

Effects of Rising Costs on Women: A North East England Perspective

By Dr Michelle Cooper, CEO, County Durham Community Foundation

Question:

Women and Equalities Committee. Impact of the rising cost of living on women.

How are rising food, energy, housing, and other costs affecting women compared to men? What are the challenges for women:

- in different types of households for example, households with children; single parents; renters; homeowners; women with other protected characteristics) and*
- whether there is any regional disparity in the effects of those costs?*

Introduction

We, at the County Durham Community Foundation, in partnership with Health Equity North, have conducted a comprehensive study on the implications of the rising costs of living in the North East of England, particularly in County Durham and Tees Valley. This resultant report titled 'County Durham and Tees Valley: Health, Wealth and (Unequal) Opportunities to Thrive' highlights significant gender disparities exacerbated by economic challenges.

Food, Energy, and Housing: The Disparate Impact

Rising food prices, which have seen an 8% increase since 2012, affect both genders. However, given that 60% of women have the primary responsibility for household food shopping and preparation, they experience the brunt of this price surge.

Energy costs, with electricity prices up by 35% and gas by 41% since 2010, pose another significant challenge. Women, many of whom spend more time at home due to caregiving duties, bear the weight of these escalating energy bills.

Housing affordability remains at the forefront, with house prices in the North East rising by 19% since 2012. Single mothers, who constitute 90% of all single parents, divorced or separated women, often struggle to afford adequate housing.

Additionally, the gender pay gap is significant in the North East of England, where women earn 16% less than their male counterparts, intensifying the struggles brought about by the rising costs.

Regional Disparities and Economic Impact

In County Durham and Tees Valley, health outcomes are 20% below the national average. Economic inequalities contribute to these disparities, and addressing the health gap could uplift national productivity by an estimated £4 billion annually.

In 2019, median wages in this region were 8% below the English average. The gender wage gap persists, with women earning significantly less than men. From 2010 to 2021, wages decreased in real terms by 3.3% for men and 4.2% for women.

Despite these wage challenges, working hours in County Durham and Tees Valley mirror the national average at 37.2 hours per week. The disparities are mainly in the types and classification of jobs.

Food insecurity in the North East is also amongst the highest in the country and known to be deteriorating. The Food Foundation has been tracking food insecurity using YouGov panels since 2020. The most recent data from September 2022 estimated that 27.8% of households in the North East were experiencing food insecurity, up from 15.2.% in April 2022.

Challenges Specific to Household Types and Protected Characteristics

Households with children, where women are primary caregivers, face the 5% rise in childcare costs since 2010, escalating costs of food, transport, and education. This strain often leaves them with less for personal health and well-being resources.

Renters, primarily women, face a 13% rise in rent costs since 2010, leading to challenges like low security of tenure and inferior housing quality. Female homeowners struggle with mortgage repayments, maintenance costs, and skyrocketing energy bills.

Moreover, women from disadvantaged groups such as ethnic minorities, disabled individuals, elderly, or LGBTQ+ communities face layered discrimination and disadvantages that further impact their overall well-being.

Children in County Durham and Tees Valley are more likely to be living in poverty than their peers in many other areas of England: 38.7% of children in the region are growing up in poverty compared to 27% in England - Middlesbrough has the highest proportion of children living in poverty in the region.

While child poverty remained relatively constant across England between 2015 and 2021 (at 29%), it increased by 10 percentage points in this same period in the North East (from an average of 28% in 2015-16 to 38% in 2020-21).

Recommendations and Conclusion

To address these challenges, targeted policies are paramount. Addressing the gender pay gap, offering affordable housing, and bolstering social support can create a significant positive difference. By promoting gender equality, flexible work structures, and affordable childcare, we can provide more robust support to women.

Our study emphasises the role of community foundations in mitigating these disparities. Financial security and gender equality promotion are essential to drive transformative change. We urge the government to tie benefits to inflation, halt Universal Credit waiting periods, sanctions, and deductions, and broaden the scope of free school meals.

A multifaceted approach - integrating early intervention, income protection, community empowerment, and cross-sector partnerships - is essential to rectify the profound health and economic inequalities women confront in the North East of England.

ENDS

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