

Addressing Gender Inequality Through a Four-Day Working Week

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The UK faces severe gender inequality in the labour market. Women spend approximately double the amount of time on domestic activities, such as childcare, compared to men.¹ Meanwhile, structural inequalities persist, with research showing that roughly two million British people, 89% women, are not currently in employment due to childcare responsibilities.²

This brief shall advocate the introduction of a four-day working week to ameliorate gender divisions in the workforce and in particular the highly gendered division of unpaid work. Introducing the four-day working week will have various economic benefits, including addressing structural inequalities in the labour market. Furthermore, it would promote equality as employees would be better able to balance care and work commitments.

THE SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM

What is the problem?

A critical issue facing the workforce today is gender imbalances in unpaid labour. In particular, the gendered division in hours of care and domestic work undertaken is an issue which urgently needs to be addressed. Currently women undertake 60% more unpaid work than men.³

Among the 72.3% of women in employment in 2019, 41% were employed part-time compared to 13% of men.⁴ Women with children aged 3 to 4 are the most likely to be in part-time employment.⁵ Women are also significantly more likely to undertake precarious forms of employment, such as zero-hour contracts.⁶

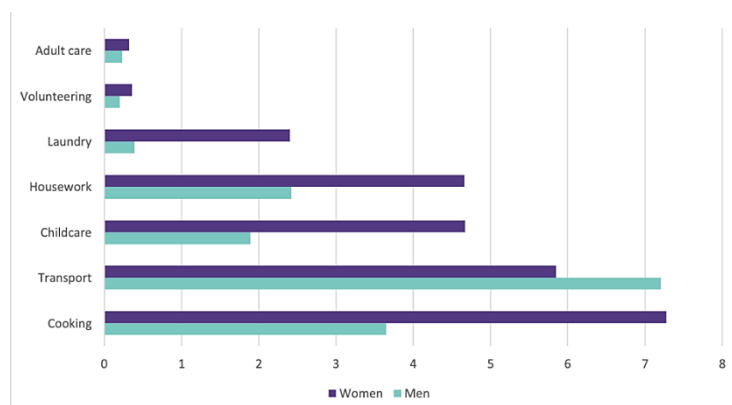


Figure 1: Average hours of unpaid work done per week in each category for men and women, UK, 2015 (Source: HETUS 2015)

	Full-time	Part-time	Temporary
Male	86.8	12.8	4.5
Female	59.1	40.5	8.8

Table 1: Percentage of men and women in full-time, part-time and temporary employment, Feb-Apr 2019 (Source: EMP01)

The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the need for a shift towards flexible working. Significantly, women were 1.8 times more likely to lose their job during the pandemic.⁷ During the first phase of the pandemic, when all workers faced a decline in hours of paid work, men spent more time on unpaid childcare and domestic work.⁸ In the second phase, when paid working hours somewhat returned to normal, this trend was reversed.⁹ This evidence highlights that, faced with fewer paid working hours (such as a four-day working week), men will increase their share of unpaid work which will help correct the stark gender imbalance.

Why does it need to be addressed?

The gendered division of unpaid work particularly two stakeholders: (1) women, and (2) the economy.

WOMEN

The current gender imbalance in the division of unpaid work has created a vicious cycle which must be stopped. With women undertaking a larger share of unpaid work on average, they have fewer hours available for paid work which therefore leads to lower earnings. Those lower earnings relative to men mean women are more likely to be forced into more 'flexible' working arrangements such as part-time and zero-hour contracts so that they can take time out to undertake further unpaid work. This greater adoption of 'flexible' arrangements by women leads to lower earnings which contributes to greater gender inequality in the workforce. Furthermore, the greater share of women in these types of working arrangements hinders their opportunities for career progression, thus limiting their long-term earning potential and further reinforcing the gender pay gap which currently stands at 17.3%.¹⁰

ECONOMY

The Women and Equalities Select Committee estimated that failing to effectively use women's skills was costing the UK £36bn a year (2% of GDP).¹¹ The current gendered division of unpaid work is limiting their economic potential which is detrimental to the entire country.

A four-day working week, which increases the amount of free time available for all workers', would promote a more even division of unpaid work, as evidenced by trends during the pandemic. This would reduce the rate at which women are forced to adopt more flexible, precarious working arrangements such as part-time employment and give them the ability to pursue more stable, higher-paid work, improving their opportunities for career progression and minimising the gender pay gap.

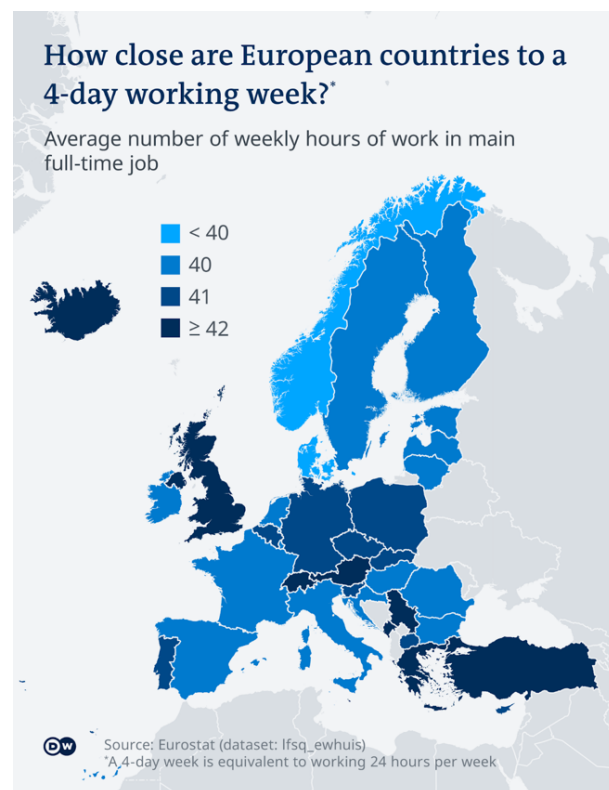
POLICY OPTIONS

In January 2018, 900,000 German workers in the metals and electrical industries fighting for a better work-life balance won a key victory. Professor Schwander has argued that 'more people have periods in their lives when they want to work less, for example, look after elderly relatives or take unpaid leave'¹². The deal allows workers who need to look after children to take 8 additional days off work in lieu of extra payment. This is significant because it will allow men to challenge the depictions of taking care of children as 'women's work', therefore degendering perceptions of what is women's and men's work. It has been argued that the result of the recent negotiations has made Germany a trailblazer in how to face the challenges of the 21st century workplace, with an 'evolution in men's gender identity',¹³ signalling a move away from the traditional division of labour.

A UK-based four-day working week trial was launched in early 2022, with more than 5,000 workers. The trial was not set up with the objective of investigating the impact on gender imbalances in the workforce at its core, however, since the 1990s, improvements on the gendered division of labour have been hindered. Therefore, it is imperative for the UK to undertake an investigation into the fact that caring labour falls primarily to women. In 2015, women contributed to 74% of all childcare in the UK and an average of 26 hours a week doing unpaid domestic work.¹⁴ This shows that women are given the disproportionate burden of unpaid labour due to the gendered attitudes towards cared work.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Create a government green paper on any trial to assess a four-day working week's impact on gender and use this in assessing the implementation of the four-day working week.
- 2 Amend the Working Time Regulations 1998, requiring employers in non-excluded sectors to offer their workers' a four-day working week for the same remuneration and reduce the working week from 48 hours.
- 3 Reform the Equality Act 2010 to include more explicit prevention of gender-based discrimination such as, introducing fines for gender pay gaps.
- 4 Create a government committee to consider how the four-day working week could cover unprotected worker categories, such as agency workers' and consider alternatives (e.g., enhanced childcare support).
- 5 Open a public consultation to understand flexible work's impact, and how this impacts individuals and employers.



¹ Eva Neitzert, *Spirals of Inequality: How unpaid care is at the heart of gender inequalities* (Commission on a Gender-Equal Economy, 2020) 1 <<https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Accompanying-paper-FINAL.pdf>> (accessed 10th March 2022).

² Government Equalities Office, *Returners: a toolkit for employers* (2018) 2 <www.womensbusinesscouncil.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/toolkit-Women-in-businessv.7.pdf> (accessed 10th March 2022).

³ Eva Neitzert, *Spirals of Inequality: How unpaid care is at the heart of gender inequalities* (Commission on a Gender-Equal Economy, 2020) 1 <<https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Accompanying-paper-FINAL.pdf>> (accessed 10th March 2022).

⁴ Office for National Statistics, *EMP01 SA: Full-time, part-time and temporary workers (seasonally adjusted)* (2022) xls (604.0) <www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/datasets/fulltimeparttimeandtemporaryworkersseasonallyadjustedemp01sa> (accessed 10th March 2022).

⁵ Office for National Statistics, *Families and the labour market, England: 2017* (2017) Section 7 <www.ons.gov.uk/releases/familiesandthelabourmarketengland2017> (accessed 10th March 2022).

⁶ Jerome De Henau, Scarlet Harris, Mary-Ann Stephenson, *Women, Employment and Earnings* (Women's Budget Group, 2018) 2 <<https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Employment-November-2018-w-cover.pdf>> (accessed 10th March 2022).

⁷ McKinsey & Company, *COVID-19 and gender equality: Countering the regressive effects* (McKinsey, 2020) <www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/future-of-work/covid-19-and-gender-equality-countering-the-regressive-effects> (accessed 14th March 2022).

⁸ Özlem Onaran and Rob Calvert Jump, *A shorter working week as part of a green caring economy* (UK Feminist Green New Deal Policy Paper, The Women's Budget Group, 2022) 10 <<https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Shorter-Working-Week-Report.pdf>> (accessed 10th March 2022).

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Office for National Statistics, *Gender pay gap in the UK: 2019* (2019) Section 2 <www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/bulletins/genderpaygapintheuk/2019> (accessed 10th March 2022).

¹¹ Autonomy Research Ltd, *The Shorter Working Week: A Radical And Pragmatic Proposal* (Autonomy, 2019) 34 <<http://autonomy.work/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Shorter-working-week-docV6.pdf>> (accessed 10th March 2022).

¹² Guy Chazen, *German union wins right to 28-hour working week and 4.3% pay rise* (Financial Times, 2018) <<https://www.ft.com/content/e7f0490e-0b1c-11e8-8eb7-42f857ea9f09>> (accessed 16th March 2022)

¹³ *Ibid* 55.

¹⁴ *Ibid* 19.

Appendix

To develop this policy, we originally met to discuss possible areas of focus for the policy brief and what policies would work to redress issues we identified. After selecting gender imbalance and the four-day working week we divided the research in preparation for planning. Jamie explored the scope of the problem, Maliha investigated policy options and found the case study used and Josh researched policy recommendations. After this was completed, a plan was drawn up which outlined sections and to whom the policy would be addressed.

After this we began to meet regularly to complete the writing process. After arranging a meeting with our tutor to discuss our plan we worked on implementing her advice we were able to begin to edit parts of the policy brief. We all took responsibility for writing different sections. Jamie was responsible for writing the scope of the problem section, put together the bibliography, and restructured sections of the brief to help its flow and keep within the word count, Maliha completed the section on policy options, selected sub-headings and ensured the overall structure of the brief was clear, and Josh was responsible for writing the executive summary, policy recommendations, appendix, organising the design and completed the references.

To ensure the piece was as strong as possible we all checked and edited one another's work and discussed which parts of our research should be carried through from the plan. In addition, we made sure to regularly reflect upon our notes to keep the policy focused and straightforward. Each time we met to write we reviewed our progress at the start and set out areas to build on for the next time.

While working on the assignment there were various elements we revised to make the policy as strong as possible. For instance, we revised the plan as it was better to cover depth not breadth, and this meant some pieces of evidence were not used in the policy brief. We also altered what specific recommendations we pursued and where to include information on the existing UK trial of the four-day working week (moved from recommendations to options as advised). Doing this enabled us to better critically reflect on other issues and expand the depth to consider specific consequences of our policy.

Overall, we worked well as a group, and were able to consistently meet deadlines and work alongside one another in a collaborative fashion to work well-together and contribute equally to the project.

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