



## Care, Poverty and Coronavirus in Wales - Oxfam Cymru briefing paper – September 2020

### About this paper

This paper explores the links between the undervaluing of care work in Wales and a growing gendered poverty crisis. It is part of a suite of papers produced to inform public debate in Wales, across the UK, and around the world. It outlines how women provide most paid and unpaid care work in Wales, and examines challenges faced by those with different types of caring responsibilities. It also details emerging evidence on the impact of the Coronavirus, and makes recommendations for policy makers to better value and invest in care. Protecting people providing care from poverty, and valuing their contribution, must be at the heart of a just, green and caring recovery in Wales. Both paid and unpaid carers are at the forefront of our response to the Coronavirus, putting themselves at risk to protect us all. Yet, if you are a carer you are more likely to be living in poverty. It is estimated that 96% of all care in Wales is provided by unpaid carers, many of whom are struggling and in need of further support<sup>1</sup>. Polling carried out by YouGov on behalf of Oxfam Cymru also shows that 68% of adults in Wales think that care work is not valued highly enough by the Welsh Government<sup>2</sup>.

**‘Women’s unpaid care in the home and in the low pay insecure work of social care also needs to be properly valued’, Mark Drakeford’s Leadership Manifesto<sup>3</sup>.**

### Defining care

Oxfam believes that care work is a valuable social good that is essential for social and economic wellbeing, yet it remains under-valued and under-invested in. Social care workers, unpaid carers of disabled, sick and elderly people, childcare workers, and those caring for children all deserve better. When we are discussing care, we are referring to all of these groups.

Unpaid care work refers to caring for people – such as bathing a child or taking care of adults who are sick, frail or have additional needs; and undertaking domestic work such as cooking and doing laundry – without receiving any explicit financial compensation. It usually takes place within households, but can also involve caring for friends, neighbours or other community members, including on a voluntary basis. ‘Unpaid carers’ in this report include both parents and guardians caring for children, and those caring for children and adults with additional needs due to, for example, illness, disability or age.

Paid care work is caring for people or doing domestic work for pay, for example, social care and childcare workers. It takes place in public and private care sectors, such as education, health and social work, but also in private households. Domestic workers might care directly for other people and do tasks such as cleaning, cooking and washing clothes<sup>4</sup>.

Care is about much more than any financial reward: both paid and unpaid care work is a vital social good. It contributes to developing human capabilities, supports children to thrive and learn, adults to rest and be ready for paid work, and support people with illness or disability to be healthy and contribute to society and the economy<sup>5</sup>. It is crucial to all of us and yet is largely invisible within economic measures and is systemically undervalued.

## Introduction

This paper explores the link between the systemic undervaluing of care work and poverty in Wales, particularly in the context of the ongoing Coronavirus crisis. Poverty is not inevitable, it can be overcome – and a crucial step in this process is to challenge the structural causes driving care related poverty, while adequately valuing and investing in care and all those who provide it. There needs to be adequate investment in social care and services for unpaid carers to enable them to have a life outside caring, including the ability to work and undertake education, training or leisure activities. While the focus here is on Wales, we are deeply concerned about the serious implications of undervaluing care across Britain and internationally – particularly for women, who generally have the least financial resilience to income shocks because of pre-existing inequalities and who therefore are likely to be impacted most<sup>6</sup>.

## Women, caring and poverty

Gender inequality is one of the oldest and most pervasive forms of inequality in the world. It denies women their voices, devalues their work, and makes women's position unequal to men's – from the household to the national and global levels. Despite some important progress to change this in recent years, in no country have women achieved economic equality with men, and women are still more likely than men to experience persistent poverty<sup>7</sup>. In the UK, women retire with on average £100,000 less in their pension than men due to caring responsibilities and the gender pay gap<sup>8</sup>. There is also a body of evidence which tells us that when time poverty is taken into account, poverty rates substantially increase, particularly for women<sup>9</sup>. There are deep overlaps between the undervaluing of care and gender inequalities.

Across the world, paid and underpaid care work is disproportionately provided by women and girls, especially those from groups who as well as gender discrimination, experience discrimination based on ethnicity, nationality and age<sup>10</sup>. This is because of harmful norms that consider this work unskilled, and implicit assumptions that women's contributions are of less value to the economy than men's. As a result of the unpaid care work they provide, women have less time to pursue paid work and career progression, making them more likely to have part time or precarious work, earn less, and be more likely to live in poverty as they get older. The Coronavirus crisis has highlighted the importance of care to our society and economy, while also exposing the deep links between gender, care and poverty. Research commissioned by Oxfam<sup>11</sup> shows that while men have been spending more time looking after their children and doing chores like cooking and cleaning, women have too, and are *still* doing more overall. Over half of women surveyed reported spending more hours on cooking, washing, cleaning and caring for children or family members. Single mothers, women living in poverty, and people from ethnic and racial minorities reported the largest increase. Some 43% of the 3,558 women surveyed reported suffering more anxiety, depression, lack of rest and sleep, and physical illnesses because of the increased care work caused by the pandemic.

Our broken global economy accumulates vast wealth into the hands of a rich few, in part by exploiting the unpaid labour of millions. Women and girls carry out 12.5 billion hours of unpaid care every day, worth at least \$10.8 trillion a year to the global economy<sup>12</sup>. With little or no time to get an education, earn a decent living or have a say in how our societies are run, carers are too often trapped at the bottom of the economy and often rendered invisible in measures of economic progress<sup>13</sup>.

## Care, Coronavirus and gender inequality

In Wales, 23% of the population are living in poverty<sup>14</sup>, and whilst there have been small fluctuations, this figure has remained largely unchanged over the last decade. Since the start of the Coronavirus pandemic, many more people are now relying on a social security system that too often fails to protect them from poverty. The full impact of the pandemic is only starting to become clear. The UK Government's Chancellor Rishi Sunak has warned a significant recession is very likely. Recent analysis suggests that Wales is more exposed to the economic impact of lockdown than many other parts of the UK<sup>15</sup> because Wales has a higher proportion (18%) of workers employed in industries most affected by lockdown measures, than both England and Northern Ireland. Analysis by the Bevan Foundation shows that in almost all parts of Wales at least 30% of the workforce is currently completely dependent on government support for their income. In some parts of Wales, especially rural areas and the South Wales valleys, the proportion is even higher<sup>16</sup>. The Learning and Work Institute suggest that unemployment in Wales could reach a higher level than during the last recession following the financial crisis of 2008. The report suggests that women are particularly at risk, since 22% of women employees work in 'shutdown sectors' compared with 15% of men<sup>17</sup>.

**'I think two things, that is very often there's a gender aspect to being a carer. I know in my own situation... the person who cared for my mum was myself and my daughters, and I think that was gender related... I do think that there is definitely an expectation on women that they will care.'** Unpaid Care Research, woman, Wales<sup>18</sup>.

In Wales, just as around the world, women are disproportionately affected by the unequal distribution as well as the undervaluing of both paid and unpaid care work throughout their lives. This profoundly affects women, as 'it perpetuates gender and economic inequalities, undermines their health and wellbeing, limits their economic prosperity, fuels gender gaps in employment and wages and amplifies existing vulnerabilities'<sup>19</sup>. Women have been at the forefront of the Coronavirus response and are likely to be hardest hit economically<sup>20</sup>. As the lockdown eases in Wales, the slow reopening of childcare settings is of serious concern to many – limiting many women's ability to return to work. Further, research carried out across the UK by Citizens Advice shows that two in five parents or carers face losing their jobs, and 'although the new research shows the risk of redundancy is widespread, with one in six of the working age population facing redundancy, it indicates that those in more vulnerable circumstances are likely to bear the brunt'<sup>21</sup>.

**'Those who have started caring during the pandemic are more likely to be managing work and childcare alongside their caring responsibilities - an incredibly demanding task, which, without support from employers or care services can be too much to manage. Already, we see 600 people (across the UK) every day giving up paid work to care, at a huge cost to the economy and personal finances. Unpaid carers have been hit especially hard by the pandemic. Many are at the point of break down, having been unable to access the care and support services they need. Their physical and mental health is in jeopardy and they desperately need a break'**, Helen Walker, Chief Executive, Carers UK<sup>22</sup>.

## Making care count in Wales

The impacts of this crisis on care will affect women more due to pre-existing inequalities and the social norm of care being mainly a role for women. This locks them into cycles of time and income poverty, depriving them of the resources to be involved in developing solutions. In the UK, women – particularly black and minority ethnic women – have been disproportionately affected by a decade of government cuts to public services and social

security due to the ‘structural inequalities which mean they earn less, own less and have more responsibility for unpaid care and domestic work’<sup>23</sup>.

To rectify this, it is absolutely critical that women are visible in decision making – particularly during times of crisis. Wales is making some progress towards equal representation, but there remains much to do – at all levels of government. The status of equal representation of women in local government in Wales needs vast improvement. Only 28% of local councillors, only 23% of council leaders, and only 36% of council chief executives are women<sup>24</sup>. Given local authorities’ role in care, it is critical that this changes.

During the Coronavirus pandemic, 79% of unpaid carers in Wales are having to provide more care for their loved ones, and 36% of them are providing more care because their local care and support services have been reduced or closed<sup>25</sup>. In Wales, as elsewhere, carers have been undervalued for far too long, and care services have received far too little investment. During Carers Week 2020, six charities, led by Carers UK, called on the government to urgently deliver a plan for social care reform and set out long term investment in care and support services. This would give unpaid carers the opportunity to take breaks from their caring role, and stay in paid work if they want to. An urgent rise in Carer’s Allowance is needed – currently just £67.25 a week<sup>26</sup>.

## Care and wellbeing

The 2014 Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act included for the first time a principle that local authorities have a duty to promote the well-being of carers from a physical, emotional and mental perspective. Even before the Coronavirus crisis, increasingly squeezed local budgetary funding pressures on social care meant that many carers had been left without support. Last year, 1 in 8 carers in the UK reported that they, or those they support, received less care or support services during the previous year due to a reduction in the amount of support from social services<sup>27</sup>.

The Coronavirus pandemic and measures to contain it are putting incredible additional pressure on carers that not only puts them at greater risk of contracting this virus, but also risks pushing many even deeper into poverty. This needs to change: our carers must be focused on caring, not struggling to pay bills and put food on the table. Oxfam, and more than 100 care, anti-poverty and women’s rights organisations, unions and think tanks – including over 20 in Wales<sup>28</sup> – have urged politicians across Britain to do more to protect carers from poverty<sup>29</sup> by investing in social care and enhancing social security. Along with saving lives, this is a key test of our response.

**‘Many (unpaid carers) are overwhelmed and incredibly anxious about how they will manage in the weeks ahead. We are calling on Welsh Government to include unpaid carers in their planning to ensure they can continue to care and stay well. Before coronavirus, social care services were already in short supply and those families with support met a high threshold to get any form of care. Now, some of those services have disappeared and unpaid carers are having to cope alone’**, Claire Morgan, Director, Carers Wales<sup>30</sup>.

People should never have to live in poverty due to the care work they do. To achieve this, we must ensure that the importance of unpaid and paid care work are better recognised and the care sector properly invested in; unpaid and paid carers are represented in the design and delivery of policies and services that affect their lives; heavy and time-consuming unpaid care work is reduced; and the responsibility redistributed more equally between women and men, and between households, governments and businesses; and paid carers are properly

rewarded, with unpaid carers protected from poverty. If we do these things, we can together make care count in Wales.

### **Unpaid carers – under-valued and under-supported**

Caring for a loved one can be one of the most fulfilling things a person can do. One carer described care to us as an:

**‘Expression of love, to know the person that you care about is okay.’** Make Care Count, Wales, woman<sup>31</sup>.

Care is about so much more than any reward, financial or otherwise. However, carers also told us that when caring is not supported and valued, the impacts on them and their families are too often invisible. Even before the crisis, across the world, unpaid care work was linked to poverty. One cause of this link between care and poverty is that unpaid carers can lose income due to having to leave paid work or reduce working hours to juggle unpaid care with paid work. It is estimated that 96% of all care in Wales is provided by unpaid carers, many of whom are struggling and in need of further support<sup>32</sup>. A complex raft of factors have led to this figure being so high. The growth in the carer population vastly outstrips general population growth, and not only are more people caring, but people are caring for longer. As the population of Wales continues to age, and local authority funding continues to fall, families are increasingly left to fill the gap<sup>33</sup>. Care work is often incorrectly perceived as ‘low skilled’, and this contributes to it being under-valued. In addition to the day-to-day demands of caring, being an unpaid carer brings with it so many related issues for the carer themselves – exhaustion, physical and mental health problems, anxiety, isolation from friends and family, and a feeling of lost identity. Lack of proper support can also lead to financial problems, with many carers cutting their working hours or giving up work altogether in order to manage their caring responsibilities, placing their own financial future in jeopardy<sup>34</sup>. The care that unpaid carers offer to the Welsh economy is estimated to be worth £8.1 billion<sup>35</sup>, and as many as three-quarters say their role has impacted negatively on their own mental health<sup>36</sup>. Simon Hatch of the Carers Trust Wales explained, “We are not providing the care around the carer. We are not providing the practical support. Although the rights are there and the law is in place to enable local authorities and the NHS to do this, there isn’t the money that goes with that law”<sup>37</sup>.

Carers Wales’ evidence paints a disappointing picture that implementation of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) 2014 Act is failing to make a real impact on the lives of too many carers. Carers Wales research showed that for many carers things have in fact worsened over the last few years, as budgets have reduced across local authorities and local health boards in real terms<sup>38</sup>.

### **Struggling to make ends meet before the Coronavirus**

Pre-crisis, among those providing care for people with additional needs in the UK, 39% said that they were struggling to make ends meet – this figure rises to 53% among those who received Carer’s Allowance. Meanwhile, 68% of all carers and 78% of carers who were struggling financially said that they regularly use their savings or income to pay for what is needed to care. Some 53% of carers who had not retired said they could not save for their retirement. Between 2017 and 2019, nearly half a million carers had to leave paid employment to care for someone<sup>39</sup>. Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups are considerably more likely to be struggling financially to make ends meet<sup>40</sup>. It cannot be right for carers to find themselves facing poverty. Research by Oxfam Cymru

shows that 63% of people in Wales believe that those on low incomes who look after sick or disabled people should receive more financial support through increased social security payments<sup>41</sup>.

Carers Wales research<sup>42</sup> shows that four out of five carers who are struggling financially (81%) have had to cut back on hobbies and leisure activities, and 61% have cut back on seeing family and friends. 13% have even had to cut back on the support services which help with caring. 6% of carers who are struggling to make ends meet have said that they have used food banks and 3% have used pay day loans.

### **Caring through Coronavirus**

In June 2020, Carers Wales reported<sup>43</sup> that nearly 200,000 people became unpaid carers in a matter of weeks – caring for older, disabled or seriously ill relatives or friends, as a result of the pandemic. This is on top of the 487,000 unpaid carers in Wales who were already caring before the outbreak. Carers Wales data shows that 112,000 women (57%) and 84,000 men (43%) started caring – typically supporting loved ones from afar, helping with food shopping, collecting medicine, managing finances, and providing reassurance and emotional support. Some will have taken on more intense caring roles – helping with personal care, moving around the home, administering medication and preparing meals. 98,000 people (50%) who have started caring since the outbreak are also juggling paid work alongside caring.

Provisions in the emergency UK Coronavirus Act to temporarily relax local authorities' care and support duties have been brought into force. In Wales this means that local authorities no longer have a duty to meet adults' care and support needs, or adult carers' support needs. They now only have to meet needs in the most serious cases where someone is at risk of, or experiencing, abuse or neglect. This means that care and support packages can be reduced, and some services withdrawn. There are concerns about the burden this places on unpaid carers potentially at the same time their own support services, such as respite care, are removed<sup>44</sup>.

In 2018, the Welsh Government announced its intention to lead a 'feminist government' and since then, Oxfam Cymru and the Women's Equality Network Wales have been tracking progress towards this goal via the Feminist Scorecard<sup>45</sup>. The report sets out the uneven distribution of unpaid care, and welcomed the Welsh Government's move to create a new national carers plan in 2020, with the commitment to taking an intersectional approach. The paper also shone a light on ongoing problems in relation to the right to respite, highlighting problems with accessibility and suitability of provision. Whilst the Welsh Government does provide £3million of recurring funding for respite to local government, the funds are not ringfenced, and therefore monitoring effectiveness of spending in this area is difficult. The Scorecard considered the paid care workforce, and highlighted the urgent need to develop policy solutions which recognise and reflect the sector's true value. It recognised the Welsh Government's progress towards scoping a Fair Work Forum on Social Care, and argued the need for significant investment in the sector.

Action on the right to respite still falls short, and we support Carers Wales calls for "funding and choice of quality services to enable carers to take the breaks they need"<sup>46</sup>. The inquiry into the impact of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 in relation to carers<sup>47</sup> found that respite care can be difficult to access, there is a lack of suitable provision, and it also lacks flexibility. Since 2017-18, Welsh Government has provided £3 million of recurring funding for respite to local government through the Revenue Support Grant, but this money is not ring-fenced and therefore monitoring and evaluation of local authority spending on respite is essential.

The pressure on unpaid carers is intolerable. Research conducted by Carers Wales during the peak of the Coronavirus pandemic shows 77% of carers in Wales have been having to spend more money during the outbreak. The top increases in expenditure include spending more on food (69%) – due to lack of supermarket delivery slots and the need for specialist food, and household bills (52%)<sup>48</sup>. Across the UK during lockdown, unpaid carers were twice as likely to have used a food bank<sup>49</sup>.

**‘It’s hard to explain to people sometimes how they need support. You try to explain, and you see people rolling their eyes in their head as you’re trying to tell them, and I’m thinking “you’re not really interested, are you?” So, you soon learn to hold back. You don’t tell people stuff, because it’s easier for you to get on with it.’** Unpaid Care Research, woman, Wales<sup>50</sup>.

The Women’s Budget Group describe social security as a ‘fundamental element of a caring economy’<sup>51</sup>. It is critical for women who receive a greater level of their income from it due to their disproportionate role as carers and secondary earners. Yet UK analysis suggests 59% of the cuts to social security by 2021-22 will have ‘come from women’s purses’<sup>52</sup>. The main entitlement for unpaid carers across Britain is the £67.25 per week Carer’s Allowance. Applicants must be over 16, spend at least 35 hours a week caring for someone who qualifies for specified disability benefits, and earn less than £128 per week after tax, National Insurance and expenses.

### **Universal Basic Income as a solution?**

There are a number of organisations who believe that a Universal Basic Income (UBI) could help protect unpaid carers from poverty, although others, including the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, have questioned its affordability and impact<sup>53</sup> on reducing poverty<sup>54</sup>. The concept would see either everyone, or the vast majority of people<sup>55</sup>, receiving an unconditional, regular payment – regardless of other sources of income. It is an approach that may help to mitigate stigma attached with claiming benefits, and is supported by Wales’ Future Generations Commissioner Sophie Howe<sup>56</sup>, who argues, “It’s time for a new approach that reflects our complex economy - one that urgently protects the millions of people who desperately need financial security right now. [...] The money could support many essential workers and volunteers so they can continue their vital work in keeping the country going - and it could help ease some of the stress on households experiencing extreme difficulties. [...] We know that poverty is the biggest driver of ill-health. We need a system that supports every single person through this crisis or we risk worsening its effects for years to come. [...] If we want an economy that works for everyone, and a society where everyone knows they have a stake, it’s time for politicians to put GDP on the backburner and focus on well-being”.

There are moves to pilot UBI in Wales, but concerns remain given that: implementing it in Wales would be difficult, given social security remains largely not devolved; it would be a significant policy shift, with huge cost to the public purse, which is risky given it remains unproven at scale; and it is a blunt instrument which carries the risk of reinforcing norms around unpaid work. Regardless of its ‘universal’ approach, there is a growing school of thought for the need for comprehensive and gender transformative social safety nets that protect the most vulnerable – including carers – from falling into poverty during a time of crisis. It is possible that a UBI could entrench a single person penalty. If a flat rate of income was paid to each individual, then a couple household would have more money to cover their rent and essential living costs (the rent on a two bedroom house is the same whether a couple live there or a single person does). Currently there is little evidence to suggest that UBI could increase the value placed in looking out for and look after each other. To shift towards this, a different values based system would mean investing in measures that: enable individuals, families and communities to look

after each other; grow the connections between people and communities; provide high quality, well-funded services that fill the gaps in support needs; and give people flexibility and choice to determine the best means of caring for those they love at different points of vulnerability in their lives.

### **Balancing paid work and caring**

While employment rights are reserved to Westminster, the Welsh Government has a significant role to play in ensuring that paid work provides a reliable route out of poverty for carers. This role, in partnership with businesses, must ensure that carers are supported at their paid work. The 'Employers for Carers' scheme<sup>57</sup> launched in 2009 as an employers' membership forum. Its purpose is to ensure that employers have the support to retain and manage employees with caring responsibilities. In June 2019, the Employers for Carers Wales Hub was formed in order to ensure that there was focus on supporting Welsh owned and based employers with carers in their workforces. A YouGov poll<sup>58</sup> carried out by Carers UK at the end of 2018 demonstrated that more and more people are juggling paid care and an unpaid caring role; with 223,000 workers in Wales identifying as a carer; this equates to 1 in 7 of the workforce also having caring responsibilities.

**'I have to work to earn money but my boss is not at all understanding and I have taken sick leave and now am frightened to take any more', unpaid carer, Wales<sup>59</sup>.**

In Wales, 6% of unpaid carers have given up work to care, and 3% have reduced working hours - this equates to 149,812 people in Wales who have given up work to provide unpaid care and 74,906 people who have reduced their working hours to part-time because of unpaid caring<sup>60</sup>. 7% said unpaid caring had a negative impact on their work<sup>61</sup>.

### **Juggling childcare and paid work**

Access to paid decent work can help lift those with caring responsibilities for children out of poverty, and improve their quality of life. Across the UK, a household's risk of poverty falls as paid working hours increase<sup>62</sup>. A key issue for people with childcare responsibilities is the level of expectation on them to undertake paid work, while also being able to access flexible and affordable childcare. The Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) has found that attitudes towards parental employment and decisions taken by individuals are complex and reflect deep-seated cultural values; individual preferences; assumptions about the gendered division of labour; the shape of tax and benefits systems; workplace parental leave policies; and the economic realities facing individual households<sup>63</sup>.

Women surveyed by CPAG report they had felt forced into becoming stay at home mums, when they would rather be employed outside the home<sup>64</sup>. Being pushed into economic inactivity is particularly harmful for lone parents and families on low incomes, as they are subject to conditionality on their benefits, and are potentially at risk of sanctions and the application of the benefit cap. The childcare sector has been left in a vulnerable state<sup>65</sup> by the pandemic, meaning significant numbers of parents may be left without the necessary childcare to engage in paid work.

The Oxfam Cymru and Women's Equality Network 2020 Feminist Scorecard rated the Welsh Government's progress on care as 'amber' - in recognition that some progress has been made on this area. The report recognised the progress made through the Childcare Offer, but highlighted ongoing issues in relation to confusion over how the scheme operates leading to unexpected childcare bills, and the need for the offer to be widened to



include children from six months, and to non-working parents – echoing the thoughts of the Children’s Commissioner who emphasised the long-term benefits of quality early years provision to children from the poorest backgrounds.

The National Assembly for Wales’ Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee found inflexible workplace structures, gendered assumptions about childcare, and wide-scale discrimination resulted in mothers becoming more likely to be trapped in part-time, low-paid work with fewer opportunities for career progression<sup>66</sup>. In 2019, 35.5% of people in Wales were lacking quality employment<sup>67</sup>. Tackling parental poverty, and therefore child poverty, requires a range of actions, including: greater access to good-quality, affordable childcare; driving up the quality of work; addressing inequalities within the labour market, including the gender pay gap; boosting parental leave entitlements; and providing an effective social safety net for all who need it. However, it also requires action to challenge deep-rooted social norms, with a redistribution of childcare responsibilities from women to men so that women have meaningful choices about seeking employment. The Equality and Human Rights Commission highlights that despite increasing women’s participation in the formal labour market, ‘men’s contribution to childcare has not increased at the same rate’<sup>68</sup>. The Commission highlights the importance of men taking on more caring responsibilities and concludes that two factors seem to encourage men’s involvement in childcare and reduce the impact on women’s careers of being the sole carer: the first being more generous paid paternity leave – equalising parental leave, and the second being more affordable childcare.

Paid work remains a critical source of income for many people with childcare responsibilities but too often fails to protect them from poverty. One way to help tackle this is boosting the affordability, accessibility and flexibility of childcare to ensure parents are supported to enter paid work – and are left with enough income after paying for childcare. Analysis suggests that parents in the UK not only pay the highest childcare costs in Europe, but the second highest in the world<sup>69</sup>. Some aspects of the social-security system seek to reimburse some childcare costs to low-income families, with this embedded within the ‘child element’ of Universal Credit. Lack of access to affordable childcare remains the main barrier to work for most mothers.

### **Wales’ Childcare Offer**

The Welsh Government’s Childcare Offer is a positive step, but in its current form is unlikely to achieve its aim of increasing maternal employment in the most effective way because most women will still be out of (or have limited access to) work for three years, by which time significant damage to pay, progression, confidence and skills is already done. Analysis carried out for Oxfam Cymru by Dr Claire Evans recommended the extension of the provision of free childcare to children under 3 for low-income parents<sup>70</sup>. Her analysis also recognised the need for affordable, good quality childcare to reflect the atypical hours that non-traditional work patterns impose on women, and the need to fund new models of childcare, for example, worker cooperatives which could be established at a place of work, education, or on housing estates. The Women’s Budget Group have also provided in depth analysis on costing universal childcare<sup>71</sup>. We have much to learn from international success in this area. Quebec introduced low-fee, universal childcare in 1996, centred on a few core premises: that if the government helped make childcare accessible and affordable, it would allow more women to join the workforce, increase childhood development and social skills, and ultimately raise revenue for the government through increased payroll taxes. In at least two of those objectives the scheme has been hailed a success<sup>72</sup>.

**“Making childcare free is absolutely essential if we want to get women into work”, Alex Davies-Jones MP<sup>73</sup>.**

During the Coronavirus lockdown, the closure of schools and childcare is likely to have had a disproportionate impact on women. Single parents, of whom 90% are women, are most likely to have been affected and 44% of single parents were already living in poverty before the pandemic<sup>74</sup>. The Wales Governance Centre research found that key workers, 68% of whom are women, face significant childcare challenges – half have school-aged children, while they were also more likely to have younger children below the age of 4 than non-key workers<sup>75</sup>. Women in Wales need a childcare provision that offers affordable, accessible and high-quality childcare for all children from six-months. Similar to provisions offered to key workers during the height of the Coronavirus pandemic, regardless of the employment status of parents<sup>76</sup>.

An often overlooked part of the story is childcare for children over the age of five. ‘Wraparound’ care and school holiday provision are critical – especially for lone parents to remain in the labour market. CPAG are exploring the notion of ‘extended schools’<sup>77</sup> – referring to services delivered by schools that go beyond the core function of the classroom education of children within the normal school day. This includes before- and after- school childcare, and holiday childcare / play provision. In July 2020, key workers in Wales were reporting they were struggling to find childcare as the school hubs had closed for the summer holidays. Only four<sup>78</sup> out of 22 local authorities said they would continue to offer care for school-aged children in hubs<sup>79</sup>.

**“I just felt like, ‘what am I going to do?’ Without childcare I would not have been able to work which would have made a huge impact on our family life and our finances, our mortgage, everything”, mother of two, from Haverfordwest<sup>80</sup>.**

The story for families is of course more complex than just fixing childcare. There is a suite of support available, but it does not always benefit paid and unpaid carers, for example, many carers whose partners work will miss out on Free School Meals and the Pupil Development Grant – Access, because they earn over the £7,400 threshold<sup>81</sup>.

### **Social care workers – undervalued and underpaid**

**‘Our staff in the health service and social care are our greatest asset’, Mark Drakeford’s Leadership Manifesto<sup>82</sup>**

Paid work is often described as the best defence against poverty – but not if you are a care worker. There are currently 113,000 people in the social care sector<sup>83</sup>, and to meet an aging population and a relatively older workforce, efforts are underway to recruit an additional 20,000 social care workers by 2030<sup>84</sup>. Providing paid care is associated with low incomes, poor working conditions and a lack of agency<sup>85</sup>. Care workers are significantly more likely to be in insecure forms of employment<sup>86</sup>. Research by Oxfam Cymru shows that 69% of people in Wales think care workers are paid too little<sup>87</sup>. These poor pay conditions potentially expose workers and their families to financial instability, and affect their physical, emotional and social well-being<sup>88</sup>. Whilst the Welsh Government curbed the use of zero-hours contracts for home care workers in 2018<sup>89</sup> poor pay and conditions persist in the sector. Research commissioned by Oxfam Cymru and carried out by Chwarae Teg<sup>90</sup> pre-Coronavirus highlighted the very real and long-term impact of low pay in the care sector. One care worker said her income did not cover her basic expenditure. The concerns were also reflected in conversations with Trade Union representatives:

**‘I was in one of my care homes last week and talked to a group of women and one of them said ‘I haven’t had heating or hot water for three years, I can’t afford to fix the boiler’.....another woman was telling me that she had to sell her house and move back in with her mother and father”. She continued: “They are all using**

**foodbanks. I've never known that! In 2017, our members using foodbanks...and they are working people. These are not people claiming benefits in their daily life. These are working people, full-time jobs, sometimes two jobs and still cannot manage to provide for their families.'** Trade Union representative<sup>91</sup>

Research from the Fawcett Society in May 2020 showed that 72% of people in the UK think care workers are underpaid; three in four people support carers getting the real Living Wage; and 65% of people agree with a rise in income tax to fund giving care workers a pay rise<sup>92</sup>. For lower-paid women, what matters is increasing their hourly rate of pay. If all women were paid the real Living Wage, 172,000 women across Wales would be better off<sup>93</sup>. A boost to the statutory or voluntary minimum rates would increase their earnings by substantially more than simply closing the gender pay gap, which is relatively small for low-paid employees<sup>94</sup>.

In April 2020 the Welsh Government announced £40million of financial assistance to support adult social care providers, and in May 2020, the Welsh Government announced a £500 extra payment for all social care workers in Wales<sup>95</sup>, as recognition for an often 'undervalued and overlooked' workforce (although as of July 2020 social care workers had not received this payment<sup>96</sup>), as well as continuing to restrict the use of zero-hours contracts in domiciliary care<sup>97</sup>. Whilst these are welcome measures, more needs to be done. The Welsh Government continues to examine the expansion of the registration of the social care workforce<sup>98</sup>, and "is a further step in progressing in our commitment to raising the profile of the sector, as it will reinforce to the public that we have a skilled and dedicated workforce". In his leadership manifesto, Wales' First Minister committed to use the power of procurement and public investment to secure quality services in, for example, the care sector, by linking that investment to fair pay and career development<sup>99</sup>.

The Welsh Government also continues to focus on levers to improve the terms and conditions of the social care sector workforce. Options for funding these have also been explored, including a social care levy using devolved taxation powers<sup>100</sup>, an approach which accords with public opinion UK-wide, where two-thirds now back a rise in income tax to fund giving care workers a pay rise<sup>101</sup>. This money is desperately needed in a sector suffering from chronic underinvestment. Any tax must be designed fairly, with those most able to pay bearing the brunt. All parties in Wales should include a fair social care levy in their manifestos for the next election, to fund social care properly.

The Welsh Government's Fair Work Commission recommended setting up a Fair Work Forum on Social Care<sup>102</sup>, and the Deputy Minister for Health and Social Services has met with the National Provider Forum, Social Care Wales and Care Forum Wales, trade unions and other stakeholders to discuss establishing this body. The work is due to recommence once the Welsh Government moves beyond its emergency response phase to Covid-19. In parallel, the Welsh Government is examining the detail of the consultation of the Social Partnership Bill, and on commencing the Socio-Economic Duty. These moves are all welcome. However, they do not meet the scale of the issues.

Social care workers have been going above and beyond for years, and the Coronavirus pandemic is no different. In a blog for the Bevan Foundation, Unison Cymru describes one example from Powys:

**'In a humbling act, at the start of the pandemic one Powys care worker agreed to self-isolate for two weeks with the person she supported when he had Covid-19 symptoms. Without complaint, she gathered her things and went to stay with him. During this period, she taught him new skills in the kitchen and garden. Colleagues**

phoned them both daily and left food, treats, messages, games and DVDs on the doorstep to keep their spirits up. The support worker had time off after her isolation period and when she returned to the client he was beside himself with excitement'. Bevan Foundation blog<sup>103</sup>.

Care homes have been at the heart of the Coronavirus response, and care leaders have criticised government decisions that were 'patchy at best and utterly shambolic at worst'<sup>104</sup>. Chair of Care Forum Wales Mario Kreft has argued the need for urgent reform of the care sector in Wales.

### **No one is safe from Coronavirus until everyone is - A globally responsible Wales**

From Porthcawl to Prestatyn, people are worried about what the Coronavirus means for us, our loved ones and our communities. However, no one is safe until everyone is. It is therefore important to recognize that this is a global crisis – and requires a global response. Not all countries have the same resilience, with 736 million people living in extreme poverty<sup>105</sup> and more than 2 billion people facing this pandemic without even access to clean water<sup>106</sup>. Beyond the clear and present dangers to public health, without action the consequences of this pandemic on poverty levels are likely to be severe and long-lasting – with carers again hit hard. Analysis shows that the economic crisis caused by the Coronavirus could push over half a billion people into poverty, as governments shut down entire economies to manage the spread of the virus. Global poverty could increase for the first time since 1990. Depending on the poverty threshold used, this could set the global fight against poverty back by a decade, and as much as 30 years in regions including sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East and North Africa<sup>107</sup>. Over half the world's population could be living in poverty in the aftermath of the pandemic. It is thought that the Coronavirus could condemn women to decades of poverty<sup>108</sup>.

The Welsh Government has set out its intention to establish Wales as a globally responsible nation<sup>109</sup>, and become 'a nation which, when doing anything to improve the economic, social, environmental and cultural wellbeing of Wales, takes account of whether doing such a thing may make a positive contribution to global wellbeing'. The Coronavirus crisis is not exclusive to this side of Offa's Dyke, and Wales should play its part in the global response. As the Welsh Government works with the sector to build its reputation as a 'globally responsible Wales', it should pay due regard to the analysis this paper provides to inform its partnership projects overseas, as well as here in Wales. The undervaluing of care is a global problem, and future programme work, for example, be it delivered through the Welsh Government's 'Wales and Africa' programme, should seek to address these challenges.

### **A just, green and caring recovery**

As governments around the world seek to recover, we are presented with a moment in history to deliver a feminist recovery. Looking at Canada as one example, YWCA Canada has recently launched their 'Feminist Recovery Plan for Canada: Making the Economy Work for Everyone'<sup>110</sup>. The eight point plan provides a roadmap to address devastating Depression-era economic lows and improve economic security. The eight pillars of the Plan include: intersectionality – understanding power; addressing root causes of systemic racism; care work is essential work; investing in good jobs; fighting the shadow pandemic; bolstering small businesses; strengthening infrastructure for recovery; and diverse voices in decisions.

Around the world and here in Wales, countries are embarking onto economic recovery plans, and the global community cannot afford more austerity measures that undermine and devalue care-related sectors, such as

education and health, and shift the responsibilities onto women, especially the most vulnerable and marginalised. Care work should be at the heart of all policies and decision making informing our feminist future during and following the pandemic. In this context, the 3Rs Framework on Care developed by feminist economist Diane Elson<sup>111</sup> and expanded to 4Rs by Oxfam and others before the crisis argues that we should<sup>112</sup>: **Recognise** unpaid and poorly paid care work, which is done primarily by women and girls, as a type of work or production that has real value; **Reduce** the total number of hours spent on unpaid care tasks through better access to affordable and quality time-saving devices and care-supporting infrastructure; **Redistribute** unpaid care work more fairly within the household and simultaneously shift the responsibility of unpaid care work to the state and to the private sector; and **Represent** caregivers, especially the most marginalised, and ensure that they have a voice in the design and delivery of policies, services and systems that affect their lives. Welsh Government must act now to protect carers from a growing poverty crisis.

**‘So that will mean tough decisions about which types of industries Welsh Government can support with limited resources. Core to that is really valuing care, and particularly unpaid care, women’s work, which we know and have seen very clearly is absolutely essential, not just to the economy, but to our health and wellbeing’, Cerys Furlong, Chief Executive, Chwarae Teg<sup>113</sup>.**

We must seek a just, green, feminist and caring recovery. As we build back better, we are presented with an opportunity to take stock and re-evaluate how we approach organising society, and how we measure ‘success’. Oxfam’s ‘Economic Doughnut’ model<sup>114</sup>, developed from Kate Raworth’s work, provides us with a conceptual framework to help us bring together our world’s greatest concerns – social justice and environmental sustainability. We should use this opportunity to assess the merit in new approaches, for example, adopting a broader definition of ‘success’ in economic strategies, to include a measure of the quality of employment alongside more traditional measures, such as Gross Value Added. This is an approach in line with Wales’ Future Generations Commissioner’s thinking, shifting our focus towards ‘wellbeing economics’<sup>115</sup>.

## Recommendations

To help make care count, the Welsh Government should:

1. Prioritise investment in the care sector as a low-carbon, gender-just solution to jobs creation and green economic recovery, placing people with caring responsibilities at the heart of the recovery<sup>116</sup> in Wales, whilst ensuring that no carer is left in poverty.
2. Recognise that care work, paid and unpaid, is skilled work and valuable to our collective social and economic wellbeing. Implement a step-change in how we value care by embedding this perspective, and the voices and experiences of people with caring responsibilities and those supported by them, across all areas of policy.

To support unpaid carers looking after people with ill health or additional needs the Welsh Government should:

3. Make it easier for unpaid carers to leave poverty - through entering and sustaining paid employment by increasing expectations on employers to provide a supportive environment as part of the commitment to ‘Fair Work’, bolstering voluntary accreditation schemes, and making access to public funds conditional on progress to achieve this.
4. Monitor local authority spending on respite care and evaluate the effectiveness of the funding.

5. Ensure that carers' voices are at the heart of designing recovery solutions.
6. Expedite the development of its Action Plan for Carers<sup>117</sup>.

To support low-income families, alongside all those in or at risk of poverty, the Welsh Government should:

7. Support those caring for children to secure and sustain decent work by boosting access to high-quality, accessible and flexible publicly funded childcare from six months (including disabled children and children with additional learning needs), to all parents, including non-working parents<sup>118</sup>.
8. Collect robust equality data as part of the evaluation and monitoring of the Childcare Offer to ensure equality of access and eligibility<sup>119</sup>.
9. Ensure those juggling paid and unpaid work can provide quality care for their children and families while avoiding poverty by improving the quality of work through expediting the recommendations of the Fair Work Commission, and ensure that receipt of public funding is conditional upon enhanced support to those with childcare responsibilities.
10. Relieve immediate income crises by enhancing emergency financial support, for example, through reviewing the criteria of the Discretionary Assistance Fund.

To protect paid carers from poverty, while increasing support for unpaid carers, the Welsh Government should:

11. Progressively raise new revenue, for example, through a Welsh social care levy, and use this to significantly boost investment in the sector to protect paid care workers from poverty and to relieve pressure on unpaid carers.
12. Expedite the recommendation from the Fair Work Commission to establish a Fair Work Forum focused on social care – ensuring that carers' voices are at the heart of this work.
13. Provide additional investment and make public procurement dependent on social care workers being paid at least the real Living Wage<sup>120</sup>, and payment of additional costs, for example, travel and personal protective equipment should be covered so that wages are not eroded by other costs.
14. Work with local authorities to require all companies submitting bids to deliver care contracts do so on an agreed set of terms and conditions (including the real Living Wage), to prevent companies from squeezing terms and conditions in order to offer a lower cost.

## Conclusion

Those providing care in Wales, whether paid or unpaid, do so for more than any financial reward they receive. However, it cannot be acceptable for those providing life-sustaining care to live in poverty. This briefing has made clear that poverty is too often closely linked to caring. While the content and solutions vary for people providing different types of care, there are two core truths: all care is under-valued, and women are impacted the most. We must do better. If Wales is to have a truly feminist government<sup>121</sup>, we require a radical step-change in how we value and invest in care. No longer can carers be invisible while being the glue holding our society together. The solidarity people have shown with carers and other key workers during the Coronavirus crisis cannot become a footnote of history – it must be a catalyst for change. We must listen to carers, and then we must act. The Welsh Government continues to consider the recovery - 'our Future Wales', and in order to build back better, we cannot overlook care. We must, together, make care count in Wales.

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