

Stubbornly Sticky: Exploring, Through Lived Realities, the Impact of COVID-19 on the Caring Roles of Heterosexual Couples in Scotland.

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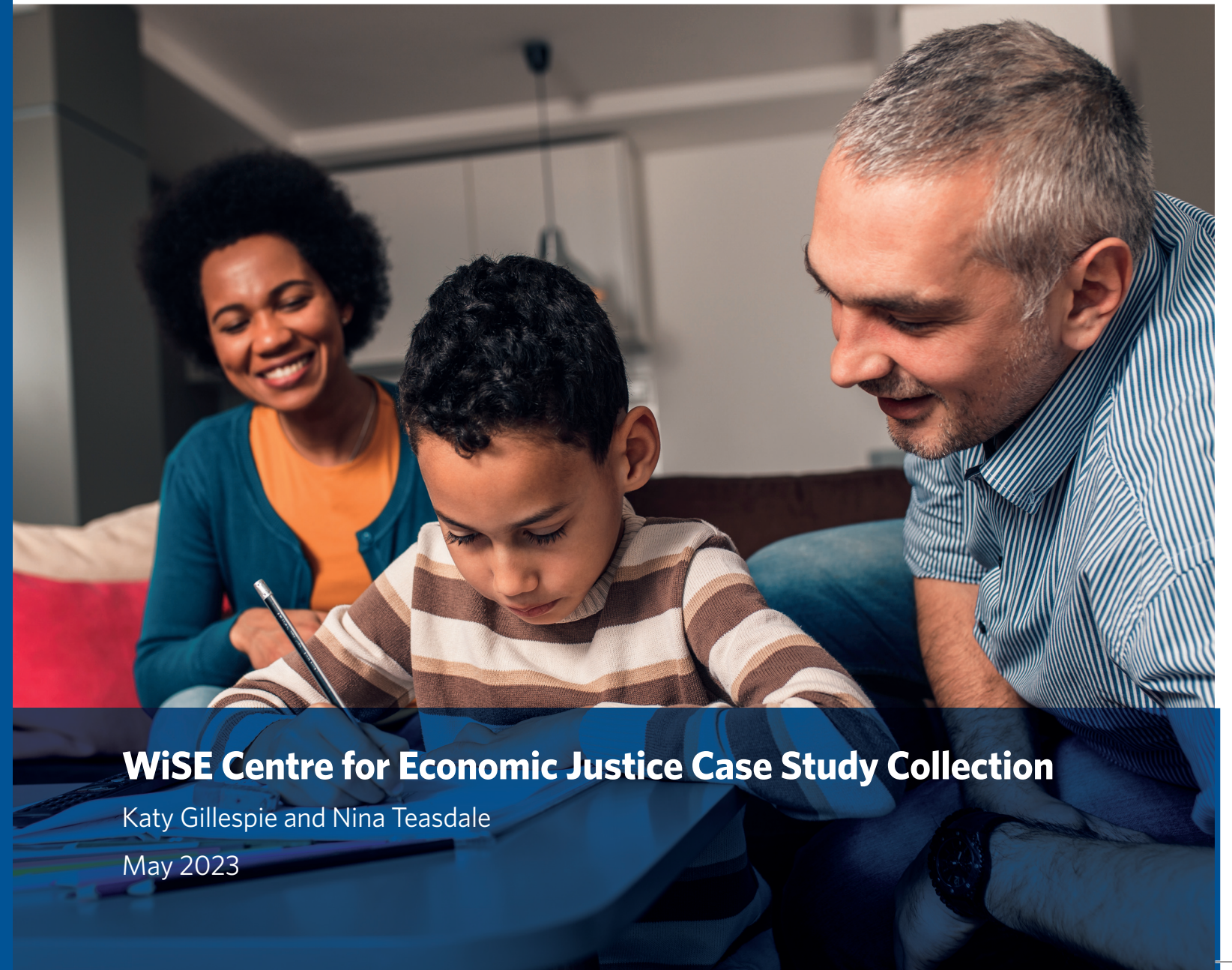
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Stubbornly Sticky: Exploring, through lived realities, the impact of COVID-19 on the caring roles of heterosexual couples in Scotland.



WiSE Centre for Economic Justice Case Study Collection

Katy Gillespie and Nina Teasdale

May 2023



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INTRODUCTION

The WiSE Centre for Economic Justice published a report in February 2023 entitled 'COVID-19 and the Centrality of Care'. This report was commissioned by The Office of the Chief Social Policy Adviser, Scottish Government, as part of a grant funding call for expert reviews to inform the work of the COVID-19 Learning and Evaluation Oversight Group.

The report focuses on research exploring the extent of pandemic-induced (temporary) shifts in unpaid domestic and care roles within opposite-sex households, and the potential longer-term impacts on the gendered organisation of work and family life. The report highlights the complex picture of peoples' lived realities and the ongoing policy work and social action that is required to support disruptions to social norms around unpaid care.

It is well known that unpaid care is widely undervalued work, often rendered invisible within policy and economic measurement, and continues to perpetuate gender inequalities, affecting women and girls' social and economic empowerment, particularly those most disadvantaged and vulnerable (ILO, 2018; Oxfam, 2020). Indeed, Parvez Butt and colleagues (2023) put forward in their Oxfam discussion paper some of the alternatives to GDP for a new economic model that *'supports a radically more equal, kinder, greener and feminist world ..., while offering redress for historical damage and inequalities'* (<https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/radical-pathways-beyond-gdp-621532/>).

While previous economic crises have not triggered radical changes to gender roles (Rubery and Rafferty, 2013), the COVID-19 pandemic represents a more radical shift in the volume of unpaid household and care work which had to be reconciled simultaneously with paid employment. Thus, amid the turmoil and deep loss created by the pandemic, there was a glimmer of hope that it might potentially induce changes around gendered care norms. However, as the crisis unfolded, research quickly revealed that progress toward gender equality was in fact reversing (WEF, 2021).

Our wider report *'COVID-19 and the Centrality of Care'* draws upon findings from two distinct but related research activities (Cantillon et al., 2023). First, a systematic review (SR) of the academic and grey literature was undertaken on the distribution of unpaid care work during the COVID-19 pandemic and how it has been shaped across gender, social class and ethnicity. Second, to complement the systematic review, 24 couple and individual qualitative interviews were undertaken allowing for rich insight into the experiences of opposite-sex households in Scotland. Interviewing couples both together and separately enabled us to gain understanding from both partners: this was especially important as it is often women who are interviewed as representatives of the household.

To complement the wider report, and with funding from Oxfam Scotland – an organisation that is working to challenge the connections between care work and poverty both globally and in Scotland, we have assembled a small number of case studies as part of our ongoing work on unpaid care to help share greater and richer insight into the interviews we have conducted and people's stories on how they organise their paid employment and unpaid care arrangements. The case studies reveal how these arrangements were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and concomitant stay home and social distancing measures, which led to the closure of some workplace, educational and childcare settings.

As a collection, the experiences shared in this report are not intended to represent the *'whole picture'* or the *'stories'* of others. We recognise that households are unique and diverse in formation, and the experiences of individuals and couples differ along multiple lines, whether this be along the lines of sexuality, age, stage in the life course, socio-economic class, ethnicity and differing types of caregiving. However, the case study collection does shine a light on the complexity of lived-experiences and how household and unpaid care and paid work obligations are managed, organised, and distributed among couples within the context of wider social, economic and institutional systems and structures that, while not fixed and unchanging, are shaped by stubbornly sticky asymmetrical power relations. Consequently, changing attitudes around social norms and the lived-experiences of changing gender-relations are in fact messier in practice, and often slow, uneven and contradictory rather than smooth and linear transitions. Understanding these varied lived realities will be essential to identifying and implementing effective policy and wider social action to shift the gendered distribution of care work meaningfully and sustainably within households.

What We Heard

This small collection of case studies is intended to inform public debate about how fundamental care is to society and economic life. Moreover, it hopes to trigger further discussion on whether and how policy could be used to drive deeper and long-lasting changes in the distribution of caring within households. All six case studies are opposite sex couples and all have children, with their experiences both overlapping and varying:

- One couple share their experiences of living in a rural context. They had a baby at the start of the pandemic that required hospital care and experienced employment changes due to the pandemic-related economic downturn. This had implications for the couple's financial situation and their household arrangements.
- Another couple with a blended family – children they have together and from previous relationships – share their experiences of shifting to a more traditional gendered distribution of work-family arrangements during the pandemic. This shift was made through a mutual agreement following the birth of their baby and

'love to see the support there for working families, so they could actually spend more quality time with either engaging in their work or more important, engaging [...] more with their own children and be able to do things that they can't do. They're just, there's no way it's conceivably, it's possible. So until that actually happens for people that are in working-class jobs, then I don't think we're going to have a really happy workforce'.

Describing that Ursula was effectively ‘flat out [...] for two years’ he depicted his changed household role as a ‘struggle’ in having to take ‘care of all parental stepdad duty’ but that it was something that he just had to do and they ‘made it through’. Across the interviews, he showed an increasing concern for the pandemic’s long-term implications for his partner’s mental health and well-being, and how, this, consequently, also impacts him.

Job worries and the pandemic

Taking on additional childcare and household duties throughout the peak pandemic period was compounded by the severe disruptions that COVID-19 caused to his occupational role as a musician and music teacher. Indeed, having already carried out online guitar tutoring prior to the pandemic, Ryan experienced increasing difficulties competing with other tutors. Further, many students were no longer able to afford their tuition or transferred to other, cheaper tutors. Both Ryan and Ursula lamented that this caused significant financial strain for their family household. Moreover, they said the pandemic and related lockdown legislations, alongside Brexit, also hindered his ability to make additional income through touring. Ryan said they are still grappling as a family with the financial impacts they experienced from the pandemic.

Changing experiences

Both Ursula and Ryan mutually confirmed that their previous family arrangements with their ex-partners have shaped their current perceptions and attitudes toward how they presently manage their household labour. Ursula had previously been in a more traditional family arrangement. Despite having ‘built that business that we had together’ (in relation to her ex-partner), she carried out all the domestic household and care arrangements. When her children fell seriously ill, the caring onus was on her – she was the partner who gave up her working position to care full time for the children.

Similarly, Ryan lamented his family role in Spain as the main earner, working upwards of 12 hours a day and thus not physically able to be an involved father. He said this was contrary to what he wanted and that there was ‘a different way of viewing life across in [...]’ and that he had assumed the male breadwinner role even though he really wanted to spend time with his child. Indeed, both Ursula and Ryan stressed how their past experiences shaped their current unpaid care allocations and gender egalitarian beliefs: both recognised the value of equal parental involvement and the different aspects that both fathers and mothers can contribute as parents. Furthermore, they shared similar perspectives on how the domestic household should be divided. Ursula believed that it should be shared 50/50 as much as possible, with Ryan asserting that:

‘I think it has to be shared and it has to be, depending on each day because every day is different, and you come across different things that happen every day, and you can’t really, I mean, you’ve got a rough plan of how it’s all going to pan out and it’s usually shared’.

Overall, their egalitarian beliefs greatly aligned with their practical allocations of unpaid care work; in that, they both perceive the divisions as fair and are generally satisfied with their household management. It was agreed that Ryan took on more of the routine household chores, and was generally tidier than Ursula, in that he is the one to prompt her to pick up after herself or carry out certain domestic duties; corroborated by them both. Although both declared that they were content to live in ‘cluttered small house’ and were not necessarily ‘house proud’, they agreed that a positive effect of the pandemic was in their increased acceptance of each other’s slightly different levels of cleanliness.

‘So I would say that we’ve actually, through having that time when we were together all the time we’ve come to accept each other’s ways a little bit more. That’s another kind of funny little angle, you know, that he kind of lives with my mess a bit, like he’ll just sort of like turn a blind eye to the fact that I prefer my stuff just left in a mess and if I see something that needs to be done, I’ll think, oh I better do that. Because he’ll be happy if I do it, so that’s kind of how things have changed is we’ve just come to negotiate each other’s ways of liking things around the house’.

The pandemic they believed thus afforded them an opportunity to appreciate and have a greater understanding of their own patterns of and practical allocations of unpaid care work. Though predominately seen as having a negative impact, the lockdown period did allow their family to be together; something that both partners cherished in that they have a ‘very sort of loving, supportive household you know’, with Ursula admitting that even though ‘there’s not a lot, not an awful lot of money, you know, we get by kind of thing’.

Therefore, the pandemic had variable effects for Ursula and Ryan’s daily management and caring allocations: through not being able to access the formal health care she required at the onset of the pandemic, her partner had to take on the major responsibility of domestic household and caring duties for their family. Consequently, both partners spoke of the relative impact this had on their mental health levels and generally heightened feelings of stress, both experiencing ‘a low-grade stress bubbling’. This was further increased by worrying about their household’s financial status as a result of COVID-19 and the ensuing cost of living crisis: all events which they perceived were poorly managed by the government, having had detrimental consequences for working class and lower income families. Describing the government’s monetary support schemes and policies provided throughout and since the pandemic, Ryan asserted that their actions are symbolic of being ‘a war on the poor, that’s the main bones about it. It’s basically more for them and less for everybody else. So, everybody else is kind of hobbling on, I’m just, you know, hobbling along, just trying to make ends meet, but I really don’t see this getting any better’.

Believing that the government could ‘have done a lot more to support me and [...] the whole country’. Overall, they both agreed that they would:

the opportunity to start a new business. While a joint decision, there remained feelings of frustration, especially around the invisibility and undervaluing of unpaid care.

- Also featured is the story of a couple in their mid-20s who were both key workers and remained in the workplace during the periods of lockdown in Scotland, one working on a Covid-ward. They also had a baby during the pandemic and had to navigate long and erratic shift patterns with childcare through informal family support.
- The case studies also provide insight into the lives of a couple who work in the education sector. The man had worked long hours in his previous occupation, re-training to be a teacher to regain some control over his working patterns and have more family time. The fixed structure of the school day, however, brought other challenges, along with school closures, including the shift to educational hubs and online learning forms of teaching during the pandemic.
- There also includes a contribution from a couple in their mid-20s who had migrated to the UK and who have a school-aged child who had not long started learning English when the pandemic hit, and lockdown measures were introduced. The man had just started his first full-time post after graduating and the woman had planned to continue her studies. They share the challenges they faced managing work, education and family life in a small flat and on a low income with no significant wider family or informal support.
- Finally, a self-defined working-class couple who experienced long-term illness during the pandemic share how they managed their caring and employment responsibilities as a blended family and the implications this had on the allocation of tasks as well as their financial situation.

Key Takeaways

It is clear from our case studies that during periods of stay-at-home regulations, school closures, or pandemic-related employment changes, the time spent by men on both housework and childcare increased, but so did the time spent on these by women. On average, studies show that women spent more time than men on both housework and childcare, both before and during the pandemic (Cantillon et al., 2023).

Overall, therefore, while the pandemic offered opportunities to redefine gender roles for some families, for most couples, it did not act as a catalyst in causing a significant reallocation of the gendered division of unpaid care work. Instead, it led to some small shifts occurring in certain households, and this was specific to key factors such as, among others, flexible working hours, adequate childcare support, and being able to formally pay for domestic support such as a cleaner. This does not mean that more egalitarian household arrangements do not exist, as some of our case studies illuminate; however, lived realities are more complex.

- While ‘lived egalitarianism’ (Uzdansky, 2011) was not a reality for most of the participants, both the women and men that we spoke to expressed gender egalitarian attitudes. All couples stated that their dual earnings were important to their household income and believed that caring and household responsibilities should be shared.
- In practice the negotiation of household and care labour was said to be pragmatic. This was commonly perceived as ‘temporary’ and a ‘not for ever’ life course phase – as well as shifting in some cases, and dependent on different individual level and wider social and economic variables. This included the job market, working hours, the participants’ physical and emotional health and wellbeing, stage in the life-course and type of caregiving and childcare available to them.
- Financial reasons, such as who within the couple is able to access the higher-paid work, was a key factor in explaining couples’ current divisions of unpaid care work.
- From our interviews and case studies, crucial to men’s increased role in household and unpaid care activities during the pandemic for our couples was whether their partner was a key worker and had to attend the workplace. Also important was whether men had more flexibility than their partner in terms of their working patterns and schedule.
- The working arrangements of one partner therefore in a couple has direct implications for how they negotiate immediate childcare and wider care duties within a family household. This reinforces the need for flexible and family-friendly policies being made available to everyone and the need to incentivise such practices to support take up.
- The enforced lockdown restrictions and stay-at-home rules provided a crucial platform for the fathers – and previously less involved parents – to become present as care providers throughout the lockdown periods.
- The pandemic encouraged some parents to pursue an alternative career path with more flexibility to work from home and be more involved parents, having experienced a better work and family life balance during periods when ‘stay home’ and ‘social distancing’ measures were in place.
- The interviews shone a light on some of the complex tensions among partner couples around managing care and household activities. This particularly related to the recognising and valuing of such work and how unpaid care, while often taken-for-granted is fundamental to their daily lives both as individuals and as a family.
- The mental and cognitive load was unequally shouldered by women, causing further forms of stress and emotional exhaustion for women.
- Couples significantly relied on informal care support, through family kin and friends, to care for their children or those in need of wider caring assistance. They viewed this support as essential to allowing them to remain in paid work amidst expensive early and elder care costs.

- Indeed, limited, expensive, or inaccessible early care provisions act as a barrier to more equitable divisions of unpaid care and, in some cases, limit one partner's ability to pursue their career goals and gain financial autonomy.
- Egalitarian attitudes and the importance of equal parental involvement in the initial early stages of children's lives are an enabler of different practices, but the case studies suggest these are insufficient without the wrap around enablers of sufficient income to buy in additional help and secure flexible working and parental leave and so on.
- The loss of formal care provisions during the pandemic had detrimental implications in exacerbating the care load for informal care providers who had to provide support to ill family members, negatively impacting their well-being.
- In many cases, the pandemic exacerbated the concentration of caring responsibilities as a result of one member of the couple being vulnerable, or having serious health issues.
- Social and gendered norms within the workplace around 'ideal' and committed workers, as well as the degree of flexible and family-friendly organisational policies in place, act both as a facilitator and a barrier to reducing unpaid care work between men and women. This was especially true for men in the sample.
- Scotland and the UK's paternity system is outdated and not reflective of men's and women's desire to share childcare and be equally involved parents.
- Stigmatising social norms that impact requests for leave or a reduction of days for care reasons, continue to discourage individuals from asking for this support. This is evident in certain sectors, such as the female-dominated sector of primary education and health sector and is encroaching upon families' potential to distribute unpaid care work more evenly.
- Preferences' for household chores were said to influence and shape the gendered division of labour, with examples of men adopting tasks stereotypically perceived as 'female', as well as 'gatekeeping' tendencies (Gaunt, 2008). Gatekeeping denotes the process whereby an individual's actions and attitudes can discourage and sometimes inhibit 'a collaborative effort between men and women in family work' (Allen and Hawkins, 1999: 200).
- The men we spoke to are all fathers, each engaging in caring responsibilities and stressed the importance of being 'involved fathers' (Atkinson, 2022). Some talked about childhood socialisation and how early exposure to more progressive, or conversely traditional gender attitudes is important in shaping men's and women's attitudes towards valuing care work and how they practically divide unpaid care activities in their homes.
- For some couples, past relationship experiences and distributions of unpaid care work greatly shaped their current revised and more equitable family allocations.

- The distribution of caring responsibilities is not immutable and can alter rapidly due to changing circumstances, including the ill health of one partner or a family member.
- The pandemic and lockdown periods provided space for some couples to better understand each other's preferences for carrying out certain household and childcare activities, alongside becoming more aware of each other's expectations around them.

Researchers' Reflections

Our interviews and case studies serve to reinforce that the rupture and magnitude of the pandemic was not enough to radically disrupt and transform the gendered distribution of household labour. However, to reiterate, they do provide important insights into lived realities that are more complex and contradictory – our couples all shared gender egalitarian thinking. Thus, ongoing work and advocacy on how policy and social action can be harnessed to facilitate 'deeper' shifts in attitudes and social norms around unpaid care and how they shape our social institutions to support longer-term changes in the gendered distribution of labour remain pivotal.

The wider report, *COVID-19 and the Centrality of Care*, can be accessed here: [PDF_COVID-19](#) and the *Centrality of Care DIGITAL*.

COUPLE SIX: URSULA AND RYAN

Ursula (52) is a doctoral student and Ryan (44-55) is a self-employed musician and they have been married for six years. They both have children from previous relationships. Their current household comprises five individuals: Ursula and Ryan, alongside Ursula's two primary-aged children (10 and 12 years old), and her eldest child (19 years old). Ryan has one child who currently lives in South Western Europe and whom he sees as much as possible, with his son visiting throughout the year.

Their current allocations of unpaid care work are split as equally as possible. Indeed, both partners agreed that having 'good communication' has been key to them both feeling mutually satisfied with their current household arrangements. Due to being their biological parent, Ursula said she takes the major responsibility for the functional childcare tasks for her two school-aged children, alongside being the primary individual who carries out the cooking for their household. This was a mutual agreement, with Ryan carrying out most of the cleaning duties, DIY tasks and general maintenance in their household. In part, this arrangement is attributed to his previous employment as an electrician. They both self-identify as working class.

Health and well-being

At the beginning of the pandemic, Ursula developed a serious illness that took some time to formally diagnose in the context of changing access to hospital services during the COVID-19 crisis. She described being bed bound throughout the first lockdown period and into the second lockdown stage, with Ryan taking on the full domestic load of household and childcare duties throughout 2020 and into 2021, alongside balancing his paid employment. Describing the pandemic-induced phase as a 'really transformative time, but not necessarily in a good way', Ursula said that COVID-19 greatly altered their previous allocations of unpaid care work and has left a long-lasting negative impact on their financial situation.

Prior to the pandemic, Ursula and Ryan had endeavoured to have an equal allocation of unpaid care work and both espoused gender-egalitarian attitudes. With Ursula's illness, however, Ryan took on the full load of household and childcare tasks, alongside – in effect – becoming a carer for his partner. He said this was something that he did not 'really bat an eyelid about taking on' having had prior caregiving experience.

At the time of interviews, Ursula was recovering well from her long-term illness and had been able to return to her studies and intrahousehold duties, and their current arrangements have returned to their generally egalitarian divisions. Self-identifying as a working-class and low-income family household that struggled prior to March 2020, both Ursula and Ryan lamented that the pandemic

and the ensuing cost of living crisis has exacerbated their financial insecurities. In particular, the lockdown closures had hampered Ryan's work in the music sector and had long-term implications for his future job security. Further, it has also had a multitude of physical and psychological implications for their family household.

Experiencing difficulties in accessing hospital appointments and seeing specialists, Ursula described the period as having a 'downhill' effect on her physical health which consequently had a 'toll on [her] mental health'. Having been physically impaired, Ursula said her partner 'was pretty much doing it all. You know, I was, I was trying, but I was literally just able to shuffle to the loo and back'. Ursula's physical condition resulted in her having to take a long period away from her academic studies and eventually resulted in her decision to drop from full to part-time arrangements. Experiencing a sense of 'horrific guilt' in falling behind with her academic deadlines, alongside having 'brain fog' after contracting COVID-19, Ursula's stress levels were exacerbated by the additional home-schooling pressures. She described the pandemic as having:

'transformed my whole life, it's transformed the way I am as a person. I lost all my confidence, you know, that sort of thing' [...] 'the whole experience has just changed who I am able to be. It's all been, quite, the whole experience was quite disabling'.

Egalitarianism

Ursula nonetheless said she was grateful for her and Ryan's egalitarian relationship in that he readily 'stepped up' to shoulder the increased unpaid care and household duties when she fell ill and was in 'effect acting as a lone parent'. They have no access to informal family networks of support.

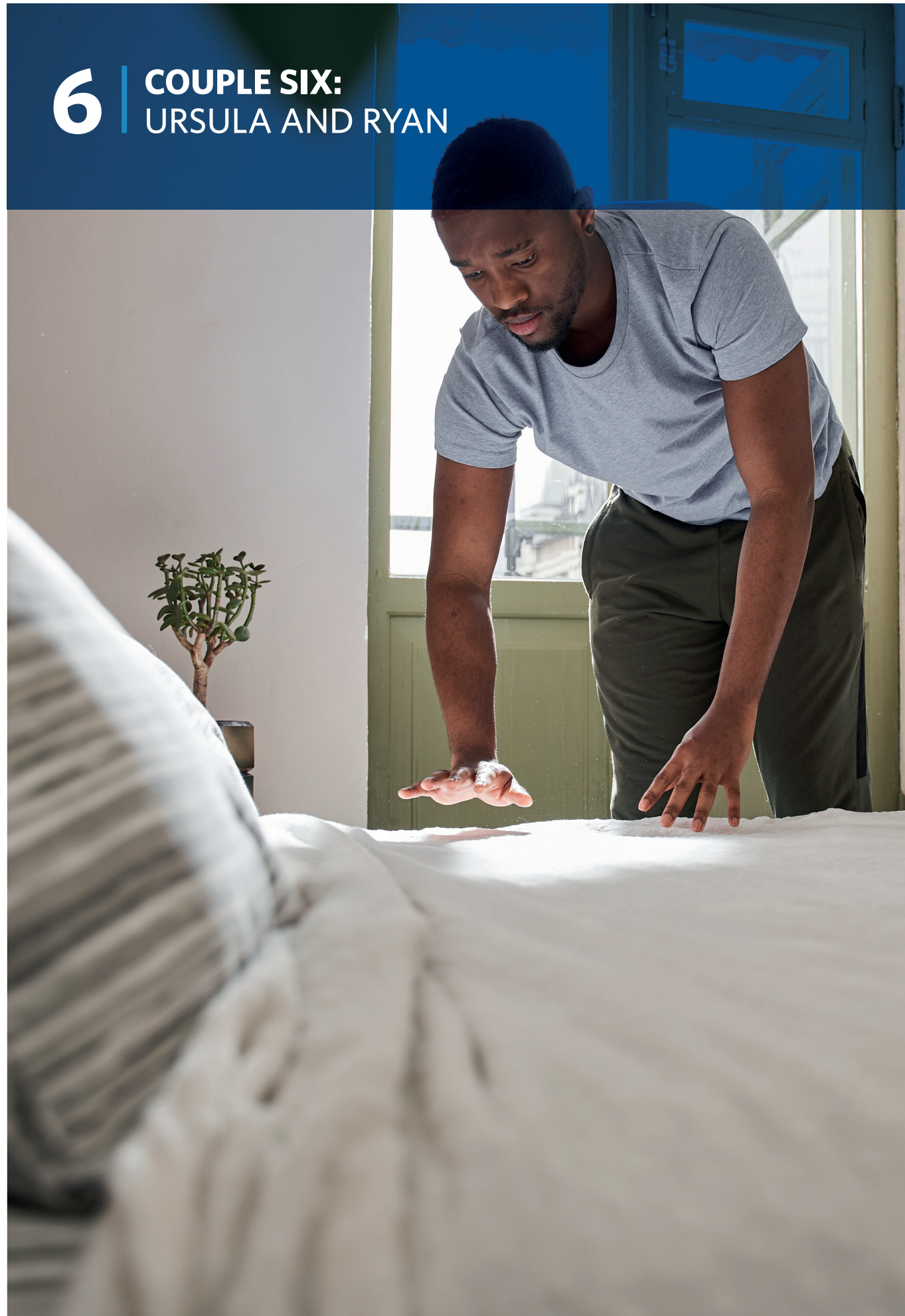
Ursula and Ryan both remarked that their prior experiences of being unpaid carers have shaped their current allocations of care work and how they perceive – and subsequently – value this form of labour. He stated that:

'it's surprising how many resources you can pull from yourself and with the situation with what happened with [Ursula] I knew where to pull that from, so I just kind of cracked on with it. That's not to say it was easy. It wasn't, it was, at times, you are sitting going like 'I don't know how I'm going to be able to manage to do anything'. So yeah, [...] I was in a position where I could actually function well enough to be able to do that but there are people out there that have nothing, so I don't know how they manage'.

Ryan stressed that his past caring experiences shaped his ability to provide care for his partner and her biological children, and how the pandemic provided him with an:

'education as to how to be able to survive in times when people are having trouble financially themselves. So, I had to work out how I was going to negotiate what I was doing. To be able to make ends meet, which was difficult'.

6 | **COUPLE SIX:**
URSULA AND RYAN



1 | **COUPLE ONE:**
TINA AND CONNOR



COUPLE ONE: TINA AND CONNOR

Tina and Connor (35-44) are a cohabiting couple who have two children under the age of five (aged 2 and 4). They live in an extremely rural location in Scotland, with limited housing availability, formal childcare facilities and job opportunities. At the start of the pandemic, Tina was on maternity leave and Connor was self-employed. With the first government lockdown (March 2020) negatively impacting his work sector, Connor gradually changed occupations, having implications for both their finances and their household arrangements.

Although both Tina and Connor expressed gender-egalitarian attitudes, the intrahousehold divisions of unpaid care during the pandemic became split along more traditional gender lines, with the majority of care and domestic tasks and the mental load taken on by Tina. These divisions were attributed to financial reasons which were heightened by the pandemic and ensuing cost of living crisis, alongside the challenges of living in a rural location with limited opportunities for stable and higher-paid work. The pandemic thus did not lead to a significant reallocation of the gendered division of unpaid care work for this couple. Their unique experiences are discussed below.

Household distribution of paid work and unpaid care

At the onset of the pandemic, Tina and Connor's family care and paid work arrangements altered significantly, with the birth of their second child. With their baby requiring hospital treatment for several months, neither were able to return back to full time work. Although admitting that *'having a tiny, tiny child is pretty stressful'* during the pandemic, and especially one that required *'a lot of care'*, both felt *'really lucky'* in terms of being able to receive some government financial support. This helped with their living and travel costs to the hospital, especially when Connor who, at the time, was self-employed and experienced difficulties finding work due to the *'downturn in his industry'*. Both Tina and Connor lamented that they could not be together as a family during this stressful time as they not only had another child at home to care for, but they had to visit the hospital separately in line with the hospital's COVID-19 policy. However, they believed that they did not experience the immediate fears and worries of the pandemic due to being *'so focused on the baby'* which, according to Connor *'took [their] mind off the Covid thing'*.

Financial Circumstances

Despite receiving some government financial support while their newborn baby was hospitalised, the pandemic had financial implications for Tina and Connor. This was compounded by housing shortages in the rural location that they live. Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, they had bought

some land to build their own home. They stressed this had led to financial challenges, affecting their decision-making and how they as a couple organised their paid work and unpaid care arrangements. Impacted by the closure of the tourist industry, Connor shifted to a new job that provided a more stable and *'guaranteed income'*. However, this new role functions on a rotation of two weeks working *'on'* and away from the family home throughout the day and into the evening, followed by two weeks *'off'*.

As both Tina and Connor confirmed, this was an agreed decision that was deemed best for their family's current situation and financial circumstances. As Connor stressed, *'you have to take the work that's there'* especially when you live in a location where job opportunities are limited. To further ameliorate some of the financial challenges they were facing, during the second lockdown phase in Scotland, Tina took on additional part-time work. She said:

'I think, possibly if costs of living hadn't gone up so, so much, I might not be working as much as I am. I might have just stuck with the other jobs that I had prior to maternity leave that were bringing in a bit of money. But we weighed it up and decided to do it because we need the money.'

Indeed, both Tina and Connor reinforced that they now *'totally rely on [her additional] income because everything's got so expensive'*.

The change in Connor's paid employment had implications for how the couple shared their childcare and domestic household responsibilities. Tina viewed her ability to work from home as positive, allowing her more flexibility in terms of providing care for their children. However, this commonly resulted in her working irregular hours, both in the early hours of the morning and then again in the evening once the children were in bed, having an impact on her well-being.

'I just don't have the rest time. So, I have a good balance between work and my family, like, I think that the way that I work works well with the kids. And I get everything done and, and that's all fine. It's just I don't have that time to shut down and rest [...] I am not getting a mental break at all.'

Informal Care Support from family

To support Tina and Connor's paid work, and help provide some form of break, informal care support was provided by Connor's mum who looked after the children two to three times a week for a few hours. With Connor working away, Tina said that she *'wouldn't be able to do [her] job without it'*, underlining the importance of informal family networks of kin in providing this form of care when formal provisions are not available or affordable. This was expressed by Connor as *'a kind of two-way thing'* with his mother providing childcare and they in turn providing emotional caring support to his widowed mother and assisting her in the context of her poor mobility.

These feelings were further compounded by their concerns for their daughter's socialisation and developmental growth. Having not long moved to Scotland before the pandemic, they remarked that their child only experienced a short period of nursery and had just started to *'learn English properly'*. Indeed, the couple had faced difficulties securing access to a place in Scotland's early care sector. They said they had to wait *'an entire year to gain a place'*. Explaining these challenges when arriving in Scotland, Fiona reiterated that:

'immediately we applied for a nursery. And we didn't get it which really, I don't know. I remember that was really horrible. Because I felt like I cannot look for a job. I cannot even think about starting at uni again as I had to be home with her... for a whole year.'

Fiona spoke of the importance of accessible and affordable early care provisions and the real-life consequences of not having access to formal care provision and the difficult decisions that have to be made among couples, especially when you do not have family living in the country to provide informal support.

There were clear tensions over each other's domestic household contributions, with Neil admitting a lack of communication. Neil said this happens when *'some of the [cleaning] stuff hasn't been properly discussed. And then we just get annoyed'*, especially in relation to how to carry out the task properly and prompting one another to do so. According to Neil, the division of unpaid care is *'split based on preferences and certain circumstances that arise [each] week'*. In part, Fiona agreed with this, especially in the preference for her decreased involvement in the developmental and play aspect of the childcare duties, but also attributed the more unequal domestic load that she carries as being partly to do with internalised gender assumptions of these roles, including her own, in that *'males and females are just different. Like, they have a different way of thinking'*.

Moving Forward

Overall, their household did not experience a radical rearrangement of their previous allocations of unpaid labour; with more being shouldered by Fiona who carried increased shares of the mental load and day to day household management. However, Neil was responsible for certain tasks and – out of preference for doing so – was more actively involved in the physical play and spending quality time with their child. Indeed, their divisions were explained in complex ways, both shifting and remaining stable throughout the pandemic, with changes in Neil's additional time spent with their child to allow Fiona to carry out household tasks in *'peace and quiet'*. The pandemic did result in additional financial worries and stress for their family, compounded by their relative concerns for their daughter's well-being.

Aware of their arrangements, Fiona and Neil outlined that they are *'striving'* to have more equality, but that it is difficult

to maintain a consistent routine, at present, due to Neil's unpredictable working patterns. Both viewed having a more consistent work pattern and Fiona's upcoming graduation and move into paid employment, along with their child getting older, as being key factors that will contribute towards their ability to more equally share the unpaid care and domestic household work in the future.

COUPLE FIVE: FIONA AND NEIL

Fiona and Neil (25-34) are a couple from Eastern Europe, migrating to Scotland prior to the pandemic. They have one primary school aged-child (6 years old). They had both been full-time students at the start of 2020, with Neil graduating at the beginning of the first lockdown. Neil then found employment as an architectural assistant. Both Neil and Fiona worked from home throughout the first and second lockdown periods in Scotland and they both said they struggled not only in terms of time but with managing the spatial boundaries of their home, work and childcare responsibilities in a small flat.

The pandemic increased their pre-existing financial concerns; prior to the lockdown, they had faced financial challenges as full-time students and Neil had worked part-time in the hospitality industry, providing necessary financial support for the family. They stressed their income was low and that they were unaware until they were informed by a worker in the social care sector that they could seek additional financial support. They eventually managed to navigate the support on offer and gain access to childcare benefit, Universal Credit and the furlough scheme, perceiving these additional social security payments as important for their family. They share some of their experiences below.

Both Fiona and Neil said their household divisions of unpaid care work prior to the pandemic had been cut across gendered lines. While Fiona carried out the majority of household tasks and ‘behind the scenes’ childcare and household management, Neil was the primary earner. Neil said that he was, however, highly involved in the childcare and carried out, through preference, specific household chores such as cleaning the bathroom.

The blurring of boundaries between spheres of life

The pandemic had variable ramifications on their allocation of tasks; it increased Fiona’s pre-existing domestic load but also led to Neil being more involved with childcare as a result of being more physically present at home. For Fiona and Neil, the biggest ramification for their household during the pandemic was having to balance their previously separated life spheres of work, university, and family under one roof. Fiona said, candidly, that ‘the hardest thing we’ve had to adjust to, is having our daughter’s home all the time. I know it sounds kind of horrible, but we kind of got used to just our own like, uni and work and home [demarcations]’- and that this resulted in ‘hard’ negotiations of ‘who did what’, with Fiona outlining that it was ‘mostly herself looking after the household’, with Neil being ‘caught up with [their] daughter’, something that she preferred.

However, she appeared to have conflicted feelings. Having suffered from post-natal depression in her home country, which they both said has conservative views about the gendered division of labour and a poor paternity leave system, she became the sole carer, struggling with the rigid gendered norms associated with intensive motherhood and expectations placed upon new mothers to ‘feel that bond [...] and want to be with their children all the time’. Hence, Fiona said she felt happier during the pandemic and the lockdowns which meant her partner was working from home and could become more actively involved in the physical play and care of their child.

However, she lamented the double burden of carrying, more so than her partner, the ‘mental labour’ and general management of domestic duties and routine childcare tasks. She said this was also ‘intensified in some way’ after the final lockdown in Scotland and return to so-called ‘normal’ life, exacerbated by an enlarged university workload. Her increased involvement in these tasks she stressed, in part, also related to Neil’s increased paid working hours. In turn, she said she struggled with the challenges of balancing the demands of being in full-time higher education and feeling not fully valued or recognised in managing this double load. She commented:

‘I think I do more around the house [...] But it’s because he does work more, he works much more than I do, I mean, although like, uni is equally important, it is. But I don’t think he’ll think about it like, oh, she must be tired from uni work, I’ll clean up...’

Heightened Tensions

These tensions between valuing each other’s relative paid and unpaid work contributions had been heightened during the peak lockdown period. Indeed, discussing how the lockdown was ‘immensely bleak and full of anxiety’, Neil noted that working throughout the pandemic was a ‘real difficult period’ that stole two years of their lives. Addressing the financial worries they experienced, he lamented that there was a clear ‘cascading effect on households’, with the compounded duties of caring and providing for your family in the same physical sphere. Having recently moved into a new job as the pandemic hit, and then rapidly moving to working from home, he reflected that it was not only challenging, but their income also fluctuated and was affected according to the projects he was assigned too – engendering further stress and pressure.

While grateful for the additional government support and benefits received throughout the different lockdown phases, both Fiona and Neil commented upon the UK’s complex eligibility criteria for accessing them. Due to Fiona’s student status, and Neil’s fluctuating income, the financial support they received also fluctuated, providing variable monthly sums of additional monetary support. In all three interviews, the pandemic and related long-term impacts were said to have had a scarring effect on their household, with both agreeing that there was a real impending ‘fear of the unknown’ in the context of the cost of living crisis.

Both Tina and Connor were acutely aware of the inequality in their household arrangements, with Connor lamenting that Tina took on the ‘bulk’ of domestic and childcare duties. Both believed that domestic household responsibilities and unpaid care work should be shared equally among both partners and is something that they both aspire to emulate one day. However, both agreed that the lack of formal care provisions and well-paying job opportunities in their current living context has led to an unequal distribution of care work in their household. Indeed, prior to the pandemic and when they only had one child, Connor stressed that they previously shared the load more equally as well as both being key financial contributors to the household.

‘In terms of domestic duties and stuff, I used to do a lot more of the cleaning and washing and whatever else...I think, it’s probably like [in order of priority], the house, the craft, and the children’.

They agreed that having their second child at the start of the pandemic created ‘more imbalance’. This unequal distribution has also been compounded by Connor’s inflexible shift work arrangements of having to work long hours away from home two weeks at a time. Tina said:

‘You know, it’s always just extremes, isn’t it? So, like when he’s on shift, it’s like 14 days, which is a lot, so if his work was more like, one week on and one week off, for you know, just for a shorter period of time. So, so it wasn’t so long to wait for him to be around again, so then you know, you’ve got the opportunity if you really need a break, you can say I really need a break, because I do occasionally say that. I’m just like that you’re getting up with kids in the morning, I need a break. Yeah. So, I guess if there was just generally more of a balance, I think it’d be a good thing. And that’s to do with [Connor’s] work and commitments, really, because I think I’ve got a good balance with what I do. And it’s not his fault. It’s just, just the circumstances’.

Connor was consciously aware of his demanding work shifts and the inadvertent impact that this has had in increasing the domestic labour of Tina. In his individual interview, he also outlined how his job role hampers the time afforded to care and his physical ability to be a more involved father, something that he was clearly eager to be for his two dependent-age children:

‘I think it’s not ideal at all in the slightest. You know, I get the guilt every time I go back on shift because I haven’t done enough with the kids on the two weeks off and [partner] is stressed, because she’s got so much on domestically, whatever, and I haven’t really helped as much as I should have on my two weeks off, and I know, I’m going to be back on shift. And I’m going to have, I’m just not here basically – it’s as good as not being here’.

Reflections and visions for the future

Acknowledging the pandemic-related impacts and their relative occupational role changes, Tina and Connor were clear in that they are not fully content with their current intrahousehold arrangements. But they jointly agreed (evident in their individual and joint interviews) that they consider this to be a unique phase in their family’s life stage course. Indeed, both aspired to have more equitable arrangements and explicitly concurred that their current allocations are only temporary and will eventually change, with Tina highlighting that there ‘is light at the end of the tunnel’. They envisioned this more egalitarian arrangement occurring when having the resources to build their own home and the security that this provides (over renting) and with their youngest going to school. They felt with this they could swap the relative stresses of each other’s current position, with Connor contributing more to the household and care arrangements, and Tina being able to take on more paid working hours.

2 | **COUPLE TWO:
LOUISE AND GARY**



5 | **COUPLE FIVE:
FIONA AND NEIL**



'Lewis does so much more of the domestic stuff, Lewis does all of the domestic stuff I would say, so that's probably really unusual, I know in most cases it would be the other way around, but it's just the way, because he was a chef and because he really likes to be, he likes things to be the way that he likes them to be. He does all that'.

Lewis and Janet stressed that for them as a couple, the pandemic encouraged further equal co-parenting practices. They had their first child at the end of 2021, weeks before Scotland entered its second lockdown wave. Indeed, Lewis described this period as having...

'worked out really well, that's three months that I would never have had otherwise, if it wasn't for Covid. I would never have had that with [child] at all, so that was amazing, and obviously, well, with the first one, it's just such a learning curve, so, if Janet had been by herself doing that, it's, it's not easy at all. And we were/ are lucky that Janet's family are never further than a knock from a door...'

The pandemic, working and parenthood

The second COVID-19 lockdown period then enabled Lewis to provide the necessary support and care to both his wife and child in these critical early stages. With Janet being on maternity leave, Lewis predominately worked from home and balanced his online teaching obligations around his caring responsibilities. He said with little face-to-face online interactions, he prepared his classroom activities late in the evening to prioritise his care responsibilities. Noting that he 'couldn't really do anything while [the baby] was awake' and that although 'it was tough doing it at night' he got 'the time back during the day, that [he] wouldn't have had otherwise' if it was not for the lockdown period.

COVID-19 did, however, have significant negative implications for their pre-COVID workload. Working as a primary school principal teacher, managing staff and vulnerable families in her work setting, Janet said that the stay-at-home regulations and lack of clear guidance for key workers in the education sector led to it being a highly stressful period. In the first lockdown wave, she was responsible for a 'big vulnerable group' of additional family management cases, with many not having English as their first language. Due to the ripple effect of the pandemic halting social worker visits to the families that Janet managed on a day-to-day basis in school, at times, she became concerned for some of the household's general well-being. Janet said that this also combined with the complex emotions she was experiencing with pregnancy during the pandemic. She said she had to:

'...spend quite a lot of time, em, phoning, em, like safeguarding, doing a lot of safeguarding stuff and our school was open to vulnerable children which is key worker children as well. But I wasn't allowed in, I actually wasn't allowed to because when you were pregnant, you were[n't] allowed into the workplace. And that was, that was difficult. That was difficult because I could have chosen, I could have chosen to go into work but that

would've been against the government recommendations and that, yeah, [...] it was, am I doing the right thing or am I not doing the right thing ...'

The pandemic also led to a temporary disruptive change in their family household as Lewis felt pressured to volunteer in a teaching hub during the first lockdown period. Initially resistant to do so as Janet was pregnant, Lewis said that he had not been 'comfortable' volunteering but having recently started at the school and, perceiving a lack of senior support, felt he had little choice. Janet acknowledged that 'as a young able-bodied man [...] it was very difficult for Lewis... to say no'. Lewis said they then felt pushed into making the mutual agreement to live apart while he was working in the hub. Due to the potential risks of coming into contact with pupils and staff members during the peak pandemic period, both agreed that this was the most appropriate decision to safeguard Janet and their unborn child.

Overall, the pandemic-induced environment did not result in a reorganisation of Janet and Lewis's divisions of unpaid work. In part, this is because they already had egalitarian arrangements with Lewis willingly taking on the lion's share of cooking and domestic household chores. Reasons for their current egalitarian allocations were predicated on the influences of their childhood socialisation - affecting their views and practical divisions on unpaid care at present, preferences for carrying out these tasks, and their gender-egalitarian attitudes. However, their childcare arrangements did become more split across gendered lines when Janet was on full maternity leave and when Lewis returned to the workplace. This, however, was not through their own choice; they both desire to co-parent their children but lamented that, at their current life course stage, they were unable to practically enact these divisions due to a perceived lack of support for Flexible Working Arrangements (FWAs) in the educational sector.

COUPLE TWO: LOUISE AND GARY

Gary (45-54) and Louise (35-44) are a cohabiting couple who have been together for four years and have a blended family made up of four children. Together, they have one biological child. Louise also has a 12-year-old child who lives with her and Gary; Louise discussed some of the challenges of managing his developmental disability and how this was compounded due to the impact of the pandemic and ensuing school closures, with her having to assist in his home-schooling. Gary also has two children who live with his ex-wife (aged 2 and 4), visiting Louise and Gary's family home on alternate weekends.

Louise was on maternity leave during the first lockdown period in Scotland, and subsequently transitioned from full-time to part-time work in the second pandemic wave, whereas Gary left his job and set up his own business. Overall, pandemic-induced impacts did not result in a significant reallocation of a more egalitarian allocation of unpaid labour and childcare tasks. However, it did alter their pre-existing arrangements, perceived primarily as a positive shift for their family circumstances. Their experiences are explored in more depth below.

Paid and Unpaid Household Work Arrangements

Gary and Louise's work-family arrangements were described as quite traditional, with Gary currently being the primary financial contributor to the household, and Louise working part-time and taking on the majority of the care and domestic household tasks. They came to this agreed-upon allocation through open discussions, seeing it as a pragmatic and 'most sensible use of both [their] time and talents right now' in the context of the pandemic and their family's specific life course stage - having recently had a baby.

Due to the timing of their child's birth amidst the pandemic and both partners transitioning to home working, Gary was able to be actively involved in the first initial months of their baby's life as a primary caregiver, alongside Louise. Indeed, he explained that this had a significant and positive impact which affected his outlook on his role as a father and, encouraged his decision to start his own business, leading to incremental changes within their family's current care arrangements.

Prior to COVID-19 and her maternity leave, Louise's worked full-time and her workplace had a clear working-from-office expectation; however, with the onset of the pandemic this quickly turned on its 'head' with her organisation rapidly transitioning to remote working and subsequently retaining a hybrid working environment. Having moved to part-time hours in the second lockdown period and after her maternity leave, Louise remarked that this shift was positive in that it enabled her to provide childcare and save on 'expensive nursery costs'. However, she said managing

work and family spaces under one roof was challenging, with Louise indicating that the blurring of spatial boundaries between her paid position and unpaid family responsibilities had negatively impacted her physical and mental well-being as well as her sense of identity as a mother and worker. She stated:

'The baby is in nursery for less time which means that it costs less, and obviously with me more, but I do think it's probably not good for me as a person. I think it's probably bad for your mental health and I think also your physical health because I am much sloppier than I was before, so [...] life feels a lot smaller than it did, so there's not that escape ...'

Home Schooling

This had been deepened she said by the additional stress of parents having to supervise and assist in their children's formal education during the pandemic in the face of mass school closures. Louise outlined that this was a source of frustration and stress in their family home - especially since her eldest child has developmental difficulties and was unable to physically access additional learning support spaces. Both struggled with their lack of usual routine throughout the first lockdown, and Louise described having 'total run ins' with her eldest child, recounting screaming and fighting over school-based activities. She said they gave up entirely on home-schooling in the initial lockdown due to it being too traumatic. However, after the sharing of guidance and support from the school in the second lockdown phase, Louise said she was able to assist her son more effectively at home with online learning.

Despite highlighting some of the negative implications of the pandemic and the measures taken to reduce the spread of the virus, Louise said that working from home had enabled her to be more productive domestically in the household, carrying out routine domestic tasks throughout her day. Prior to the pandemic, these tasks were often stressful, having to be completed in a shorter window of time. Reflecting upon her work and family arrangements prior to the pandemic, she recounted how she was often in a 'cold sweat' managing the stressful morning family care routine with having to get into the office, noting how she could not envision returning to that more stress-induced period. In a similar vein, Gary experienced a positive occupational change during the pandemic - he started his own independent business. Amidst the pandemic, Gary's business:

'really took off, ... and with working from home, giving me more autonomy and completely changing my perspective of work and how I can work differently and different hours to kind of get a better lifestyle for myself and this wee nuclear family that we have'.

Limitations to the current two-week paternity leave

For Gary, the pandemic enabled him to spend more time caring – beyond the limited statutory two weeks of paternity leave afforded to fathers in the UK. Gary stressed that COVID-19 gave him the ability to have time that would ‘never have happened’ if it was not for the lockdown and stay-at-home regulations. Louise also acknowledged this significant benefit of COVID-19 in relation to her partner and her son’s relationship, remarking that the lockdowns have ‘made a huge difference with [baby], as he’s probably got a much stronger bond with Gary’. Her comment reinforced the paradox of how, in some cases, the pandemic afforded families important time to become closer and allowed some previously less involved parents – due to restrictive ‘ideal worker’ cultural norms and ‘gendered’ leave measures – to be present as active care providers. Gary emphasised that he was very grateful for this additional time which surpassed the limiting two weeks of leave he had experienced with his other two children, remembering that it is ‘heart-breaking, physically painful having to leave your kid [...] and be missing things’. He emphasised that at that life point ‘for financial reasons, after two weeks, [he] had to go back to [his] work [long pause]’.

Gary explained that the pandemic had fuelled his desire to be a more involved and proactive father: in spending the first lockdown with his new-born, he remarked that he ‘wanted to be with my children more’ and ‘didn’t want to go back to an office, I didn’t want to drive two/four hours a day’. Gaining back long hours of commuting time and saving costs by continuing his work-from-home pattern, he said that in many ways the pandemic had been ‘positive for the bigger family picture’ and that he is ‘more flexible to help [Louise], more proactive with making decisions, in terms of where I can be and what I can do’.

However, similarly to Louise, he also experienced difficulties with navigating spatial boundaries between home and employment obligations. Working over 12-hour days in the early development stages of his business, Gary explained that he finds it ‘very, very hard to shut off, in that the office is there’ (next to their living room) and that it’s a ‘real struggle’ to switch off completely after a full day’s work. Despite both sharing this feeling, Louise and Gary agreed that they felt very lucky to have a home space that affords them an entirely separate office environment to work in.

Traditional divisions and Egalitarianism – differing life course stages

In relation to how they allocated their care work and paid work responsibilities, Louise reflected:

‘I do a lot more of it now because Gary is earning more money... and we kind of agreed that he’ll start paying for more and I’ll do, basically the house stuff, and I’m fine with that’. Gary corroborated this recounting that ‘we made the decision as a couple that Louise would work on a part-time basis to do the majority of it and I’ll help in every way I can’.

Both explicitly agreed that this pandemic-related division of domestic labour and paid work arose through joint discussions and was heavily linked to the current stage in their life course as a family. However, both of their joint explanations of this arrangement and their individual family roles – Louise as the primary caregiver and Gary as the main earner – were expressed in different ways. Indeed, while admitting that it was she who instigated the conversations that led to the current divisions of unpaid labour, Louise commented that she was nevertheless not completely satisfied and felt her positionality as a woman, current part-time employment and role as the primary caregiver ‘is no coincidence’, pointing to societal gendered norms and workplace environments and policies that encourage traditional gender roles of women as carers and men as breadwinners (Gaunt et al., 2022).

‘I’m very lucky to have the option to be at home with my child and stuff, but it wouldn’t be my first choice of life, like I would be more of an office work person; and I think, I don’t think it is valued, that, like I have as much capacity to make as much money as [Gary] does but I am seen as being at home and doing the crap. I’m a bit like I’ve sacrificed something to do this, but I don’t think that’s necessarily seen, I think it’s seen, as, oh you’re getting to be at home, you don’t need to work’.

Here, Louise’s excerpt is symbolic of how unpaid labour is undervalued and invisible as a form of work. Moreover, subtle forms of tensions arose in both individual’s descriptions of their practical division of family care and their experiences of this. Although Gary remarked that he ‘helps out’ as much as he can in the household around his work schedule, Louise found the use of this expression frustrating, as it is suggestive of her being the innate and primary family caregiver. However, it was reiterated several times by both Louise and Gary that their family-work arrangements had been a mutual decision and were only for a short period in their lives given the age of their baby and the opportunity the pandemic offered for Gary to start his own business. In turn, both expressed gender egalitarian values and a desire to shift the weight of some of their family responsibilities to one another, with Gary stating that he would ‘swap in a heartbeat if I got to spend more time with the wee man [his son]’ and Louise conversely asserting that ‘sometimes, I would kill to sit in an office on my own’. They appeared very aware of this tension, however, and asserted that they hoped the dynamics in the allocation of household work would eventually shift among them as a couple.

COUPLE FOUR: JANET AND LEWIS

Janet (30) is a principal primary teacher and is married to Lewis, who is also a primary school teacher. They have two pre-school children (21 and 5 months old). Janet had been on maternity leave during the first lockdown period in Scotland, and has returned to work for four days a week, with one day off to provide care for their children. Both Janet and Lewis described their household allocation of labour as egalitarian with – in terms of role reversal to established social norms – Lewis shouldering the primary responsibility for the cooking and general cleaning in the household and Janet is the higher earner.

Career Shifts and gender-egalitarian arrangements

Janet and Lewis both work in the education sector. Janet worked in a more senior and higher paying role. Lewis had previously worked in the hospitality sector, and while he enjoyed his job, he had worked extremely long and demanding hours. To gain greater control over his working hours, and to have increased time with his family, Lewis had re-trained as a teacher.

Janet said she was very satisfied with their current work-home-family arrangements, remarking that Lewis takes greater responsibility for intrahousehold tasks as he does them ‘better’. This was confirmed by Lewis who said he preferred to be in control of the household’s domestic organisation. The couple received informal childcare support from both sets of grandparents. They also paid for a cleaner once a week to undertake what they defined as the ‘core domestic tasks’. They perceived the support from the grandparents as crucial in enabling them to both work and questioned what they would do without such help, especially in the face of high nursery costs. They saw the cleaner as essential in freeing up time to focus on their children.

Experiences of the pandemic

Both Janet and Lewis talked about how COVID-19 had significantly affected schooling and their work as teachers. They also reflected on the shortcomings of the UK’s paternity two-week paid leave system and working in an inflexible occupational role that does not encourage family-friendly working patterns. They both agreed that the paternity system is outdated and needs to be restructured to account for couples like them, who enact – as much as they can – egalitarian household arrangements but face obstacles in their ability to share childcare responsibilities practically and equitably. Moreover, they also were acutely aware of societal gendered norms and how there exists a certain degree of stigmatisation for men taking and requesting additional leave (or a reduction of days) in the education sector, particularly in the female-dominated

sector of primary education. They both felt this to have hampered Lewis’s ability to be a more involved father.

Overall, the pandemic was described as greatly disruptive to Janet and Lewis’s occupational work arrangements, causing undue stress and concern in their household throughout the intensive lockdown periods. They did, however, talk positively about their family arrangements and their allocation of unpaid tasks. Indeed, Janet and Lewis exuded egalitarian attitudes, and both strongly emphasised the importance of equal parental involvement in the initial early stages of children’s lives, noting how this is critical for children’s health and well-being, and general development. This is something they both said they were passionate about. Their egalitarianism was also reinforced by having similar beliefs that domestic household tasks should not be an assumed gender norm for women to carry out. In part, they outlined that the socialisation processes of witnessing their parents enact egalitarian divisions in childcare and domestic work have greatly influenced their current egalitarian and role reversal household allocations. While Janet asserted that childcare and household tasks should be ‘an equal responsibility’ she was nonetheless aware of the gender norms around caring. She said:

‘I think society expects that it’s not any equal responsibility because there’s never an expectation that Lewis is gonna be the person who’s going to be the primary career, but really, in reality, they’re both of our kids, so’.

This was reiterated by Lewis who stated that ‘I think things should be equal, I feel...there’s no one person should have responsibility and, in our house, ... I want to do it and like doing it.’ They both talked about personal preferences, with Lewis being very conscious that he had gatekeeping tendencies and liked to take control of the majority of household activities, such as the general tidying up, washing and cooking, for example. He stressed that he likes to do things his way and has undiagnosed OCD tendencies, admitting that he is ‘too controlling over it, so... I’m fine doing it’. He stated:

‘I enjoy cooking and like doing like the washing and stuff, like, I just like having... doing it my way [we both laugh]. And like the tidying and stuff, like, I dunno, I find cleaning and tidying quite therapeutic. Like tidying, everything needs to be in the right place [...] I like getting everything tidied and doing it my own way’.

Lewis reiterated that a key factor influencing his current contributions to the household was his childhood socialisation. This is evidenced in his reflection that ‘growing up, my mum did the cooking but my dad, he’s a bit like me, like clean freaks, so he would do all the cleaning and stuff like that...so, equal, definitely equal...’. Janet corroborated Lewis’s justifications for taking more control in this household domain, explaining that:

4 | **COUPLE FOUR:**
JANET AND LEWIS



3 | **COUPLE THREE:**
LILLY AND DAVID



COUPLE THREE: LILLY AND DAVID

Lilly (24) is a nurse and David (27) is a prisoner officer and they have a baby – born towards the end of the second COVID-19 lockdown phase in Scotland. Both work in full-time positions. The couple have been cohabiting for seven years and at the beginning of the pandemic moved to a new rented home. As key workers, both had to be present in their workplaces throughout the lockdown periods; perceiving this as a particularly stressful and anxiety-inducing time.

This stress was further compounded by a relative's death because of COVID-19 and the couple having experienced a series of miscarriages. Overall, the pandemic influenced their intrahousehold arrangements of unpaid care work in complex ways; with temporary shifts in the allocation of 'who does what'. Indeed, David actively contributed more and took on the lion's share of intrahousehold duties while Lilly was working very long hours on the COVID-19 wards as a nurse, but this shifted following the birth of their first child and then shifted again with her return to work from maternity leave. Some of their story is shared below.

Being a key worker during the pandemic

Both Lily and David are key workers and throughout the pandemic remained working 'on site'. David's job as a prison officer prior to the pandemic had comprised long and erratic shift patterns involving off-site travelling, often extending beyond his contracted hours. However, this changed during the pandemic when he was promoted into an office-based role with fixed working hours. This consistency in his work pattern enabled David to take on more of the household tasks. This was perceived as a positive shift for Lilly who went on to experience very long and irregular working patterns, causing a severe dip in her mental health as a result of being involuntarily transferred from her regular hospital ward where she worked to a very busy and intensive COVID-19 ward. She depicted the changes in the allocation of domestic duties as her partner having 'done a lot more'. Prior to the pandemic and their change in job roles, she said that it would always have been her doing the cooking and cleaning. But she said, 'David's done a lot ...'. In particular, she talked about:

'coming home, I'd strip at the door, and he would put everything into the wash, and ensure all of my ward clothes were washed and cleaned after every single shift to reduce the likelihood of the virus spreading in the flat'.

Lilly found the pandemic a stressful and emotional period, witnessing 'a lot of deaths in the ward'. They also as a couple experienced their own covid-related bereavement, alongside the trauma of multiple miscarriages. Amidst these distressing times, she remarked taking great comfort in David's emotional as well as hands-

on physical support, describing him as a 'rock' for her during this period, and 'stepping up' to manage their domestic household duties.

Indeed, David emphasised that the pandemic had been a very difficult period for Lilly, recounting that when Lilly arrived home from the hospital, they 'couldn't touch each other' until her uniform had been washed and Lilly had showered. He highlighted how his internal job role change had altered his contributions towards domestic care duties, with him doing much more. He stressed that growing up he had taken responsibility for caring for both his elderly grandparents and talked about how this had influenced his values around the importance of unpaid care work. As a consequence of his previous unpaid caring experiences, he said he was not fazed by taking on more of the household tasks.

Shifting arrangements: individual and societal contradictions

Both David and Lilly expressed gender egalitarian attitudes, but their arrangements shifted and became more traditional at the tail end of the pandemic, and after the birth of their first child. David said that while their childcare arrangements were equal, household tasks were not anymore, with Lilly taking on the most when she was on maternity leave.

So, while both Lilly and David believed the household labour should be divided 'sort of fifty-fifty' – with David saying, 'we live in a different generation now', Lilly stressed that she was also aware that the society in which we live means it tends to:

'always sort of falls on the women. Like, it will be me that sorts who [the child] is going to. If I get my shifts, I am like "right, when's my mum working, if she's not..." Our brother-in-law will help, but only so long as he's off. But I think it's usually me who does everything childcare-wise. It's me that does most of the housework and the organising'.

Lilly also stated that although David does 'help her' in carrying out the domestic load, he needs to be asked to do so and 'doesn't really think of it in terms of the way I do'. She also noted that she carried the mental load and there was no thinking ahead or planning by him with her schedule in mind. Lilly said:

'if I want to go to the gym, I need to make sure David is home. And I'm going to book this class [at a specific time], whereas he'll just say to me "oh I'm going to this, or that." I ask to make sure he will be here...'

Gatekeeping Tendencies

David said their perceptions of their contributions to housework and the quality of these tasks were also very different. David admitted that 'I tidy the house and Lilly

cleans the house [...]'. Lilly then commented: 'he wouldn't say there is a difference, but I am absolutely certain there is'. Lilly also expressed that her levels of expectation around cleanliness were different from David's and showed signs of gatekeeping tendencies. Much of the domestic care literature has suggested that gatekeeping behaviours, as exhibited through high levels of expectation and standards, can act as a barrier to male partners becoming more involved in the household and childcare duties (Gaunt, 2008). David stressed that 'Lilly is a little bit more meticulous, OCD-wise', while he said he took a more relaxed approach to cleanliness levels and knew his standards around routine household tasks were not up to Lilly's. In the couple interview, Lilly commented 'I clean and you tidy' and that 'he doesn't do it to my standard, like he'll clean around stuff, I'll clean under...'. David associated his partner's increased involvement in unpaid care with her personal preferences and satisfaction levels of 'taking more pride in doing housework'; Lilly quickly dismissed it as being related to pride.

Overall, Lilly admitted to not feeling fully satisfied with their post-baby family-work arrangements. David, conversely, said that he believed that it had been working well for their family. But he also assured his partner in their couple interview that he was willing to take on or do whatever tasks required doing, remarking 'if you need me to do something, I'll do it'.

Irregular working hours and childcare

Both partners agreed that one of the difficulties they face following Lilly's return to work after maternity leave is her irregular shift work – and night shift – patterns. They both said that this made it difficult to 'plan ahead', especially in relation to childcare. While they had formal childcare in place for one day per week, their wider family provided informal care support for the rest of their working patterns. David took responsibility for the childcare drop offs and pick-ups, with the grandmother providing childcare regularly. David's brother was also involved and provided occasional help but their main source of informal care was from Lilly's mum. This, they said, was essential support given: (i) their working hours, especially for Lilly in terms of not being predictable; and (ii) the cost of formal childcare. David also reflected on his own work environment. He said that while his working hours were now more fixed in terms of start and finishing hours, he nevertheless worked in a male-dominated occupation, where attitudes among some of his senior colleagues still revolved around gendered stereotypes and a clear demarcation between work and family, with the latter not intruding into the former. As a consequence of this, he lamented that it was not always easy to speak openly about life outside of work or to raise family matters.

In an 'ideal world'...

Both Gary and Lilly said that in an ideal world, they would both like to reduce their hours to provide more care for their child and spend further quality time together as a family.

Lilly also stressed that her job was too emotionally and physically draining, especially during the pandemic and in the context of ongoing staff shortages and she was unsure how she could maintain that level of stress. However, they said this was currently not really a possibility for them as financially they both needed to work full-time. Of priority for them, they said, was saving for a mortgage, so that they could buy their own home and then subsequently re-think the work-family-household arrangements.