



Government  
**Equalities** Office

Putting equality at the heart of government

**The economic downturn  
– the concerns and  
experiences of women  
and families**

Qualitative and  
quantitative research

**Research findings**

March 2009

# Summary

## Women and families: attitudes, concerns and worries about the economic downturn

The Government needs to understand people's concerns about the economic downturn in order to identify solutions to protect families and build a stronger and fairer economy for the future. Women's experiences of the current downturn may vary compared with men's because they are more likely to:

- have caring responsibilities;
- work part-time or have other flexible working arrangements;
- be second earners;
- be on a low income or form part of a poor household; and
- head up lone-parent households.

These differences and others mean that women and men will be **affected differently** by the economic climate.

This document presents findings from Ipsos MORI's research for the Government Equalities Office (GEO) on the concerns and experiences of the economic downturn among women and families. It consists of discussion groups and two tranches of questions on nationally representative surveys, both conducted in January and February 2009.

### Key findings

- The qualitative findings suggest that women are generally more concerned than men about the effects of the downturn on themselves and their families. This concern is heightened among parents and carers, as well as among women in industries they perceive to be more vulnerable to recession, such as service industries.
- The survey results show that more women than men are concerned on many measures, including:
  1. concern about the impact of the economic downturn on family life (80% of women compared with 70% of men);
  2. feeling that the economic downturn has 'reduced the quality of their family life' (35% of women say it has reduced a great deal or a fair amount, compared with 26% of men);

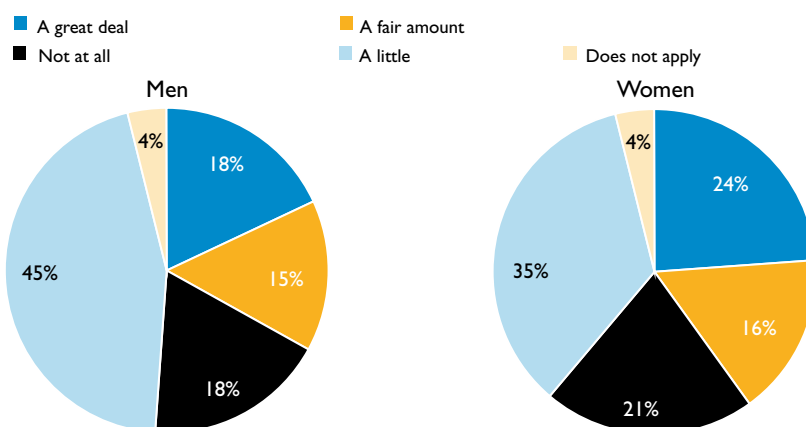
3. less optimism about the future of their personal financial circumstances over the next 12 months (19% of women think they will improve, compared with 27% of men);
  4. worrying about unemployment of themselves or members of their family (40% of women and 33% of men have worried a great deal or a fair amount in the last 2–3 weeks);
  5. agreeing that they have cut down their spending as a result of the current economic downturn (67% of women and 61% of men agree);
  6. agreeing that they cannot afford to save now as a result of the current economic downturn (59% of women and 49% of men agree);
  7. worrying about their ability to pay the bills (37% of women and 27% of men have worried a great deal or a fair amount in the last 2–3 weeks); and
  8. worrying about their children's job prospects (31% of women and 20% of men have worried a great deal or a fair amount in the last 2–3 weeks).
- There are **no** significant differences between men and women on the following measures:
    1. agreeing that 'if my family experiences difficulty in the current economic downturn, I believe there is government support and advice that meets my needs';
    2. worrying about their pension;
    3. worrying about their ability to work flexible hours;
    4. worrying about their ability to buy for the family the sort of things they're used to buying;
    5. worrying about their ability to retire as planned; and
    6. worrying about their ability to take maternity or paternity leave as planned.

# Worries and concerns about the downturn

- One of the biggest immediate concerns among the public is unemployment of self or family members. Figure 1 shows that more women than men are likely to be concerned about this issue (40% and 33% respectively).

**Figure 1: Concern about unemployment of yourself or family members**

I am going to read out some things that some people worry about these days, and I would like you to tell me to what extent, if at all, you have worried about each one in the last two to three weeks. For each, please tell me if you have worried about them a great deal, a fair amount, a little or not at all... Unemployment of yourself or members of your family.



Source: Ipsos MOR/GEO  
Base: 1,033 British adults (453 men, 580 women), 11–12 February 2009

- The discussion groups suggest that men are more concerned with job loss *per se*, as opposed to overall effect on their families, while women are concerned about this as well as other factors, such as partner job loss, reduced/increased job hours, pressure on individuals and household (bills, childcare, etc.).

*We may not actually show it to our partners, but we tend to worry more, because at the end of the day you're worried about are you going to survive – put food on the table for them and everything else.*

Female, Newcastle, 45–59, C2DE

*Women are at the front line. They hold on to the purse strings – it's their responsibility to buy the food, pay the bills; they have the worry of how to do that.*

Male, Northampton, 60+, C2DE

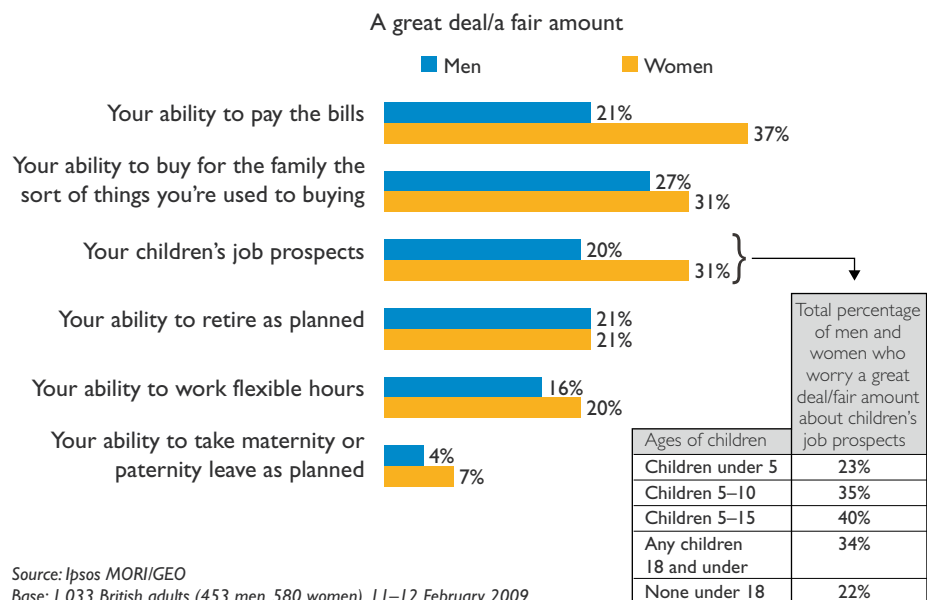
- A higher proportion of women than men also report that the downturn has reduced the quality of their family life (35% and 26% respectively).
- Figure 2 shows that three in 10 women are **worried about their children's job prospects** as a result of the downturn compared with two in 10 men (31% of women compared with 20% of men).

*My daughter, because her husband's not earning so much money, or they're concerned about the future, is having to work longer at her part-time job. So she spends less time with her children.*

Male, Northampton, 60+, C2DE

**Figure 2: Women tend to be more concerned**

I am going to read out some things that some people worry about these days **because of the current economic downturn**, and I would like you to tell me to what extent, if at all, you have worried about each one in the last two to three weeks. For each, please tell me if you have worried about them a great deal, a fair amount, a little or not at all.



# Income and personal financial circumstances

- **Fewer women than men are optimistic about future improvements in their personal financial circumstances** – only one in five women (19%) think their personal finances will improve over the next 12 months compared with nearly three in 10 men (27%). One-third of both men and women (36%) think their personal finances will get worse over the next 12 months.
- **Two-thirds of women (67%) agree that they have cut down their spending** as a result of the economic downturn, compared with six in 10 men (61%).

*I'm making Sunday roast last two days now, where before we just threw it out.*

Female, Newcastle, 25–59, ABC1

- **Six in 10 women (59%) report that they cannot afford to save now** as a result of the economic downturn, compared with five out of 10 men (49%).

*I haven't got any cash to save... if I did have I don't know where you'd put it even because nothing's giving you a return.*

Male, London, 25–44, ABC1

- Some women in the discussion groups mention that one effect of their concern is that they have switched to a less expensive supermarket, although other women also mention this and worry that children might suffer because of parents buying lower-quality food.

*My daughter argues with me about money more than my husband. Sometimes she'll come home and say, 'so and so's got this much money and why haven't I?'*

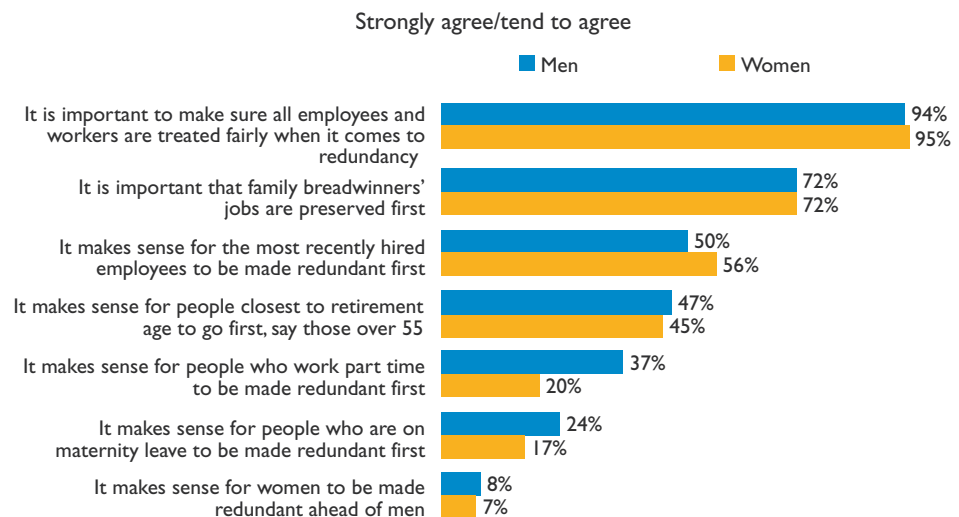
Female, Northampton, 25–59, mix of social grade

# Working arrangements

- Women in the discussion groups mention concern about the possibilities of facing redundancy, reduced part-time hours or longer working hours as workloads intensify in certain sectors to compensate for reduced resources.
- The vast majority (89%) of survey respondents (both men and women) do not agree that 'it makes sense for women to be made redundant ahead of men'. Fairness and breadwinners were regarded as important factors when making redundancies (Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Fairness and breadwinners should be important factors when making redundancies**

Please tell me how much you agree or disagree with each of the following statements. In difficult economic times, if an organisation is struggling...



Source: Ipsos MORI/GEO

Base: 1,033 British adults (453 men, 580 women), 11–12 February 2009

- Almost twice as many men as women agree that 'it makes sense for people who work part time to be made redundant first' (37% and 20% respectively).

*I approached them and they did change my hours to a set shift... so I have the ability to drop her off, get to work, leave work, pick her up, without losing out on wages and losing out on working time. I don't think they'll do it now for anybody new.*

Female, Northampton, 25–59, mix of social grade

- The group discussions suggest that (where applicable) **women are especially concerned with the potential loss of part-time jobs** – particularly if they work in the private sector. This is likely because more women are in part-time work than men.

*I was working for [a construction firm] and they cut all part-time hours, kept the full-time hours, and now they're employing more full-time staff for some reason.*

Female, Northampton, 25–59, mix of social grade

# Caring arrangements

- One in five mothers (20%) with children aged 16 and under say they are concerned that they will have to change their childcare arrangements due to the downturn (Figure 4).

*With my daughter turning 18 months, I would have been able to pay her nursery fees on my part-time wages, but then with the downturn I couldn't because my mortgage payments were going up, everything was going up... so I had to make the decision to go to full-time work.*

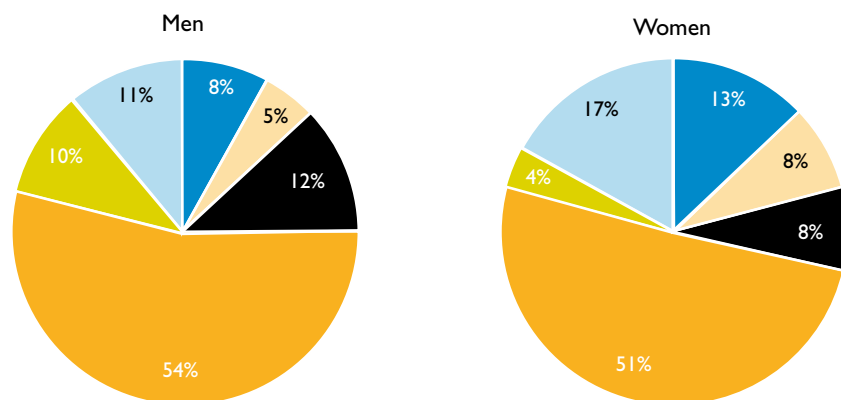
Female, Northampton, 25–44, ABC1

- Some 6% of all parents indicate that they have already adjusted their childcare arrangements.

**Figure 4: Concern about childcare arrangements**

How concerned, if at all, are you that you will have to change your current childcare arrangements due to the current economic downturn?

■ Very concerned      ■ Fairly concerned  
■ Does not apply      ■ Not very concerned      ■ I have already adjusted my childcare arrangements



Source: Ipsos MORI/GEO

Base: 1,033 British adults (227 parents with children under age 16 (82 men, 145 women)), 11–12 February 2009

- The group discussions indicate that women are worried about having to work longer hours and spend more on childcare.

*I am on occasions totally reliant on other people like my parents and my childminder. But you're asking them to use things like their fuel which is so pricey at the moment. And you're very conscious of that.*

Female, Northampton, 25–59, mix of social grade

- The qualitative work also suggests that women are concerned about whether they will be able to find new employment that complements their current childcare arrangements. A source of concern for women in the discussion groups who report that they are working more hours is that, as a result, there has been less time to spend with their families and much more to 'juggle' in taking care of their families.
- A few of the women in the discussion groups mentioned feeling stress because of concern about both their elderly parents as well as their own children. These individuals (often referred to as the 'sandwich generation') feel worried not only for their immediate family, who require emotional and financial support, but also for their parent(s) who in some cases required financial support or care as well.

*My father's carer's hours have been cut in half because the funding has been reduced.*

Female, London, 60+, mix of social grade

#### TECHNICAL NOTE

The research comprised 10 discussion groups with men and with women in three locations in England (London, Northampton and Newcastle) in January and February 2009. In addition, a quantitative survey was administered to a representative sample of residents across Great Britain to test the extent to which the views of participants in the qualitative research were indicative of wider public opinion.


The survey was conducted in two parts: part 1 comprised a sample of 1,049 adults in Great Britain, conducted over 6–8 February 2009. Part 2 comprised a sample of 1,033 adults in Great Britain, conducted over 11–12 February 2009. Interviews were conducted by telephone. Data was weighted to the known population profile, by age, gender, social grade, work status, cars in household and region.

The survey research is designed to provide robust data that is representative of the views of the British population as a whole. The focus group work, or qualitative research, is not statistically robust but rather is designed to explore participants' understanding of and reasoning about the issues at hand.

#### FURTHER INFORMATION

The full report, **The economic downturn – the concerns and experiences of women and families** by Julia Clark, Jerry Latter, Isabella Pereira, Katrina Leary and Tom Mludzinski, is published by the Government Equalities Office (GEO). This report is available on the GEO website at: [www.equalities.gov.uk](http://www.equalities.gov.uk)

Although this research was commissioned by the GEO, the findings and recommendations are those of the authors and do not represent the views of the GEO.



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