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‘British Families in Lockdown’ is a qualitative study led by Leeds Trinity University which has investigated the day-to-day experiences of British families during the first seven weeks of lockdown. Fifty-six families from a diverse set of socio-economic backgrounds, geographies, religions and cultures participated in telephone or video calling semi-structured interviews and they shared their detailed, personal stories and experiences of employment, children’s schooling, health, well-being, family life, leisure time and technology use during the first phase of lockdown.

Outside of this study, reported Covid-19 evidence is overwhelmingly quantitative based, scientific, clinical, anecdotal or journalistic, as such, these qualitative insights will help build a more rounded picture of British family experiences. The study was quick to respond to the pandemic and is one of the few qualitative studies collecting data from the UK population during the initial stage of lockdown. Our initial findings demonstrate some of the complex ways in which Covid-19 has impacted equalities debates related to ethnicity, disabilities and gender. Our data supports quantitative reports to some extent but there is contrasting evidence and wider issues to also consider.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

- Our study did not identify any particular gender divides or gender inequalities in terms of employment.
- Neither working women nor working men expressed any concerns about the impact of lockdown upon their career progression. However, those who were looking for work had concerns about how they would find employment and when.
- Some women were out of work through choice prior to lockdown and their employment status remained the same during lockdown. These women took the most responsibility for household tasks and childcare. Both working mothers and working fathers reflected on the advantages of less commuting time, which allowed more time for personal and/or family related activities.
- For some parents, the experience of lockdown provided an opportunity to reflect on work, family and childcare priorities for the future with the view of seeking a better balance.
- Our study seems to have identified a great deal of gender equality within the households of the parents we interviewed. Strongly gendered divisions of roles were rare and there were a number of families in which domestic roles were flexible between either the mother or the father.

ON GENDER

The data in our study was taken from households which generally comprised of opposite sex couples. We did not specifically request that members of the household identified their own gender, however we listened to the pronouns used by the participants and have been able to identify some gendered patterns of behaviour as described by the participants. Some of the parents were separated and in the majority of cases the children lived with the mother with

fathers having differing degrees of access to the children both before and because of lockdown.

- We did not identify any particular gender divides or gender inequalities in terms of employment whilst speaking to parents.
- Few working women and men expressed concerns about the impact of lockdown upon their career progression.
- Women and men who were not employed prior to lockdown, classified themselves as full time mums/dads or housewives/househusbands and felt this role to be of equal importance to the earning role. In these families, little or no change was reported in relation to family dynamics during lockdown.
- Parents who were responsible for the home and children (housewives/househusbands), irrespective of gender, seemed to consider their roles important, essential and valuable.
- In all families there appeared to be a negotiated balance of work and domestic responsibilities between the parents.
- A small number of women were on maternity leave during lockdown and were concerned about issues such as job security, maternity pay and what working conditions would be like upon their return.
- Fathers were in some cases taking on the majority of the childcare during lockdown, particularly in families where the wife/partner had the higher income. In two families, the fathers gave up employment during lockdown to become responsible for childcare and to support the mother and her employment needs.
- Prior to lockdown some working parents of both genders had already negotiated part-time hours, flexible working or home working options so that they were able to support their children at home.
- Most mothers and fathers reported supportive attitudes from employers when having to work from home with children in the household. In a minority of cases, parents felt unsupported by employers when trying to manage work and childcare commitments.
- Parents of all backgrounds who were working full time hours outside of the home prior to lockdown, were generally happier to be spending more time at home and with their family.
- Both mothers and fathers reflected on the benefits of less commuting time, which allowed more opportunity for personal and/or family related activities.
- For both men and women, the experience of lockdown provided an opportunity to reflect on work, family and childcare priorities for the future, with the view of seeking a better balance. For some who had prioritised work previously, they now saw increased value in more family time.
- Both genders who worked longer hours prior to lockdown, or who were focussed on their personal career development, reported feelings of stress when trying to balance previous expectations of employment with additional family responsibilities as a result of lockdown.
- For some families, mothers and fathers attempted to take turns to work whilst the other parent looked after the children. Parents reported mixed views on the effectiveness of such approaches, with some mothers reporting less work productivity compared to fathers who sometimes reported more.

- Some women were out of work through choice, as negotiated with their husband/partner. The long-term pre-existing objectives being for them to be permanent housewives whilst the children were growing up.
- Parents generally shared household duties including gardening, DIY, shopping, cooking, cleaning and spending time with the children.
- Our study seems to have identified a great deal of gender equality within the households of the parents we interviewed. Strongly gendered divisions of roles were rare and there were a number of families in which domestic roles were flexible between either the mother or the father.
- Some mothers were particularly concerned about possible infection risks when leaving the house and/or having to take children with them to complete grocery shopping or other essential activities. In these cases, the fathers would often volunteer or agree to oversee such tasks.
- Some fathers were very keen to be the only one leaving the house, due to worries about the virus being brought back to the children. This was supported by the mothers.
- Our interviews suggest that mothers in general tended to be more involved in childcare both before and during lockdown. Fathers were involved in childcare to varying degrees prior to and during lockdown itself, often depending upon residential and employment status. These patterns of behaviour often began following the birth of the first child when the fathers' received less statutory paternity leave in comparison to the mothers.
- Some fathers were more confident than others when looking after children during lockdown, and this depended on the child's age, needs of the child, the father-child relationship and childcare experience prior to lockdown.
- For some working mothers, they felt that there was an imbalance of time spent on childcaring activities compared to working and non-working fathers during lockdown, with some mothers feeling that they were doing more of the childcare.
- With regards to home-schooling, there were mixed responses regarding parental input. Some families felt that a joint parental approach was taken. In other families, one parent appeared to undertake more responsibility for home schooling than the other.
- Most spoke of family relationships becoming stronger or closer during lockdown with increased cooperation between parents.
- Mothers and fathers were often building new and stronger bonds with children during lockdown and as a result of changes to working hours and patterns.

CONCLUSIONS

Our study identified little in the way of discernible gender inequalities for the families we interviewed. The families we spoke to reported significant harmony, cooperation and equality between the mothers and fathers. Both men and women worked and both men and women took on responsibility for childcare and the home at different times and to differing degrees in different families. Those in a working role were not seen as superior or more important than those in a domestic role. For many of those parents who were used to spending most of their time at work, the experiences of more family time and strengthened family bonds during lockdown led to a number of benefits, not least in terms of the perceived mental well-being of

the whole family. As such, some parents are considering reducing their work commitments in the future in order to spend more time with the family. The arrangements made between parents concerning which parent took on which roles and at what times was rarely if ever based upon the gender. Instead these decisions were based upon individual suitability, circumstance and competence. The only significant gender division we encountered was the statutory imposition of less paternity leave in comparison to maternity leave, which may or may not have had knock on effects upon how the differently gendered parents saw their obligations and roles in society.

RECCOMENDATIONS

- The presence of significant gender equalities within British homes is encouraging and needs further qualitative investigation within the contexts of current gender debates.
- The possibility that mothers have been more involved in childcare than fathers need further research. The impact of differential statutory maternity/paternity leave periods on gendered childcare roles and perceptions requires further investigation.
- Encouraging equality between parental roles in terms of childcare should possibly be consistent from the birth of the child in order to avoid later gender discrepancies.

PROJECT DETAILS

Research Team:

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Lead Academic Organisation:

Leeds Trinity University

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