



PICKING UP THE PIECES

YOUNG WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF 2020

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INTRODUCTION

Young Women's Trust is a feminist organisation working to achieve economic justice for young women.

Our annual survey shows that year on year, access to economic justice is blocked for far too many young women due to the systemic inequality they face. Whether that be discrimination in the workplace, a welfare system ignoring their needs, unequal caring responsibilities or spiralling mental health issues because of the heavy load they carry. This year however the coronavirus pandemic and resulting recession has left young women picking up the pieces and exacerbated the existing inequality they face with catastrophic consequences.

This report explores the impact of the pandemic, and what life is really like for young women in 2020, by combining findings from our annual survey of 4,000 young people, with in-depth peer research interviews with 60 young women across England and Wales, we have a unique insight into the economic, mental, and emotional impact the crisis has had.

Findings from our survey indicate that of the 5.4 million young women aged 18-30 in the UK an estimated:

- 1.5 million young women have lost income since the coronavirus pandemic
- 750,000 have been made to come into work despite concerns about their safety
- 4.1 million young women think women face discrimination in the workplace
- 1.9 million young women would be reluctant to report sexual harassment for fear of losing their job up from 1.3 million last year
- 3 million young women are worried about their mental health, compared to 2.7 million last year
- 3.3 million young women feel ignored by politicians

Young women are disproportionately likely to work in the sectors that have been worst affected by the lockdown and are more likely to be key workers than men. We found young women's safety being compromised in these vital roles, including being forced to come into work when showing symptoms of coronavirus, and facing increased levels of sexism and sexual harassment.

Young women are being pushed into poverty with many reporting skipping meals and accessing benefits and food banks for the first time. These financial struggles are compounded for some young women who we found were also experiencing economic abuse.

As people fall ill with the virus and childcare facilities close, young women are taking on significant unpaid caring responsibilities. This is affecting both young women's ability to access work, and their mental health.

Our peer researchers heard about the true toll of the coronavirus pandemic on other young women. In addition to increased stress, anxiety and depression, young women reported being in crisis and having to access emergency mental health services. Others struggled to connect with support online.

Young women reported an increase in sexism and other discrimination, in particular racism, since the start of the coronavirus pandemic, within the workplace and outside. At the same time, they feel ignored by politicians. However, as confidence in politicians plummets, political activism is growing to strive for equality and economic justice, with more young women identifying as feminists.

Our findings show that if the Government truly wants to help the country recover from the current crisis, they need to reconnect with and listen to young women, including those who face additional discrimination and barriers such as young women of colour, young female parents and young disabled women. Any recovery plan for the UK must acknowledge and address the extent to which young women have already been picking up the pieces and holding up our economy in 2020.

METHODOLOGY

At Young Women's Trust, we believe that young women should be at the heart of all our work. We work with a large network of young women through our services, campaigns and participation work. We know that young women have the experience, ability and drive to create the changes we need to make an equal society for women.

Our job is just to facilitate this. Peer Research is research that is led and carried out by people with lived experience of the topics being studied. For us that means young women with experience of low pay or no pay working in paid research positions conducting our research. When a young woman is interviewed by another young woman like her, she is more likely to share openly and honestly. Young women take part in a paid research training programme, then work with the research team to design the research questions, methodology and questionnaire, find participants, interview them and help to analyse the data. For this project, 12 young women researchers interviewed (over the phone), 60 young women from diverse communities across the UK.

Thank you for talking to me today. Being able to talk about this, was really, really big. And, I don't know, just feels more liberating to be able to talk to somebody else other than my family about it.

A survey was also carried out for Young Women's Trust by Yonder Data solutions (previously named Populus Data Solutions). A representative sample of 4,020 18-30 year olds in England and Wales, with panel services provided by Populus Live, were surveyed between 28 September and 12 October 2020. In addition, a booster sample of 568 was carried out among Black and Mixed Ethnicity respondents. Findings were significance tested at 95 per cent. We include booster samples to ensure there are enough responses from different groups of young women, e.g. different ethnicities, to avoid grouping together findings for all young women of colour. We have not been able to present all intersectional data for this report, however, we will be looking at this in more detail in future work.

SECTION 1: WORK

ACCESS TO WORK

Many of the industries that have been hit hard by closures and new restrictions due to the coronavirus pandemic are those which predominantly employ young women, including hospitality, retail and leisure. These industries were already often lower paid, with more insecure contracts and irregular hours. Young women across England and Wales in our survey reported they were more likely to have been offered a zero hours contract at 43 per cent of young women compared to 35 per cent of young men.

Since the UK entered lockdown on 23rd March:

- Around a quarter of young women (23 per cent) had been furloughed
- 28 per cent of young women lost income
- 19 per cent lost working hours
- 10 per cent lost their current job
- 20 per cent lost future work
- A third of young women (33 per cent) applied for a job during this period and didn't hear anything back, and this was even higher for 18-24 year old women at 41 per cent.

I only managed to get one week of work during the summer. And I used to work part time at the football stadium and that's not running. And then I managed to get a job as a cleaner, but that's only four hours a week.

There just weren't many jobs at all to start within make up, obviously. Like the little jobs, there were hundreds of people were going for the same jobs anyway. So that is definitely scary.

I managed to get employment as a waitress. But then again, my employment status isn't, like, secure because it's unpredictable as to where we're going.

I'm quite worried... most of the hospitality jobs are not there anymore. And that's sort of the main job you can do part time.

The hospitality industry is under so much pressure. Often when an industry is under pressure, they take out their staff, they cut back on staffing hours. So you end up doing more work, same pay, incredibly stressful. I suffer with depression anyway. And under that kind of stress, it just makes it worse.

SAFETY AT WORK

A strong theme in our interviews is young women feeling unsafe at work because of the coronavirus pandemic and being unable to challenge this because of their insecure employment status or discrimination faced as a young woman. This led to many choosing to quit their employment.

Women in employment are twice as likely to be key workers as employed men.¹ They are facing the biggest health risks on the frontline, working to support their communities.

- 14 per cent of young women report having been forced to come into work by their employer despite their concerns about safety (compared to 11 per cent of young men).
- 16 per cent have worked without the protection or safety equipment they needed (compared to 12 per cent of young men).

I was working but now not. I was actually scared to go to work, I was scared I would catch it.

I'm more prone to just say yes to everything that is said to me at work because I'm afraid that if I do, they could fire me or anything can happen. I'm the only one wearing a face mask every single day at work so of course that doesn't make me feel 100 per cent safe.

I found the way they treated us and implemented social distancing and safety measures to be dreadful. I did actually have a virus and when I told them my symptoms, they said I wasn't allowed to stay off for it. So I was actually in my place of work with the virus for a day [restaurant].

I was actually showing symptoms, I had a temperature. The way we had to call in sick was to post it on the staff Facebook page, which really felt not ok. I basically got publicly shamed by the owners of the restaurant. They were like, this isn't acceptable, we're really short-staffed, you should come in. And then I went straight into isolation and just quit.

Where I was working, the COVID protocol wasn't implemented properly. So for example, you can come in with COVID symptoms and still be put on a non COVID ward because your test results haven't come in, and you could potentially be spreading it and then your test results come in positive then you're moved to a positive ward.

Because we're working in a nursery and there's like loads of kids coughing at the moment. Because they are babies we can't ask them to cover their mouths, wear masks. I think we are most at risk of getting it than say someone in a school.

1 Resolution Foundation (28 April 2020) Risky business Economic impacts of the coronavirus crisis on different groups of workers. Available at: <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/risky-business/>



Young women reported that because of limited safe work available, some had to take more unsocial hours which also affected their safety, particularly as a young woman travelling or working late at night.

- In our survey 16 per cent of young women had been unable to apply for a job, turned down a job or left a job because the journey to and from work wasn't safe. This was even more common for young women with a disability or long-term health condition (24 per cent).

I work at five o'clock in the morning, all I have to do is go to my front door, walk out to the gate, and my car is there. But I'm still terrified. I get terrified driving home from work at midnight, and they're not [young men]. It's just one of those, women are just terrified.

Because I was doing night shifts. That wasn't good for my anxieties. Then during the day I was just scared. I didn't want to catch it.

So I was then contracted about 45 hours, but because we always finished late, I'm still working like 50 hours. It was horrendous. The Eat Out to Help Out I don't think helped, I understand what it was for, but it was too much of a risk during the coronavirus, because social distancing really wasn't implemented.

WORKPLACE DISCRIMINATION

Even before the coronavirus pandemic, young women faced discrimination in the workplace. However, current conditions have heightened this, particularly in young women-dominated industries. Young women spoke of employers purposely employing young women because they were less able to challenge mistreatment, and even purposely employing young women they saw as 'attractive' in the hospitality industry.

- 76 per cent of young women aged 18-30 said they thought women faced discrimination in the workplace (56 per cent of young men), and women aged 18-25 were even more likely to think so (81 per cent).
- Two in five young women said they have experienced sexism in the workplace (39 per cent).

Basically all of the people working there were young women. All of the waitresses were between 16 and 25. And all the chefs were between 16 and 26. The owner was a man in his, like, late 40s. I feel like he was just a bit of a bully. And the fact that we were all younger women, he could just take advantage of the fact that we weren't going to stand up to him. And I guess they just found us easier to kind of, bully into working long hours. We worked long, long hours.

[Advice for employers] maybe not judge them or sexualise them before you've even started working there.

Being a young woman changes the way you're, like, treated at work compared to being an older man. Because they are, like, respected even less and they just don't want to listen to you.

- 21 per cent of young women said they have been paid less than a male colleague in their workplace to do the same or similar work.
- And a quarter of young women said they have been disappointed by their employer's efforts to tackle the gender pay gap (24 per cent young women, 18 per cent young men).

Young women also reported feeling that in some industries, the limited available opportunities were more frequently being offered to men.

Male applicants got the jobs more. They thought the male people would be better for the job. Working with young people, they thought that with males they would be listened to more.

In terms of in the workplace, I did feel as though men got more of a chance to actually go back to work and women are kind of pushed to the side a little bit. I don't know if that's because people know that women have more responsibilities and men can just be loose and do whatever they want in a way. Women have been left at home.

Young women of colour and young women with a disability or mental health condition particularly reported facing discrimination from employers during this period.

- 41 per cent of Black young women said they had been discriminated against when in, or looking for, work because of their ethnicity, as did 28 per cent of Asian young women and 22 per cent of Mixed Ethnicity young women.

Because I feel like most people that were put on the front line are black people, are people from ethnic minorities, therefore, that's the reason why I feel like they are more likely to catch COVID... I think that is a discrimination because... so where I was working, most white people were always allowed to go and work from home. But I thought like, from my point of view, it was always black people, other people from ethnic minorities that were still stuck on the ward.

- 41 per cent of young women with a disability or long-term condition said that they had been discriminated against because of this when working or looking for work.
- 36 per cent of young women compared to 28 per cent of young men said their mental health had affected their ability to look for work. A quarter said their mental health had affected their ability to stay in a job (24 per cent) and manage finances (24 per cent).
- 41 per cent of young women were worried about their employer not understanding their mental health needs and this rose to 65 per cent for young women with a disability or long-term health condition.



So if you've got an invisible disability, and you're trying to say to your boss, I've got quite a low immune system, but they really don't want employees with 'all that rubbish', they get annoyed.

They're gonna start seeing people like us at risk as more costly... typically through fear of not doing the right thing. Especially with the lack of information around corona, I think this will obviously have a bigger impact on the disabled community.

And you get like petrified of kind of saying to your employer, oh, yeah, I've got schizophrenia. It's well under control but sometimes I will have a bit of an off day. I think they even get quite scared of like, hiring people when they are mentally ill, unfortunately.

I think people thought it was really helpful to just throw suggestions at me that weren't going to realistically work for someone with my disabilities and my needs. So I felt quite like I was floating on my own without much help. And I also felt with women, as someone with anxiety, I really struggled to reach out for help to appropriate people and services. So I felt like I was in a bit of a hole.

I have been trying to look for work, every place is dangerous for someone in a wheelchair to apply because if there is like a fire or in a shop or something.

- Almost a quarter of young women with children said they had been discriminated against because of being pregnant, on maternity leave or returning to work after maternity leave (23 per cent).

And quite a lot of my work colleagues... weren't very happy about the fact that I was having a baby and I wouldn't be able to do stuff like lift heavy boxes and lift clients... That was awful. They just discriminated against me and they were just awful to me.

She didn't seem to understand the symptoms you get with a pregnancy, she just kept telling me, it was just, it's all in the head. And let's just get on with what I was supposed to be doing. It makes me not really want to go back to work after maternity leave.

SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Sexual harassment is an issue of increasing concern for young women, with 44 per cent thinking that 'there has been talk but no action to tackle sexual harassment since the #metoo movement started' (compared to 28 per cent of men); this has increased significantly from a third of women last year.

- 36 per cent of young women said they would be reluctant to report sexual harassment for fear of losing their job (19 per cent of men), an increase from 25 per cent of women last year. This is even higher for young women with a disability or long-term condition (50 per cent).
- 27 per cent of women would be reluctant to report sexual harassment for fear of being given fewer hours (compared to 14 per cent of young men) this has increased from 9 per cent last year. This is more pronounced at 33 per cent for young women aged 18-24, 33 per cent of Black young women and 41 per cent of women with a disability.
- A third (33 per cent) of young women said they wouldn't know how to report sexual harassment at work (compared to 23 per cent of young men), 39 per cent of young women aged 18-24, 42 per cent Black young women.
- 69 per cent of women who experienced sexual harassment did not report it to their employer and this rises to 74 per cent of women aged 18-24.
- Almost a quarter of young women (22 per cent) knew of cases of sexual harassment at work that have been reported and not dealt with properly (compared to 18 per cent of young men). This is an increase from 16 per cent of women last year.

My age and my gender were a massive factor. The sexual harassment was actually me and another girl that reported. Just kind of gutted that I pushed and nothing came through. Other females are still going through the bullying because the store manager wouldn't let it go through. It's probably pushed aside.

As well as sexual harassment, 16 per cent of young women were worried about employers not understanding if they faced domestic abuse or other forms of violence against women, this rose to 26 per cent for young women with children.



SECTION 2: FINANCES

PUSHING YOUNG WOMEN INTO POVERTY

At a point in their lives where many young women are striving towards some economic stability and independence, the coronavirus pandemic has stalled or reversed progress with devastating consequences. Young women reported both a loss of income, and rising costs such as gas and electric, from being at home during lockdown.

- Almost a third of young women said it's a real struggle to make cash last until the end of the month (31 per cent compared to 23 per cent for young men). Young women with children were more likely to agree (46 per cent), and even more so for single parents (53 per cent).
- Young women with a disability or long-term health condition were more likely to say they are struggling (44 per cent compared to 27 per cent without). This was especially true for those with long term mental health conditions (48 per cent).
- 57 per cent of young women described their financial situation as just about managing (47 per cent) or struggling (10 per cent). This was worse for young women who are parents (57 per cent just about managing, 15 per cent struggling), and for young women single parents it was very much the majority (60 per cent just about managing, 21 per cent struggling).
- 1 in 4 (27 per cent) young women said that when they think about their household finances they are filled with dread, compared to 23 per cent of young men. This rises to 39 per cent for young women parents (39 per cent agree) compared to non-parents (24 per cent agree) and 50 per cent of single female parents also said they were filled with dread when thinking about household finances.

The money I would use to like buy the kids clothes or put towards other things that now I'm having to wait and save. The gas and electric I've had to pay them more, because I'm more at home with the kids. Having to get the social worker to come and get a little bit of shopping for me and bring it here but he doesn't know what we eat. It was hard because it was only like to do a set budget of like 20/30 pounds, which is nothing once you buy like the essentials, there's basically nothing left.

It's a lot of stress. So I haven't been able to buy certain things or there's a point where I couldn't even afford to pay my rent. So that was a lot of stress. It put a lot of strain on my relationship. Things like I had to choose between paying rent or doing food shopping. I had to choose between like, do I pay gas or electric? We will be without one or the other. At one point selling stuff on eBay, just get the extra change that we needed. I ended up selling my laptop, my iPad. The things I used to FaceTime friends and family I had to sell so I could afford to pay my rent.

And obviously financially I wasn't prepared for it because I was self-isolating for the most part. So your gas and electric is going to be higher, and your food bill gonna be higher... I now have a little side hustle for social media selling pictures of myself. For me, for my age 21, I will actually tell people that I'm older than I am because I feel like I'm addressed differently. I don't want my children to be looked upon a certain way for some things that I do with my life. Like, before this was going on and both my children were in school consistently and I was working and stuff from weeks ago. I wouldn't have had to go to that result if all this wasn't going on.

DEBT AND ECONOMIC ABUSE

Young women reported debt and having to borrow money and rely on others as having a heavy toll on their mental health.

- 16 per cent of young women reported that they are in debt all of the time.
- Young women with children were more likely to say they were in debt all of the time (32 per cent parents, 13 per cent non-parents) and single parents even more so at 41 per cent.
- Young women with a disability or long-term health condition were twice as likely to say they were in debt all of the time (28 per cent compared to 14 per cent for young women without).

I'm still in debt. See, I'm paying off best I can which is a bit frustrating because I was hoping this year I'd be debt free well, rather than having to slow stuff down and still keep paying it off. I thought I would work really hard this year.

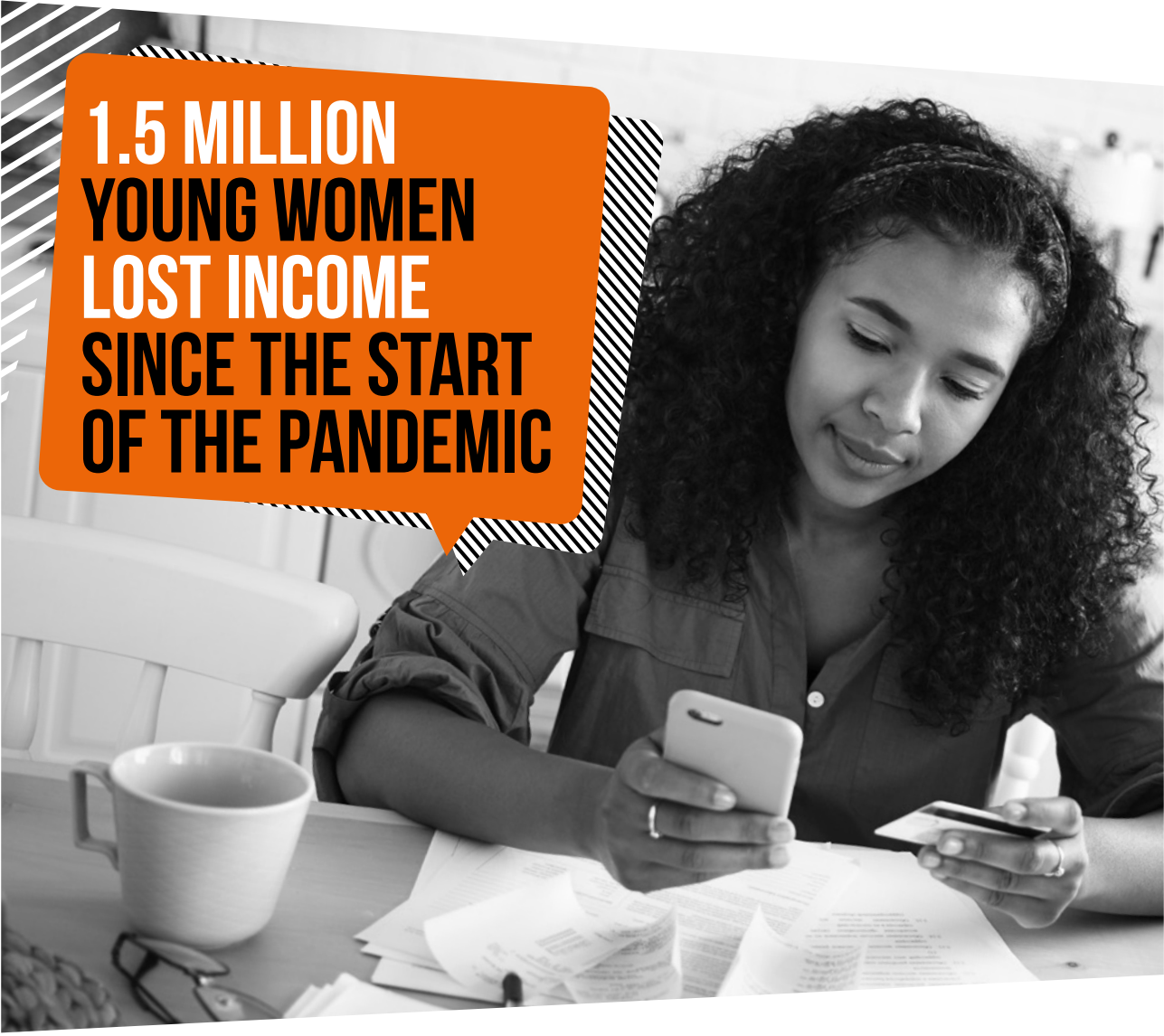
[Living with boyfriend and his parents] has like a mental toll on me, because I'm a very independent person. I don't like relying on other people. And I kind of feel like an intruder.

I don't want to be put in the position where I ask them for money because it's really bad for my self-esteem and my mental health. So I'm trying to be careful on the things that I buy.

One of the hardest things is like, obviously, as I live by myself, I'm not really receiving enough income. Because the whole point that I applied for a job is for me to get enough income to look after myself and to be on top of my responsibility like the rents. So when we went on lockdown, that kind of messed up.

Because I have bills and then I'm panicking if I'm gonna pay them on time. And then I've got like, because we've had the birthdays of the children. I'm like, What can I get them? And then what bills do I pay? I get stuck for money, borrow money. And then go into a cycle.

We are constantly arguing about money because he's obviously bringing all the money and I'm not getting anything in. [On a joint claim now for universal credit, getting less] – I don't get any help from my council taxes which I find is wrong because they should help both people.



**1.5 MILLION
YOUNG WOMEN
LOST INCOME
SINCE THE START
OF THE PANDEMIC**

These financial struggles are compounded for some young women who were also experiencing economic abuse. Experiences of domestic abuse are often under reported in surveys as young women may not want to disclose or may not recognise their experiences as abuse. Despite this, around one in ten young women reported they had experienced forms of economic abuse.² This included a partner or family member using control, threats or violence to prevent access to work/study, or to take wages, benefits or money for essential items.

I couldn't take being in the house any longer. And the kids were making me very overwhelmed. When I feel like I'm caged in, or I feel like I'm trapped, like I can't breathe. I was getting more angry quickly. I was depressed. I was also going through domestic violence during the time of the lockdown. So a lot is going on for me.

.....
² We will be working with Surviving Economic Abuse to explore these findings in more detail

WELFARE AND FOOD BANKS

Our interviews highlighted many young women struggling to access sufficient finances to support themselves or their family during the crisis.

- 12 per cent of young women overall said they had applied for benefits since lockdown started on the 23rd March 2020, however this rose to almost a quarter for mothers (23 per cent) and single mothers (24 per cent).
- Of those young women who did apply for benefits, this was the first time applying for 69 per cent of 18-30 year olds.
- This was the first time applying for benefits for 84 per cent of 18-24 year old women.
- 13 per cent of young women skipped meals to make ends meet, as did 30 per cent of young women with a mental health condition and 35 per cent of young women single parents.
- 9 per cent of mothers and 14 per cent of single mothers had used a foodbank since lockdown started.

I wasn't able to eat properly. Because I only really made sure I had enough for my children because I had to pay extra in other areas. So it did affect me physically, mentally, I actually went and then I got changed over to Universal Credit. And during this time, like you have to wait like four weeks to get your first payment. So, and I wasn't prepared for that, and it kind of put me in an awkward predicament. For the first time I had to go to a food bank as well, because it just kind of put me in a mental space, which I wasn't really prepared for.

Because of coronavirus a lot of things have gone up, so the money that you usually get from benefits it's not enough. Our social worker then referred us to some charities to get like little food boxes and the nursery gave us a 15 pound voucher every week, but only for one child.

Young women reported difficulties accessing the Job Centre, housing benefit and social services support during the pandemic causing much uncertainty and distress.


I went to talk to the Job Centre but they no longer have the number that I call. Not operating because of COVID. I think I'm getting a call from Universal Credit next week sometime. I receive PIP for mental health but I think that's due for review. So I'm not sure what that's gonna look like.

I had problems with even convincing them that I had a disability, which meant I had to, like live on my savings for nearly a year. Getting stuff like PPE for my carers and stuff has definitely added more strain. I pay them by direct payment, something that's provided by social services but was cut over 50 per cent before, like, literally two weeks before corona. And I was trying to appeal it, and then everything got shut down. So I went from 43 hours a week to 17 hours and 45 minutes without a consultation.

Social care to get access to them, support workers are unreachable, or obviously being out of the office. Before I would go to speak with them addressing issues or get support with food vouchers at certain points if I needed, but it was hard to get them to support.

At the time lockdown started I was trying to get a council flat. And then they said that was on hold for like three months. So I couldn't get anywhere and I have to end up going private. It was a nightmare really brought the stress out so bad. It is in bad condition, one of the bedrooms and damp. It's not an ideal house with my child.

I [previously] had my daughter taken away from me because I had nowhere to live, I was 17 at the time. So that is why I was so stressed and anxious this time because I don't want it to happen again. I just think we need to take young mums into account and they need to house them.



**SINCE MARCH, 69% OF
YOUNG WOMEN CLAIMING
BENEFITS DID SO FOR
THE FIRST TIME**

SECTION 3: UNPAID WORK AND CARE

Prior to the crisis, women carried out 60 per cent more unpaid work than men on average.³ Our research found young women facing increased levels of unpaid work, including both adult and childcare, due to the coronavirus pandemic. This additional workload impacted both their mental health and ability to access paid employment and economic justice. Many were supporting those who had the virus or vulnerable people who were shielding. On top of this, lots of young women had taken on childcare and home schooling since schools and nurseries had closed.

As one young woman who provided care for her children, as well as her dad, during lockdown summarised:

There was no childcare. I was the teacher. I was the mother. I was the maid. I was the carer. I was everyone. Everything.

CHILDCARE

As a result of Coronavirus, lockdown and social distancing restrictions:

- 12 per cent of young women said their nursery closed down permanently
- 23 per cent reported the before and/or after school clubs they normally used had closed down
- 17 per cent said the cost of their childcare had increased
- 17 per cent had reduced their hours at work to manage childcare
- Almost one in five young women with children (19 per cent) found that managing childcare was negatively affecting their mental health.

The limited childcare available is expensive and 51 per cent of young women parents, up from 33 per cent last year, were unable to apply for a job, turned down a job or left a job because they could not cover childcare costs.

30 per cent of young women with children have been discriminated against when looking for, or in, work because of having children or other caring responsibilities.

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³ 1 ONS (10 November 2016) 'Women shoulder the responsibility of 'unpaid work' Available at: <https://bit.ly/2KBdnG9>

There are no after school clubs anymore. There are no children centres anymore. So I've always got my one year old at home. And we've just been kind of tripping each other over constantly where the kids are fed up with me and you're just like, banging heads together, always fighting with each other now because they're always stuck indoors as well.

My son suffers with heart and breathing problems... he is due an operation next year, it was supposed to be this year, but because of the coronavirus, it got pushed back and I recently got a text to say that every individual case is going to be reviewed as into who is more at risk. My son is high risk, so anytime that high-risk people are not allowed to be out, me and my daughter then have to also isolate. My daughter stopped going to nursery during the lockdown because of my son being high risk, we were at home for 7 months.

Nursery is only open 9-1 and it's kind of put me in a bit of a funny position because I can't really do anything within those hours. It's stressful, I want to be able to go out and work.

**HALF OF YOUNG
MUMS WERE
UNABLE TO GET
OR KEEP A JOB
BECAUSE OF
CHILDCARE COSTS**



ADULT CARE

Our research on the impact of coronavirus earlier in 2020 found that one in ten young women had spent time looking after relatives who had Covid-19, and many were providing additional care to those who were vulnerable or shielding.⁴

We found that this situation continues with young women taking on increased levels of adult care from being at home and adult care services being closed. Protecting family members was also affecting their ability to access work and economic justice.

She used to go to centres to give my mum a break but that doesn't happen anymore. She can't have any other external carers anymore because, obviously corona. So it's falling a lot more on me and my mum.

I have my mum's brother who lives with us. And he's got mental health concerns too. So I support him more in terms of his life, life admin, because he's just not capable. I also have to do that for my mum, because there's language barriers... I would say it's increased just because I am at home. And that means I'm needed to help more, because I'm there.

There was a point where my dad went in for an operation. And I didn't want to be coming into work where I'm at risk of getting it and my dad's immune system was down. I had to take [unpaid] holiday so that my dad could be safer.

I'm not working because my nan is so high risk of COVID so she doesn't really want me to go out and get a job.

Although young women were taking on additional care for adults, many did not see this as providing care and saw it as their duty as a daughter or family member.

I always helped him with finances and shopping, I did end up shopping as he would get confused. Everyone says I should be claiming money for that, but should I really be claiming money for looking after my dad?

I wouldn't be classed as like a young carer or anything but my mum does suffer a lot with mental health, like she's had breakdowns in the past and she has been diagnosed with depression. So obviously I do try and take care of her as well.

⁴ https://www.youngwomenstrust.org/assets/0001/3589/Ignored__Undervalued_and_Underpaid_Report.pdf

In our in-depth peer interviews, young women also shared how coronavirus restrictions meant some were now not able to provide the same level of care for parents, grandparents and other adults. This was a key source of anxiety and stress during lockdown for many.

My mum's got bipolar and she literally had a high episode for months. I used to go shopping for my dad once a week because he's at high risk and obviously mum with her bipolar and everything. Basically, there was this one time in the month where we literally had to stay in our flats for about two weeks, so I couldn't really get to them. So that was a big problem. Because of dad not going out and mum just going on the loose all the time.

My brother's got psychosis. And he had to go to hospital earlier this year, so my family needs a bit of extra support. There's a lot more anxiety around what he's gonna do, whether he takes it seriously if he realises how serious it is for his health.

I've had to go back every week to do her shopping. Make sure she's eating make sure there's food in the house, electric and gas. Her anxieties got a lot worse. It puts a massive strain on my anxiety too because it's if I get stopped, am I gonna get in trouble? Am I gonna get fined? Although it is something I'm allowed to do. It's still that worry of if you get stopped.

My boyfriend at the time of lockdown, he was made homeless. So again, trying to find him services and trying to keep up his mental health. And having mental health support delayed for 6-8 months definitely had an effect on both of us. I can't give him the reassurance I'd like to because I'm like, I don't know what's going on either, I didn't feel very helpful. And I kind of felt useless.



SECTION 4: MENTAL HEALTH

YOUNG WOMEN AND MENTAL HEALTH

Our previous research with University College London highlighted the link between experiences of sexism at school/work and outside, and young women's mental ill health, including long-term impact.⁵ This crisis in mental health has been compounded by coronavirus. In our interviews we heard how mental ill health impacts all areas of young women's lives including access to economic justice.

The young women researchers for our report were able to sensitively explore the area of mental health in a way that allowed other young women to open up about extremely difficult and distressing experiences. They heard about the true toll of the coronavirus pandemic on other young women, including those who already experienced mental ill health. In addition to increased stress, anxiety and depression, young women reported being in crisis and having to access emergency mental health services.

In April, my mental health was really, really bad. And I felt so alone because my dad wasn't at home. And I couldn't see my family. I couldn't give a niece or nephew a hug or anything. I was in hospital with an overdose as I tried to take my own life. Because lockdown got on top of me and I was already feeling a bit rubbish before.

- Young women were more likely to say their mental health had become worse over the last 12 months (43 per cent compared to 32 per cent for young men), and young women with a disability or long term health condition were much more likely to report this (61 per cent compared to 38 per cent without).
- Almost three in five young women said they were worried about their mental health (57 per cent) compared to 46 per cent for young men, a rise from 51 per cent last year. This was higher for 18-24 year old young women (60 per cent) and young women with a disability or long term condition (85 per cent).

For young women living on their own, e.g. having left the care system, lockdown was described as an isolating and scary experience.

When it first started and we didn't really know what it's about and stuff, we just have to be in. I live literally, just by myself. Not seeing any friends that was really like difficult. And it was just hard because you just get really like bored and just a bit unmotivated. I was scared to even go to like, food shopping and stuff. So when it first started, that was probably the hardest part. [Young woman care leaver]

Because I'm someone who's experienced a mental breakdown before, I feel like being in isolation, I feel like I had no one, because I couldn't really see my family and my friends. And so when I had a chance to see my friends, I couldn't see them because my neighbour called the police. And from then I've just been by myself, it just feels lonely, just feels like I'm alone.

⁵ www.youngwomenstrust.org/assets/0001/2669/Impact_of_sexism_on_young_women_s_mental_health.pdf

17 per cent of young women felt they 'have no one to turn to'. This rises to 30 per cent of young women with a disability or long-term health condition, and 45 per cent of young women single parents. These statistics were clearly reflected in many of our interviews.

I've been shielded and stuff, which is to keep me safe but means I've had access to less services and a lower quality of life than most people. So they said that we were allowed an hour out each day and that was recommended. I don't even have an hour of full support to be able to do that on a standard day. That did make me feel discriminated against and upset and angry. Because I'm thinking, if an hour out a day is our basic human right then I won't get that. I didn't leave the house for like seven months. And I think it's still affecting me... I'm also in a flat that isn't accessible, I can't really see out the window, I have no garden, and I can't even open my windows if I'm on my own. I literally felt like I was in prison.

Because I'm a single mother, it was hard for me to balance the two of them, which had an impact on my mental health, because I felt like I was stuck in a cage. I had a real mental breakdown, I was going through a lot of things, I couldn't stand being inside.



**OVER HALF OF
YOUNG WOMEN
ARE WORRIED
ABOUT THEIR
MENTAL HEALTH**

ACCESS TO SUPPORT

Young women highlighted how discrimination towards young women affected their access to mental health support.

Yeah, because literally my partner...he's called up services and been given a diagnosis right away when it took me a really long time to get a response and I'm still waiting to have an autism referral. And when I've spoken to people...they've kind of been really reluctant to believe that I know I'm on the autistic spectrum. I have evidence for it.

I went to another doctor's appointment because I was really, really bad. And they were like it's your hormones. It's not my hormones and it proper got me worked up, 'oh you know, periods and stuff'. I feel like you go to somebody with mental health especially being a woman, and they'll just fob it off on something else.

The move to online support was also a hugely distressing for some young women who felt they could no longer access the support they needed, particularly with limited or no internet access.

At one point, I didn't know where to even go, like I wanted to talk to some kind of mental health support line. And I wasn't able to do that. So after a few days I really thought I needed someone to talk to and I didn't even know how to seek that help without having internet access. I mean, I did have like suicidal thoughts. I would never have for the sake of my children, but I did get very low.

It's sent me on a very dark downward spiral. This is the second lockdown and I've still not been able to get any help through my doctor surgery or NHS. They're telling you they're gonna be referred. Then two, three weeks later, nothing happened. A lot of it is 'go online. just go online and look at these websites. Look at the pamphlets online.' Obviously, that's not very helpful.

Trying to get a counsellor, the waiting list were too long and then never available. And being told that, it's like you're just not important enough to get help.

With the lockdown, I haven't been able to access the therapy or the support groups that I've been part of, I haven't been able to access my medication as easily. So I recently had an issue with one of my medications where I don't feel like it's working. And I've not been able to get it changed. So my option is to either keep taking it, or to come off of it. Either way, it's not a great option. I'm having a lot of trouble accessing the support, which in the past has led to me having a breakdown and needing to go into hospital. But right now, that's not an option because psychiatric hospitals aren't taking new patients.



There was no kind of information from social services on what we could do, who was available or who to speak to if there was an additional problem. I didn't know what I could do about talking about my standard health problems anyway. Because I felt like I was bothering people. It's always been that way with disability anyway. But I think corona has made it a lot harder. I had a depressive a period. Honestly, I wanted to kill myself before it was over. And I didn't really know how to function. But then I did start finding stuff.

Many young women commented that they found it difficult to create a connection with a counsellor or social worker online.

So it was good that I didn't have to travel anywhere, but at the same time, it was hard to kind of have a connection and really get into, like, issues online.

Me and my social worker were very close. My social worker took on my case just after my 15th birthday. So it was very hard for me to take in that she's actually left over the phone, which really kind of hurt me. With the other social worker, it was very hard to communicate with him because I'm having to do FaceTime and I'm not really a FaceTime person. I don't really like being on the camera, I prefer the person to come face to face. Everyday he was messaging and I felt like he was harassing me. I don't have Wi Fi in my house and I'm really bad at computers. They'll put me in a group but I don't know how to connect to the group, so I've missed a lot of like social channels and meetings.

I just got referred and having had a telephone consultation with the psychiatrists, it wasn't as effective as having a face to face conversation, because, I mean, he only talked to me for four minutes.

UNCERTAINTY AND THE FUTURE

The coronavirus pandemic this year has caused high levels of uncertainty and stress for young women, many of whom were already at a point in their lives where they were making difficult life decisions and striving towards economic stability and independence.

Not knowing, like, what the future is going to be, can be really scary. And especially at that time when I was unemployed and not really knowing like, what's going to be next, but what, what's my future now? How am I going to cope with this? How am I going to support my dad?

I have cerebral palsy so I always need help from people anyway. And, you know, looking for work and kind of looking at what I wanted to do my life, I was kind of determined to build something for myself. And then everything shut down. And that really affected my mental health.

And then also, just not knowing, you know, what's going to happen with the future like future jobs and stuff? But, I mean, I've been quite lucky in that. I'm under a care team already. So I've been having therapy. And I think that's been helping with some of the low moods but I think it has made my depression worse, to be honest. It's all on the telephone now.

I am really uncertain about the future. I thought I knew what was going to happen. And now I have no idea where my life is going to go. The world is just burning and no one has a clue what to do.

**61% OF YOUNG
WOMEN FEEL
IGNORED BY
POLITICIANS**



SECTION 5: POWER AND EQUALITY

WOMEN'S EQUALITY

Our survey showed that many young women feel sexism and other forms of discrimination towards them has increased, in the workplace and outside, since the coronavirus pandemic. At Young Women's Trust we see that these experiences of discrimination have a profound impact on access to economic stability and justice for young women.

- Just 8 per cent young women thought women's equality has got better in the last 12 months (compared to 18 per cent for young men), down from last year when 15 per cent young women agreed with this statement, and 2018 when 26 per cent agreed.
- Half of 18-24 year old young women said they were concerned about men and women becoming less equal, and this rises to 53 per cent of young women with a disability and 54 per cent of Black young women.
- Only 17 per cent of young women believed women and men have equal rights in the UK compared to 41 per cent of young men.
- 61 per cent of young women and 45 per cent of young men saw sexism as a major problem in the UK. This is higher for young Black women (68 per cent) and young disabled women (71 per cent).

Women might not be, like, a statistical minority, but we are minoritized we're deliberately misunderstood. There is such a deliberate ignorance when it comes to the amount of extra care work and mental load that women do.

Lockdown measures have meant young women are increasingly having to attend appointments alone and work, shop or exercise alone at irregular hours where they have faced more harassment. Young women also reported a rise in sexism and racism experienced online.

Sexism has increased definitely. There's been a few times where I've gone to appointments and they underestimate me for the first glimpse of me.

Someone in the food bank... used anti-Semitic language. And his behaviour was quite sexist as well. It was completely inappropriate.

During lockdown, I felt just as a woman leaving the house like men were quite 'vulturey'. And like, I was just going for a walk. It's Ramadan. So I couldn't go for walk in the day. I went after my fast and in the evening. 10 o'clock on my own, we're just walking up and down to get some fresh air in lockdown. Some guy approached me on his bike...

I had this one bloke, follow me around the shop, but he was just staring at me... I felt so uncomfortable. Yeah, but the only reason I go shopping late at night. It's because there's nobody about.

I have a lot of concerns around around racism and around sexism. I feel like we've been put back a few years with our progression. But we've been launched forward with technology. And that feels like a very, very dangerous mix. They'll end up in these spaces, where they feel like it's acceptable, because they're all talking about the same thing.

Young women of colour in particular reported experiencing discrimination, and lockdown and social distancing measures exacerbating racism which already existed in their communities.

I think during this lockdown, I think the people we live around, I think, because of our colour, because of our age, I feel like it gives them excuses to call the police for no reason... because of how hard it is during the pandemic, and you just want, like, your friends around you. And it gives them the skills to show like, okay, yeah, she's a young girl, we're older than her. And, obviously, you're not allowed friends, but I feel like you shouldn't do something to someone if you know you're doing the same thing.

I'm a black female. So yeah, there's all the Black Lives Matter things going on like that. So I'd say that's had more of a toll on me. I think discrimination has increased due to the pandemic.

And obviously I am Chinese myself. When we first started out, it was kind of like Chinese people kind of brought it into the UK. So, I think I was in kind of a massive stereotype. Like, Chinese people were frowned upon.

TRUST IN GOVERNMENT

Our research showed a clear picture of young women feeling ignored and therefore untrusting of the current government.

- 61 per cent of young women felt ignored by politicians, as did 72 per cent of young women with a disability or long-term health condition.
- Only 11 per cent of young women compared to 18 per cent young men were confident in the government to do what's right for them.
- 70 per cent of young women said that their confidence in politicians has got worse in the last 12 months compared to 66 per cent of young men. 18-24 year old women were more likely to say their confidence has got worse (75 per cent) and young women with a disability or long-term health condition (80 per cent compared to 68 per cent without a disability).
- Only 8 per cent of young women and 18 per cent of young men agreed that the government is addressing young women's needs.

They just need to listen. Because they don't listen. You could say to them I'm a single mum, I'm 26 years old and I've lost my house. And they'll go, 'Oh, it's because you did this when you were 14.'

On key issues such as the coronavirus response and Brexit, young women's confidence in the government is lower than young men's:

- 11 per cent of young women and 16 per cent of young men said they had confidence in the government's response to coronavirus
- Only 9 per cent of young women and 16 per cent of young men said they had confidence in the government's ability to deliver a Brexit that has positive outcomes for them.

Confidence in other authorities was also low and varied hugely based on demographics. For example, only 44 per cent of young women were confident in the police to do what's right for them. This drops to 35 per cent for young women with a disability/long term health condition and 33 per cent for young women on the lowest or no pay. This is strikingly lower for young Black women at 17 per cent, compared to 32 per cent Mixed Ethnicity young women, 36 per cent for Asian young women and 47 per cent for white young women.

ACTIVISM

As confidence in politicians plummets, political activism to strive for equality and economic justice is growing.

- A majority of young women said they identify as feminist (66% of 18-24 year olds), remaining consistent with last year but up from 60% in 2018.
- 12 per cent of young women aged 18-24 had taken part in a demonstration or protest compared to 5 per cent of 25-30 year old women. The impact of the Black Lives Matter movement can also likely be seen in the statistics, with taking part in protests higher for young Black women (19 per cent) and Mixed Ethnicity young women (15 per cent).
- Young women were significantly more likely than young men to have signed a petition (57 per cent compared to 45 per cent). Again, the younger age group of 18-24 were more likely at 67 per cent, as were young Black women (68 per cent) and young disabled women (64 per cent).
- 37 per cent of young women had shared or posted about a campaign on social media compared to 24 per cent young men. This rose to 45 per cent for 18-24 year olds compared to 30 per cent for 25-30. 51 per cent of young Black women and 47 per cent of young women with a disability had shared or posted about a campaign on social media.

Our findings show that if the Government want to help the country recover from the current crisis, they need to reconnect with and listen to young women, including those who face additional discrimination and barriers, such as young women of colour, young female parents and young disabled women.

We need short projects for women, young women to like, get involved with and connect with. And use like their different skills. If it was like a community project, like a local campaign something where you're engaging with the public.

CONCLUSION

2020 has been an extremely challenging year for most; however, our research shows that young women are among those hardest hit by the economic fallout of the pandemic, and the discrimination and harassment they already faced has been exacerbated.

The sectors young women predominantly work in, such as hospitality, have been decimated. Many of those who continue to work in frontline roles face insufficient safety measures which are putting their lives at risk.

Young women already took on high levels of unpaid care work, however the pandemic has meant drastically increased child and adult care, impacting their ability to earn and their mental health.

Our report has shown the worrying impact of mental health and social services becoming less accessible or moving online. Many young women have been cut off from family and friends, feel isolated and alone, and unable to access support until they are at crisis point.

As the fallout of coronavirus becomes apparent, young women will continue to be among those facing the biggest economic difficulties – unless urgent and comprehensive action is taken.

The government need to ensure that this heavy load which young women have been carrying is recognised and addressed in their recovery plans. We found that young women have been picking up the pieces and holding up our economy in 2020. It is crucial that no young woman is left behind in the aftermath of the pandemic. If the government truly wants to help the country recover from this crisis, they need to listen to and reconnect with young women.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM YOUNG WOMEN:

Our researchers asked young women what the government needs to do to improve their lives now and in the future:

1. Safe and secure work opportunities for young women

The Government Job's Plan needs to include investment in the sectors many young women work in, such as hospitality and care, and targeted support to allow routes into new work areas. Alongside this, equal pay reporting and investment in support is needed to allow young women to challenge unsafe practice and discrimination.

For women, like, better support with regards to balancing their personal and professional life, and not being penalised for it. So whether that's obviously pregnancy and maternity. Making equal pay more of a norm in society. There have been improvements but there's still a long way to go. And just increasing the transparency around it.

Opportunities for women to get them into different trades and sectors, because a lot of the jobs that women had before lockdown, were waitresses, and bar staff, and retail stores. The majority of the jobs where women are normally the one hired, their markets have shut.

2. Better financial support and benefits

Reform of the benefit system is needed to better support young women during this crisis and beyond. Reform particularly needed for carer's benefits and those trying to access work.

Like, my sister's severely disabled and needs like round-the-clock care. Giving carers money for that, like, an actual living wage.

Not only financially but also supporting their back with getting groceries and stuff like that.

Especially during something like this, maybe just like a £500 payment that they're giving to people so people can get through.

Because I'm on benefits. I have to only work under 16 hours, which I find really annoying. And just because you're on benefits, surely you should be able to work normal hours.

3. Data on the impact of coronavirus on women

Government responses to coronavirus need to be informed by data and the voices of diverse young women on the economic and wider impacts on their lives.

I've read so many articles about women's experiences, and I was like, okay, at least I'm not alone in this. And it just makes me feel a bit better. There should be at least some sort of like information... it affects women's menstrual cycle, like COVID can affect that. And like the aftereffects of it as well, there's not much information on that for women in particular.



4. Mental health support specific to young women

Accessible mental health support is needed which is tailored to young women's experiences.

I'm very concerned with mental health, I want to feel supported by a mental health service that especially deals with young women and what we're going through right now. First of all, it's very hard to be a woman. Second of all, it's harder to deal with during a pandemic.

More therapy available for young women, because I mean, because I know, a lot of my friends are like severely anxious and severely depressed and even suicidal or that's all been exacerbated by the virus, and by lockdown, but they've been put on really long waiting lists, like 12 months.

There needs to be young women's therapy. Because you can give me flexible hours. But then what about my mental flexibility? Am I okay? Is there stress from my bills, x, y, z. That's what employers need to be doing, every organization, have a source of therapy or someone that people can talk to. Because not everyone has their mum or dad or family.

5. Investment in digital resources and better remote support for young women

Ensure no young women are left isolated and unsupported during this crisis and beyond, particularly those living alone, single mothers and those experiencing domestic abuse.

So, like, young people like me come into these problems with their internet, there's like a place you can go get it fixed or get like a laptop on loan. Once you lose assets, it can be a bit like, what do I do now?

So if you don't have that internet, especially young mothers, it's gonna have a toll on me and other mothers in general. But if I just received a letter in the mail, with a support line number, email, and location for selected few services...even just someone to speak to.

I think they need to put in a scheme to check up on people who are regular users of support groups. So that if you're in a mental health or dv support group, or single mom support group or anything like that, they should have a weekly Zoom meeting so that even if you don't have a wide social network, there is an option for you to interact with other people.

Maybe they're victims of violence - they should really protect the women that face tougher household conditions, maybe scheduling some free mental health service for them or setting up phonenumber that you can call whenever you need to, or if you need to reach out or even like with money.



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