



LOCKDOWN ONE YEAR ON:

HOW YOUNG WOMEN ARE PAYING THE PRICE FOR THE PANDEMIC

MARCH 2021

FOREWORD

One year on from the first Covid-19 lockdown, this report highlights how important it is to find out about young women's experiences and shows why we need the Government urgently to put the needs of young women at the centre of its plans.

Like me, many young women feel unheard and unseen.

Few young women have been unaffected by the pandemic. Many young women have lost work or have been struggling to find employment with many accessing benefits, often for the first time. Others have had to go into a job that is unsafe, which has had a negative impact on their health. This has pushed many young women into poverty, including sometimes having to go without eating, wondering if they are going to have enough to pay their daily living costs.

The pandemic too has meant young women picking up more caring responsibilities and others have been put at greater risk of domestic abuse. There is so much confusion and uncertainty in the air and this has had a devastating effect on young women's mental health.

Before Coronavirus happened, I had finally planned for what I wanted to achieve. I decided I wanted to finally get my GCSE qualifications, get support for my mental health, be more active and involved in opportunities. It has been such a long hard road studying from home without support and I feel so behind, and my mental health has been affected.

I feel honoured to have been part of this research. The way young women have opened up to me and to Young Women's Trust about their experiences of the last year has been eye-opening. So much has changed since the first lockdown and it was important to check in on young women to find out how the pandemic has affected them and what support they need now.

The Government must listen so the right steps can be taken to prevent disastrous long-term effects for young women. There needs to be a better understanding of the impacts of the pandemic on young women. There also needs to be immediate financial support and a long-term plan to move forward in a way that helps young women meet the challenges they are facing.

I am passionate about ensuring we get the change that as young women we need and I hope this report will help to ensure that no young woman is left behind.

Freya Pulham-Binch,

Young Women's Trust Peer Researcher



INTRODUCTION

The deep impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on society and the economy has had a devastating effect on young women's work, finances, and mental health.

One year since the first lockdown began on 23 March 2020, this new report draws on new research, where we asked young women about their experiences in the last 12 months. It also draws on insights from young women we have directly supported through our services during this period.

The findings make for troubling reading, providing yet more evidence of how young women feel let down by government. It lays bare the increasing stress on young women's finances; the challenges of juggling work, childcare, and other caring responsibilities; and the pressure cooker of a growing mental health crisis.



With the situation facing young women changing from week-to-week, this new research provides valuable additional insight following our earlier **Picking up the Pieces** research, which highlighted how existing inequalities combined with added pressures - with disastrous consequences. This research, published in November 2020, found that 1.5 million young women had already lost income since the pandemic hit, forcing many to claim benefits for the first time.

As the vaccination rollout continues apace and a roadmap has been set out for coming out of lockdown, it is essential that regained freedoms do not obscure the huge and evolving challenges young women continue to face from a system that is still failing to tackle inequality and meet their needs. As we look ahead, it is vital that no young woman is left behind as the country seeks to rebuild after one of the most extraordinary and damaging years in many decades.

**51% OF YOUNG WOMEN
UNABLE TO APPLY FOR A
JOB, FORCED TO TURN DOWN
A JOB OR LEAVE A JOB
BECAUSE THEY COULD NOT
COVER CHILDCARE COSTS**



METHODOLOGY

Between 27 January and 19 February 2021, Young Women's Trust hosted a survey on its website, receiving 315 responses from young women aged 18-30. The survey asked a number of questions about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the government's response. All statistics within this report are taken from this survey, unless otherwise stated. It also included open ended questions allowing young women to share their experiences. Although not set up as a nationally representative survey of young women, the findings provide important insight into the challenges faced by many young women.

Quotes are taken from the survey and have been anonymised where young women have asked us to protect their identity.

This report also includes quotes from in-depth interviews conducted by young women peer researchers with 36 young women who had used our Work it Out coaching and CV feedback service, gaining unique, honest insights into how the pandemic is affecting young women one year on from the first lockdown.

We have also included insight from applications to our Emergency Fund over the last year. The fund provided relief payments to help young women aged 18-30 who were facing financial crisis and struggling to afford essentials such as food, utilities and rent.



SECTION 1: WORK

"I've been shielding since 23 March 2020. I was forced to leave my job because I felt unsafe and I have been turned down at interviews for having a disability and needing to shield (I asked if I could work from home as it was an office-based role, they said no)."

Anon

"I lost my job after the first lockdown, well not only my job but my whole career (I worked in the events industry). I took a full-time job in a pub but then was subsequently furloughed. I apply to about 50 jobs a week and hear nothing back from most of them. I feel like the pandemic has ruined my life in some way and my mental health has never been this bad." Amy

"I was initially furloughed and that was helpful. Unfortunately, I was made redundant before the furlough scheme extension was announced in November, and my employer refused to reinstate me despite that being the right thing to do. I am struggling to find further employment [and] struggling to feel motivated." Anon

KEY FINDINGS

A full year after the very first coronavirus restrictions, young women's work continues to be significantly affected. Our new survey of young women finds that one in five have lost their job or future work. Those who continue to work, especially young women in precarious employment or unable to work from home, remain vulnerable and continue to face unsafe working conditions that require them to work without proper social distancing, safety procedures or protective equipment. These unsafe conditions exacerbate power imbalances and the risks young women already faced in insecure work, such as sexual harassment and discrimination in the workplace.

Furthermore, young women have told us that furlough practices have exposed inequalities in their workplaces and that they continue to face discrimination. Many women, especially mothers, were likely to have to ask to be furloughed due to caring responsibilities. Others have told us that gender discrimination was evident in the way in which employers placed employees on furlough, with young women frequently returning to full pay later than male colleagues.

Additionally, we are already seeing evidence that as redundancies rise, increasing numbers of young women are losing their jobs, with many being penalised for the time they had to take out to care for children and others during the pandemic.

KEY STATISTICS

- **1 in 5 (18%)** young women told us they had lost their job or future work.
- **1 in 10 (9%)** young women said they have been forced to stop work altogether.
- **21%** of respondents said they were unemployed.
- **1 in 7** of those unable to work from home said they have been working without proper protection or safety equipment.



SECTION 2: FINANCES

"I had to take two weeks off to self-isolate after my mum caught Covid for the second time from her work in a care home. Work were nasty to me and accused me of lying. The financial hit from this was devastating and I am still trying to catch up now on bills I was forced behind on." Ashleigh

"I work in theatre and had been progressing towards my dream role. When theatres were closed I was made redundant and it took me several months to find alternative employment. Having now taken a significant pay cut, I worry about our financial situation and whether I will be able to achieve my career goals at all." Anon

"Being a young woman in employment, renting privately has left me in a terrible financial situation. It has forced me to cohabit with a short-term partner in order for me to be able to buy essentials. I do understand that this situation is much better than many others, but I do feel financially dependent." Kirsty

KEY FINDINGS

The early stages of the first lockdown were incredibly challenging for many young women. They told us that their costs were rising as travel restrictions meant they had to shop at more expensive local shops rather than cheaper supermarkets and were home more often, forcing up spending on gas and electricity. A significant proportion of young women were unable to afford sufficient food and other essentials during this time and 35 per cent of young women single parents reported skipping meals to make ends meet.

This worrying picture has continued to grow and has been compounded by the job losses and losses of income outlined above. This is reflected in the higher number of young women worrying about finances at this point in the pandemic.

Notably, mothers, who have been most likely to sacrifice income to take up additional childcare due to the closure of schools and early-years settings, have seen their financial concerns grow the most.

KEY STATISTICS

- **1 in 10** young women said they have been unable to afford food or other essentials.
- **57%** said they have been affected financially.
- **2 in 3** mothers said they have been affected financially.
- **51%** said they are worried about their finances or future finances.

SECTION 3: CARING

"My partner has been signed off work for six months, being treated for anxiety as a direct result of lockdown. My father was admitted to a psychiatric hospital after attempting suicide three times as a direct result of lockdown. This has increased my unofficial caring responsibilities in my family. I have been juggling this with caring for my own small child and trying to work from home full time. This, plus the separation from friends for support, has definitely impacted the decline in my mental health." Kate

"My mentally ill father was affected by the lockdown and I cared for him for several months, until his abusive behaviour became too much and we took him back to his house in Cumbria. This very much affected my mental and physical health. It has taken several months to recover and only now am I retraining and looking into a job in web design." Hannah

"Childcare difficulties have been enormous, I also have fears that my child has had such limited social interaction and exposure since being born in January 2020 that this will affect her development." Mollie

KEY FINDINGS

Prior to the pandemic, young women were already carrying a disproportionate responsibility for unpaid work such as cooking, cleaning and taking care of children. Our **research** has found that in financial terms this was worth £132bn annually, demonstrating the huge pressures young women were already facing.

These pressures have only intensified over the last 12 months as young women have seen their caring responsibilities grow over the course of the pandemic. Restrictions on household mixing have meant caring for vulnerable relatives has been falling on fewer people, whilst the closure of schools and many early years settings has increased pressure on mothers in particular.

The additional caring responsibilities have affected the ability of many young women to work, whilst others have faced hostility and discrimination from employers. The combined effect of this has been to further increase the pressure on young women's finances and mental health.

KEY STATISTICS

- **1 in 7** young women told us they have caring responsibilities.
- **1 in 4 (24%)** said they have seen their caring responsibilities increase.
- **3 in 4** mothers said they have had to engage with home-schooling.
- **1 in 3** mothers said childcare responsibilities had affected their ability to work during the pandemic.

SECTION 4: MENTAL HEALTH

"There has been next to no support for young people, and the mental health services that were suffering before the pandemic have been hit even worse, meaning accessing them is next to impossible." Josie

"I have struggled a lot with my mental health, as well as two job losses due to the lockdown. I have lost out on mental health support due to the first lockdown. Now I am struggling to get the help I need due to waiting times and delays. People with pre-existing mental health issues seem to have been forgotten." Lauren

"[I've struggled with] increased stress and loneliness, my treatment for mental health was impacted by the lockdown when my group therapy was changed to zoom therapy. The government has not done enough to battle Covid, putting front line workers, often those on low pay, at risk. Young people, especially young women are going to suffer from the financial fall out." Anon

KEY FINDINGS

The combined impacts of rising unemployment, falling income and increased caring responsibilities during a global pandemic (that has created fear and uncertainty in and of itself), have been highlighted in young women's growing concerns about their mental health.

Mental health services were already under pressure but have faced growing demand at a time when face-to-face support has been scaled back and young women's access to their existing support frequently curtailed.

KEY STATISTICS

- **83%** of young women said their mental health has been negatively impacted since the first lockdown a year ago.
- **81%** said they have seen stress levels rise.
- **More than half (55%)** said they have experienced depression.



SECTION 5: DOMESTIC ABUSE

"I'm a key worker working for a domestic abuse charity, and domestic abuse and homelessness has massively increased during this time and there's still not enough funding or support for these services. All our mental health has been affected by increased workloads and not having the usual mechanisms to destress after work or socialise." Anon

"I have had to move in with an abusive family member through having nowhere else to go after losing my job, prosecuting someone for assault while you live where they spend all their time is hard." Anon

"Since the lockdown began it affected me a lot of different ways. I was grieving from my miscarriage last year. Then after four years, my marriage [ended] last April 2020 when I fled from my ex-husband and his family due to domestic violence. This has made me homeless as all my family was back home. I started having suicidal thoughts as it's a shame in our culture to leave husband and my family wouldn't accept me back home either." Anon

KEY FINDINGS

The pandemic has put more young women in situations where they are isolated from support whilst they are experiencing or trying to flee, abuse from a partner or family member. Job losses and the narrowing of social support networks has stripped away the financial and social independence that helped to protect many young women from abuse. It has also made it harder for young women to leave those who are abusing them, whilst the already precarious funding for women's services have been increasingly stretched, putting greater numbers of young women at risk of harm.

KEY STATISTICS

- **1 in 20** young women said they had been at risk of abuse from a partner or family member.
- **Half** of those said they had also experienced economic or financial abuse.



SECTION 6: GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

"I feel although it had been an entirely new and unknown situation, the government has responded slowly and poorly to the pandemic. Resulting in the loss of lives, income and the mental, emotional and physical wellbeing implications of the nation. I have been affected mentally by each lockdown, lost my job and my sense of self. I am slowly rebuilding my life and my career, but still have a long way to go, and have had no professional support during this time." Joanne

"The lockdown happened too late and put people under so much fear and stress. If the lockdown happened sooner we would be in a better situation than now. At my work we have employed people who lost their jobs, homes and future plans because of Covid." Heather

"I think the constant back and forth of opening and closing workplaces was a huge contributor to the severity of the economic issues we are now facing. Self-employment assistance has been awful and there should be an investigation into how many people have now lost their businesses and future plans to this crisis." Philippa

KEY FINDINGS

Perhaps unsurprisingly given young women's concerns about the impact of the pandemic on their work, finances and mental health, a sizeable majority have expressed disappointment and anger at the government's response. Many felt that the effects of the pandemic on people like them had been made worse by the government's handling of the crisis.

If the government truly wants to help the country recover from the current crisis, it needs to reconnect with, and listen to young women. This includes those who face additional discrimination and barriers, including many young women of colour, young female parents and young women with a disability.

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 during the pandemic.

KEY STATISTICS

- **87%** of young women said they were dissatisfied with the way the government has handled the crisis.
- **86%** said they felt that the government response had made things worse or much worse for people like them.

SECTION 7: WHAT WE KNOW FROM THE YOUNG WOMEN WHO ACCESSED OUR SERVICES IN THE PAST YEAR

YOUNG WOMEN'S TRUST EMERGENCY FUND

"Due to Coronavirus I unfortunately lost my previous job and was denied starting my new employment which was meant to restart in September, and now I have lost it for good due to staff cuts. This resulted in me having to max my credit card and not be paying most of my bills. Being a person that was used to work three jobs and never have a day off, the lockdown has had a negative impact not only on my finances but also on my mental health. Being away from family and friends and having lots of time to myself in a house full of strangers and lots of worries about the future hasn't been easy."

Anxhela

"The lockdown massively affected me due to my mental health and being isolated from family and friends especially, having no means of transport. My mum could not visit due to being high risk, and my friends were not allowed, I have never felt so alone in my whole life. With no money from work due to my sick pay being exhausted, awaiting a health assessment from the government that was booked for January 2020 and supposed to be rearranged but Covid hit and everything was at a stand still, no money, new baby arriving soon, no view of when this may be sorted."

Anabelle

At the end of March 2020, we launched an Emergency Fund appeal in response to the pandemic, so we could distribute support quickly to young women to enable them to buy food and other essential items. We raised funds to support 2,500 young women, and worked with national referral partners, to distribute grants via a network of over 100 frontline women's services.

From evaluation of the fund, it is clear that Covid-19 and the resultant lockdowns quickly had a very significant impact on young women already facing disadvantage. Echoing the findings from our lockdown survey, loss of their own income or that of someone they depended on due to Covid-19 was a major issue, as was increased unpaid care responsibilities, the impact of lockdown and the lack of access to support on their mental health and increased domestic abuse.

Of young women who have received support so far from the Young Women's Trust emergency fund:

- **75%** have used food banks or been dependent on others for food donations.
- **58%** were unemployed or in insecure employment and had lost income as a result of the pandemic.
- **56%** received or were waiting to receive state benefits.
- **56%** had high levels of debt.

- **26%** had no recourse to public funds, meaning their immigration status makes them ineligible for benefits such as child benefit or universal credit.
- **25%** were financially dependent on someone else who had lost income due to the pandemic,
- **25%** undertook a significant level of unpaid caring work, which in many cases had increased due to the pandemic.

WORK IT OUT

"Working from home had a really negative impact on my mental health. I became really anxious, very emotional and really disconnected from work. It had a really big impact on my wellbeing. Because of this sort of added stress, I actually quit my job as well so I am now unemployed." Anon

"Probably the biggest thing to me would be my mental health. In terms of jobs, there's been less people advertising. And because so many more people are unemployed in comparison to what there was before you feel like you're not going to get the same opportunity, even if you do apply to many more people out there." Anon

"I took redundancy as my workplace is still not open and isn't going to be open until Easter and they couldn't keep furloughing us all the way through. So I didn't really have a choice but to take redundancy. I was renting before but I am now back at my parents because I can't afford to live independently." Anon

Since the first lockdown a year ago we have supported record numbers of young women through our Work It Out service – by providing free coaching over the phone and online, and personalised feedback on CVs, cover letters and job applications to build skills, stronger mental health and opportunities for the future.

Follow-up evaluation calls with 36 young women who have accessed Work It Out by young women peer researchers add to the picture that young women have been heavily impacted by job losses, furlough, loss of income, a much more competitive jobs market, isolation and a negative impact on their mental health and personal life. Some young women also reported challenges accessing benefits and job opportunities online. Interestingly, some young women did report some positive aspects, including the (forced) opportunity to take stock of what they wanted to achieve in their life as well as saving money and time through remote working.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

During the last 12 months there are few people who have been unaffected by the challenges the pandemic has created. However, young women, already beset by inequality, discrimination and uncertainty, have been left exposed to some of the worst impacts. The devastating effect the pandemic has had on young women's finances and mental health, combined with inadequacies in the government's response to it, threaten to take a long time to repair.

We must, of course, act with urgency to provide the immediate support young women need to ride out the ongoing crisis. The Government has said it will do 'whatever it takes' to 'build back better'. If it is serious about doing so it must address the inequalities that left young women at risk in the first place. We must ensure that no young woman is left behind as the process of rebuilding begins, ensuring that a recovery for all leads to an economy for all.



WE CALL ON THE GOVERNMENT TO ENSURE THAT NO YOUNG WOMAN IS LEFT BEHIND BY:

- **Providing essential financial support.** Extending the £20 uplift on Universal Credit by only 6 months is a missed opportunity to provide the support many young women desperately need. The uplift should be made permanent and extended to all those receiving benefits, including Carer's Allowance.

Additional support should be made available to help young women pay off or write off debts that have risen due to the pandemic.

- **Understanding the ongoing impact of the pandemic:** As job losses rise, it is important to understand the impact these are having on young people and to ensure transparency in the decision-making process. We are calling on the Government to publish national level redundancy data broken down to show the impact on those with protected characteristics. Employers should also be required to publish their own redundancy data.

The Government response can be more effective if it also understands the impact of its own decisions. We are calling for increased transparency and effectiveness through the publication of Equalities Impact Assessments of all major policies and laws.

As the Government's Kickstart scheme begins to create employment opportunities, monitoring must include publication of data that shows the number of opportunities taken up by young women and those with other protected characteristics.

- **Prioritising funding for support services:** Mental health services and services supporting survivors of domestic abuse have been devastated by the pandemic, despite seeing a surge in demand.

These services have never been more needed and we call on the Government to provide emergency funding to these services and commit to long-term funding reform to ensure their survival.

WE ALSO CALL ON THE GOVERNMENT TO BUILD THE ECONOMY OF THE FUTURE WITH YOUNG WOMEN AT ITS HEART BY:

- **Investing in quality jobs and training for young women.** The pandemic has highlighted the huge inequalities facing young women. Low paid, precarious and inflexible work has limited the opportunities of young women for too long and left them exposed to the worst of the economic impacts of the crisis.


As unemployment among young people rises we must look to create jobs that are flexible by default, well paid and offering meaningful opportunities for progression. We must invest in apprenticeships that are overwhelmingly creating employment for young people and provide an answer to the entrenched gender segregation that has undermined economic growth.

- **Investing in a childcare revolution.** Even before the pandemic, the childcare system was in disarray. Young women were shut out of opportunities because of the cost of childcare and many providers have been pushed to the wall because of the crisis. We call on the Government to create a childcare infrastructure support fund to provide urgent support to prevent childcare providers from closing. This should lay the foundation for an overhaul of the funding system with the aim of creating a universal free childcare system.




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