

workingdads.co.uk – Written Evidence (LBC0061)

The post-Covid world presents an opportunity to redraw society along more gender equal lines.

The benefits of doing so are not confined to some sort of morally correct aim for equality between men and women. Though I would certainly regard that as an ideal outcome.

There are benefits to men's and women's physical and mental health, educational outcomes for children and - an increasingly crucial factor going into the Covid induced economic downturn - for the economy.

Key to achieving the gender equality we want and reaping those benefits is men, specifically fathers.

workingdads.co.uk is committed to helping men achieve the work life balance they want. It was started in January 2019 in response to increased interest among men in working differently - part time, flexible hours, working from home and self employment.

Ultimately the aim is gender equality.

Lockdown has entrenched gender inequalities. The time to put in place policies that will prevent a similar situation occurring in the event of a second spike or further pandemic is now.

Numerous studies through lockdown have shown women have shouldered more of the burden of domestic work since March. The Official for National Statistics the most recent and most credible among them. King's College's Global Institute for Women's Leadership also published robust research. (Full disclosure: in a freelance capacity I co-produce A Podcast of One's Own with Julia Gillard for GIWL). According to the Fatherhood Institute men increased the amount of work they did around the home by 58% in lockdown. However women did even more, particularly tasks regarded as low status such as getting children dressed and household cleaning.

Clearly women will struggle to do their own paid employment, let alone progress their careers, if they are having to dedicate more time to household tasks. A survey of 20,000 women by the pressure group Pregnant then Screwed backed this up finding women more likely to be made redundant and working fewer hours in lockdown.

At workingdads.co.uk we focus on a number of areas that need work to improve equality.

This moment is an ideal opportunity to address them

PATERNITY LEAVE

Currently men get just a fortnight of statutory paternity leave. Not long enough to learn how to be an engaged father. The mother gets more practice at childcare and inevitably gets 'better' at it. A pattern is set for life. But if men are given the opportunity to do more parenting they too will not just get better at it but enjoy it. Increasing paternity leave was mentioned in the government's good work plan. There was a consultation at the end of 2019. However it seems to have been set aside since the general election.

SHARED PARENTAL LEAVE

This has been a welcome innovation since its introduction in 2015. However uptake remains low. This is largely due to economic and social factors. The two interact. If Shared Parental Leave was affordable for more couples more men would use it and it would be normalised.

There needs to be an element of SPL specifically for fathers, as is the case in many other European nations where take up is much higher than in the UK.

FLEXIBLE WORK

Lockdown has shown that flexible working is practical for many more roles than previously thought.

As their children grow fathers need to work flexibly in order to be more involved. Just as mothers do already.

The proportion of men with formal flexible working agreements is below 10% according to the latest workforce stats. Among women it's nearer 50%.

However surveys carried out by workingdads.co.uk among others have shown a much larger proportion of men have informal flexible working arrangements. Men want to work flexibly but make arrangements on the nod.

It's not just that men aren't applying for flexible working however. Men who do put in a formal application are more likely to be rejected than a woman doing the same. This suggests employers expect women returning from maternity leave to want to change their working hours and arrangements. But they do not expect men to do the same. Giving men more substantial paternity leave and Shared Parental Leave would change that perception as employers and line managers would begin to expect men to take bigger chunks of time away from the workplace for childcare.

At workingdads.co.uk we collate and share best practice. We've identified a number of themes and policies that would help drive change.

Role modelling and normalisation are strong drivers of change. Repeatedly men we talk to only thought to take more paternity leave or switch to flexible working after another man had done the same. See the good work done at Aviva on equal parental leave for an example of how role modelling and normalisation can change behaviour quickly and for the better.

Gender pay gap reporting has been a huge driver in forcing big employers to think about gender equality. This year's suspension of gender pay gap reporting was disappointing, it must be reinstated next year. And ideally extended to parental policy transparency. As with gender pay reporting if large employers have to publicly state what they offer with regard to flexible working and parental leave/pay it is likely to drive standards and innovation.

BENEFITS

The benefits of more engaged fatherhood are multifold.

Men who do more domestic work and are more engaged with their families enjoy better physical health - which ties in with the government's anti-obesity drive; better mental health - important as we begin to understand the mental health implications of the current crisis and continue to address concerning statistics around male suicide; better relationships - couples who split the childcare are less likely to split up.

Women who live in a more equal household/society are less likely to face the same burdens and loss of control that they have through this period; there's evidence they are less likely to suffer Post Natal Depression if their partner is more involved in parenthood from the start; they are able to pursue a career more equally if that's what they want to do and consequently close the gender pay gap.

Children of more engaged fathers enjoy better physical and mental health, better relationships, better educational outcomes, are less likely to be in trouble with the police and tend to carry forward a more gender equal outlook.

The economy swells if men do more domestic work. The benefit of women being able to participate more fully in the economy is measured in billions of pounds. Estimates vary but a more equal society that implemented the measures I've set out above would benefit from between 2-10% of GDP.

I'd be very happy to go into more detail on any of the above.

Alternatively much of is set out in my book *Dads Don't Babysit* (Ortus Press, 2018)

Like everyone else I would rather we had not reached this point due to a dreadful pandemic. However, as your committee recognises, there are exciting opportunities as a result to address long term issues.

Tackling the position of fathers in society and particularly the workplace as a way to achieve gender equality is something I've worked on and campaigned on for a number of years now.

Increasing paternity leave and funding Shared Parental Leave for dads would send a powerful message about the role of fathers in society and in the family.

Government and employers have had to recognise that people have responsibilities beyond the workplace due to the lockdown and the closure of childcare settings.

Flexible working practice ought to take that forward. A right to work from home would be welcome but even more effective would be efforts to share best practice and normalise flex for men/fathers. At workingdads.co.uk we'd love to be involved and help with any such effort.

None of these steps is revolutionary. In the case of flexible working it's just a case on building on what's already happening since lockdown kicked in.

However the result has the potential to be huge - increased gender equality, a happier and healthier nation, and genuinely a better world post-Covid.

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