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The opportunity costs of informal care: does gender matter?[☆]

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Abstract

In this paper, we investigate the costs borne by both male and female carers in terms of their forgone formal employment opportunities. Traditionally, informal care was supplied by women but nowadays women are not only more likely to work, but also likely to be significant contributors to family finances. For women, this implies that the size of any forgone earnings cost of informal care is increasing. At the same time, population ageing is making for increasing numbers requiring care. From a policy perspective it is therefore helpful to consider a less traditional but nevertheless important source of informal care, men. We find that both male and female carers bear indirect costs in that they are less likely to be in paid work than otherwise similar non-carers and when they are in paid work they earn significantly less. However, we find that the motivation for lower employment participation is not the same for men as it is for women.

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1. Introduction

A key objective of the social services modernisation programme¹ launched by the UK government in 1998 is to help people to live independently. Central to this objective is

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¹ Department of Health (1998).

continued support for the policy of caring for the elderly infirm and chronic sick in the community.² Furthermore, government policy makers acknowledge that people generally want to live in their own homes if they can, and that within the community informal carers are the most important providers of social care.³ However, they also concede that “the care system does not adequately recognise the enormous contribution that informal carers make to maintain the independence of people with care needs” (Department of Health, 1998, para 2.10). In order to address this problem the government has included support for carers as one of the key elements in its action plan for modernising social services⁴ and developed a national strategy for carers (Department of Health, 1999). But in order to develop appropriate support packages it is important to identify who is caring and discover how informal care responsibilities impact on their lives. With respect to the latter, a key element is the quantification of the opportunity costs that arise because of the constraints imposed on carers’ labour supply by caring commitments.⁵ With respect to the question of identification the supply of informal care has traditionally been regarded as a female activity. However, successive General Household Surveys (GHS)⁶ have revealed that such activities are surprisingly common amongst men. This result is of some policy interest during a period when population ageing is making for ever increasing numbers needing care and labour market opportunities for women are expanding. The combination of these two factors raises doubts about women’s continuing willingness to meet such needs on the required scale. Men are a potential alternative source of supply but, perhaps even more so than for their female counterparts, there may be a trade-off to be made between caring and earning. This paper reports what is to our knowledge the first ever investigation of this issue from the male perspective.

In previous work (Carmichael and Charles, 1998, 1999) using the 1985 General Household Survey and its follow-up, the 1990 GHS we investigated, the impact of informal care responsibilities on the labour market behaviour of women—the traditional and still the numerically more important source of informal care. We found that working aged female informal carers were earning less per hour than would have been expected given their human capital. In addition, more committed female carers were less likely to participate in the formal labour market than otherwise similar non-carers. In this paper, we turn our attention to men, comparing and contrasting the labour market experience of male carers with that of their female counterparts.

² This stance towards community care is longstanding. See, for example, Department of Health (1989), para 1.9 and earlier reports dating back to 1957 (see Rowlands and Parker, 1998, v).

³ Department of Health (1998), paras 2.7 and 2.10.

⁴ Department of Health (1998), para 2.11.

⁵ The national strategy for carers (Department of Health, 1999) acknowledges that a majority of working-age carers are in paid employment and therefore flexibility needs to be a key theme in any package of support.

⁶ The 1985 General Household survey was the first ever large scale official survey of informal care activity in the UK and included a series of question designed to identify carers and provide information about them. A similar set of questions was included in the 1990 and 1995 surveys and more recently a new question on informal care responsibilities were included in the 2001 census. The data set used in this paper is extracted from the 1990 GHS, the 1995 data was not available when the study was initiated, however, Rowlands and Parker (1998) report some findings from a mainly bivariate analysis of the 1995 data and also provide a useful comparison with findings from the 1985 and 1990 data sets.

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