



FACTSHEET

COVID-19 AND GENDER EQUALITY AT WORK

MAY 2020

Introduction

The health crisis, and the measures adopted by government and employers in response, are having a profound effect on the labour market and the way we work more generally. Some of those changes – for example, the widespread shift to home working – could have long-lasting and significant impact.

Existing inequalities in the workplace mean these changes could have a disproportionately negative impact on women, setting back progress on gender equality at work and in wider society.

This factsheet considers the status of women at work when COVID-19 first emerged and the potential impact of the crisis. It makes recommendations to employers and policy-makers to mitigate any negatives and harness opportunities as they relate to gender equality.

Employers have a pivotal role to play in shoring up women's rights during this time.

We are urging Business in the Community members to play their part in making sure this crisis doesn't turn back the clock on women's equality at work.

Three top tips for employers

1	Make sure diverse, representative groups inform the big decisions you make – avoid group think
2	Ensure any cost-cutting measures are spread fairly. Do not disproportionately cut women's roles or salaries
3	Enable men pick up caring responsibilities during this time, by allowing them to amend their working patterns for example.

1. The starting point: women at work in 2020

The number of women in paid work in the UK has reached record highs in recent years. However, a combination of historic and ongoing structural inequalities, outdated policies and cultural attitudes mean:

- **women earn less:** they make up the majority of [those in low-paid work](#)ⁱ, those [suffering in-work poverty](#)ⁱⁱ, and also face a persistent gender pay





gap. The situation is acute for black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) women; while ethnicity pay gap data is not routinely collected by the Office for National Statistics, research has found [that Bangladeshi and Pakistani women experience an aggregate gender pay gap](#) with white British men of 26.2%.ⁱⁱⁱ

- **women typically hold less senior roles** and are more likely to be in precarious work than men. For example, [more than half of those on zero-hours contracts are women](#).^{iv}
- **women are more likely to face gender discrimination** and sexual harassment in the workplace than men.^v
- **women must combine paid work with greater caring responsibilities than men:** although men's role in caring is increasing, [women still tend to do the majority of unpaid care in the UK](#), looking after children and older relatives.^{vi}

Women make up the majority of those working in the NHS, in social care and in childcare – many of the key worker roles society is depending on; this factsheet does not seek to address the specific needs and risks these groups are experiencing.

2. The impact of COVID-19

While the overall situation remains changeable, there are some clear trends emerging that could significantly alter women's access to and security in work, now and in the future.

Trend 1: [Severe economic pressure and continued 'lockdown' sees firms continue to cut costs, with more falling into administration as time goes on.](#)^{vii}

The unique challenges of COVID-19 mean that, unusually in times of economic pressure, industries

[where women make up most workers are worse affected](#), such as in the hospitality and retail industry.^{viii} Moreover, as firms utilise the government's Job Retention Scheme, there is a danger that women – because they are likely to hold less senior or less secure roles in any particular company – make up a disproportionate number of those furloughed or in some other way 'on the frontline' of cost-cutting measures. This skewed impact on women could be compounded by the welcome decision to include the option of furloughing as a result of being unable to access childcare – experience tells us it is more [likely that mothers rather than fathers will seek to bridge the childcare](#) gap through stepping away from work.^{ix}

In the longer-term, this could see an overall drop in the number of women in paid work, a reduction in women's working hours, a potential widening of the gender pay gap and a consequent reduction in their financial security overall - and a rise in female poverty.

Employers should recognise that some groups including women are more likely to be at risk and take steps to address this:

- Ensure a diverse mix of people inform decisions to cut costs, avoiding group think or 'affinity bias'. In this way choices between, for example, whether to 'mothball' specific functions or 'slice' across your full organisation when looking at reducing pay roll costs are more likely to be





considered from all angles – avoiding unwelcome ‘gender blindness’.

- Ensure the demographic make-up of those staff most affected reflects your wider workforce profile – monitor who is, for example, being re-deployed and compare the demographic data to your wider workforce profile.
- Take alternative steps if a measure will see one group disproportionately impacted, such as which workers are made redundant following furloughing.
- Seek to understand early on the potential impact on your gender pay gap as a result of furloughing, reducing hours, salary sacrifice, redundancies or any other measures impacting employee pay.
- *Longer term:* Develop clear re-entry plans for those staff who are in some way stepping away from the workplace and where appropriate apply learnings from other re-entry moments, such as after maternity or parental leave.

Policy makers should:

- Ensure a diverse mix of people inform the government’s approach to supporting business and industry currently. BITC is supporting the women’s sector call for [greater visibility of women during the crisis](#).^x
- Identify the demographic profile of the shareholders, workforce *and* customer or service user base of those firms and sectors seeking financial support and ensure government support is distributed fairly.
- Carefully consider the implications of the Job Retention Scheme on wider gender equality and refine it where necessary, including: a) gathering data about who is accessing it, such as gender and ethnicity, older/younger workers; b) amending it to [allow for staff to access part-time furloughing](#) in the event of childcare problems;^{xi} c) working with employers to consider how to ensure

the ‘long tail’ impact of furloughing is considered in pay-gap reporting requirements next year.

- Longer term: Apply the same approach of ensuring diverse groups inform decisions on any further recovery measures introduced, such as tax breaks, committing to carrying out a robust and comprehensive equality impact assessment and making this analysis publicly available.

Trend 2: Working from home continues to be required where possible

A record number of people are now learning how to do their jobs from home.^{xii} This unexpected and sudden shift will not be experienced equally – for example, different groups will have different levels of access to home working (typically higher-grade roles can be done remotely more easily), and the mental health impact of this period will also vary. Applying a gender lens, there are two distinct impacts: a) [the stark rise in domestic abuse is largely impacting on women](#)^{xiii}; b) changed experiences and potentially attitudes on agile or flexible working, in this case job location, [could prove of great benefit to women workers](#); flexible working is known to be a significant enabler when it comes to the recruitment, retention and progression of women in the workforce.^{xiv}

Employers should:

- ensure managers have suitable training and support to spot and work with colleagues at risk of abuse while working from home; there is wider guidance available on this in BITC’s [Domestic Abuse Toolkit for Employers](#).
- recognise that different groups will experience different levels of comfort and challenge during the move to home working. BITC’s [Top Tips to taking an inclusive approach to supporting your workforce during the COVID-19 pandemic](#) includes guidance on addressing this in regard to policies, leadership and line manager support





- monitor and track what has been learned during the move to remote working, especially for those roles previously understood as only deliverable in the office or on site. Ask workers at different levels to record their experiences, including those involved in ensuring appropriate systems are in place (HR, tech support), team leaders and line managers.

Longer term: revise company policies on flexible/agile and remote working to reflect what has been learned during this period, seeking feedback from your employee base.

Policy makers should:

- respond to calls from the wider women's sector for [greater funding for services supporting women at risk](#).^{xv}

Longer term: Harness the opportunities posed by the widespread shift to home working to address the slow progress during the move to [mainstream flexible or agile working](#).^{xvi} Government should deliver on its manifesto commitment to consult on making flexible working the default from day one of a job and include relevant changes in the upcoming Employment Bill. The pandemic is seeing governments around the world look again at this area – for example [Germany has pledged to introduce a bill enforcing a legal right to work from home](#).^{xvii}

Trend 3: Significant changes to arrangements for those with dependent children or other caring responsibilities

With most schools and childcare settings shut because of the lockdown, and many informal networks reduced as older relatives isolate, the [nearly 5 million households in the UK with dependent children must now manage paid work with a significant drop-in support, and may also face extra caring demands from sick or self-isolating relatives](#).^{xviii} This situation may not ease when lockdown measures are reduced; one in three of those nurseries closed say they do not

expect to be able to re-open^{xix} while 'grandparent care' - the support many families rely on - may also not be available in the same way as previously.

[Because women tend to do the majority of unpaid care](#),^{xx} this trend is a grave threat to women's ability to access and hold down paid work; it risks undoing what has been a significant enabler of women entering the labour market in recent years. At the same time, this is a fresh opportunity to recognise the crucial economic value of this unpaid care - researchers have estimated this work is worth around [13% of global GDP](#).^{xxi}

Employers should:

- ensure they have a clear picture of the caring responsibilities of your workforce, such as knowing how many parents with dependant age children work for them.
- amend policies that relate to combining paid work with caring responsibilities, including carers leave and flexible working to reflect the extraordinary situation we are in – more support on this can be found in BITC's [COVID-19 Supporting Carers in the Workplace toolkit](#).
- crucially, promote any changes to the wider workforce – do not presume that those who need it are familiar with the support offered. For example, many male staff may not have previously looked at their caring policies.
- support parents and carers' networks, including ensuring these are promoted across the wider workforce (establishing these if they do not already exist).
- reach out to male employees and ask what, if any, extra support or working pattern changes they need right now, champion and highlight men who are amending their working patterns to allow them to deliver on their caring responsibilities. [BITC research](#) has found role modelling and senior leadership plays a crucial role in enabling male staff to feel comfortable requesting some form of flexible working.^{xxii}





Longer term: Recognise that this situation is likely to have two phases – the immediate ‘in crisis’ moment, and the longer-term impact as many families must start again with arranging the network support that enables them to juggle paid work with caring responsibilities, such as finding new childminders. Consider policy change, such as time-limited extra days to enable employees to arrange new caring support.

Policy makers should:

- Recognise the fundamental role the wider caring ‘net’ - be it nurseries, childminders or other set-ups have played in the increasing the number of women in paid work in the UK, and the broader economy and develop a deliberate recovery support package for this section, on a par with other industries receiving support now and as the next phase of the crisis develops.

For more information, get in touch with Charlotte Woodworth, Gender Campaign Director:
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