

A Spotlight on young women who are defined as NEET and economically inactive

Una Mirada a las mujeres jóvenes que se definen como NINIs y económicamente inactivas

Um ponto de mira nas mulheres jovens que são definidas como “nem nem” e como inativas na economia

Sue Maguire ^a

^a Professor, University of Bath
sm2578@bath.ac.uk

Recibido_Received_Recebido 26/06/2017

Aceptado_Accepted_Aceito 29/06/2017

Publicación online_Available online_Publicação online 31/07/2017

Keywords

NEET
economically
inactive
youth
unemployment
young women
early motherhood

Abstract

Within the not in education, employment or training (NEET) group of young people, young women have a much greater propensity than young men to be economically inactive (EI), largely due to their caring responsibilities and, to a lesser extent, health problems. As such, they tend to remain NEET for much longer periods and often remain welfare dependent. In contrast to young people who are actively seeking work, the NEET EI group is overlooked by policymakers, in terms of targeted support and intervention to encourage their (re-)engagement in education, employment or training. The purpose of this paper is to challenge this rationale and to question why so many young people (especially young women) are sidelined in this way. It exposes the tensions in policymaking between enabling young women to fulfil their caring responsibilities while, at the same time, supporting their entitlement to benefits and ambitions to make a wider contribution to society. The paper draws on evidence from an on-going study in England, to highlight the isolation and disconnect felt by young women in the NEET EI group and raises questions about the long-term scarring effects of leaving so many of them socially and economically excluded for such long periods of time.

Palabras clave	Resumen
NINIs población inactiva desempleo juvenil mujeres jóvenes maternidad temprana	Dentro del grupo de jóvenes que no están en dentro del proceso de educación, ni de empleo ni de formación (NEET en inglés, NINI en castellano), las mujeres jóvenes tienen una propensión mucho mayor que los jóvenes a ser económicamente inactivos (EI), en gran medida debido a sus responsabilidades en tareas relacionadas con el cuidado de personas y, en menor medida, a problemas de salud. Como tales, tienden a permanecer NEET por períodos mucho más largos y a menudo siguen siendo dependientes del bienestar. A diferencia de los jóvenes que buscan activamente trabajo, el grupo NEET EI es pasado por alto por los formuladores de políticas públicas, en términos de apoyo dirigido e intervención para fomentar su (re) participación en la educación, el empleo o la formación. El propósito de este artículo es cuestionar esta justificación y cuestionar por qué tantos jóvenes (especialmente las mujeres jóvenes) están marginados de esta manera. Expone las tensiones en la formulación de políticas públicas entre permitir que las mujeres jóvenes cumplan sus responsabilidades de cuidado y, al mismo tiempo, apoyar su derecho a beneficios y ambiciones para hacer una contribución más amplia a la sociedad. El documento se basa en la evidencia de un estudio en curso en Inglaterra para poner de relieve el aislamiento y la desconexión sentida por las mujeres jóvenes en el grupo NEET EI y plantea preguntas sobre las cicatrices a largo plazo de dejar a muchos de ellos social y económicamente excluidos por largos períodos de tiempo

Palavras-chave	Resumo
nem nem inatividade econômica desemprego juvenil mulher jovem precoce maternidade	No grupo de jovens que não estudam ni trabalham, conhecidos como “nem nem”, as mulheres jovens são mais propensas que os homens jovens para inatividade no âmbito econômico, em uma grande parte isto é devido às suas responsabilidades familiares e, em menor grau, aos problemas de saúde. Como consequência, eles permanecem “nem nem” por períodos muito mais longos e muitas vezes permanecem bem-estar dependente. Em contraste com os jovens que estão procurando ativamente trabalho, o grupo “nem nem” é ignorado por políticos, em termos de apoio e intervenção para incentivar a participação dos jovens na educação ou emprego. O objetivo deste trabalho é trocar este raciocínio e perguntar porque tantos jovens (especialmente as mulheres jovens) são marginados dessa maneira. Este trabalho expõe as tensões na formulação de políticas para que as mulheres jovens possam cumprir suas responsabilidades familiares, enquanto isso, ao mesmo tempo, apoiar o direito das mulheres de acesso a prestações e suas ambições para fazer uma contribuição mais vasta para sociedade. O documento baseia suas teorias em evidências de um estudo em curso na Inglaterra, para destacar o isolamento das mulheres jovens no grupo “nem nem”. Também questiona as consequências desta marginalização por longos períodos de tempo.

SUMMARY

► Introduction ► Context ► Looking at NEET EI in England ► Conclusion ► References

I INTRODUCTION

Among the group defined as not in education, employment or training (NEET), young women are more likely than young men to be categorized as economically inactive (EI). Conventional wisdom, which is broadly supported by statistical evidence, is that they tend to have caring responsibilities, predominantly for family members – children and parents. At one level, the accuracy of this evidence cannot be called into question. However, by exploring the background and context of this phenomenon, and by drawing on the findings of a study of economically inactive young women in the UK, this paper will suggest that other pertinent factors, notably their interaction with the welfare benefit system and their marginalization from external support, are at play. Moreover, following an appraisal of how young women in the NEET EI group approach the challenges in their lives, the paper will propose steps which should be taken to address the needs of young women who find themselves labeled as NEET EI.

Before considering the findings of the UK study, it is instructive to look back at the derivation of the term ‘NEET’. In 1988, the UK government removed most young people under the age of 18 from the unemployment count by effectively withdrawing their welfare entitlement (Furlong, 2006). ‘NEET’ was conceptualised within the UK in the 1990s to recapture the size and scale of youth disengagement and social exclusion. The UK, like most countries across Europe and other advanced economies, has, in recent years, experienced an alarming rise in the levels of young people who are detached from both the labour market and the education and training system. The term ‘NEET’ is now applied internationally to a much wider cohort, typically 16-24-year olds (and in some countries up to the age of 29 years), and includes young people in receipt of unemployment benefit, as well as those who claim other types of welfare support or none at all (Maguire, 2015).

UK Labour Force Survey (LFS) data divides the NEET population into two groups: a) the economically active (EA), which includes young people who are actively seeking work, i.e. the young unemployed and the economically inactive (EI) group, who comprise young people with caring/family responsibilities or ill health and for these primary reasons are not actively seeking work. While a number of studies have segmented the NEET group in terms of young people’s propensity to re-engage with EET (education, employment or training), the prevalence of high economic inactivity rates among young women is under-researched, due to the widespread belief that it is attributable to early motherhood or other caring responsibilities and that this group of young people requires little attention or intervention from policymakers because of their domestic commitments. An OECD report identified twelve key characteristics of the economically inactive. These are a combination of: a) underlying or prior factors, such as low educational attainment and/or being from an economically disadvantaged household; b) characteristics which were evident while in EI status, such as parenthood and caring responsibilities; and c) the effects of being EI, such as having a higher propensity to be

in poverty, 'lower satisfaction with life', 'having less trust in people', and being 'less confident in the ability of society to help them' (OECD, 2015).

2 CONTEXT

It is certainly true that young women are disproportionately more likely than young men to be NEET in almost all OECD countries, with the exceptions of Luxembourg and Spain, where young men are more likely than young women to be NEET (The Economist, 2013). Young women who are NEET also have a much greater likelihood of being EI. Data from these countries show that female NEET EI is overwhelmingly attributed to caring or other domestic/family responsibilities and, in some countries, to cultural expectations. As an extreme case, of the 40 per cent of young girls in Turkey are NEET (compared to 18 per cent of boys), 93 per cent are EI, possibly with family care responsibilities (Bardak et al, 2015). Assaad and Levison argue that inadequate global labour market demand for young people, invariably leads to young women being more likely to be found doing non-labour force work and less likely to report themselves as actively seeking work. This results in many young women not being included in the unemployment rate, especially when the 'seeking work' criteria is applied. However, exceptions to this trend do exist. For example, in Latin American, Middle Eastern and North African countries, where female unemployment rates are substantially higher than those of males, this is attributed to significant numbers of educated women seeking work in public sector employment. This trend does not displace the co-existence of high female inactivity rates in these localities, which perpetuates the situation of young women assuming responsibility for non-labour force work (Assaad and Levison, 2013).

Given that high rates of female economic inactivity are a common feature among most NEET populations worldwide, it is, perhaps, surprising that there is a dearth of national and international evidence about effective interventions to address this situation. More fundamentally, there is an absence of data which accurately quantifies the size of the group or describes its composition/characteristics within individual countries. This shortcoming is exacerbated by a lack of research seeking to learn more about the everyday lives of NEET EI young women. Some commentators highlight that the NEET EI group is essentially an under-researched 'black box', which is categorised in terms of what young people are not doing, as opposed to understanding the likelihood of young people within the overall group or subgroups (re) engaging with education, employment or training (EET) (Tamesberger and Bacher, 2014). This is despite the fact that it is acknowledged that periods of inactivity, including unemployment in adolescence or early adulthood have a scarring long-term affect on young people's lives (Gregg and Tominey, 2004).

3 LOOKING AT NEET EI IN ENGLAND

In an attempt to address, to some extent, this gap in knowledge, a two-year study (2015-2017) is being conducted in England by Young Women's Trust (YWT) and myself, with supported funding from the Barrow Cadbury Trust. The focus of the research is to examine economic inactivity rates and why they disproportionately impact on the lives of young women (Maguire and McKay, 2016). The first year of the project comprised:

- i. A literature review
- ii. Interviews with ten key experts, including policymakers and academics;
- iii. case studies in five localities, with local stakeholders who were involved in devising and delivering employment interventions in each area. The sample included thirty-eight respondents;
- iv. In-depth interviews with ten young women who were NEET and EI;
- v. Analysis of the Labour Force Survey (LFS)

3.1 POLICYMAKERS AND LOCAL STAKEHOLDERS

Among these respondents, was a concern about an overall acceptance that all young women who are NEET and EI will remain so for long periods of time because of their early motherhood, caring responsibilities or ill-health. This was perceived to be an issue that required 'unpacking', in order to gain more understanding about their needs and requirements.

A highly significant finding was the existence of a demarcation with regard to the type of welfare benefit and intervention that young people receive. It was clear that this depended on their classification as either NEET EI or NEET EA. Those who are NEET and EI (who are predominantly female) typically remain on welfare support for much longer periods than those who are NEET and EA, and are also far less likely to receive any form of positive support or intervention. This was despite the fact that analysis of the LFS, which was conducted as part of the study, showed that most (86%) NEET and EI young women expected to work in the future. Those in lone parent households or living with their partner and children were more likely to say that they definitely or probably expect to work in the future than young women in other types of households, which clearly indicates that they view their inactive status as temporary.

At the same time, the support received by young people who are actively seeking work and claiming welfare support was fiercely criticised for high levels of sanctioning, unrealistic target-setting and an emphasis on removing claimants from the register at the earliest opportunity. Crucially, it is the youth unemployment rate, i.e. the number of young people in the NEET and EA groups, that attracts national media attention and which is scrutinised by national government and by authorities such as the International Labour Office (ILO). This difference between the two groups is also reflected in the proportions in their respective claimant

counts, with much lower numbers of young women being present in the NEET and EA category. The policymaker and local stakeholder respondents stated a preference for an approach in which young people were provided with targeted and tailored support, instead of being subjected to demanding targets and having the threat of sanctions hanging over them.

Concerns were also expressed about the impact of being NEET and EI on young women who were relatively isolated within their households and communities, notably their increased likelihood of suffering from low self-confidence, low self-esteem and, for some, mental health issues. It was perceived that their detachment from external and independent support and advice could have long lasting effects on their health and likelihood of future employment. Furthermore, it was acknowledged that it was very difficult for local agencies to identify and to engage with young women in the NEET and EI group.

For young mothers who are NEET and EI, major barriers to engaging in education, employment or training were considered to be: affordable childcare; a reluctance to leave their children; access to transport; and appropriate employment and training opportunities.

3.2 YOUNG WOMEN

The in-depth interviews with ten young women who were NEET and EI provided illuminating insights into their lives and experiences, particularly in relation to their school and post-school experiences, domestic circumstances, money management, and their hopes and aspirations. In this admittedly small sample, the majority had caring responsibilities (for their children), while two young women were NEET and EI because they suffered from anxiety and depression and one respondent refused to claim welfare support because of her previous negative experiences of dealing with the Job Centre.

Every respondent had attended local secondary schools and had some experience of post-16 education, training or work. Their qualification levels ranged from two young women who left school early, due to their being bullied, without completing formal qualifications, to one young woman who gained very high grade qualifications at school. The majority had either completed or started a post-16 option, and the main reasons for non-progression were either pregnancy or mental health issues. One young mother was currently undertaking a qualification in youth work, with the goal of training to be a support worker before her youngest child reaches the age of five.

Half of the young women were living in their parental home. However, most of them continued to rely on a parent and/or family members for emotional, practical and financial advice and support, irrespective of their circumstances. This included help and support with childcare, food, clothing and personal care costs and assisting with application forms for housing or benefit receipt. Those who lived at their parents' home contributed minimal amounts to the household budget and, in some cases, their dependence on their family

resulted in a reluctance to move out of the family home, because of the perceived risks this posed to their established support networks. They tended to lack friendship networks, have few hobbies or interests, and limited social activities was the norm. Their weekly activities revolved around remaining within their households, some caring for their children or others, undertaking domestic responsibilities and watching the television. Thus, family networks appeared to both insulate and isolate young women from the outside world. The following quotation captures something of the routine of many of these young women's lives.

'Monday morning, we wake up. I probably put the washing on and we go out. We walk up to see family members and I take the baby to the park. He goes to his nan's every other weekend. On those weekends, I stay at home and clean. I don't have any friends really - most people my age, they do not have kids and they want to go out and party. By the time it comes to the weekend and (name of baby) is away, I'm absolutely shattered. I'd rather sit at home with a cup of tea and a colouring book.'

(Single mother, aged 21, lives alone with baby)

Strikingly, in the face of scarce resources, young women in the sample were adept at managing their finances. They were asked to describe their experiences of claiming benefits, their expenditure patterns and the use of money received from partners and boyfriends. Despite their insistence about 'money being tight' in all circumstances, there was no expectation or frustration about entitlement to more financial resources, without a significant change to their immediate circumstances, i.e. their ability to move into employment. Nonetheless, feedback from the young women interviewed chimed with evidence provided by other case study respondents about the extent to which most young mothers were reluctant to find work or participate in education or training, because of the stigma, within their families and community, associated with 'leaving' their children.

Also, most respondents felt reluctant to miss key aspects of the child's development, which they believed would be an inevitable outcome from leaving full-time motherhood. These commitments and beliefs sat alongside a prevalent feeling that single parenthood, coupled with welfare support, continues to be regarded negatively in the public's stereotypical perception, which they were keen to dispel. They believed that they carried a label which associated them with low worth and poor parenting.

While there were three young mothers with partners (one couple lived together), there was a noticeable lack of reliance on their male partners, although all but one contributed financially. The young women felt that it was their responsibility to look after their children, with additional support from the child's father or their partner being subsidiary to the support they received from their family and benefit payments. To some degree, this was perceived to be a defence mechanism or reaction to their own childhood experiences.

Unsurprisingly, budgeting revolved around welfare payments, which, in most cases, were paid on a fortnightly basis. Priorities included food, rent, fuel, children's clothing and toiletries. Those who lived independently

relied on loans to buy furniture or goods which had been acquired from charity shops by support workers, who acted on their behalf. Transport costs were inconsequential, as most young women failed to leave their immediate vicinity. Buying clothes for themselves was infrequent and considered to be a luxury item. Two respondents had received assistance from money advice workers to help them cope with budgeting, which they viewed as a positive support intervention.

Significantly, and perhaps in contrast to common perceptions, all respondents expressed an ambition to find work, leave the benefits system and secure financial independence. They were asked to offer suggestions of changes that could be made by themselves or by the mechanisms of support or intervention, to enable this to happen. The lack of 'decent' jobs and their ability to find work due to the immense competition that young workers face was a prevalent overriding concern.

With regard to their own needs, there was a strong voice for one-to-one personal support, which should be tailored to meet their individual needs. This call for intensive support included the need to access help with the demands of parenting and/or living alone, as well as assistance with navigating their way (back) into the labour market.

Some young mothers feared the expectation that, once their youngest child reached the age of five, they would be coerced into finding a job, without any gradual reintroduction to active labour market status. A preferable step-by-step approach might involve attending short courses to improve their skills etc. The overriding call for mentorship and personalised support is a significant finding, alongside the isolation and lack of external interaction with the outside world that many young women (and men) face, and is encapsulated in the following quotation.

'I do not want someone else to be closer to my baby than me. I do not know how I am going to do it. It would be helpful if I could sit down with someone to help me go through things when I am ready. I don't know how it works. I would love someone to tell me how it works. I have not got a clue. Make me understand how I can do it, how I can cope. The kid, me, work etc. My family would say 'you are better off with your mum, it is too hard to move out'. Someone external, who has been in our situation and done it. A young mum who is working now and has a house.'

(Single woman, aged 19, pregnant and lives with her mum and siblings)

4 CONCLUSION

It is clear from this research that questions must be raised about our ability to implement effective and appropriate (meaningful) policy interventions targeted at young women who are NEET when there is such a dearth of knowledge and understanding about the NEET group as a whole. One issue is its expanded age

cohort, incorporating both the EI and EA groups, which have been shown to have very different needs. This perhaps leads us to a conclusion that while the umbrella term 'NEET' has been rolled out to a much wider age cohort, this has failed to be accompanied by an expansion in understanding about the characteristics and needs of young people who fall into this category and perhaps just as importantly, to acknowledge the wider implications for inclusion and wider policy responses. A key stumbling block in gaining a better understanding is that we do not know the extent of the problem – we do not know with any great accuracy, how many NEET young people there are, where they are, or how we can identify, contact and engage with them.

There appears to be a passive acceptance among policymakers that the NEET and EI group, which comprises young people (in many countries, the majority being women) who experience early motherhood or caring responsibilities or ill health will remain inactive for several years. The responses of the young women in the study suggest that this may not be the case, certainly if their stated aspirations come to fruition. Also, caring responsibilities imply a lack of value in this context, because they are inextricably linked to EI. An important finding is the demarcation with regard to the type of welfare benefit and intervention that young people receive depending on their classification as either NEET EI or NEET EA. Young women who are NEET and EI typically remain on welfare support for much longer periods than those who are NEET and EA, and are also far less likely to receive any form of positive support or intervention. There are also many more young people who are NEET and EI, who do not claim welfare support because of cultural and/or domestic reasons and who do not interact with welfare or support agencies at all. This is another cause for concern as many young people may be 'hidden' or 'unknown' to statutory, support or voluntary services.

Coupled with financial hardship, the evidence about young women who are NEET and EI being isolated, disconnected and hard to reach is overwhelming. It highlights their reliance on small family networks within confined communities, with little access to external support or recognition. Unsurprisingly, among our sample, low self-worth and low self-esteem were commonplace. To these young women, particularly those with children, their ability to navigate their way back into the world of work faced insurmountable obstacles. These include: a) their lack of self-confidence b) the challenges of securing and funding reliable childcare; and c) finding employment in local economies where opportunity structures appeared to be stacked against them.

Anxiety and depression are prevalent among many groups of young people, especially the large number of young women (and young men) who were defined as NEET and EI for health reasons. This was borne out in our own findings from case study and statistical evidence and it raises concerns about the extent to which mental health issues can be exacerbated when they are accompanied with isolation due to a lack of targeted support.

The research found that, in localities where agencies had established strong and effective partnership working to identify the needs of young people within the confines of their local economy, examples of positive local initiatives were evident. However, effective action could often be constrained by a complex set of local

arrangements and an absence of any long-term strategy or planning. Factors which were felt to inhibit the impact of collaborative partnerships were:

- The lack of central government supported programmes;
- The short-term nature of funded initiatives with a variety of outcome measures;
- The impending removal of EU structural funding in the UK; and
- A growing reliance on charitable and philanthropic funding to support NEET intervention projects.

An overriding need for change was highlighted in the first year of this research. Key elements in this process of change were considered to be:

- A requirement to offer personalised, one-to-one support to young women who are EI (and to other groups), within their communities, by trained staff without financial penalties or sanctions for withdrawal;
- Effective tracking systems, which could reduce the numbers of those who are 'unknown' ;
- The ability of young people to (re)establish trust with external agencies;
- Support which is accompanied with training provision and employment opportunities that are meaningful and long-term; and, if required,
- Affordable and accessible childcare.

While the cost of such intervention may seem excessive, the net effect of, at best, 'sidelining', and, at worst, disregarding the potential of young women (and young men) who are defined as NEET and EI or EA is both neglectful and wasteful. These messages have resonance and significance to policymakers not only within the UK but to many countries, who also have excessively large numbers of young people who are NEET and economically inactive (EI).

5 REFERENCES

Assaad, R. and Levison, D. (2013). *Employment for Youth – A Growing Challenge for the Global Economy*. Background Research Paper. Submitted to the High Level Panel on the Post-2015 Development Agenda. University of Minnesota.

Bardak, U., Masada, M. R. and Rosso, F. (2015). *Young People Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET): An overview in ETF partner countries*. Turin, European Training Foundation.

Eurofound (2016). *Exploring the diversity of NEETs*. Publication Office of the European Union, Luxembourg. DOI: 978-92-897-1466-2

- Furlong, A. (2006). Not a very NEET solution: Representing problematic labour market transitions among early school leavers. *Work, Employment and Society*, 20 (3): 553–569. DOI: 10.1177/0950017006067001
- Gregg, P., and Tominey, E. (2004). The Wage Scar from Youth Unemployment, *CMPO Working Paper Series* No. 04/097.
- Maguire, S. and McKay, E. (2016). *Young, Female and Forgotten?* Full Report. Young Women's Trust, London.
- Maguire, S. (2015). NEET, Unemployed, Inactive or Unknown – why does it matter? *Educational Research. Special Issue: Education to Employment: Complicated Transitions in a Changing World*, 57 (2):121-132. DOI: 10.1080/00131881.2015.1030850
- OECD (2015). Family database www.oecd.org/els/family/database.htm OECD - Social Policy Division - Directorate of Employment, Labour and Social Affairs.
- Tamesberger, D. and Bacher, J. (2014). NEET youth in Austria: a typology including socio-demography, labour market behaviour and permanence. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 17(9):1239-1259. DOI: 10.1080/13676261.2014.901492
- The Economist. (2013). *Generation Jobless*. <http://www.economist.com/news/international/21576657-around-world-almost-300m-15-24-year-olds-are-not-working-what-has-caused>