

Is caring for kids or relatives really still seen as a woman's job?

As figures show that women take more sick days than men – but spend them caring for others – Louisa Peacock asks why dropping everything to look after sick kids or relatives still seems to be a woman's role



Why is there still an unwritten rule that it's the woman who will sacrifice work to care for relatives or children? Photo: ALAMY



By [Louisa Peacock](#)

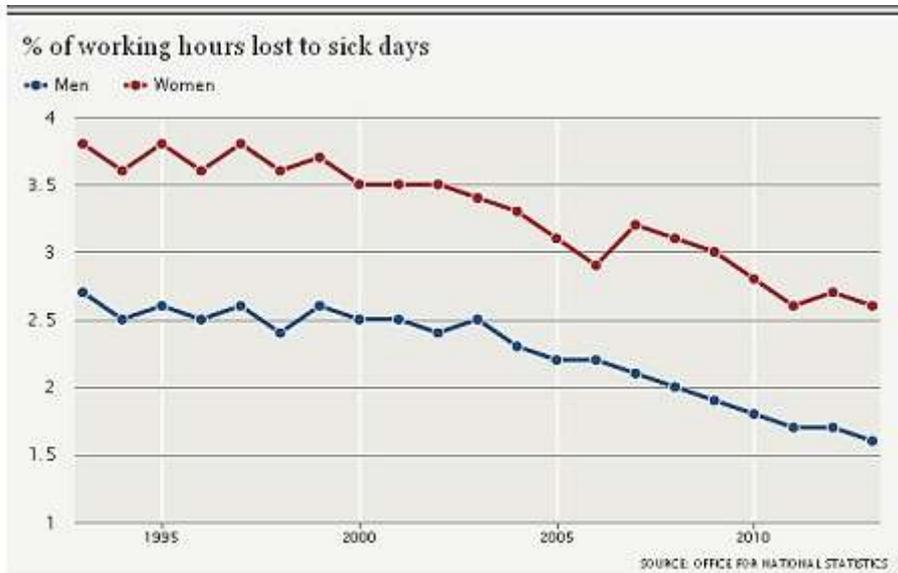
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So women are getting it in the neck again today over sickness absence. While the number of people pulling sickies has fallen, it is women who are more likely to be off ill than men, the latest government figures show. A whole 42 per cent more likely, in fact.

The figures follow another set of data [earlier this month](#), which revealed almost two thirds of UK employees on long-term sick leave are women.

Women! Who'd employ them? Not only are they the ones that go off on maternity leave, abandoning their employer for months on end (tusk), they're also prone to more illness than man-folk. It's a wonder that any boss has the nerve to recruit them at all!



As the [Telegraph pointed out this morning](#), however, amid the headlines screaming that WOMEN are more likely than men to take sick days, are the actual reasons behind this phenomenon.

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For in many cases, she is not taking sick days because she's a) ill or b) just can't be bothered to turn up to work. She's taking sick days to care for other people: kids, or [elderly relatives](#), in need of emergency help.

According to Karen Steadman, researcher at the Work Foundation, women tend to be the main carer for children or elderly relatives, so take sick days to deal with emergencies. Seeing as employers wouldn't grant the time off otherwise, pulling a sickie is often her only option.

Ah, suddenly the stats seem a lot clearer. The woman, yet again, sacrifices her day, life (and even her career – given that a high sick record pulls no favours when it comes to promotion rounds) to care for others, putting the needs of others before her own. The man, meanwhile, gets to carry on as normal at work.

When it comes to caring for kids or elderly relatives, is this still seen as a woman's responsibility?

Yes - it's mainly the woman who takes time off No - it's shared between men and women now Not quite - it's getting better, but there's still a long way to go
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Leaving aside the fact that employees feel they have to lie to their employers to take time off in emergencies; leaving aside any thoughts that companies could, you know, actually encourage flexible working, the real question here is, why aren't the men pulling sickies to care for others just as much?

Why is it always the *woman* who rushes to care for those in need, and not the man?

You can imagine the call from the childminder or nurse that your child/ relative is suddenly sick and needs to be taken home or visited immediately. You can imagine the frantic exchange between parents over breakfast that morning, deciding which one of them will rise to the call. And as you can imagine, it's nearly always the woman who does.

When I was younger, I cannot recall a single day when my dad looked after me while I was sick. It was always my mum. Many friends of mine say the same. Why is there an unwritten rule that women carry this burden, and men don't?

Steadman tells me it's still considered somewhat the norm for women to take time off to care, and for men not to get involved. "It's still the normal way we think and to think otherwise is considered controversial," she says.

She adds: "There's an expectation in the workforce that it will be the woman who cares for others, whether it be elderly relatives or relatives with disabilities, or kids. It's a societal thing, if you go out on the street and ask your average person whether a woman or man is expected to care for children or relatives, they will generally say women.

"For fathers, it's still seen as a strange thing to do to take time out to care. That feeds into a societal pressure on men not to do it."

To some extent, historically, the fact that the father has tended to be the main breadwinner of the household, could explain it. Taking time off for him was generally not seen as an option as he climbs the career ladder and becomes more involved in very important projects where he needs to be there day-in, day-out. Certainly, historically, the woman may have sacrificed her day because, simply (and crudely), she didn't earn the same amount of money as the man and so there was less at stake.



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But in our generation, and in our kids' generation, are things changing? Will they ever change? As more women become equals to men in the workplace, as more women become the main breadwinners, shouldn't it follow that more and more men take sickies to care for kids or relatives at short notice?

Steadman points out that as new rules come in from 2015 [allowing mums and dads to fully share maternity leave](#), attitudes and expectations should change in time. "But it will still require a cultural shift, a shift in expectations," she said.

A quick poll in my office and the younger fathers and men say that they are far more open to themselves taking time off to care, if and when the time comes. The women, however, say it's still largely seen as 'their role' to care and some laugh at the thought of their husband taking duty.

When it comes to caring for elderly relatives, the men point it out it depends who's side of the family the relative is on. Good point.

But when it comes to children? Again, the men are more open to taking some time off as and when. This is a huge change from my father's day, when it just wouldn't have even been considered.

But many of my male workmates bravely admit that they assume it would be their girlfriend or wife that offered to take time off first, and that if the man were to do it, it would be doing *her* a favour.

Even in 2014, it seems it is still a woman's role to drop everything at the last minute, to make a sacrifice, for others.

Will it always be the case that women are The Ones Who Care? I hope not. But when will men ever catch up?