

MINUTES

The impact of COVID-19 on women in the workplace

Women and Work APPG Meeting, Monday 18 May 2020
3-4pm via Zoom

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

Parliamentarians in attendance:

- Baroness Garden of Frognal

Minutes

Co-Chair of the Women and Work APPG, Jess Phillips MP convened the meeting as Chair, welcoming attendees and panellists to the APPG's first virtual meeting.

She noted the disproportionate impact COVID-19 is having on women, with regards to exposure, with many women, particularly BAME women being key workers. She added that women were also the most likely to suffer from negative consequences due to economic insecurity as a result of the pandemic.

Co-Chair of the Women and Work APPG, Laura Farris MP said that this was her first meeting of the APPG and gave a brief introduction of her background. Laura explained how prior to becoming an MP, she worked as a barrister focusing on employment law.

Laura mentioned research which shows that over 3 million workers in the UK are in high risk roles and 77% of these workers are women. 98% of workers who are both in high risk roles and have low wages are women, the majority of these are in the caring professions. Women are also more likely to be on the frontline.

Laura raised the issue of home-schooling, stipulating that there are such different experiences being had when it comes to home schooling. She added that women tend to take on the larger share of home-schooling, with men's jobs often being deemed more important. Laura also mentioned the issue of single parent homes.

Laura also said we should think about what happens when normal life resumes as not every industry will survive 2020 so we should focus on the affected sectors and roles that could face the chop soonest. She said that regrettably women have a higher risk of redundancy and long-term unemployment than men.

The first speaker, **Janet Veitch, Chair of the Women's Budget Group** started by saying that the coronavirus pandemic in the context of gender is an issue equally affecting men and women. Janet said we must point out that there has been a huge increase in male deaths from COVID-19 and so all work has to be done in this context.

Janet pointed to the most recent ONS figures of the working population showing that there have been very different rates of coronavirus per occupation, with lowest skilled men been hit the highest. She noted that men working as security guards have had a death rate of

45 per 100,000 and Janet said this should be recognised by Parliament, where there are many male security officers. Janet also noted how those of poorer socio-economic status and BAME communities have also been suffering higher mortality rates.

Janet said that women are overrepresented in low paid work, are more likely to have debt, are more likely to be carers and more likely to be the users of care services as women live longer than men. She added that women are also less likely to work from home, with only 1 in 10 low paid workers able to work from home.

Janet addressed the issue of childcare as there are concerned women returning to work without adequate childcare provision in both two and single parent families. The problem of childcare has been left to women to individually solve rather than collectively or being led by government. Janet says that investment in social infrastructure is key here.

Janet then raised the issue of social care, saying the Government were already facing a crisis in social care before both Brexit and COVID-19. There is a shortage in care for disabled people, children and the elderly. She stipulated that shortages and issues in the care workforce affect women who step in to manage the shortfall as well as making up the majority of care home residents.

Janet said we could not return to paid work until the childcare issue is resolved. She also argued that we needed a guarantee from the Government to be protected by the furlough scheme until safe childcare is available.

Janet said there was a need for the Government to look at these issues in detail and recommended that an equality impact assessment is adopted. Janet suggested that there needs to be a template of questions for employers to look through to identify how to look at sex as a protected characteristic in law and to take it into account when women are coming back to work.

Next, Janet raised the issue of the connection between poverty and violence against women and girls. She quoted research which shows that if you cannot lay your hands on £100 at short notice you are two times more likely to suffer from rape and three times more likely to suffer from domestic violence. This statistic shows a clear link between economic autonomy and vulnerability to violence. She stated that COVID-19 and lockdown have meant extra demand on domestic violence services, which need extra funding by Government. Janet also called for an expansion of the definition of violence against women and making sure that there is a clear employer responsibility.

Janet then said that lockdown had proved that home working is a viable option for many and that we couldn't return to 'normal' work patterns after the pandemic. She noted that working online with greater flexibility would have enormous implications for women and stated that flexible working by default should be made law. She said that by doing this, this would shift the onus onto the employer to explain why the role could not be done at home.

Jess Phillips MP said she agreed with Janet and added that the issue of women's resilience with personal finance and the likelihood of other vulnerabilities can't be ignored. Next Jess said that one of the silver linings from COVID-19 could be a springboard for proving the

viability of flexible working but noted the onus on care work and childcare was also important.

Laura Farris MP said in her maiden speech she talked about flexible working and did not foresee such a strong headwind, adding that it is important to keep making the case for it as it has previously been viewed as an indulgence people have been reluctant to give as it was often viewed negatively. However, people can now see it has much more efficiency and spending time with families rather than commuting is precious.

Sue Coe, Senior Policy Officer for Equality and Strategy, TUC, started first by saying she echoes what Janet had said. Sue added that it was important to think about the gains of flexible working but to also think about the many frontline workers for who working from home is not available.

Sue also said that childcare is insufficient, especially for those who do not work a 9-5 job. She argued there was a need for a flexible investment in childcare and a strengthening of parental rights to allow them to adapt to the new environment.

Sue then stated that the main focus should be about the disproportionate impact on BAME workers, particularly BAME women workers. She noted the shockingly disproportionate number of BAME deaths - for example in the NHS, the death rate for BAME workers have is 7 times higher compared to white peers.

Sue said that a lot of the debate is focused on things we already know, such as BAME people being more likely to live in overcrowded housing or to be concentrated in insecure work with fewer employment rights. She noted that numerous reports have shown this but have not been acted upon and argued that we now had to take action on these issues.

Sue said that whilst she would welcome an investigation into medical aspects, she was also very interested in the role of indirect and direct discrimination playing on the experience of BAME women workers, both in healthcare and school settings. She said there were anecdotal reports of BAME workers being allocated to higher risk job roles over and above white colleagues as well as reports of tiered approaches to distributing PPE, with outsourced and insecure workers often at the back of the queue.

Sue concluded that this work should not just be done by employers with an equality duty but feels the ultimate need is for the Government to be doing this and to look at the impact on people with protected characteristics. Sue said we have seen little evidence of the Government doing this yet.

Jess Phillips MP said she has seen a spike in people feeling they cannot speak up to their bosses about their safety or circumstances, such as with regards to childcare. Jess added that it is much simpler said than done to put the onus on the worker and raised the examples of agency cleaning staff in schools being in shielded groups. Jess questioned how do you speak to your employer when you are told to go to work and concluded that it is naïve to think that workers can shield themselves in these circumstances.

Laura Farris MP referred to whistleblowing raised by Sue and said that some women in her constituency had been furloughed but told to go to work. However, they would not say who the employer was due to fear. Laura wondered if there could be a Government response

to this, such as a reporting line set up to keep track of accountability of employers who have been exploiting staff or the furlough scheme.

Joeli Brearley, Founder and CEO, Pregnant Then Screwed, began by saying that pregnant women have been classed as clinically vulnerable since 16th March. However, until 11th May there was no guidance about what this meant. In addition, 8% of pregnant women have been suspended on incorrect terms, such as not being paid at all or are on sick pay. In addition, she said research had shown that 25% of pregnant NHS workers were having direct contact with patients who could have COVID-19. Joeli said that this was incredibly worrying as we don't know the impact of COVID-19 on the growing foetus, while women in the third trimester who get the virus could get more severe symptoms.

Joeli then highlighted the disproportionate impact on pregnant BAME women, with five pregnant women so far having died from the disease, all being women of colour. She said research showed that pregnant BAME women were four times more likely to be hospitalised than white women and are also more likely to be put in dangerous situations. BAME pregnant women also are more likely to be suspended on incorrect terms. Joeli said she would like to see BAME pregnant women classed as shielded rather than the current classification of extremely vulnerable. She noted that thousands have been told to continue to work on the front line but are gravely concerned about this.

On 11th May, she noted there was further guidance given on 8 sector specific guides. However, there was nothing clear for health and social workers and there has been little guidance for teachers and nothing to explicitly say what the law is. Joeli argued this had led to confusion between employees and employers. Joeli said that if people are unable to socially distance, they should be suspended on full pay.

Joeli raised the second big problem of maternity leave not being excluded from self-employed earnings. She noted that the gender pay gap for the self-employed is already at 43% and almost half of the self-employed are on poverty pay. However, she argued that within this group were vulnerable new mothers. In addition, some people are not eligible for the 30 hours of free childcare a week as their earnings fall below the threshold.

Joeli said we will also see mass redundancies as the furlough scheme ends and many new mothers will be pushed out of jobs due to undocumented biases. Joeli called for positive action to stem the flow and a need to act urgently. She noted that only women on maternity leave have protection from redundancy and said it was urgent to ensure pregnant women also have enhanced protection.

Joeli argued that access to justice is almost impossible. To help combat this, she said she would like to see an increase in the time limit to make a tribunal claim as 14% of people have said the time limit is what stopped them from raising a tribunal claim. She argued it should be extended to 6 months or longer.

Jess Phillips MP said she too was concerned over the discriminatory response over COVID-19. While it may have been unintentional at the beginning due to the pace, the Government should be pressured into rethinking some of the inbuilt discrimination.

Q&A

Sue Coe said that before COVID-19 she was working on a ‘flexible working for all’ campaign and said that there is a need to strengthen the rights around flexible working and have a day one right for flexibility, with employers having a duty to advertise the available flexible working options. She argued there is a need for a two-way flexibility underpinned by rights.

Joeli agreed that the right to work flexibility will be crucial going forward and noted it should be a day one right rather than only granted after six months.

Sue said she was still waiting for consultation with BEIS around this. She added that an equality and gendered sensitive approach would be crucial to recovery and should be put centrally.

Jess Phillips MP said she understood giving slack to business in this period, yet the reporting over the gender pay gap dropped off this year so raises questions of how organisations can continue their gender ambitions. Jess asked how we can make small advances, such as data gathering leading to enforcement or practice, and how to maintain this in a post COVID-19 economy. She argued that mass unemployment figures can’t just be blamed on COVID-19 if they overly affect women and stated it was important to make sure the gender pay gap reporting continues.

Jenna Norman, Public Affairs Officer at Women’s Budget Group and said they have been recommending that employers, especially big employers, report who they are making redundant by protected characteristics. She said the Women’s Budget Group were concerned for primary carers and pregnant women and that there is evidence that the gender pay gap could massively increase as a result of the pandemic.

Jess Phillips MP raised the example of someone working for an estate agent/property firm where all the women but none of the men had been furloughed. She said there was a need for continuing furlough to have a condition for some monitoring of protected characteristics as well as a need to ascertain this as the furlough scheme changes and develops.

Sue also raised the issue of gender pay gap reporting. She argued that reporting may have been suspended to avoid over burdening businesses during this difficult period, but stated that it was imperative not to give the message that this move was due to gender equality being something ‘extra’ than can be indulged when times are good. Rather it should be central. Sue said it would be good to have this postponing explained. Sue would also support monitoring around redundancies and furloughing at larger firms. She expressed concern about women with childcare commitments being furloughed, distanced from the workplace, or being the last to be brought back. She had already heard some instances of this, with men without children being brought back early.

Jess Phillips MP said there should be better guidance to employers and a better structured reporting line, such as a phonenumber for employees to report to.

Sue said it would be useful for the Government to look at the existing strategy and see its holes.

Jess Phillips MP suggested potentially not speaking about BAME but being more granular about the different types of BAME women and also being more specific about different

types of work. Jess added that, from a Birmingham perspective, there has been little said about people living in multigenerational families, who may also rely on this for childcare. Lots of British Bangladeshi and British Pakistanis are likely to live in big intergenerational families and this can lead to issues of health and economic viability, such as when people are shielding in their homes. She said there has been a big gap in this area of rhetoric on intergenerational families and there hasn't been the granularity needed.

Sue said one of the issues was that the voices of BAME women themselves were missing in policy making.

Jess Phillips MP added that there has been data on the safety of teachers and children in schools mixing, but what about often older, often BAME, often poorer school support staff who have had no response on the effect of their work.

Joeli said the death of Mary Agyeiwaa Agyapong and the publicity around her death has had a positive impact in the work of reducing women in dangerous environments by 10 percent. However, it is stark to look at research from before COVID-19, which shows black women are five times more likely to die in childbirth than white women, and Asian women are two times more likely. She argued that more attention was needed to look at the disparities from before COVID-19 and realise a lot more needs to be done to protect these women.

Jess Phillips said we needed to make sure that the protection taken isn't simply not employing these women as this was not the answer to the issue.

Laura Farris MP said the conversation had shown that greater scrutinization was needed. She noted that the pandemic and issues raised today would impact the future of work and there were many more conversations to be had. She noted that effective communication to Government during this challenging time was key and that there must be a focus on retaining and protecting jobs.