



VALUING YOUNG WOMEN'S UNPAID WORK

Research by Young Women's Trust Peer Researchers, all of whom are young women with current experience of unpaid work. **Survey written by** Tayah Turay, Victoria Crow and Maria McNabb. **Fieldwork, interviews and analysis by** Mattea Sykes, Ashleigh May and Tayah Turay.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Young Women's Trust is a feminist organisation working to achieve economic justice for young women. One of our four key objectives is to build a society that values the unpaid work it relies upon young women to do.

This is vital to our mission, as although women do the vast majority of unpaid work, their value, potential and skills are so often overlooked. In the UK we view care services as an expense, while physical infrastructure such as construction is seen as an investment for the future.

The reality is that young women make a huge economic contribution via their unpaid work. Using ONS unpaid work figures we can estimate a value to the economy of at least £140 billion¹, and this does not include the many additional areas of unpaid work young women highlighted to us through this research. They are stepping in to do the work of holding communities together after years of austerity and cuts to local government funding.

As this report demonstrates, young women are disproportionately providing care for their children, partners and families, alongside supporting their wider communities, through skills such as empathy, patience, creativity and organisation - a contribution rarely recognised or acknowledged.

And this unpaid workload is having its impact on young women's mental health, relationships and economic freedom. By picking up the pieces they are being pushed further into poverty and away from unlocking their potential.

This research was designed, conducted and analysed by young women peer researchers currently in unpaid work, allowing unique and authentic insight into circumstances that are so often holding young women back from what they would like to achieve. At Young Women's Trust we believe all society prospers when young women's contribution is valued.

¹ Figure based on value of women's unpaid work calculated by ONS 2015, from the UK Harmonised European Time Use Survey (HETUS), with 3% annual uprate for inflation from 2015, then reduced to represent 18-30 year old women (20% of 18-100 UK female population). <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/articles/womenshouldertheresponsibilityofunpaidwork/2016-11-10>



2. PEER RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Young women received research training over two sessions supported by Partnership for Young London. The survey and interview script was written by young women working together in a workshop session.

The online survey was shared by the peer researchers and via Young Women's Trust networks and completed by 85 women. Peer researchers were paid for their time and conducted 1:1 interviews over the phone with sixteen young women from across the UK who had experience of unpaid work. Interviewees were recruited via the Young Women's Trust Facebook Lounge, a closed Facebook group for young women aged 18-30, with experience of living on low or no pay.

A further session was then held for young women to conduct quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data received.

The key purpose of the peer research methodology is that young women participants feel comfortable sharing honest responses about their lives, as our peer researchers made clear:

"I felt that they could relate to me more, we were equals and had an understanding of the difficulties I was interviewing about. I wasn't some stranger in a white coat asking questions about something that I didn't have any lived experience or personal knowledge on. At times I could provide small snippets of "I know what that's like" or "I've been in that situation" which I hope comforted the young women."

"I think that the women were more open and honest with me because they knew I had been through similar experiences, they felt comfortable in sharing exactly how they felt about the situation and did not hold anything back. I also felt that when I asked why they did unpaid work, they had the same or very similar responses to the ones I had before."

The project also provided a valuable development opportunity for young women to gain research skills:

"I learned a number of valuable research skills from being a researcher on the project from interviewing techniques to analysing data collected, it has inspired me to want to carry out more research projects in the future."

"I was worried about talking to the young women, but opening up about such personal topics and talking in a free, safe environment...I realised that I was quick thinking and good at asking the right questions, I work well in that sort of situation. It has ignited an interest into how research is carried out & why, which I don't think I'd have developed without this project."

3. DEMOGRAPHICS AND EXPERIENCES

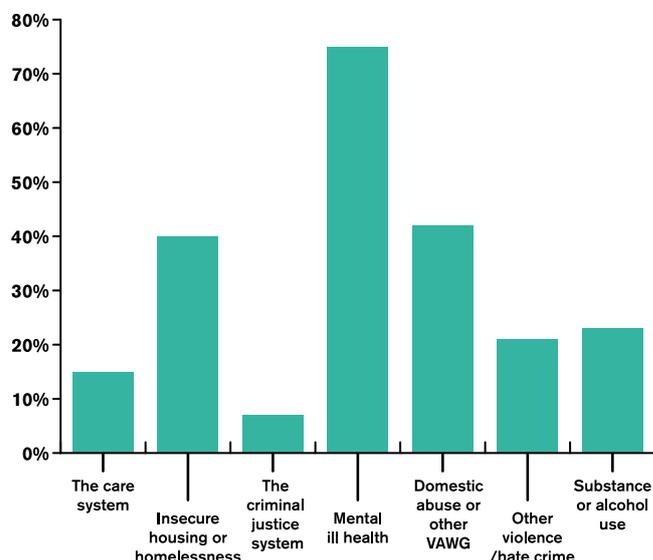
There were 85 participants in the research. 75 were young women aged 16-30, 10 respondents were women just over 30.

Of those who completed this demographics section (75), 56 percent identified as young women from white British or other white background, 43 percent as young women of colour. Almost 50 percent had a disability or long term health condition (including mental health). 60 percent had no religion, 26 percent were Christian, seven percent Muslim and three percent Sikh. 76 percent identified as heterosexual, 21 percent as bisexual and three percent as queer².

The main source of income young women reported was welfare benefits, followed by full-time employment, part time employment, self-employed or being reliant on a partner's income. A third of young women respondents (36 percent) cared for children and 16 percent primarily cared for adults (with many doing both). Almost half (48 percent) reported having no 'caring responsibilities' however in the narrative questions, many of these young women did describe caring for both children and adults on a weekly basis, they just didn't define themselves as being a 'carer'.

² The sample size was not large enough in this particular study to do full intersectional analysis against unpaid work experiences, however this will be prioritised in our future research on unpaid work.

Young women reported a range of experiences that will also impact on their access to economic justice and autonomy alongside their unpaid work. A huge 74 percent had experience of mental ill health, 41 percent had experienced housing insecurity or homelessness and 41 percent had experienced domestic abuse or another form of Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG).



4. CATEGORIES OF UNPAID WORK

When developing this project, young women peer researchers with experience of unpaid work looked at the official ONS categories of unpaid work, which includes housework, adult care, child care and volunteering³, and added in the categories they thought were missing.

This included emotional labour – time spent counselling and emotionally supporting others – over and above what would be defined as childcare or adult care. Those young women who entered their hours for this task (27), spent on average 11 hours per week on emotional labour. Young women described providing this to a range of people in their lives every week, for instance: *‘to friends who have mental health issues or family who are going through difficult times’*.

Other additional categories included household administration and planning, unpaid support to a family business or support for family or cultural events.

³ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/dvc376/index.html>

5. LEVELS OF UNPAID WORK

The majority of young women (79 percent) reported they feel they do ‘a lot of unpaid work’

This rose to 100 percent for young women who are parents, including single parents, who reported up to 138 hours per week spent actively looking after children (including their own children and younger siblings). Only one young woman who was a single parent highlighted support received from anyone else with childcare – her mum who does 10 hours a week – but *‘because of her disability it is less than I do – she is unable to take them to school’*.

Young women who lived with children, with family (parents/siblings/grandparents) or partners reported higher levels of unpaid work than those who lived with friends/flat mates or on their own. However young women who lived with friends or on their own still often took on unpaid duties outside of their immediate household, for example *‘emotional support for my mum who is blind and a full-time carer for my brother, respite care for my older brother who is autistic and struggles with mental health issues.’*

Of the young women who entered their hours for housework (40), there was a huge range from 2 – 65 hours of housework per week, with an average of 11 hours per week. Only 21 identified someone else who did this in their household, most commonly a partner or mother, doing an average of five hours per week.

Young women with caring responsibilities reported an average of 88 hours of childcare per week, with seven sharing this with a partner, however none reporting equal hours for this task. Young women who care for adults reported spending on average 36 hours per week on this task⁴.

⁴ As the sample size is small for this survey we will be looking at levels of unpaid work further in the next stage of this research/campaign.

6. CONTRIBUTION TO FAMILIES, COMMUNITIES AND THE ECONOMY

Young women highlighted how their unpaid work benefits the economy by taking on tasks that would otherwise need to be paid for, or provided by a local authority, and by propping up others in paid employment at the expense of their own careers:

“Because if I don't look after the children my partner can't work. If I go and work we will struggle to afford childcare and suffer more than its worthwhile me working.”

“Otherwise my mum would have to pay for someone to help with stuff.”

“It's work that in other circumstances you could pay someone else to do.”

“I am a maid, chef and cleaner for others.”

“I care full-time for four children and a husband who has mental health problems.”

“I help others with their work yet receive none of the money they receive.”

“I am a full-time carer for my mum who is severely disabled. I am also severely disabled myself. I do a lot – most of the cooking and cleaning. I have to help her physically as she gets stuck places, sometimes she can't get out of a chair or bed. I also provide a lot of mental and emotional support for her. I also manage the bills, benefits and financial things, as she can get confused and upset. I can't go away in case she needs me.”



7. PERCEPTIONS OF UNPAID WORK

Being unable to afford childcare or professional adult care, and not qualifying for adequate benefits such as carers allowance or disability benefits was commonly raised in responses.

Young women also spoke of families and communities falling apart without their help:

“Nothing would get done and the other people who rely on me would suffer also.”

“My mum’s mental health would deteriorate and my brothers and sisters would suffer because of that. My younger brother would have to do the work but he wouldn’t be able to handle it because of his mental health.”

“My nan would find it very hard to go to appointments, or understand what is being said to her in her appointments... it would be difficult for her to communicate with professional bodies such as doctors, nurses, figures that work at the council. If I didn’t take her to the shops she wouldn’t be able to get out, if I didn’t cook or clean for her, her house would be a mess.”

Despite the benefits to individuals and society, almost 40 percent of young women had previously never seen any of the tasks they do as unpaid work, instead many saw the daily tasks as routine and not involving any skills:

“Normal life everyday things you do without questioning or thinking about.”

“The stuff I have to do. Seems normal.”

“Just what a woman does.”

Some young women were able to identify skills they use in their unpaid work, for instance for housework one highlighted:

“Organisation, time keeping, manual labour, resilience, resourcefulness, determination.”

However, many were unable to identify the skills they used or didn’t think they used any:

“Skills used? I’ve never even thought about that.”

“Oh god that’s a good question. That’s a tough question.”

“No skills, it’s just myself and the kids.”



One young woman who cares full-time for her mum suggested:

“I don’t think I use any skills as I just follow instructions from my mum. I am not good at cleaning.”

Childcare was the exception, with more young women able to identify some skills but often generalised as ‘mum skills’ or ‘mothering skills’.

At the end of the survey young women were asked to reflect on whether they felt differently having taken part:

“I didn’t realise how much of what I do counts as unpaid work.”

“It has made me realise how much I actually do.”

“For my mental health I’ve had to make a conscious acknowledgement that what I do does have purpose and it is work... I used to think I was a complete burden, I was worthless.”

8. WHY YOUNG WOMEN DO UNPAID WORK

a) Young women care

When asked why they do unpaid work, young women most commonly highlighted that they do the unpaid work out of love and care for their family or friends:

“Love and family responsibility.”

“Because I love her and there is no one else.”

“I do the unpaid work around arranging care because I love and care for my grandparents. Unfortunately my other family members do not do it (I am the only woman as their children i.e. my dad and uncle are both men and haven't 'stepped up').”

“I love my mum and think it is better for her to be cared for by someone she knows and loves rather than a stranger.”

“I would do anything for him because he is my child.”

“I want to help elevate the workload of the people I care about, because someone has to. I also do it to keep busy and useful. Who doesn't want to feel 'needed'?”

b) Positive benefits

Some young women highlighted that despite taking on a lot for others, they enjoyed helping people, and the tasks they do also have some benefit to their mental health:

“It gives me a sense of achievement.”

“It helps me feel organised and in control!”

“My mental health gets bad when I'm not doing anything... Makes me feel a bit more normal going out, getting laundry done, almost like self-care I guess.”





c) Obligation and necessity

Another common answer was that they were obliged to complete unpaid work as no one else will:

“The most striking thing that I heard when interviewing women was ‘If I don’t do it, nobody else will’ – the women I interviewed often had this response whether there were others who could help out or not. I feel that it is a huge responsibility for women to juggle several roles as well as their own lives.”

Tayah, peer researcher



“ I don’t have a choice, especially for women it’s just built into us from a young age. You just feel obliged to.”

“ This is my life and what I have to do, although sometimes overwhelming, I have got used to it.”

“ Because if I don’t they won’t be done and I want to be a good nice person.”

d) Fear of repercussion – unpaid work as economic abuse

Worryingly, a number of young women reported not just that they felt obliged to complete unpaid work, but that they were fearful of negative repercussions or abuse from either a partner or family member for not doing so.

“ As a child and teenager, I faced a lot of emotional and physical abuse associated with these unpaid tasks when they weren’t done or I refused to do them.”

“ My partner would be frustrated and resentful.”

“ I would get shouted at, shamed and blamed by family members.”

“I will be labelled ‘lazy’ and undesirable for marriage.”

“My family would see me as being disobedient.”

The organisation Surviving Economic Abuse (SEA) define economic abuse not just as someone using or misusing another’s money, but also controlling how they acquire money and economic resources, such as preventing them from being in education or employment⁵.

93 percent of the young women surveyed wanted to be in paid employment, however some feel stuck in unpaid work and actively prevented from accessing economic autonomy:

“I am unhappy when I don’t want to do them but still have to. Some of the tasks effect my mental health negatively, because I don’t get positive reinforcement. Sometimes I am faced with more emotional and psychological abuse. Certain people have taken advantage of me financially too. It’s been a real struggle trying to get back money that I need now but the lesson has been learnt.”

“My quality of life is extremely poor as a result of being forced to stay at home and look after kids that I struggle to care for. I didn’t plan to have an additional two children [twins]. They came about as a result of an unplanned pregnancy. I stopped taking contraception as my mental health is poor... My partner refused to take precaution and would make a fuss if I refused to be intimate. And now I am burdened with more responsibility than I can manage and am frowned upon if I complain or struggle...childcare fees rocketed and I am now unable to work as we can’t afford it! Makes me feel extremely bitter and resentful.”

⁵ <https://survivingeconomicabuse.org/economic-abuse/what-is-economic-abuse/>

9. EXPECTATIONS ON YOUNG WOMEN

Ninety two percent of young women reported that the men in their lives 'do not have the same expectations on them' when it comes to unpaid work.

When asked which tasks there was most expectation on your women in particular to complete, respondents ranked childcare highest, followed by housework, laundry, cooking then emotional labour and caring for adults.

a) Intimate relationships

Most young women with male partners reported an imbalance whereby they completed more unpaid work:

“I try and make my boyfriend but he doesn't like doing any of that stuff.”

“Thinking about it I do not feel it is fair that I do everything and my husband comes home and everything is ready for him and I get no help.”

“Whilst my partner does also do unpaid work, there are areas which are not his focus and which are left entirely to me.”

This was particularly highlighted for mixed-sex couples where there were children:

“Majority of responsibility is on the mother, the dad still wants to be young, although this is not every young couple.”

“I feel young mums still have to do the nursery run and come home to do the cooking and cleaning even if they've worked the exact same hours as a man.”

Tayah, peer researcher

“Majority of women do more than men at work and at home. Majority are the main carer for children and adults. I have seen men take credit for things they do not do, whereas women are not given the encouragement to speak more loudly about all the things they do. Children see this. They become familiarised with it. It becomes the norm and part of our culture. I used to fight a lot about this, but eventually I submitted, because I wanted harmony.”

However, there were exceptions to this, with a number of young women highlighting supportive male partners, and two describing the share of unpaid work overall as equal, for example: *‘My partner helps with these tasks because they are a shared responsibility. Some weeks, if we are very busy, we won't do so many of these tasks. There is no consequence to this other than living in a messy house.’*

However, others describing partners who wanted to help but faced barriers to doing so:

“If men want to do more caring it's seen as there is something wrong with them.”

b) Familial and intergenerational relationships

Young women undertaking adult care particularly highlighted that the expectation to care fell more on young women than young men:

“There is massive pressure on daughters to care for their parents – childcare and adult care, cooking, cleaning.”

“Being a younger woman it feels like there is pressure, like it's our time to step up to responsibility. Because we are just seen as less, we are just kind of put on to do all the other tasks although it doesn't even involve us being paid - because we are women it's seen as our role and our job.”

“I think sometimes it's a historical thing, even though it's 2020 I think because our grandparents did it, and our parents did it, we are now expected to do it. It is difficult to break away from that stigmatisation that is still around... That caring, nurturing and loving side is seen as much more of a feminine aspect.”

“I would see my mother swamped with work and I would like to alleviate some of that by helping out more. My mother believes that women should be doing all of this and more.”

“My husband’s family are quite rigid on gender roles – cooking cleaning, family care obligations, when his parents get older it is assumed I will become their carer.”

Many young women raised that intergenerational expectations can vary for young women dependent on cultural background:

“One of my friends she’s from Eastern Europe, and she has always said to me how her brothers were never expected to do chores in the same way as she was, were not reprimanded in the same way. I myself am from an Indo-Caribbean background and have noticed that too growing up.”

“It affects young women at different intersections, differently. Especially as a South Asian woman, the gender inequality expressed through how normal unpaid work is, is strong and hard to actively resist without family drama as a result.”

“It’s expected of me. It’s been ingrained in me since a young age that I must do certain tasks and act a certain way. It’s part of the culture I have grown up in. It’s what I see other women do. It’s what I see men not do.”

“Men in my culture expect to be served similarly to how their mothers treat them – like kings. Even if the husbands are not expecting it, the mother and sister in-laws do. Many families break apart over bad treatment of the daughter-in-law. Modern enslavement exist, even within well educated families. This is very damaging to self esteem and mental health.”



10. IMPACT ON YOUNG WOMEN'S LIVES

a) Mental health and relationships

The majority of young women surveyed suggested that they do not feel valued for the unpaid work that they do (67 percent).

Young women report that unpaid work had most impact on their leisure/social time with 79 percent reporting a negative or extremely negative impact. One woman who cares for children and adults highlighted: *'My friends are not understanding of my situation – I prioritise family so they don't include me thinking I won't come. I have become isolated because of it.'*

This was followed by 70 percent of young women who reported unpaid work had a negative impact on their mental health. Over half of young women reported that unpaid work had a negative or extremely negative impact on their sleep:

"It affects my sleep – I'm constantly on edge, I have to check mum has medication, my brother is not leaving the house or bringing friends round. My family have to be straight, I check on them all including my baby before I sleep."

b) Impact on finances and economic freedom

93 percent of young women said they do want to be in paid employment. However they reported:

"I spend time focusing on unpaid tasks when I could be working towards my goals."

"It affects my future plans and aspirations."

"I have less free time to pursue career."

"If I go and work we will struggle to afford childcare and suffer more than it's worthwhile me working."

"I have to find a job which means I could take kids to schools/nursery and do other unpaid tasks, not a lot is suitable."

55 percent reported their unpaid work actively prevented them from accessing any paid work. Responses showed a worrying number of young women feeling trapped in unpaid work, supporting others to survive, access paid employment and fulfill their ambitions at their own expense.

Some young women reported that they enjoyed the tasks they do such as caring for loved ones, however the majority received no reward or recognition for this work, leaving them struggling financially, with no time to focus on their own access to economic justice.



Young women peer researchers during research workshops at the Guildhall, London.

11. RECOMMENDATIONS FROM YOUNG WOMEN

a) Access to care, benefits or pay

100 percent of young women responding to the survey believed that the unpaid tasks they do, do have value and worth.

Over half believed the tasks should be paid, and most others suggested some tasks should be paid and some not, for example volunteering is more of a choice compared to unpaid or recognised adult care. Young women highlighted different ways this could be 'paid', including via a fairer benefit system and access to support:

“A better financial situation, some emotional support and being better valued for my work would help.”

“They could be better valued by change in the benefits and universal credit system and nursery prices, a change in affordability.”

“Vouchers, incentives, rewards.”

“If the value of these tasks was recognised properly then it would be possible to reduce them across society through introduction of support such as free childcare for example. These tasks could also be redistributed more fairly between men and women through policies which incentivise men to take parental leave for example.”

“Now I think about it I just feel more angry, it's not recognised and there is not any support in place especially for young women who have to have everything on their shoulders.”



b) Public awareness and recognition

Young women who are not in paid work and are seen as not likely to be in the near future, are often labelled 'Economically Inactive', however respondents to our survey wanted the huge contribution that they make to be recognised by society:

“If they were more recognised it would make you feel better. I've often felt I wasn't doing anything, all I'm doing is this same routine day in day out and it does affect your mental health, but then when you actually realise I'm supporting my mum, I'm supporting my brother, supporting myself and my daughter so it is a lot, and it's something you should be proud of. Just recognise that people may have other things they are doing – they are not just at home unemployed, recognise what actually that person is doing at home, praise them that what they are doing is more than they think.”

“Emotional labour should be acknowledged as a form of work.”

“More awareness of what women do, society needs to be aware of the amount of work and amount of pressure, it goes unspoken.”

c) Re-balancing of roles

Young women want unpaid work to be shared more equally, and this to be taught to men and women from a young age:

“I would prefer if the work was shared out equally as most of the burden is on me.”

“I think a lot of men and women don't understand that these are you know choices – we should share these roles more equally and just appreciate the women that are doing a lot of this stuff.”

“By teaching men and women how to do these things and how to be emotional and take on these tasks.”

“I think parity of tasks across a partnership should be better valued. It should be part of what is considered a healthy relationship to discuss and value those things that are done.”

“As it is often not considered real work, it becomes undervalued by men who are benefitting from it and it reinforces it's status as 'women's work'. In turn, this creates further obstacles for women in accessing full-time employment, as they have greater burdens which they need to juggle.”

12. CONCLUSION

Young women feel undervalued and unrecognised for the huge amount of unpaid work they contribute to society and our economy. Many normalise and accept this work as what young women 'have to do' to be accepted by partners, family and broader society. Young women's unpaid work is having a detrimental impact on their mental health, causing financial struggle and pushing many further into poverty.

This needs to change. Even through taking part in this short research project, young women participants and the researchers themselves had a chance to reflect and see the skills and vital contribution they make to our society:

“I enjoyed interviewing other young women about their unpaid work because I felt that I could relate to them. It was comforting to hear that there were people who, like me, take on several roles without a question to help their families and friends.”

“I found it brilliantly interesting but also really sad, it opened up my eyes of just how extensive this women's unpaid work issue is. I thought I was one of few young women who had the responsibility of unpaid work but it made me realise I'm not alone.”

The findings and recommendations from this report will be used to inform Young Women's Trust campaign on unpaid work this year- ensuring the voices of these young women, so often overlooked, are raised and heard.

13. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

We call on the government to address young women's unpaid work by:

- **No more using the term “economically inactive” to describe young women's status**
- **A new law so people have a legal right to receive care**
- **Equal investment in care as in construction – pound for pound – so society understands care is as important as roads and railways**
- **A childcare revolution! Access to childcare for everyone, no matter what stage of work or learning, ensuring men share parental leave and enabling single parents to nominate a second carer to share leave with**
- **A change to planning and building regulations so there's support for organisations and communities to build childcare spaces**
- **A national carers' scheme that provides financial and emotional support and celebrates everyone who cares**
- **A welfare system that works for young women instead of discriminating against them**
- **Ensuring employers appreciate skills learned outside the workplace**
- **A nationwide community action fund to support the valuable work young women do in their communities**
- **A national support service for young women 16-25 experiencing economic abuse.**

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