

Women and Covid-19

March 2020

Key messages

1. Due to women's position within the labour market, and within households, Covid-19 will affect both women and men differently. It is crucial that any policy response to this crisis takes these differences into account, particularly the experiences of women with additional protected characteristics; BAME women, disabled women, and women on low incomes are likely to be worst affected by this crisis
2. Women are in a precarious position within the labour market; they are at risk of losing their jobs, having to take unpaid leave, or being exposed to the virus due to their role in front-line services. Women are also at risk of being left, without pay, to depend on inadequate social security systems. Women in the workforce need to be protected to ensure they can continue to work in these essential services and stay healthy, and where women are not able to work they should be supported with adequate financial support.
3. Women bear the majority of responsibility for child and elder care, and are forced to balance this with work. Employers should be equipped to support women to balance work and care needs without being financially penalised. However, we also need to be cautious of defaulting to old stereotypes around men and women's roles within the household and within work, wherever possible we should incentivise shared caring responsibility.
4. Government will be better placed to understand the different impacts of the crisis if women's voices are in the room and involved in decision making at all levels.
5. Women are at risk throughout this crisis, of falling into poverty, and abuse and violence within their homes, and online. Government cannot let these risks fall off the radar throughout this crisis, and must do everything they can to protect and provide a safety net for women.

1. Women in work

1.1. Women dominate in sectors that are now providing 'front-line' services, such as health and social care and in pharmacies, as well as in retail and cleaning jobs. These workers are essential to keep things running and to provide care for those suffering from Covid-19, but are also at higher risk of catching the disease and therefore passing it on to others. Recent analysis shows that there are over 3 million people in jobs at high risk of exposure to Covid-19 in the UK, and 77% of these are women, and of the million of these workers that are low-paid, 98% are women.¹ Concerns have been expressed that we may see an increase in women becoming infected due to their position on the front-line.

1.1.1. ***Welsh Government must to do everything they can to protect women working on the front-line in Wales. Measures should be put in place to ensure they can access work through***

¹ Women's Budget Group, Low paid women at highest risk of exposure to Covid-19, March 2020, <https://wbg.org.uk/media/low-paid-women-at-highest-risk-of-exposure-to-covid-19/>

transport and childcare provision; to ensure they are safe at work, with adequate PPE, testing for Covid-19 and mental health support; and financially supported if they are unable to work due to their own sickness or that of a family member.

- 1.2. We know that women are more likely to be working in low-wage jobs, often on zero-hours contracts, placing them at a higher risk of financial hardship and losing their jobs due to the insecurity of their current roles.
 - 1.2.1. In Wales, women make up 80% of human health and social workers, and 57% of workers within accommodation and food services.²
 - 1.2.2. Women also tend to be employed at more junior levels, where there may not be the facility or technology for them to work from home.
- 1.3. Women are also more likely than men to be dependent on public transport for travel, placing them at higher risk of catching the virus while travelling.
 - 1.3.1. Welsh Government should work with Transport for Wales to ensure there is appropriate guidance and facilities for hand-washing and maintaining hygiene, and that this is enforced by staff to ensure that those who need to can travel safely to work.***
 - 1.3.1.1. Where employers still require staff to travel to work, they should where possible try to flex hours so employees can avoid peak travel time on public transport.***
- 1.4. Women dominate in the sectors that have been adversely affected by the impact of Covid-19, such as hospitality, retail and leisure industries. Women working in these sectors are often on low wages, zero-hours contracts and work part time - 41% of women in Wales are working part-time compared to 12% of men - meaning they are less likely to be able to access Statutory Sick Pay (SSP).³
 - 1.4.1. Currently, you are only eligible for statutory sick pay if you are employed, and if you earn more than £118 a week – that is 14 hours at minimum wage. Many women may not meet this minimum, and will not benefit from any support – 5% of women in Wales work less than 10 hours, and 44% of women work between 10-34 hours compared to just 14% of men.⁴
 - 1.4.2. ***UK Government should abolish the earnings threshold and employment status of Statutory Sick Pay, and raise the rate of SSP to that paid to a full-time worker on the National Living Wage, £322.64 per week.***⁵
 - 1.4.3. Those who do not meet the criteria will be left to apply for Universal Credit; [we have previously raised concerns](#) about the support this actually provides, particularly for women and particularly in terms of the delays when trying to access this financial support. Before the outbreak of Covid-19, there were reported waits of more than 5 weeks for families who had applied for universal credit. If this is to be the vehicle of support for people to fall back on, UK Government need to ensure that it is properly resourced to deal with and process applications.
- 1.5. Welsh Government should work with utilities companies to look at how they can mitigate against potential missed payments. They could consider how can be reduced for households across Wales, payment or tax holidays for families with a loss of income, or caps on costs due to rise in April.***

² Chwarae Teg, State of the Nation 2020, <https://charaeteg.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/State-of-the-Nation-2020.pdf>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Women's Budget Group, Covid-19: Gender and other Equality issues, 2020 <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/FINAL-Covid-19-briefing.pdf>

1.6. Both UK and Welsh Government should undertake a serious review of the viability of Universal Basic Income (UBI) for supporting families, considering also how it may have mitigated against the impact of Coronavirus. This review should also assess the impact of the pandemic on different groups of people – particularly those with protected characteristics – and how we can better mitigate against negative impacts in the future.

2. Women as carers

2.1. We know that women still shoulder the majority of child and elder-care responsibilities, with formal childcare settings closed, and informal arrangements with family members outside of the household no longer able to take place this is likely to have adverse effects throughout this crisis. In particular for single parent households, with no one to balance these caring responsibilities with – of which 90% are led by women.⁶ With the duty of child education and care moving from the paid economy, to unpaid labour, this crisis is revealing the inadequacies of the current childcare system that is propped up by informal family arrangements.

2.1.1. This will impact women's economic position and financial independence if they are in households where they are taking the main responsibility for childcare.

2.1.2. The need to balance care and work, particularly with school closures, may mean women are forced to work outside of traditional working hours and patterns.

2.1.3. Women may also be forced to take carers or dependents leave. While current UK Government guidance advises that those who are taking time off work to care for someone with Covid-19 are eligible for sickpay, there is no guidance for carers or dependents leave to be paid, putting parents at significant risk, particularly if they are in single-parent households.

2.1.4. **Government should amend advice and guidance to employers to ensure that are able to support women in their workforce throughout this time.**

2.1.4.1. **UK Government should explore options to provide statutory payment for those required to take carers leave while schools are closed.**

2.1.4.2. **Welsh Government should incentivise employers, and require Government funded employers to provide guidance to employees on all available financial support and local support. This should also include information on support with bills and payments, and information and clarity around the impact on pensions for those forced to take time away from work.**

2.2. At the moment, pregnant women are advised that they are in a higher risk group, but the uncertainty around this is causing anxiety for many pregnant women and their families. Government should carefully manage communication with pregnant women about the latest, up-to-date guidance, and wherever possible ensure that resources, guidance and support are available online.

2.3. We are at risk of inadvertently rolling back the clock in terms of gender equality by putting pressure on women or assuming women will take on primary caring responsibilities. Employers need to support women with childcare responsibilities, while also encouraging **all** parents within the workforce to share childcare responsibilities where possible. We should not fall back to treating mothers as carers, and fathers as earners.

⁶ Gingerbread, Single parents: facts and figures, 2019, <https://www.gingerbread.org.uk/what-we-do/media-centre/single-parents-facts-figures/>

2.4. We welcome Welsh Government's recent announcement to invest in supporting firms to ensure they are set up for home-working, including capital investment in IT equipment to facilitate this. However, such an adjustment to ways of working will also require a cultural shift, and the need to adapt workplace policies in line with these changes.

2.5. Ensure that employers in the public and private sector are incentivised or required to allow employees to work from home as default wherever possible. Guidance and support should be issued through Business Wales on how to facilitate this, and Government should work with organisations like Chwarae Teg with experience in this area to ensure that investment in technological equipment is supported with information on how workplace policies and culture need to adapt to this change.

2.6. For those with caring responsibilities in the workforce, employers should be flexible on working with individual employees to find a balance that allows them to work around their caring responsibilities at home; this may mean facilitating working outside of traditional hours and patterns. However, no one with caring responsibilities should have to lose out financially, and employers should not make assumptions about the balance of responsibilities within households and how their employers wish to balance work and care.

3. Women in decision-making

3.1. Diversity leads to better decision-making, and evidence shows that when women are in the room, different issues are raised and addressed; for example, female Assembly Members are most likely to raise education, social care and domestic abuse and violence.⁷ It is easy for people to overlook gender equality as a 'niche' issue in a time of crisis, but gender needs to be central to our response, as it is central to the way our society is structured and organised

3.2. Deliberate efforts are needed to ensure women are at the table and leading throughout this time of crisis within Wales. Political Parties and Government should be doing what they can to ensure diversity at the top is improved and women are visible in Government briefings.

3.3. Calls have been made from organisation across the women and equalities sector for better representation of women at the top of Government.⁸

3.4. Diverse representation should be ensured within both the Welsh Government's core Covid-19 group, and within the UK Government's 'War Cabinet' to make sure that women's voices and experiences are represented at the top of Government throughout this crisis.

4. Women at risk

4.1. Due to women's position in the labour market, and within households, they are at risk of financial hardship. [Our recent research](#) found that women are often precariously balancing a combination of working hours, caring responsibilities, and benefits to stay afloat, but one change can put them at risk of poverty. This situation is exacerbated within the current crisis, and decision-makers should be mindful of the potential impact on women.

4.1.1. We need to be mindful of the adverse impacts in particular on groups like disabled women, and BAME women who are at increased risk.

⁷ P. Chaney Women and Policy-making: Devolution, Civil Society and Political Representation, in Our Changing Land: Revisiting Gender, Class and Identity in Contemporary Wales (ed. Mannay D.). University of Wales Press: Cardiff. (p.220-238), 2016

⁸ Fawcett Society, Coronavirus: Campaigning for women's visibility in UK response, 2020,

<https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/news/coronavirus-campaigning-womens-visibility-uk-response>

- 4.1.2. Concerns about the ability of the social security system to adequately support women already existed, and are exacerbated within the current situation. Welsh Government should consider whether and where they are able to improve or top this up in Wales to ensure there is a safety net for women in Wales.
- 4.1.3. ***UK Government should put urgent measures in place to improve the provision of social security, to ensure that waiting times are eliminated and applications are less onerous throughout this time of crisis.***
- 4.2. We cannot ignore women's risk of domestic violence and abuse throughout this crisis, as we are forced to stay home.
- 4.2.1. ***It is crucial that this risk does not fall off the radar, and Welsh Government are being proactive in supporting women who may be at risk. Welsh Government should work with Welsh women's Aid and others in the violence sector to ensure those at risk are being protected and consider how safe spaces can be provided. We echo Welsh Women's Aid's call for those working in refuges to be classed as key workers.***
- 4.2.2. ***Welsh Government should also work with the NHS, employers and others to ensure front-line workers who are likely to be in touch with individuals during this time period are equipped and trained to recognise the signs of abuse, and sign-post women to help and support wherever possible.***

Recommendations:

1. Welsh Government must do everything they can to protect women working on the front-line in Wales. Measures should be put in place to ensure they can access work through transport and childcare provision; to ensure they are safe at work, with adequate PPE, testing for Covid-19 and mental health support; and financially supported if they are unable to work due to their own sickness or that of a family member.
2. Welsh Government should work with Transport for Wales to ensure there is appropriate guidance and facilities for hand-washing and maintaining hygiene, and that this is enforced by staff to ensure that those who need to can travel safely to work.
 - 2.1. Where employers still require staff to travel to work, they should where possible try to flex hours so employees can avoid peak travel time on public transport.
3. UK Government should abolish the earnings threshold and employment status of Statutory Sick Pay, and raise the rate of SSP to that paid to a full-time worker on the National Living Wage, £322.64 per week.¹
4. Welsh Government should work with utilities companies to look at how they can mitigate against potential missed payments. They could consider how can be reduced for households across Wales, payment or tax holidays for families with a loss of income, or caps on costs due to rise in April.
5. Both UK and Welsh Government should undertake a serious review of the viability of Universal Basic Income (UBI) for supporting families, considering also how it may have mitigated against the impact of Coronavirus. This review should also assess the impact of the pandemic on different groups of people – particularly those with protected characteristics – and how we can better mitigate against negative impacts in the future.
6. Government should amend advice and guidance to employers to ensure that are able to support women in their workforce throughout this time.
 - 6.1. UK Government should explore options to provide statutory payment for those required to take carers leave while schools are closed.
 - 6.2. Welsh Government should incentivise employers, and require Government funded employers to provide guidance to employees on all available financial support and local support. This should also include information on support with bills and payments, and information and clarity around the impact on pensions for those forced to take time away from work.
7. Ensure that employers in the public and private sector are incentivised or required to allow employees to work from home as default wherever possible. Guidance and support should be issued through Business Wales on how to facilitate this, and Government should work with organisations like Chwarae Teg with experience in this area to ensure that investment in technological equipment is supported with information on how workplace policies and culture need to adapt to this change.
8. For those with caring responsibilities in the workforce, employers should be flexible on working with individual employees to find a balance that allows them to work around their caring responsibilities at home; this may mean facilitating working outside of

Recommendations Continued:

9. Diverse representation should be ensured within both the Welsh Government's core Covid-19 group, and within the UK Government's 'War Cabinet' to make sure that women's voices and experiences are represented at the top of Government throughout this crisis.
10. UK Government should put urgent measures in place to improve the provision of social security, to ensure that waiting times are eliminated and applications are less onerous throughout this time of crisis.
11. It is crucial that this risk to women who are forced to isolate with abuse partners does not fall of the radar, and Welsh Government are being proactive in supporting women who may be at risk. Welsh Government should work with Welsh women's Aid and others in the violence sector to ensure those at risk are being protected and consider how safe spaces can be provided. We echo Welsh Women's Aid's call for those working in refuges to be classed as key workers.
12. Welsh Government should also work with the NHS, employers and others to ensure front-line workers who are likely to be in touch with individuals during this time period are equipped and trained to recognise the signs of abuse, and sign-post women to help and support wherever possible.

For further information please contact:

Natasha Davies
Policy and Research Lead



Natasha.davies@chwaraeteg.com



07837 284695

Polly Winn
Policy and Communications Partner



Polly.Winn@chwaraeteg.com



07825 965580