

The Gendered Effect of the Covid-19 Lockdown on Child Arrangements for Separated Parents

A survey conducted by FNF Both Parents Matter Cymru asked separated parents about their time with their children and how this had changed during the Covid-19 lockdown.

The Government has issued guidance on this matter, and the President of the Family Division, [Sir Andrew McFarlane](#), has reiterated the [main point](#), which is this,

“Where parents do not live in the same household, children under 18 can be moved between their parents’ homes. This establishes an exception to the mandatory ‘stay at home’ requirement; it does not, however, mean that children **must** be moved between homes.” (*emphasis as in the original*).

In April’20, the charity [made a submission](#) to the House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee following their Call for Evidence. This was based on a provisional analysis of the data from the survey, to meet their required deadline. I have now had the opportunity for further analysis, specifically disaggregating the responses by sex and by status as main carer.

As of 13th May 2020 there were 413 responses, 100 from women (24%) and 313 from men (76%).

Results disaggregated by sex of respondent are shown in Tables 1 to 3 below. All these tables show the percentage of respondents of the same sex (i.e., as a percentage of 100 for women or as a percentage of 313 for men, as all respondents answered every question). Salient findings were as follows...

Disaggregation by Sex Only

Before Covid-19 Lockdown

57% of women respondents (57) were the main carer contrasted with only 6% of men (18).

A similar percentage of women and men shared care equally (19%, 20%).

Comparable percentages of women and men had no contact, or only indirect contact, with their children (9%, 14%).

For a clear majority of male respondents, 68%, the child arrangements prevailing prior to lockdown were court ordered, whereas for female respondents this was only 35%.

For a majority of female respondents, 53%, the child arrangements prevailing prior to lockdown were obtained through an informal agreement between parents/carers, whereas for male respondents this was only 10%.

Child arrangements agreed through formal mediation services were far less common, though more common for men (6%, 18 cases) than for women (1%, or just one case).

More men (27, 9%) than women (6, 6%) were not seeing their children at all prior to lockdown.

During Covid-19 Lockdown

82% of men stated that they were “aware of the detailed guidance issued by the UK Government about the care of children of separated parents during the current Covid-19 pandemic”, compared to 68% of women who claimed this.

Rather more men thought that their female partners were aware of this guidance (73%) than the women themselves claimed (68%), whereas rather fewer women thought that their male partners were aware of this guidance (66%) than the men themselves claimed (82%).

30% of women had more time with their children during the lockdown than before, whereas only 9% of men had more time with their children.

For 34% of women the arrangements during lockdown had remained mostly the same as before lockdown, whilst this was the case for only 20.5% of men.

27% of women had no contact, or only indirect contact, with their children after lockdown, an increase from 9% prior to lockdown.

However, a much larger percentage of men (61.5%) had no contact, or only indirect contact, with their children after lockdown, a huge increase from 14% which prevailed prior to lockdown. This is the main finding of the survey.

There was a very large gender difference in satisfaction with arrangements during lockdown. 61% of women stated that they “agreed with the arrangements that apply for the care of their children today (i.e., during lockdown)”, but only 25% of men agreed. In view of the huge increase in the percentage of men who have no contact, or only indirect contact, during lockdown, this is hardly surprising.

Disaggregation by Sex and Status as Main Carer

Because the majority of female respondents were main carers, but only very few male respondents were main carers, a question which arises is whether the apparent gender effects noted above are aliasing an effect arising in reality from status as main carer, rather than sex *per se*. Results were therefore filtered on “main carer” and then also disaggregated by sex, with the following results...(see also Tables 4 and 5)...

Only 18 men (6%) were main carers prior to lockdown so caution is needed as the statistics are small (cf., 57 women as main carers).

Comparison of Table 4 with Table 2 shows that the gender effect in how child arrangements were established prior to lockdown, which were apparent in the latter, persists in the former despite controlling for main carer status. In fact the gender effect is even more clear.

Some 89% of men who are main carers (16 cases) attained that status through a court order or through a formal mediation service, compared to only 28% of women main carers.

67% of women who are main carers attained that status through informal agreement between the parents/carers, compared with only 5.5% of men (i.e., just one case).

Comparison of Table 5 with Table 3 shows that the gender effect in contact time prevailing during lockdown is ameliorated, but not eliminated, by controlling for main carer status.

A larger percentage of female main carers (49%) than male main carers (33%) have more time with their children during lockdown than before.

A larger percentage of main carers of both sexes have increased time with their children during lockdown than is the case across all respondents.

A larger percentage of main carers of both sexes have essentially unchanged child arrangements during lockdown than is the case across all respondents, but this is particularly marked for male main carers.

A far smaller percentage of (formerly) main carers of both sexes have either no contact or only indirect contact during lockdown compared with the whole sampled population, and this is again a particularly marked difference for men.

88% of female main carers and 77% of male main carers have increased or essentially unchanged time with their children during lockdown (compared with 64% and 30% respectively if main carer status is not controlled).

Curiously, the large gender difference in satisfaction with arrangements during lockdown persisted despite controlling for main carer status. 81% of female main carers stated that they “agreed with the arrangements that apply for the care of their children today (i.e., during lockdown)”, but only 39% of male main carers agreed.

Disaggregation by Sex and Status as “Not the Main Carer”

Another means of addressing whether it is gender or status as main carer that is more significant is to control on the complementary category, namely those respondents who reported being “Not the Main Carer” or “Sharing Care Equally” or having “No or Only Indirect Contact”. Results were therefore filtered on this category and then also disaggregated by sex, with the following results...(see also Tables 6 and 7)...

Men: 295 (94%); Women 43 (43%)

For men the data in Tables 6 and 7 are very similar to the data in Tables 2 and 3, because the overwhelming majority (94%) of men are in this filtered subset, i.e., *not* the main carer.

For women the impact of being the main carer, or not, can be gauged by contrasting Table 4 with Table 6, and contrasting Table 5 with Table 7.

Tables 4 and 6 show that a larger proportion of women who are not the main carer had their contact arrangements ordered by the court, and a smaller proportion by informal agreement between the parents, than was the case for women with main carer status.

However, even after filtering on “not the main carer”, a larger proportion of men than women had their contact arrangements ordered by the court, and a larger proportion of women than men have their arrangements agreed informally between the parents. Consequently, there remains a gender effect in how arrangements are achieved, even after controlling for “not being the main carer”.

But, interestingly, Table 7 shows that for people designated “not the main carer”, the extent of contact during the lockdown is very similar for men and women.

In particular, for people designated “not the main carer”, 26% of men and 33% of women had more, or broadly the same, time with their children during lockdown.

And, for people designated “not the main carer”, 64% of men and 58% of women had no contact, or only indirect contact, during lockdown.

In this analysis, filtered on *not* being the main carer, both men and women were dissatisfied with the arrangements prevailing during lockdown (76% of men and 65% of women). This indicates that women’s satisfaction with the arrangements is strongly related to being the main carer, whereas the majority of men are dissatisfied whether they are the main carer or not.

Main Findings

- [1] 61.5% of men responding to the survey had no contact, or only indirect contact, with their children during lockdown, a huge increase from 14% which prevailed prior to lockdown.
- [2] In comparison, 27% of women responding to the survey had no contact, or only indirect contact, with their children after lockdown, an increase from 9% prior to lockdown.
- [3] The gender effect is ameliorated by controlling for main carer status, but still apparent, especially in respect of how child arrangements are decided (court order versus informal parental agreement).
- [4] The small percentage of men who are the main carer overwhelmingly achieve that position through formal processes, either court orders or formal mediation services. In stark contrast, far larger numbers of women are the main carer, and the majority of them achieve that position by informal agreement between the parents/carers.
- [5] For people designated “not the main carer”, the extent of contact during the lockdown is very similar for men and women: 64% of such men and 58% of such women had no contact, or only indirect contact, during lockdown. However, there is a far larger proportion of men than women in this position (94% cf 43% in the survey, and 92% cf 8% in the general population).

Table 1: All Respondents

| Which of the following best describes your care of the children..... | women | men |
|---|--------------|------------|
| I'm the main carer | 57% | 6% |
| I'm NOT the main carer | 15% | 60% |
| I share care roughly equally | 19% | 20% |
| I have no contact or only indirect contact with my child/ren | 9% | 14% |

Table 2: All Respondents

| BEFORE the Coronavirus 'lockdown' was your time with these children ... | women | men |
|--|--------------|------------|
| Court ordered | 35% | 68% |
| Agreed through FORMAL mediation (e.g., using a recognised Family Mediation service) or a solicitor agreement | 1% | 6% |
| Agreed between the parents / carers | 53% | 10% |
| Controlled through Children's Services (e.g., child in Local Authority care or Child Protection plan) | 4% | 1% |
| Only when the main carer allowed | 1% | 6% |
| I wasn't seeing the child / children | 6% | 9% |

Table 3: All Respondents

| Which of the following statements is closest to your experience NOW, during the Covid-19 lockdown? | women | men |
|---|--------------|------------|
| I have more time with my child/ren than before | 30% | 9% |
| The previous arrangements have mostly remained the same | 34% | 20.5% |
| I have less time with my children | 9% | 9% |
| Now I only have INDIRECT contact eg Skype / phone etc | 11% | 27.5% |
| I have no time / contact with my children | 16% | 34% |

Table 4: Main Carers Only

| BEFORE the Coronavirus 'lockdown' was your time with these children ... | women | men |
|---|--------------|------------|
| Court ordered | 26% | 78% |
| Agreed through FORMAL mediation (eg using a recognised Family Mediation service) or a solicitor agreement | 2% | 11% |
| Agreed between the parents / carers | 67% | 5.5% |
| Controlled through Children's Services (eg child in Local Authority care or Child Protection plan) | 3% | 5.5% |
| Only when the main carer allowed | 0 | 0 |
| I wasn't seeing the child / children | 2% | 0 |

Table 5: Main Carers Only

| Which of the following statements is closest to your experience NOW, during the Covid-19 lockdown? | women | men |
|---|--------------|------------|
| I have more time with my child/ren than before | 49% | 33% |
| The previous arrangements have mostly remained the same | 39% | 44% |
| I have less time with my children | 9% | 0 |
| Now I only have INDIRECT contact eg Skype / phone etc | 2% | 17% |
| I have no time / contact with my children | 2% | 6% |

Table 6: Respondents Reporting Being “Not the Main Carer” or “Sharing Care Equally” or having “No or Only Indirect Contact”

| BEFORE the Coronavirus 'lockdown' was your time with these children ... | women | men |
|---|--------------|------------|
| Court ordered | 46% | 67% |
| Agreed through FORMAL mediation (eg using a recognised Family Mediation service) or a solicitor agreement | 0 | 5% |
| Agreed between the parents / carers | 35% | 11% |
| Controlled through Children's Services (eg child in Local Authority care or Child Protection plan) | 5% | 1% |
| Only when the main carer allowed | 2% | 7% |
| I wasn't seeing the child / children | 12% | 9% |

Table 7: Respondents Reporting Being “Not the Main Carer” or “Sharing Care Equally” or having “No or Only Indirect Contact”

| Which of the following statements is closest to your experience NOW, during the Covid-19 lockdown? | women | men |
|---|--------------|------------|
| I have more time with my child/ren than before | 5% | 7% |
| The previous arrangements have mostly remained the same | 28% | 19% |
| I have less time with my children | 9% | 10% |
| Now I only have INDIRECT contact eg Skype / phone etc | 23% | 28% |
| I have no time / contact with my children | 35% | 36% |