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Meeting the career development needs of single parents

Elsa R. Olaru & Emma Bolger

Social inclusion involves ensuring all individuals and groups are afforded the right to educational, training and employment opportunities. In this article, we highlight how single parents have been disproportionately experiencing inequity within the labour market throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing considerations for career development practice. A study conducted in April 2021 assessed the impact of COVID-19 on childcare commitments and the support single parents require to achieve their career goals, and six themes emerged through qualitative analysis. Recommendations to support the career development needs of single parents are made for employers, policymakers and career practitioners.



Introduction

Single parents in the UK

According to the ONS (2019a), a lone parent family is formed by a single parent with at least one dependent or non-dependent child who lives at the same address. Most single-parent households are headed by women (University of East Anglia, 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, many single parents found themselves in a challenging situation, dependent on one income to support their family, and unable to rely on help from another adult in the household to manage childcare responsibilities.

There were 2.9 million single-parent families recorded in 2019, representing 14.9% of families in the UK. Single parents with one child (55.3%) were in full-time employment; as the number of dependent children increased, the number of single parents working part-

time also increased (ONS, 2019b). Prior to the onset of the pandemic, in the period 1997-2019, there had been a substantial increase in the number of single parents taking up employment (Learning and Work Institute, 2020).

Employment and poverty

Despite being in part-time or full-time employment, poverty has been a constant issue for single parents across the UK. Three main drivers are linked to single parents' poverty: adequate earnings from employment, insufficient income from social security, and high living costs (Public Health Scotland, 2020).

Several studies and official reports find evidence that paid employment has not been an efficient solution to cut poverty, particularly for single-parent families. A report by Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2019) notes that around three quarters (73.6%) of single-parent families live below the Minimum Income Standard (MIS) for the UK, despite 38.8% being in full-time employment.

Poverty for single parent households is higher than two-parent households because: there is only one income earner in the family, the earner is limited in the hours of work they can commit to due to childcare availability, hourly earnings may be lower because of the gender pay gap. Compared to income earners in couple households, single parents are more likely to be working part-time because they cannot find full-time employment or they work in temporary jobs because they cannot find permanent roles (NHS Health Scotland, 2016), leading to job insecurity.

There is a disproportionate cost to raising a child, regardless of sources of income, within a lone-parent family compared to dual parent families (0-18 years:

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£153,000 for dual parent families and £185,000 for single parent families). Fixed household costs relating to childcare, for example, cannot be offset (Hirsch, 2020). During lockdown, parents in employment felt that their work was disrupted because of childcare (ONS, 2020). Unemployed single parents face additional barriers: low or no qualifications, no driving licence, health problems, and living in a household with at least three children (Public Health Scotland, 2020).

To stay in employment, single parents rely on childcare, which can be costly, or reduction in working hours, which lowers their income, increasing the risk of poverty. Government initiatives were introduced to support low-income families: tax credits in the late 1990s that allowed single parents to increase their income when working part-time, the expansion of sparse childcare provision and up to 70-80% of childcare costs through working tax credits, specialist employment support at jobcentres focusing on the needs of single parents, and voluntary employment programmes (Gingerbread, 2018). However, welfare sanctions and conditionality related to benefits, housing, and support services for single parents later increased, such as the Lone Parent Obligations implemented in 2008. This initiative seemed more effective at moving single parents off out-of-work benefits and into work, but less effective with younger parents because they were less experienced and not work-ready (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2014).

Welfare has been designed to influence the employment behaviour of single parents. However, their economic situation is negatively impacted by policies that were not designed for their specific needs (Nieuwenhuis, 2020). Engagement in paid work was conceptualised as a key parental responsibility, ending maternalism. Parental care was no longer considered to have an economic value. This led to a loss of the status of single parents as a vulnerable group that required financial protection (Davies, 2012). Job Seeker Allowance sanctions and back to work schemes applied to single parents make it difficult for those with lower or no qualifications and no work experience to comply with the restrictions of the welfare system (JRF, 2014).

In conflict with the concurrently emerging 'fair' and 'decent' work agendas, as policies changed single

parents became pressured to engage in paid work and they gradually stopped being considered as vulnerable (Millar, 2008). The expectation to be self-sufficient and not dependent on out-of-work benefits pushed single parents into inferior work, but many failed to escape poverty through their earnings, even after receiving tax incentives or child maintenance. Those who have been economically inactive for a long-time struggle to access the labour market, and the type of employment obtained is often low paid, temporary, part-time, has long or unsociable hours, is low skilled and/or labour intensive with high staff turnover. These are characteristics of poor quality and insecure jobs (Centre for Social Justice, 2011), leading to material hardships related to insufficient food, inadequate housing, or bill paying struggles. Too many jobs offer inadequate pay which can lead to insufficient savings or pensions (JRF, 2021).

As single parenthood is more common among individuals with lower qualifications, and as women represent most single parents, they face more barriers accessing employment because of disadvantages in the labour market: gender and motherhood pay gaps, fewer opportunities for career progression, expectations to work part-time, job insecurity, and poor work-life balance. Single parents are found less likely to have adequate jobs that match their preferences compared to coupled parents (European Commission, 2017).

Single mothers who had involuntary job gaps and were unemployed or underemployed were at higher risk of experiencing material hardships than single mothers who were in adequate employment (Eamon and Wu, 2011). Zhan and Pandey (2004) studied the interaction between gender and education and found that degree educated single mothers earned less than their male counterparts and they suggest that this gender pay gap was partly the result of gender discrimination in the labour market.

There are many routes that lead an individual becoming a single parent, but many become so following experience of domestic abuse (Close the Gap, 2019). The Scottish Women's Aid Building Equality (2018) project highlights some of the labour market and paid employment-specific challenges for women who have experienced domestic abuse. These

include: losing access to qualifications, work clothes or equipment; accessing references; disruptive housing status; continuing abuse; costly legal action; social isolation; and loss of childcare. These barriers can affect access to work and broader career planning: goal setting, study options and job-seeking. Only limited research exists with a specific focus on career guidance and development interventions for individuals who have experienced domestic abuse (eg. Chronister & Linville, 2008; Froeschle, 2009; Carthy & Taylor, 2018; and Bornstein, 2011). Existing research tends to be highly specific and has not yet integrated the impact of the pandemic on domestic abuse survivors.

According to Stack and Meredith (2018), the financial hardships experienced by single parents affect their psychological wellbeing, with some parents describing feelings of isolation, anxiety, paranoia, depression and suicidal thoughts. Wu et al. (2014) found that underemployment negatively impacted health particularly for single mothers who were in part-time, low-paid jobs. Age can be a factor determining single parents' ability to find employment as older parents may be in a better position to secure quality employment having gained work experience, compared to younger parents who never worked. For young single parents, the accessibility of options such as apprenticeships, a popular entry route to the labour market for young people, requires critique.

Geographical variation can be a barrier to employment as labour market demand is weaker in some regions. Mosorow and Jalovaara (2019) found evidence that single mothers are less flexible on working hours and travelling distance to work, which decreases their ability to take on certain jobs. There is also a shortage of flexible part-time jobs in the UK that would benefit single parents (Public Health Scotland, 2020).

COVID-19

Women, who comprise the majority of single parents, experienced a greater impact on their income due to COVID-19 mitigations, as the pandemic affected work in female-dominated industries, (eg. administration, education, and health industries). According to the UEA (2020) the pandemic affected women as they were more likely to be furloughed, lose their jobs, or reduce their work hours to look after their children

during the lockdown, and received less income, allowing for gender inequality to rise. Iztayeva (2021) found that during the COVID-19 crisis, highly skilled single fathers changed careers or negotiated flexibility with their current employer due to caregiving responsibilities, compared to single fathers in low skilled jobs who had less control over their schedule.

Hertz, Mattes and Shook (2020) researched the impact of COVID-19 on single mothers who lived on their own with their children and those who lived in multi-adult households and found that mothers in single-adult households experienced greater stress associated with managing competing demands, and difficulty balancing remote work and supervising children. Lockdown had a different impact on single parents' ability to work: many started working from home, some experienced changes in the terms and conditions (reduced hours), others were placed on the Job Retention Scheme because of shutdown industry sectors or in response to childcare responsibilities (Gingerbread, 2020).

Single parents felt affected by lockdown and reported feelings of isolation caused by the extra caring responsibilities. Remote work during lockdown has been unevenly distributed, with higher paid employees being able to work from home (Working Families, 2020) to fit new caring responsibilities. Adams et al. (2020) found that a higher percentage of mothers initiated furlough during the crisis than fathers or employees without children, and many furloughed employees had concerns about their long-term job prospects.

Single parents' perspectives of the effects of the pandemic: a research study

The aim of our study was to find out what impact single parents perceive the COVID-19 pandemic had on their childcare commitments and career. We also assessed the support that single parents require to overcome any perceived barriers to employment to enable them to manage childcare responsibilities and achieve their career goals following the pandemic.

Methodology

Participants

The mixed-methods study received approval from the Ethics Committee at the University of the West of Scotland and complied with the Career Development Institute professional guidelines. Before starting the survey, every participant was informed about the purpose of the study, data protection policy, and the institution and researchers responsible for the study. A total of 28 responses were received (six partially completed, and 22 fully completed). The gender variable was not included in the analysis as the aim of the study was not to identify gender differences but to explore the effects of COVID-19 on single parents' career development without making inferences about gender.

Measures

The data was collected in April and May 2021 through an online survey advertised on social media channels (LinkedIn, single parent Facebook groups, Twitter, One Parent Family Scotland and NetMums). The online survey incorporated 21 questions across five sections: two quantitative sections gathered demographic information about the sample, type of household, employment status before and after COVID-19, and information related to income and remote work; three qualitative sections with open-ended questions gathered participants' perceptions, attitudes and behaviours/ intentions related to childcare, employability, and career development.

Results

The quantitative data was used to understand the characteristics of the sample and to find out whether participants' occupation was affected by the pandemic. The qualitative data was analysed with thematic analysis following the six-phase model developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The codes and themes were peer reviewed to ensure a higher internal validity of the study.

Research question 1

The first research question assessed the impact that single parents perceived that COVID-19 had on their

childcare commitments and three themes emerged: (Table 1):

Table 1.

Themes	Subthemes
Formal and informal childcare	Support network Additional support needs
Work-family role conflict: employee vs parent vs teacher	Balancing 'home working' and 'at home learning' Remote working influences quality of life
Mental health and wellbeing	Burnout Psychological distress

Formal and informal childcare: Single parents spoke about their challenges during lockdown as formal childcare stopped because of nursery and school closures, and the difficulty to get help with childcare from their support network because of lockdown restrictions. Some parents were able to create a childcare or support bubble with other family members. Some respondents described the challenges in managing childcare on their own as their children had additional support needs and 'they could not work independently on schoolwork' or they 'could not be left unsupervised'. Some respondents commented that they had no family nearby and 'no support from other adults' and that they could not return to work because of the lack of childcare.

Work-family role conflict: Many respondents talked about having to deal with various and constant demands as life changed during lockdown and they started to work from home. They got involved in their children's learning and took on the role of 'teacher' as schools also 'moved online' due to lockdown restrictions. Single parents felt overwhelmed trying to play the role of employee, teacher and parent, having very little 'me time' and personal life. Survey participants spoke about the difficulty of managing work and home-schooling during the height of the pandemic, and despite having an understanding employer and a family-friendly work environment, there was no decrease in their work expectations.

Mental health and wellbeing: Lockdown restrictions had a psychological impact on single parents as they

suddenly found themselves isolated without access to formal childcare, and swept away from their support network, feeling lonely and overwhelmed from managing work and parenting, factors contributing to increased psychological stress. One parent expressed their concerns about feeling burnout as they had a child with additional support needs who required constant supervision, which alongside work commitments became difficult to manage, and they feared it would impact their career if not addressed. Another single parent talked about experiencing psychological distress caused by an increase in their work demands.

Research question 2

The second research question assessed the level of support that single parents needed to manage childcare and achieve their career goals following COVID-19 and the following themes emerged (Table 2):

Table 2.

Themes	Subthemes
Studying and training	Financial support Digital connectivity
Fair treatment in the workplace	Flexible working Loss of income
Flexible and affordable childcare	Childcare outside 9-5 Support for all (inclusion)

Studying and training: Single parents talked about studying and training (reskilling) to get back into employment or for career change. Some completed essential training for personal interest as training was more accessible during the lockdown since they were able to do it from home. Other respondents were unable to do any courses as they ‘did not have the financial means or childcare support’ or because schools closed during the lockdown and they no longer had time to study, or because childcare was too expensive. The thought of studying and retraining came as participants considered a career change; one parent mentioned constantly questioning their career choice, but the age factor seemed to stop them as they wondered, ‘what else would you do, given your whole life has been directed to your current job?’

Fair treatment in the workplace: Single parents may have different concerns about work: flexible working, welfare benefits or time-off as balancing working life with home life can be a challenge. Remote working was generally perceived by the respondents as a positive experience. As one participant commented, a health condition impacted their ability to work when they had to commute for long periods, so home working ‘greatly improved the chances for long-term employment’ and enabled them to ‘work at full capacity without experiencing ill health’. The importance of flexible working arrangements, and ‘working from home as a standard’ were highlighted, also flexibility from employers as remote working shifted to be considered positive and advantageous, and as improving the quality of life. However, according to some participants, too many employers publicly endorse an illusory version of flexible working and part-time workers are discriminated against.

Flexible, affordable childcare: The pandemic made childcare access even more challenging as some parents were furloughed or isolated during the lockdown. The situation was challenging for single parents who have children with disabilities or additional support needs and require increased or constant supervision. Single parents who work shift patterns need childcare support outside the business hours considered to be ‘the norm’ of 9am to 5pm; childcare needs to be available before 7.30am and 6pm, and to cover weekends and night shifts. Some parents were unable to progress in their career because of childcare commitments, having to choose between keeping ‘the children at home and relying on screens to keep them entertained or paying hundreds of pounds a week in childcare-money I don’t have’.

Discussion

This study had limitations: the findings are based on data analysis of a small sample because of COVID-19 restrictions, and may be skewed towards participants with digital skills and internet access who completed the survey. There was no control group in this study so further research could assess the impact of COVID-19 on careers by comparing data from single parents and partnered parents.

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In the context of career development work, inclusivity defines how we support each client, without bias or prejudice, to achieve their goals and fulfil their potential whilst having an awareness of any barriers that may prevent them from doing so. There are career guidance implications within the findings of the new empirical research conducted and we review them alongside current UK-wide policies on working practices. Employment support for single parents should take into consideration longstanding factors that impact their participation in the labour market: childcare, transportation, work attire, lunch expenses, unpaid work, lack of skills and experience that are common career concerns for this vulnerable group, which need consideration to enable single parents from all socioeconomic levels to progress in their careers (Kossek et al., 1997) however, the pandemic has heightened many vulnerabilities, especially for single mothers.

The findings suggest that self-directed and self-initiated learning inside and outside the workplace is important for individuals to pursue personal learning goals and CPD. Career guidance and counselling could play a key role in facilitating successful transitions into better quality employment for single parents, through signposting of upskilling, reskilling and career change opportunities and enabling individuals to develop a sense of personal agency to help them navigate through a challenging and uncertain labour market (Bimrose and Brown, 2014). This is already emerging as a noted interest, with awareness now that single parents should be offered lifelong learning opportunities to study and reskill which will enable them to access better quality employment to lift them out of poverty and contribute to addressing future skill shortages and skill gaps (UK Parliament, 2021).

Affordable, quality childcare remains a perennial problem. We suggest that policymakers reconsider the level of childcare support that single parents are entitled to and collect evidence of how informal childcare subsidies might work and how parents might respond if such support was state funded. A combination of formal and informal childcare, where gaps in formal childcare provision (particularly for those with additional needs) can be filled to enable parents to participate more in the labour market, however, it is not available to all and perpetuates inequity.

Single parents may not be allowed the opportunity of flexible working that is advertised. There is no guarantee that any flexible working request will be accommodated and appealing a refusal can take up to three months (ACAS, 2022). Employers consulting and collaborating with single parents to create packages of working conditions that will make work-life balance possible (part-time, compressed hours, remote working) could advance this. Flexible working offered as a norm may help unemployed single parents to increase their chances of finding employment and would eliminate the statutory need for employees to wait for 26 weeks to be eligible for consideration for flexible working.

The prevalence of domestic abuse amongst women and single mothers and its interrelationship within career guidance practice warrants further exploration, and while not a focus of the empirical research conducted with single parents on this occasion, should be considered in future work on this topic. Similarly, the accessibility of upskilling and reskilling opportunities, including vocational education and training could be examined, to ensure equitable access to career change opportunities and entry routes to the labour market for single parents.

Single parents remain highly vulnerable in the labour market as their protection within legislation is limited. Without single parent status being considered a protected characteristic within the Equality Act 2010, it is difficult to see how their specific needs will be prioritised. Positive action is required. They are a vulnerable group with specific needs, whose contribution to the economy is hindered by labour market restrictions. In the post-pandemic landscape career development support must accommodate and advocate for single parents' needs, to avoid perpetuating the inequalities this group faces.



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