

MINUTES

Future of the Workplace: How has COVID-19 changed the way we work?

Women and Work APPG Meeting & EGM, Tuesday 14 July 2020
2-3pm via Zoom

Chair: Laura Farris MP, Co-Chair of the Women and Work APPG

Parliamentarians in attendance:

- Laura Farris MP
- Caroline Nokes MP
- Baroness Grey-Thompson
- Kirsten Oswald MP
- Baroness Garden of Frognal
- Selaine Saxby MP
- Abena Opong-Asare MP
- Jo Gideon MP

Minutes

Co-Chair of the Women and Work APPG, Laura Farris MP convened the meeting, welcoming attendees and panellists to the APPG's virtual meeting. The meeting began with an EGM to formally elect Laura Farris as Co-Chair of the APPG. Laura then explained that this was the APPG's third virtual meeting and would look at how COVID-19 has changed the workplace. She said it would explore what lessons can be learned from the pandemic, including what positive aspects of behaviour change can be taken forward.

Laura referred to research by the Institute for Fiscal Studies, which found that, while the UK entered the COVID-19 crisis with women's employment at record highs, the closure of schools and nurseries have led to additional childcare falling disproportionately on mothers, which risks inhibiting career progression. She also outlined how some have observed a dilution in emphasis on diversity and inclusion since the pandemic began, and how the factors that contribute most to the gender pay gap have been exacerbated by the pandemic, as women are clustered in the sectors that have been hardest hit by the crisis and often pay the least.

Laura then introduced the first speaker, **Yvonne Braun, Director of Policy, Long Term Savings and Protection at the Association of British Insurers (ABI)**. Yvonne explained that ABI represents the insurance and long-term savings industry. She said that the most striking impact of COVID-19 is the levels of home working it has led to, with 95% of ABI's members working remotely. This is likely to continue for the foreseeable future but there were some advantages including businesses saving money by reducing or getting rid of their office space, and it also being more environmentally sustainable to have less business travel. Yvonne stated that many people wanted to continue working remotely, and in a more flexible and agile way, such as through job-sharing.

Yvonne explained that ABI has observed a significant gender imbalance at the top of the sector through its diversity and inclusion work. Through this work, the ABI has found that people who work part time are often women and as a result of working part time, it was found that they were less likely to progress in their careers. She noted that this was not true, however, for job-sharers, as they can progress as a partnership. Yvonne stated that members have observed that advertising vacancies as job-shares increases the number of applications by women. She argued that the upcoming Employment Bill will be a great opportunity to ensure these gains are not lost.

Yvonne noted that any gender imbalance in returning to the workplace needs to be prevented. She argued that if women choose to work from home more than men moving forward, this will worsen inequalities as women may not be in the room when big decisions are made.

Yvonne then turned to the gender pensions gap, explaining that women typically save less than men in their pensions, particularly because they earn less on average. Through the COVID crisis, women have been disproportionately affected by job losses, furlough, and caring responsibilities, which will negatively impact their careers and therefore their pensions too. Yvonne said that it is important to draw attention to the gendered impacts of the crisis. She suggested that possible solutions could be greater education around pension issues, or sector initiatives like the transparency the ABI encourages around parental leave and pay. She added that greater engagement from the Government is needed, however, on balancing caring responsibilities and what drives a woman's career choices.

Laura agreed that it is impossible to ignore the way the COVID-19 pandemic has revolutionised the rationale for flexible working. She explained that this does not just mean working from home, but also involves a better distribution of private and professional life. In the past requests for flexible working were treated as "*lightweight*" and "*fluffy*"; a sign of someone who was not committed to work, or a "*mum's request*". However, since the nation has been forced to work from home, employers have seen the benefit of this too as it can lead to cost savings on office space. She argued that many employers will be stretched in the coming months and flexible working is a way to reduce costs and support the retention of women.

Laura then introduced the next speaker, **Angela Ishmael, Senior Diversity and Inclusion Consultant at Diverse Matters**. Angela explained that Diverse Matters exists to support a range of organisations; in the private and public sectors, small and large businesses, and charities. They support companies to take diversity and inclusion (D&I) to the heart of their work and evaluate what these principles mean in practice, beyond legislative obligations.

Angela addressed the future of D&I after COVID-19, saying that her main concern is how women may be treated through redundancies. Given the history of pregnant women being most vulnerable to redundancy, she said it is important to encourage employers to look at the role of women in their organisation and what the impact of making them redundant would be. She argued employers need to explore ways to keep skills in their organisation, through initiatives like job shares.

Angela stated that she is fearful diversity as an issue will lose relevance when in fact, it is more important than ever. She argued that organisations won't survive the potential oncoming recession without clear D&I strategies, so those that have not yet taken it seriously need to make that shift. She said it was vital for business resilience and cultivating different mixtures of skills and added that the natural strengths women have as leaders are required in an economic crisis. Angela said that generally, women tend to be better at active listening, thinking laterally, and thinking about employee needs, and these skills should not be underestimated. She reiterated that organisations can't *not* take D&I seriously.

Angela explained that she is also concerned about managers and leaders at the top of organisations reflecting on their behaviour, as it will affect their organisation as a whole. She predicted that there will be men in leadership roles who feel it is imperative to get people back into the office, but this will send a problematic message to those who don't want to or cannot return, given how companies have managed with remote working and flexibility through the crisis.

Angela told the Group that flexibility is not just a gender issue, as younger workers also value it greatly. She said younger workers are keen on progressing their careers but also want to be part of organisations that take them and their lives outside work seriously.

Angela said it is important for the Government to give organisations, particularly smaller ones, the support they need to progress D&I. Those without human resources departments and structures need to think about what flexibility will mean in practice for their organisation, whether that be funding, technical support, or something else, to enable people to continue working flexibly and remotely if they need to.

Angela said she was interested in women who have been furloughed or are self-employed, given the role of national insurance contributions in receiving a full pension. She noted that not all organisations consider supporting their women employees to review their national insurance contributions to ensure they receive a fuller pension, which means that many women get to retirement before they realise that the way they have worked means they have not been able to contribute as much. She said that COVID will have interesting implications for how the Government will support women to make these contributions if furlough and self-employment support affects them. She added that the furlough scheme and other forms of welfare support have not always been available to all women who needed them.

Angela concluded by arguing that organisations will need to consider people with protected characteristics who have been disadvantaged by COVID, and not be afraid to be inclusively innovative to support them. She added that there has been a rise in domestic abuse during the lockdown period, which has started a conversation about how employers should support employees experiencing it in a homeworking environment. Angela said that good practice should not be lost just because people are focusing on the survival of their business, but that it is even more imperative that these practices continue, beyond legislative requirements.

Laura thanked Angela. She pointed out that one of the reasons pregnant women are often made redundant is that they are seen as costly and onerous. People are more alive to their employment rights when the economy is good, but when lots of people are being made redundant it is harder to prove that discrimination has taken place. Laura agreed that D&I is not just a nice idea, it is an important feature of effective working, and organisations should not just let it be a box they tick if they can. She also commented on Angela's insights on how the young value flexible working, saying that young people tend to object to the idea of the "rat race" but have valuable talents and skills, so flexible working practices can accommodate and utilise this.

Laura then introduced the next speaker, **Michelle Gyimah, Gender and Ethnicity Pay Gaps Consultant for Equality Pays**. Michelle stated that she would be talking about pay gaps, and that she works with organisations to help them have conversations about pay gaps, collect data, understand why they exist, and put together effective action plans to reduce or eradicate them.

Michelle explained that the COVID crisis led to pay gap reporting being suspended for this year. She said she was confident it would be business as usual and was surprised that the requirement to report was suspended shortly before the deadline. Michelle stated that pay gap reporting is a business imperative and the fact that so few chose to still report shows what happens when companies are allowed to pick and choose what to do about D&I: they see it as optional. She said the trickle-down effect of this is that a number of organisations are freezing their D&I budgets and D&I roles are going into redundancy pools. This shows that D&I is being deprioritised when it is most needed.

Michelle outlined her concerns about the furlough scheme and how organisations have decided to use it. She explained that a lot of people are in a difficult positions as their employers are not demonstrating flexibility and were offered furlough as the only way to be able to look after their children while schools and nurseries have been closed. Michelle said it is important to understand why furlough is being used as the only option for women whose employers aren't willing to give them the flexibility that they need to do their jobs without childcare. She predicted that in the future, when redundancies have been made and companies are thinking about growth again, if there is a large cohort of people who took furlough for these reasons, it is unlikely they will be considered for promotions and pay rises, in spite of their talents. Michelle argued that this is due to presenteeism, and male counterparts who have been at work the whole time will be privileged by these practices.

Michelle explained that there is also a gender divide in how decisions are made. She said that when people are in panic mode, they focus on the issues that are right in front of them, but organisations need to consider how the modern workplace truly functions. She argued they should focus on how to retain the most talent and skills, and avoid typical approaches to redundancies.

Michelle added that redundancy should be a consultative process; an opportunity to speak to staff about what they think and ask for feedback. She argued that people will come up with innovative ideas if they are given the opportunity to have a voice. Furthermore, people with protected characteristics have different viewpoints that will help employers to see

their staff as people. She stated true leadership is shown through the ways people respond to crisis, and many younger workers are prepared to leave organisations about issues they care about, like pregnant women being made redundant. Companies need to think about how they behave now and what that says about them as an organisation. Michelle concluded by saying that the pandemic presents both challenges and opportunities for companies.

Laura said that people going to their boss with creative ideas during this period may be the difference between having a job and not but many may feel they haven't had the opportunity to propose new ideas. One possible innovation is the idea of keeping two thirds of a job, which would be better than long-term unemployment

Laura introduced the final speaker, **Caroline Nokes MP, Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee**. Caroline said Yvonne had summed up a key concern she shares about women in the workplace, which is that they are less likely to be in the room when big decisions are made because they are less likely to have leadership roles.

Caroline explained that the Women and Equalities Committee is engaged in three inquiries about COVID and protected characteristics. They are firstly looking at how BAME people have been affected. She said she is frustrated at how long it is taking for issues to be resolved despite how clear it is that BAME people are more affected by the virus. The second inquiry is into the gendered impact of COVID, and is exploring issues such as women being more likely to be furloughed, women coming back to work and feeling anxious about redundancy and whether decisions about who comes back will be affected by furlough, and whether women have been affected by childcare. Caroline said she agreed with Laura that it will be easier to hide women being disproportionately made redundant if a lot of redundancies are taking place. She added that women are disproportionately found in the sectors that have been worst affected by the crisis. She stated that the final inquiry is into the impact of COVID on disabled people. Caroline added that when intersectionality is considered there is a "*horrific triple whammy*" for people whose identities intersect across the areas of these inquiries.

Caroline said that the Minister for Women and Equalities, Liz Truss appeared before the committee at the start of lockdown and was very positive about the benefits of more remote working and less travel, believing that this would save time and increase productivity. Caroline said that it is important to spare a thought for those who cannot work from home, like people who work in retail, adding that retail workers who are single parents will be particularly struggling without access to childcare. She expressed disappointment that the Chancellor did not mention childcare or gender in his economic update; there was no suggestion about supporting women entrepreneurs and not focus on gender and racial inequality within the levelling up agenda.

Caroline said that the committee went into the pandemic without its strategy for the year finalised. There are many things they want to do but they will have to look closely at the pay gap and suspension of reporting. She suggested that they might do an annual inquiry on this for the next four years, requiring ministers to come in each time and proactively engage with closing the gap.

Caroline said a standing item for the committee is the race disparity audit and unit and what it has achieved over the last twelve months.

Caroline concluded by saying the committee's current inquiries will produce recommendations and positive outcomes, and that she would hold the Government's feet to the fire on this. **Laura** agreed that intersectionality is vital, noting that redundancy is often seen as a way to get rid of workers over age 65. She added that childcare providers operate on extremely tight margins at the best of times and COVID-secure measures, coupled with long term funding, issues mean many may have to close. This directly impacts women in the workforce, and so is not just an issue about survival of that sector.

Q&A

Laura opened the discussion to questions and comments from attendees. A member of the audience asked what the other benefits of the pandemic for women have been, in addition to flexible working. **Yvonne** said the ability for entrepreneurs to offer online courses has provided an opportunity to expand businesses' reach through online delivery. She said she is interested in the new models of entrepreneurship that will come out of the COVID crisis due to the need to adjust to new circumstances.

Angela added that women who are parents have been incredibly resilient in balancing so many things; like domestic work, paid work, and teaching children. She said that the time they have taken to create opportunities for themselves has been amazing. She added that this has been a concerning time financially but she has been amazed at how entrepreneurial spirits have developed, commenting that, for her, the pandemic has been an opportunity to reflect on the next steps in her career and options for retirement; something she wouldn't have the chance to think about otherwise.

Laura asked the panel if they had heard of Aviva's mid-life MOT, which they conduct for all staff at around age 45, supporting them to make an assessment of where they want to be upon retirement and their current savings level, providing support for people to get to where they want to be. **Michelle** said she thought this was a brilliant idea, and that we should be talking about pensions, career journeys and financial cycles from the start of careers. She explained that it is easy to have career objectives, but these are often not aligned with financial objectives. People need to know about things like negotiating, asking for a pay rise, understanding how their pension works and what it will look like when they want to retire. Michelle added that she likes the idea of a mid-life MOT, but it should be happening sooner, as knowledge enables people to make better choices.

Yvonne agreed, adding that people are living for much longer now but final salary schemes are disappearing. Without employers taking some responsibility for that, outcomes in retirement are in the hands of individuals. She said it is important for women to assess what they should be saving and is critical for these conversations to happen with all employers.

A member of the audience commented on the need for data on how many women are being furloughed or made redundant. **Caroline** said it is essential to collect further and more granular data and avoid anything too broad; there needs to be intrinsic detail by sector, age, ethnicity etc. She explained that one of the challenges with the Committee's

inquiry into the impact of COVID on BAME people is the tendency to refer to BAME communities as one, but the risks are actually starkly different between BAME groups. She said she is frustrated that little action is taking place but it is also imperative to collect data in a more granular way that shows how different factors interact with each other.

Angela added that if an emphasis on D&I is to be maintained, it is vital that organisations – regardless of their size – collect data to help them make effective decisions about the workplace and the programmes they need to put in place.

Debs Ingham from How Do You Do It asked if the potential negative impact of the COVID crisis on career progression could be another disincentive for men to take up shared parental leave. **Laura** said she thought this would be the case.

Michelle said she believes that shared parental leave needs to be reviewed because it is too complicated and not a viable financial option for families. One problem is that it was designed without much financial incentive so is difficult for people to take up. Men observe how women are treated in the workplace for having families and, Michelle hypothesised, are likely to be put off taking time out of their own careers for family as a result.

Yvonne agreed and said that uptake won't change unless men are offered more right to pay. She explained that Nordic countries have a "*use it or lose it policy*", which has produced a different paradigm around caring. She said that the Government will have to set a clear direction, otherwise a shift won't happen. She stated that a lot of ABI members give mothers and fathers six months of paid leave but finding an employer who does this is a matter of luck. **Laura** added that creative thinking by policymakers is needed to make shared parental leave attractive to all.

Stephanie Eynon from BSI asked if we should be talking about flexible working more inclusively to maximise the impact of these conversations; taking them beyond issues of caring. **Angela** agreed, stating that flexible practices need to be offered across the board. It is fair to prioritise according to need and those with caring responsibilities do have the highest need, but there is also room to explore what flexibility actually means and what it can bring for all employees. There are problems about work-life balance for all workers. The issue came to the fore as a result of discussions about family-friendly policies but young people and those without children also value work-life balance. The COVID crisis has proved that employees do not need to be sitting in an office to deliver, so we should be thinking innovatively about what flexibility means in practice. She added that there are some roles that cannot be made flexible, so it is important to think about how to support those individuals too. **Laura** agreed and said the APPG would be advocating for a flexible working clause in the upcoming Employment Bill. She agreed that there are many different reasons people would want to work flexibly and they shouldn't have to justify this; everyone is entitled to a private life that they can enjoy.

Laura thanked the panellists and attendees and brought the meeting to a close.