average salary of construction workers. It is obviously lower.

We also have a crisis in care. We have 1.4 million people with unmet care needs. We have a crisis in childcare. We actually need to invest in care to provide the services we need. This is not just about creating jobs. We need a recovery plan that takes into account the care crisis and the climate crisis that we are facing, creates jobs in both sectors and encourages men and women to take up jobs in both sectors. This is not about saying we need to invest in care because those are the sorts of jobs women do, although they are the jobs women do. It is about saying we need to invest in care because this has huge benefits for wider society and the economy, and would create more jobs for men than investment in construction, as well as more jobs for women.



Q21 **Chair:** In green technologies and strategies that help green growth, do you think there would be value in setting aside a proportion of funding specifically to encourage women into the sector to get some sort of balance?

Dr Stephenson: Yes, definitely. That would be very good and very important. We have made that point at various points, talking about proposals for a green new deal, for example.

Professor Adams-Prassl: I have two points. The first is about timing. I completely agree that we would like many more women entering construction and STEM, and many more men entering social care, which we do not talk about very much. However, thinking about smoothing out the immediate effects of the crisis over the next year, we know that job loss has a very negative effect on future career prospects. It is important to get people back into work quickly. Making sure there is job creation that individuals who are currently unemployed can quickly and easily move into, with the set of skills they currently have, is definitely worthy, backed up by a proper, gender-neutral training scheme to enable women to enter traditionally male-dominated sectors and vice versa, depending on where demand in the economy is.

On that STEM point, while there is quite mixed evidence on the effectiveness of female quotas on boards, you see much more consistent positive evidence for the impact of having female managers on women across the organisation. Quotas are good, but do not necessarily make it right at the top of the organisation. It should get women into positions of power within the normal everyday workplace, to improve workplace practices across the board.

Chair: We are pretty much out of time on this panel. Thank you for your time this afternoon. If there is anything you want to add in writing, please do so.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Victoria Benson and Rosalind Bragg.

Q22 **Chair:** May I welcome our next panel of witnesses to this afternoon's session of the Women and Equalities Select Committee? I hope that you heard the earlier evidence session. We are very much looking forward to what you are going to contribute this afternoon. Can I start by asking you both to briefly introduce yourselves and explain how your organisations have focused on the gendered economic impact of the response to the Covid pandemic?

Rosalind Bragg: I am Rosalind Bragg, director of Maternity Action, which is the UK's maternity rights charity. We promote the rights of all pregnant women, new mothers and their families to employment, social security and healthcare. We deliver specialist advice on employment rights, benefits and the entitlements of migrants and asylum seekers. During the pandemic, we provided detailed, up-to-date information on



rights at work, the coronavirus job retention scheme, the self-employed income support scheme, maternity pay and maternity benefits to pregnant women and new parents. We also engaged with Government on the changes needed to the schemes to ensure fair treatment for pregnant women and new mothers.

Victoria Benson: I am Victoria Benson, chief exec of Gingerbread, which is a UK charity advising single parents. Single parenthood is very much a gendered issue, in that more than 90% of single parents are women. Before this crisis, we knew that single parents were twice as likely as couple parents to be in poverty. The crisis has had a profound effect on single parents, who have particular issues about childcare and work. We expect these issues to continue long after the immediate crisis has finished. We have been working with single parents during the crisis on issues around childcare, employment and benefits, and practical issues like child contact arraignments. We are expecting a really large increase in the number of single parents who are unemployed after this crisis.

Q23 Alex Davies-Jones: Thank you both for giving evidence to us this afternoon. Ros, my questions are primarily directed at you. Victoria, if you want to chip in or have any comments to make, please do so. I would like to talk about prior to the coronavirus pandemic, if we can think back to before the chaos. How confident were you that the measures to protect women from pregnancy or maternity discrimination were working effectively?

Rosalind Bragg: It is very clear that, before the pandemic, the protections for pregnant women and new mothers at work were not working effectively. Research by the Equality and Human Rights Commission released in 2016 found that pregnancy and maternity discrimination was extremely high. Just over three-quarters of all pregnant women and new mothers in the workforce experienced some form of discrimination and one in nine of these women lost their job as a result. That is 54,000 women each year forced out of work. They may have been dismissed, unfairly made redundant or felt compelled to resign. Health and safety was an area of particularly poor practice, with 4% of pregnant women and new mothers leaving their jobs because of unsafe working conditions. This was very high-quality research undertaken by the EHRC, with solid randomised samples, so this is very good data to work from. It was also possible to compare this with figures from 10 years earlier, when the Equal Opportunities Commission had done research. It found an 80% jump between the 2006 and the 2016 figures.

It was very clear to us that, prior to the pandemic, things were not in a good state. Unfortunately, there was not any legislation, guidance or substantive changes made by the Government following the 2016 research that would have supported any improvements up until the pandemic. It seems to us that the situation has deteriorated since the 2016 research came out.



Q24 **Alex Davies-Jones:** Yes, definitely. You mentioned no legislation. The previous Chair of this Committee is seeking to introduce a Bill—she is speaking this afternoon—that will prohibit redundancy during pregnancy and maternity leave for six months after the end of the pregnancy or the leave. Do you think six months is sufficient to assist women who may have been left financially impacted?

Rosalind Bragg: The Bill is a very positive step in strengthening the protection for pregnant women and new mothers in the workplace. We know from the 2008 downturn that pregnant women and new mothers are particularly vulnerable when the economy contracts. Unfortunately, a lot of employers unfairly target pregnant women and new mothers when they are downsizing.

The Bill, if it was adopted by Government and swiftly put into place, would really provide enormous value for women who are very worried that they are going to be first in the queue for redundancy when their employer contracts. The Bill extends protections from pregnancy through to six months after return, so it covers the danger periods for women, and it is a much stronger set of protections than those offered under the current legislation, which are limited to the period of maternity leave and are very difficult to enforce. This Bill offers a strategy to prevent redundancies rather than leave women to try to find a way to enforce the unwieldy legislation we currently have in place.

Q25 **Alex Davies-Jones:** I have been contacted by so many constituents and even friends who are really scared about what is going to happen to them. There are on parental leave currently. What are the main concerns of the women who have been contacting Maternity Action for advice? Has the nature of the requests you have had changed as a result of lockdown and some of the release measures that have now been put in place?

Rosalind Bragg: Immediately following lockdown, we had a lot of calls from very distressed pregnant women and new mothers seeking help with the impact of the pandemic on their employment and income. Pregnant women were identified as a vulnerable group by the Prime Minister on 16 March, but this was not supported by any guidance to employers about how to handle health and safety measures for pregnant women at work. This is a really worrying omission.

As a result of this, many employers placed pregnant women on statutory sick pay or unpaid leave, asked them to use holiday leave, or asked them to commence their maternity leave early. In fact, in law, they were required to offer the women safe working conditions or suspend them on full pay. Instead of that, we had women experiencing a substantial drop in income during their pregnancy. That will flow through to impacting on their maternity pay, because statutory maternity pay entitlements are dependent on income at particular points in pregnancy. That was quite a significant problem. We know that many women remained in unsafe working conditions because they could not afford to stop working.



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The coronavirus job retention scheme included no mention of pregnancy in the guidance. As a result, a lot of employers thought that pregnant women were ineligible for furlough. We raised this with the Government on numerous occasions but, unfortunately, this was not resolved. The best the Government could say was that pregnant women were not ineligible for furlough. That is not much help to those who are trying to resolve this with their employers. Again, that left women taking badly paid or unpaid leave if they had unsafe or unsatisfactory working conditions, with a substantial drop in income.

The self-employed income support scheme did not consider the circumstances of women who had taken time out of their work to care for a new baby. It was only after a substantial amount of lobbying that they decided that maternity allowance would not prevent a woman from applying for support under the scheme. I do not think the current guidance still adequately accommodates women who have taken a period of maternity leave, given that the calculation is over a three-year period, in which a woman may have been not working for the best part of one of those years.

The other issues that came up were, more recently, around the cut-off dates for the furlough scheme. The initial announcement did not consider the needs of women or, indeed, men returning from maternity leave or shared parental leave. It was only after considerable lobbying that we managed to get that changed. That change was made on 9 June, the day before the cut-off date.

Since the moves to lift lockdown, I think there has been a lot more concern about redundancy. We have had a lot of calls from women who are being made redundant or are fearful of redundancy. This is a massive concern for women. They often call us for information about their rights to redundancy pay and maternity pay. In many cases, we are hearing of redundancies that are profoundly unfair redundancies, where the maternity cover may have been kept on while the woman who went on maternity leave is made redundant. There are huge problems with this lifting.

On top of that, of course there are the problems of childcare. If you cannot resolve your childcare, you cannot return to work. There are women quite distressed at being told by their employers to come back to work or else resign. While that is an issue for both parents, I think it is impacting most heavily on the woman.

Q26 Alex Davies-Jones: Yes, it is absolutely awful. How have your organisational priorities and concerns changed over the lockdown period as this has gone on? Where have you had to put your resources?

Rosalind Bragg: We have put a lot of resources into providing the advice to women and their partners. We have had massive use of our online resources—I think we had over 100,000 views of a blog we put out the day after the Prime Minister's announcement, and similar views of our



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FAQs. We have kept our FAQs up to date. Each time the Government have made an adjustment to the guidelines, we have revised those within 24 or 48 hours. That has been necessary because there have been so many changes that directly impact on pregnant women and new parents. It is incredibly confusing. We have also engaged with the Government to try to influence those schemes. We have written to the Chancellor and senior Ministers 13 times since the pandemic commenced.

Q27 Alex Davies-Jones: Have you had any positive responses?

Rosalind Bragg: I think we have had one ministerial response to the letters we have sent. That was on an issue we raised around universal credit and maternity allowance. We have not been invited to consultative events. We have not been consulted formally by any of the officials in any of the Departments. The response, however, is that we have seen some changes in those schemes, so some but not all of the issues we have raised have been picked up by Government in some of those revisions to the schemes.

Q28 Alex Davies-Jones: That takes me on nicely to my final question for you. It is disappointing to hear that you have not really been consulted or engaged on some of these issues. You have already mentioned the fact of childcare support. It was disappointing to hear this afternoon that there was no support for the childcare sector, which we know many women returning from maternity leave rely on so desperately. It also predominantly employs a large number of women. I had the privilege of sitting on the Petitions Committee, where we heard evidence regarding the maternity petition. We heard compelling evidence then about the impacts coronavirus has had on women, predominantly women who are on parental leave or maternity leave. What more do you think the Government could be doing to limit the impacts of Covid on women who are currently on maternity leave?

Rosalind Bragg: There are a number of things we need Government to do for women who are currently on maternity leave and those who are yet to start their maternity leave. First, statutory maternity pay entitlements should be based on normal pay and disregard any periods of statutory sick pay. This is quite important for protecting women's income when they are on maternity leave, given particularly that women have been wrongly put on statutory sick pay for health and safety issues. It is also going to be an issue around the test and trace arrangements coming up.

We need guidance on health and safety for pregnant women for different occupational settings. It needs to be made clear when you need to suspend a woman on full pay. Currently, we are still seeing very bad practice. I think many women are starting maternity leave early to avoid having to negotiate those problems. We need to strengthen redundancy protection, which we have already discussed.



We need revisit the way maternity allowance is dealt with under universal credit. Women on statutory maternity pay are treated differently from women on maternity allowance. As a result, women on maternity allowance may be £5,000 worse off. There is no justification for that and unfortunately we are going to see a lot more women ending up on maternity allowance because of the problems arising from the pandemic. It is an important step to protect the incomes of women on maternity leave.

The issue of support for parents unable to return to work due to lack of childcare is a huge one. It is very disappointing that this was not addressed in today's statement. An extended limited form of the coronavirus job retention scheme would be incredibly helpful for parents trying to find a way to fill the gap between returning to work, their employer reopening their workplace, and the childcare services coming back online. In addition to the formal childcare, there are also issues around informal childcare, which are a particular problem for low-income women and women working unsociable hours. Guidance at the moment still limits the use of grandparents, for example, in provision of childcare. Making some provision for these parents who cannot return to work because of childcare is critically important.

On top of that, the no recourse to public funds provisions need to be scrapped. Universal credit and a range of other benefits are available only to those who do not have the no recourse to public funds restrictions. We have people, many of whom have been key workers and worked in the NHS and in care roles, who have no recourse to public funds as a restriction on their leave to remain. As a result, they can be in really quite dire financial circumstances if they are unable to work.

Q29 **Angela Crawley:** Ros and Victoria, it is nice to have you both back before the Committee. You have outlined very clearly in many respects many of the ways the Government could have sought to improve conditions for many pregnant women or new mothers in the light of the current crisis. How many of the recommendations that you just outlined there, Ros, have the Government taken on board so far? How many of those recommendations did we hear today in the Chancellor's statement?

Rosalind Bragg: The issues I have just raised today are issues that the Government have not acted on. None of these recommendations has been adopted. We have written to the Chancellor and other Ministers about a number of these questions without success—for example, that the calculation of statutory maternity pay should be based on normal earnings. We managed to get the adjustment so that it was not based on your furlough income, for example, which is 80% of what you might otherwise have been getting. However, they did not make the change to disregard statutory sick pay. We have a series of outstanding questions here.

We were particularly disappointed not to see in today's statement an extension of the coronavirus job retention scheme for parents struggling



to negotiate childcare. That would have been a perfect opportunity to address that, given the very strong evidence that this will prevent a lot of parents from returning to work.

Q30 Angela Crawley: That was going to be my next question. It was on the coronavirus job retention scheme and whether the Chancellor could have accommodated more flexibility in that system to account for some of these anomalies and instances, also for those who are self-employed, in terms of the income support scheme. Many new mothers who have started their own businesses might find themselves in a situation where they have no financial support at this time due to their self-employed status. To what extent have any of those concerns been addressed? What recommendations would you make to the Government in respect of how the Government could seek to resolve some of these issues?

Rosalind Bragg: The first step is to consider the circumstances of pregnant women and new parents when developing the schemes. It was very, very clear that neither of these groups was considered while the schemes were developed. It was only in response to lobbying by Maternity Action and others that essential changes were made, but they are still incomplete. It is extraordinary that we have the agency that delivers maternity allowance saying that it cannot tell you how much time a woman has been out of her regular work, so as to calculate a proportionate entitlement to the self-employed income support scheme. There are conditions like that that seem a little odd.

The starting point is to look at the needs of these groups in the design of these schemes. The circumstances now warrant a flexible scheme that responds to parents struggling to organise childcare. That similarly needs to deal with the very strong likelihood that parents will also be dealing with school closures, childcare services closing and other people they care for being required to stay home. You cannot leave a six year-old at home on their own; you need to have someone there caring for them. A scheme that supports that, rather than relying on parents at best getting access to statutory sick pay, is critically important. It is very likely that parents will have multiple periods off work dealing with the consequences of test and trace.

Q31 Angela Crawley: You have touched on this in your previous answers. I appreciate that Maternity Action supports many pregnant mothers or new mothers, but it also supports their partners, as you mentioned. We understand that many businesses have brought in really positive measures where they have extended paternity leave for men and encouraged shared parental leave, as a positive step towards redressing that balance, perhaps removing some of the stigma in the assumption that the role is primarily for the women, and redressing inequalities in the workplace. Do you have any concerns specifically about men who may be using this period of paternity leave or shared parental leave? What ways could the Government seek to address the concerns that men have as well?



Rosalind Bragg: It is very clear that women still carry the bulk of the domestic workload. While the evidence shows that men are doing more during the pandemic, it is still significantly less than the contribution of women. There are cultural factors at work of course, but the design of shared parental leave needs to be fundamentally rethought. At the time it was introduced, we were quite critical of the complexity of it and that has proven to be well founded. It is incredibly difficult to negotiate, whether you are a parent or an employer.

We should have a simple system in which there is a protected period for the mother and then each of the parents has their own individual entitlement. That is something employers can really negotiate. If you have it as a "use it or lose it" provision for fathers, all the international evidence says they are much more likely to take that leave. Of course, you have to do it in such a way that you do not leave families who choose a more traditional model of care at a disadvantage. You need to have one that supports all the different choices that families might make.

Angela Crawley: Victoria, do you have anything that you would like to add?

Victoria Benson: No, just to reinforce that point that childcare is the key issue for most of the single parents we speak to. Most of them rely on formal childcare and patchwork formal childcare. We are hearing much the same, that many single parents are unable to return to work because they do not have any choice. They cannot leave their children at home alone and their employers are putting them in an impossible situation. Many have used up all their unpaid leave, all their annual leave, and are now resigning. That is what we are hearing in increasing numbers.

Q32 **Angela Crawley:** My final question to you, Victoria, is with regard to single parents. One campaign that has been highlighted is the child maintenance scheme, the idea of having a basic threshold of contributions from the other parent to ensure that many single parents are not left without another source of income. Is this something that Gingerbread supports or do you have any other proposals as to how you would address these problems with the Child Maintenance Service?

Victoria Benson: One of the biggest issues that single parents have faced during the crisis is that their ex-partners have not been able to or have chosen not to pay child maintenance, many for valid reasons, in that they may have lost their jobs or been furloughed, but many for other reasons. Unfortunately, due to lack of resource, the CMS has not been pursuing or investigating any of those reductions in payment. The resident parent has faced loss to their own earnings, an increase in expenses because their child is at home with them the whole time, and then the triple whammy of also losing their child maintenance payments, which many single parents really rely on that to feed their children. It is not about a luxury. They are not huge amounts.



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We have a relationship with the DWP and the Minister responsible for child maintenance. We have said that the children are the ones losing out and the Government have a responsibility to the children to ensure they do not lose income and are not reduced to food banks, which is what we are hearing increasingly. Yes, we believe there is a duty for the Government to fill the gap. We know that, fundamentally, it is the failure of the paying parent to pay, but, at the end of the day, it is the children and the resident parent who are struggling the most at this time.

Q33 Angela Crawley: It would be helpful to see some of the enforcement powers that have come into place being used more proactively.

Victoria Benson: That is the point, really. There are powers of enforcement available to the CMS, but we are not seeing them used. It should be using those powers.

Q34 Peter Gibson: Thank you for your time today, witnesses. My questions at this stage are directed primarily to you, Ros. You mentioned at the outset some statistics that you gave us. I would be interested to know, not necessarily now, if you could follow up and write to us, how those statistics split down by size of employer and whether your issue is primarily focused on SMEs. Particularly in the light of the Bill that is before the House today, in your view, under the existing redundancy law, is it ever possible to make a pregnant woman redundant in a way that is not discriminatory?

Rosalind Bragg: There are two questions there. The first one was on the breakdown of discrimination figures by employer size. I will get back with the precise figures, but there was not a significant difference between SMEs and larger employers. Historically, it has been understood that smaller employers were more likely to discriminate, but I think that was not held out in the 2016 research. I think the problem existed across the board.

On the redundancy question, are you asking about the legislation that is before the House today or the existing provisions?

Peter Gibson: The existing law.

Rosalind Bragg: It is actually very easy for an employer to make a pregnant woman or new mother redundant under the existing law. The rules are that you must not discriminate; the Equality Act applies. So if you are closing down a division of your business and a pregnant woman is one of those who has been made redundant, there are literally no issues whatsoever, no problems at all. If the woman is on maternity leave, there are some additional obligations. You have to consider if there is a suitable alternative job available and you should offer that to her without interview.

That is very hard for women to challenge. Employers should do that as a matter of following the law—they should identify and offer those jobs—but, if you are a woman on maternity leave who is facing redundancy, it



is very hard to work out if there is suitable alternative job available that you should have been offered. While that law is in place, it is very difficult to exercise that right and, once you return from maternity leave, you cease to have that protection. We know a lot of employers who wait until women return from maternity leave before making them redundant. It is a very common time for women, particularly higher-earning women, to be made redundant.

Q35 Peter Gibson: I have one small, short follow-up question. The Chancellor announced today the grant of £1,000 to every employee who has been furloughed. Do you welcome that? Do you think that will help avoid redundancies?

Rosalind Bragg: I would like to think that additional financial support for employers to retain staff would help reduce the number of redundancies. I would echo some of the statements made by speakers on the previous panel about the scale of investment. While employers may well be able to last for a few months after the lockdown lifts, I suspect there are some longer-term challenges to avoid some of the redundancies that they are currently contemplating.

Peter Gibson: Victoria, do you want to comment on any of the questions I have just asked?

Victoria Benson: To reinforce that, many single parents work in the shut down and most affected sectors. We believe they are afraid that, once lockdown lifts and the job retention scheme ends, the biggest risk is to them and their jobs. They simply will not have jobs to go back to because the sectors are decimated. The biggest issue facing single parents in the long term is the loss of jobs and what the Government measures could be to ensure they can either continue in work or have adequate income to feed and clothe their children.

Q36 Peter Gibson: Do you welcome the grant of £1,000?

Victoria Benson: Yes, I do, but again I am wondering how long that will stave off redundancies.

Q37 Kim Johnson: Thanks, Ros and Victoria, for being here today. Victoria, I benefited from the support of Gingerbread as a single parent of twins many years ago. The ONS states that we have 2.9 million lone parents. What would you say have been the main concerns of people seeking advice from Gingerbread since the start of the pandemic?

Victoria Benson: Gingerbread saw a huge increase in the number of callers to its helpline and website. Also, we have friendship groups around the country, and surprisingly, because this was not the function of the friendship groups, they have also seen a massive influx in people asking for advice and support. The main issues are around benefits, work and childcare, all of which are connected. Many people are losing income and losing their jobs, being unable to work from home. We have also had



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many people with very practical issues around how they look after their children and anxiety.

Single parents are in a very unusual position, in that they are solely responsible for their children. More than 70% of parents before this crisis were in work, so they were juggling work and childcare, and it was all down to them. Once the schools shut, they were faced with the position of having to try to work and to look after their children. In many cases, there were lots of mental health issues, and concerns and anxiety around what would happen if they or their children became ill. There is a higher proportion of single parents who are key workers as well, so that anxiety was higher there, as was the anxiety around what will happen to childcare.

Q38 Kim Johnson: We have already heard that there is a major disproportionate impact on single parents. Have you had queries from parents experiencing difficulties with child contact? What have their experiences been? Has the Government guidance helped at all?

Victoria Benson: Yes, we have. We have had a lot of queries through our helpline. We also have a page on our website that gives guidance, because we got a lot of queries from parents who were the resident parent and did not feel it was safe for their child to go to the non-resident parent, for whatever reason. We also got queries from parents whose ex-partners were refusing to take the children for the same reason; they were citing coronavirus and safety issues.

There was a lot of confusion among the parents who phoned our helpline. They did not find the Government guidance helpful; they found it contradictory. We put up clearer guidance and links on our webpages that we thought provided more clarity. Once bubbles started to be announced, that again increased the confusion among single parents. They did not know whether the rules in relation to bubbles applied to them. Again, it increased the amount of conflict between the two parents because it was another ground for them to disagree.

Similarly, we have heard from fathers—and it is often fathers—who felt that the resident parent, the mother, was withholding contact unfairly. Our guidance was always for the two parents to try to communicate as much as they could. If the resident parent felt it was unsafe—we have resident parents who were caring for their elderly parents as well, so they were shielding—there was a valid ground for not letting the child go between two households, but they should try to maintain contact in other ways, for example via FaceTime or Skype.

Q39 Kim Johnson: Can I ask whether you informed the Government of this feedback from your parents and tried to get them to amend in any way?

Victoria Benson: We have not been specific about child contact arrangements.

Q40 Kim Johnson: My second question is to both Victoria and Ros. The



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Women's Budget Group has stated that half of single mothers live in poverty because, as you mentioned, they are reliant on one income and do not have a lot of support in terms of childcare. What has been the experience of single parents who have been trying to access benefits over this period?

Victoria Benson: The majority of calls that we have through our helpline are about benefits. They were before the crisis and they were beyond the crisis. Many parents are still experiencing massive delays, and that has been the biggest issue, because of course they need that money to come through. We have also heard that many could not benefit from the extra £20 because the benefit cap was still in place. We have called on the Government to lift the benefit cap. Many parents did not find the guidance from the DWP on the job retention scheme very clear either, so they came to us for advice on that and how it applied to them.

There have been lots of questions about working tax credits and, if the working parent's hours were reduced, how that impacted on their tax credits. Many of our helpline advisers were recalculating benefits entitlements for that. There are still a huge number of calls about benefits and a huge amount of confusion. Many parents could not benefit from the increase because of the benefit cap.

Kim Johnson: It sounds as if a lot of women have benefited from your services. Ros, would you like to add anything extra to what Victoria has just said?

Rosalind Bragg: We are seeing a lot of women applying for benefits at the moment who have not previously applied for benefits—a new cohort coming into the social security system. I think a lot of people are absolutely shocked at how low the rates of benefits are, and they are extraordinarily low, and are quite distressed about how they are going to make ends meet on much lower income. There is a continuing problem with the delays in the commencement of universal credit, which creates enormous financial difficulty for families.

Another issue for us is still the no recourse to public funds provisions. That leaves people who would, under other circumstances, be in work without any income whatsoever, in many cases, and looking at destitution. It is a problem for a number of migrants with insecure status, but we are seeing destitution among people who have the right to work in the UK and would normally be in regular employment.

Q41 **Kim Johnson:** This is to both of you. The Government have reimposed conditionality and that is likely to have an impact in terms of sanctions going forward. I wanted to know your opinion on that.

Victoria Benson: We have called on the Government initially to not restore conditionality. Since they have announced that all those sanctions are renewed, we disagree with that. Many single parents cannot look for



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work, for example because of childcare. It is a massive issue that that has been reimposed.

Kim Johnson: We need to reinforce that.

Victoria Benson: There is no clarity about what would happen to a single parent who cannot return to work because they do not have any childcare for their child. We need clarity on that.

Q42 **Kim Johnson:** This is the final question, again to both of you. It is a bit of a wish list really. What are your three asks of Government in the short and medium term from the point of view of the economy and gender equality?

Rosalind Bragg: Specifically for pregnancy and maternity, we would like to see a taskforce to address pregnancy and maternity discrimination, which brings together voluntary organisations, unions and businesses to find solutions. It needs to be a cross-Government response, bringing in BEIS, health agencies, DWP, the Health and Safety Executive and others. That would be a critically important intervention to protect jobs for pregnant women and new mothers.

We would like to see maternity retention rates incorporated into gender pay gap reporting. That would make public some of the very bad practices we are seeing in some employers and encourage employers to undertake much better practice in the future. That is a very key intervention that does not cost anything. That is something that Government should consider.

We would like to see a reduction in the number of women in insecure work. It is very clear that insecure work and all the problems attached to that is a public health issue in the pandemic. The Government should take that on as a particular priority. On top of that, it would be useful to repeat the Equality and Human Rights Commission research from 2016 to track what has actually happened to women in the workplace since we last explored the practices of employers and the consequences for women.

Victoria Benson: The three asks are around benefits, work and childcare. Around childcare, we would ask the Government to invest in childcare and make it intrinsic to the rebuilding of the economy because it really is very important. Around work, we would call for the extension of the job retention scheme for those with caring responsibilities plus other support measures to assist specifically single parents in getting back to work. As I say, their needs are very particular. Around benefits, scrap the benefit cap and the two-child limit. Single parents are most impacted by that. Increase child benefit by £10 a week and the child element in universal credit and legacy benefits.

Another issue that we have become aware of is that the capital limit for universal credit will be exceeded by many single parents if they are made



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redundant. We feel that that should be taken into account. I do not think it is intended that that get caught and prevent single parents from getting universal credit. Those are the three key asks around benefits, work and childcare.

Kim Johnson: Thank you so much, Victoria and Ros, for your contributions this afternoon.

Q43 **Chair:** Can I go back to Ros on something she said about access to benefits and delays? Do you have any quantifiable figures that you can share with us about specifically women finding it harder and slower to access either benefits in the first instance, or the advances that are of course available?

Rosalind Bragg: We do not have any figures on that, unfortunately. For most of our callers, we will provide them with advice on what to do, but we are not tracking what the outcomes for them are over time. We just know that a number of women have contacted us who have not been able to access benefits, and we have taken them through what they were able to do about that. It is not a straightforward system. Particularly for people for whom English is not their first language, there are additional barriers to sorting through the procedural hoops to get there. There are delays built into the system. Of course, if you get an advance, that means you have less money when your first payment comes through and you somehow have to survive for longer with limited funds. It is not in itself a solution.

Q44 **Chair:** Do you have any evidence—and you have just referred to it—as to whether UC has been any more or less straightforward than the legacy benefits system?

Rosalind Bragg: I do not think I can comment on that, to be honest.

Chair: That brings our evidence session this afternoon to a conclusion. Let me take this opportunity to thank both Ros and Victoria for the information they have provided.