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The gender employment gap: Executive summary

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THE GENDER EMPLOYMENT GAP:
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Mr Alfie Bingham
Dr Heather Dickey
Dr Corina Miller

DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMICS
Queen's University Belfast
185 Stranmillis Road
Belfast BT9 5EE

<https://go.qub.ac.uk/economics>

One of the most dramatic economic transformations of the last century has been the entry of women into the labour force. Women's labour force participation has risen sharply, and many women are now more likely to work continuously over their lifecycle. The progress in women's labour market opportunities and outcomes is advancement towards achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals in key areas such as Gender Equality, Decent Work and Economic Growth, and the Reduction of Inequalities. However, this progress in women's employment rates, and the closing of the gender employment gap, has slowed considerably since the 1990s, with women still facing considerable barriers to the labour market with respect to full-time employment and career progression that do not apply to most men. Gender gaps in key areas such as labour force participation, employment, and income remain large and persistent and represent a barrier to women's abilities to achieve equal participation in society and equality of opportunity.

This research project has sought to explore the drivers of the gender employment gap in Northern Ireland, and more broadly the UK. To do this, the research has focused on three key determinants of the gender employment gap: (i) the role of motherhood and its associated penalty in the labour market; (ii) the provision of informal caregiving; and (iii) the influence of gender norms and attitudes.

First, a recurring theme in the gender employment gap literature is the impact of childbirth on women's employment trajectories. Childbirth often leads to career interruptions for women as they take maternity leave or reduce their work hours to provide childcare. Upon return to the workplace, women are more likely to return to part-time, lower-paying jobs that can result in long-term lower career trajectories and occupational segregation.

This research finds a clear and substantial penalty for mothers after childbirth. Employment trajectories following childbirth diverge between men and women, with men's labour market outcomes typically remaining unchanged after parenthood, whereas women experience immediate, large and long-run penalties following childbirth. For instance, mothers are 18% less likely to be employed, and 30% less likely to be full-time

employed compared to non-mothers; wages decline with the number of children a mother has, and mothers' hours of work fall by 9 hours per week, on average, after childbirth.

The substantial body of evidence on the child penalty for women points to the need for policies that address the high economic cost of motherhood on women's employment and earnings. This calls for changes in government policies and organisational practices to improve the work-family balance, especially for women who bear the labour market penalty for having children. For example, a wider acceptance and implementation of flexible working arrangements, post maternity leave training and re-induction, and consideration of maternity-related absences from the workplace in promotion and career progression opportunities.

Second, the role played by informal caregiving has received much less attention in the gender employment gap literature. Given the current demographic changes many Western countries are experiencing it is likely that the demand for elderly care is going to increase in the years ahead. Since evidence points to women being more engaged in elderly caregiving, we would expect this to be another contributor to the gender employment gap.

This research reveals several interesting findings that contribute to the limited evidence on parental caregiving: (i) providing parental care reduces women's probabilities of being in full-time employment, but does not have the same effect on men, and (ii) greater intensity of parental caregiving reduces average hours worked for women, but not for men. These findings highlight the importance of accounting for the intensity of care when analysing the impact of caregiving on labour force participation and are broadly supportive of the limited evidence on parental caregiving. The broad consensus is that, as the intensity of caregiving responsibility increases, so does the burden on the employment outcomes of adult children. The second main consensus is that women fare worse than men.

It is important for policymakers to understand the link between caregiving and employment decisions, as increased demand for informal caregiving is expected to provide

another negative shock to women's labour force participation later in their working lives. Appropriate policy implications may include providing more funds to increase the supply of formal care and seeking to influence organisational culture to promote flexible working that will enable people to remain in the labour market or return to it after a period of informal caregiving. For those who are seeking to return to the labour market, policies that focus on the carer may be appropriate, for example, training programmes that improve re-employment prospects.

Third, the role of gender norms and attitudes, as a contributing influence on the gender employment gap, has received increasing attention in economic and social science research in recent decades. Traditional gender role attitudes and anti-egalitarian views are expected to have negative impacts on women's employment status as they discourage women's labour force participation while encouraging childrearing and home production. This research does find evidence to support the argument that the gender employment gap continues to be shaped by gender norms. For example, women with more traditional gender norms are less likely to be in full-time employment compared to women with less traditional attitudes to gender roles. Concerning gender equality policies, firms' practices and government policies that facilitate work-life reconciliation have been shown to be an effective tool for increasing female employment rates.

This research has investigated three important contributors to the gender employment gap in NI and the UK and has been motivated by the argument that more equal employment opportunities and better access to the labour market for women are key dimensions for achieving inclusive growth and a sustainable social system. The benefits of a greater gender balance in employment opportunities include the potential economic gains, as well as the broader positive benefits on the well-being of women and the quality of society, and these perceived benefits align with the Department for the Economy's vision for inclusive and sustainable growth in the Northern Irish economy. Given that gender inequality in the labour market continues to be large and persistent, there remains much scope for further research on the gender employment gap.