

One Thousand Women's Voices: Recording EIS Member's Experience and Resilience During Covid-19

Briefing for EIS Trade Union Reps and LA Secretaries

Background

The impact of the Covid-19 crisis continues to detriment women's lives and equality. Women are disproportionately represented on the frontline of the pandemic, are at higher risk of gender-based violence and domestic abuse, as well as bearing the burden of an increase in unpaid and caring work.

In October 2020, the EIS Strategy Sub-Committee issued a Memorandum requesting the Equality Committee to identify the gendered nature of many of the issues arising from Covid-19 that currently face the teaching workforce, and the actions or aims required to address these issues – in order to shape national and local campaigning. The Equality Committee subsequently conducted a research project into women's experiences during this time.

The women who recorded their experiences in an online EIS questionnaire about their health, homelife, paid and unpaid work show that more needs to be done to recognise their experiences and contributions.

As trade unionists representing members of a profession where the majority are women, we must ensure that our efforts reflect women's working lives and experiences – and these are greatly shaped by gender inequality.

The EIS' findings from the One Thousand Women's Voices, questionnaire speak loud and clear - and the opportunities for change are there, if we are willing to grab them. This briefing will provide insight into the findings from a sample of one thousand EIS women members and give suggestions for possible trade union activity.

"(The most challenging for me at this time has been) the juggling of all my duties. When you are at work you are a teacher and that is your duty for the hours you are there. At home you are on Teams all day whilst trying to plan the next learning pack, answering emails from school, participating in online courses to up-level your skills to allow for remote learning, answering your telephone, dealing with queries from school, teaching your own children, working in the school hub all on top of caring, cooking and cleaning responsibilities."

Members' experiences

The burden of juggling paid and unpaid work

Across Europe, in pre-pandemic times, women worked 13 hours more a week unpaid, and 7 hours less a week paid work compared to men. During lockdown, this has intensified, meaning many are struggling to juggle home and work-life.

Research from the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions finds that the motherhood penalty remains significant. Across the EU, the gap between men and women without children is 1%, but when there are two children under 6 this raises to 25%, and 37% when there are three children.

Recent research from the Institute for Fiscal Studies on how parents are balancing work and family during the pandemic show that mothers were interrupted over 50% more than fathers. During the same time, the number of mothers in paid employment has reduced by 5%.

Of course, it is not only women who have children who experience disproportionate burden with regards to unpaid caring work or domestic work, but it is important to consider mothers specifically.

One Thousand EIS Women found that:

"It is a very stressful situation as I am trying to do everything! Work, clean, make meals, try to home school and care for 2 young children who are very demanding. At one point my 4-year-old was hanging around my neck while I was trying to teach a live stream lesson to my class."

"Lone parent to two young children with no family or friend support. My 6-year-old has mental health issues and I also have an adult autistic daughter who is staying with me due to lack of individualized support because of the pandemic. It's a nightmare situation and I feel totally overwhelmed and exhausted."

"I am doing far more hours than I am contracted to keep on top of the workload associated with the extra demands of home learning. I am also having to work evenings and weekends around childcare commitments. Meetings etc are sometimes held on my non-contracted days, but I feel I must attend in order to stay informed."

"(Workload has) easily tripled and became stretched across the working week with no home life balance up to late evenings. At times I was getting up at 3am to begin work for school as there was so much development for online learning, it was the only way I could manage it with primary age children of my own."

- 68% of respondents said the amount of housework they do has changed during lockdown.
- 20% have main or sole responsibility for childcare, and a third currently have nobody to help. 65% of those who already had caring responsibilities have seen these increase.
- Many, including the over 30% who are part-time, reported more “unofficial” work hours and a burden of flexibility placed on the employee to work around domestic and caring responsibilities.
- **58.5% of respondents said their ability to carry out paid employment has been adversely affected.**

Risks at home at work

Many members will be worried about contracting Covid-19, and both their own, and others’ safety when being asked to go into work. In addition to fears around Covid-19 and anxieties about the future, 29 women answered that they felt unsafe at home or in their personal relationships. The cause of this varied, however it is well known at this time that isolation due to lockdown can intensify domestic abuse and many women are left without support. Regardless of whether members are working from home or not, domestic abuse is a workplace issue that impacts women’s equal participation in work.

In terms of increased risks associated with contracting Covid-19, One thousand EIS Women found that:

- 8.5% of the overall respondents are dependent on public transport to get to their workplace, and 21 people rely on this to provide care for others.
- One in four respondents have an underlying health condition, and less than five percent were previously shielding.

“I am finding it more difficult to be in school now that I am pregnant. I have been asked to support pupils in our hub. I work in an ASN school and social distancing is difficult. No one seems to be able to tell me if I’m safe in school”

“The stress and worry of the possibilities of infection and fact that it would almost certainly kill my husband has been overwhelming at times. The guilt of working and putting us in danger is highly distressing; ironically not working leaves me upset and guilty as I feel I’m letting my students & colleagues down. I’m also scared of catching Covid and dying- a likely scenario. But I have to get up every day & care for my very ill husband. There is no day off from that- ever, Covid or not.”

The impact on mental health

There is no doubt that the additional pressures at this time have, and continue to have, an adverse impact on women's mental health and wellbeing. The relentlessness of juggling multiple responsibilities leave women with little to no time to reset and recover, coupled with fears around Covid-19 and the unpredictability of quickly shifting expectations for education delivery.

The research from One Thousand EIS Women found that:

"My eyes feel raw from crying so much. I feel like I am drowning."

"I am stressed constantly; I have suffered from lack of sleep and an underlying feeling of anxiousness at all times. Trying to ensure my children are still happy and educated has overtaken any time for concentrating on my own wellbeing."

"I have no time to myself and find myself more prone to tears, worry and the feeling of helplessness. It is all very stressful."

"I am more snappy with the children because I am more stressed than usual. I feel very guilty about that but it's hard not to get stressed when so much demand is put on you, all day every day."

"At one point, I wanted to end everything. This pandemic was the worst time of my life."

- 25.5% had experienced illness of someone they care for, and 21% had been physically ill themselves.
- **93.5% of respondents said they have experienced increased stress, anxiety, low mood or depression**, and 19% had experienced bereavement.
- 71.5% had not accessed health or emotional support.
- Around one in ten members live alone, facing further isolation.

Differences with groups who share a protected characteristic

Ethnicity data was gathered for over 500 participants. 5% as Asian, and 2% as Mixed or Multiple Ethnic groups and less than 1% as African, Caribbean or Black, or Arab. Due to the differences in sample size, it is difficult to draw conclusions regarding most relatively small differences between the groups, however a few relevant differences exist.

- Compared to the white respondents, BAME members were more likely to work in school, be in peripatetic roles, and there were more BAME responses from higher education, and less from further education.

- BAME members were significantly less likely to say that their ability to carry out paid employment has been affected by the pandemic and reported fewer changes to their paid work hours.
- BAME members were more likely to say they felt unsafe at home and in personal relationships, but the sample is very small.
- In terms of mental health issues, BAME members were only slightly less likely to report experiencing increased stress, anxiety, low mood and depression, but overall reported experiencing less illness of others they care for, compared to white members. **At the same time BAME members were significantly less likely to have accessed health or emotional support for their health and wellbeing.**
- One BAME Members said that:

"(The most challenging for me at this time has been) being a member of the BAME community and knowing the research findings of increased impact of COVID19 on BAME members. And having to try and get my employer to take this into consideration around my work practices and make reasonable adjustments."

11.5% of the One Thousand Women Voices identified as being Deaf or having a disability, 10 people identified as autistic, but all of these members also identified as disabled so we will refer to this group as "Disabled" for the purpose of this briefing.

- Disabled members were 9% less likely to work in school, and 9% more likely to work in further education compared to non-disabled members.
- Compared to non-disabled members, those who identify as Deaf or living with a disability or Autism were significantly more likely to have an underlying health condition with 70% (compared to 19.5% for non-disabled workers), 18 % were previously shielding (compared to 2.4% of non-disabled).
- A higher number of Disabled members identified as LGBT (9%).
- Disabled members were more likely to report that their ability to carry out paid employment had been affected at this time and were 10% less likely to have someone who helps or shares their caring responsibilities.
- Notably, Disabled members were almost twice as likely to have been physically ill during this time, and to experience illness of someone they care for – with near 70% reporting their access to existing support for their health and wellbeing affected by the current situation. Many Disabled members commented that they felt isolated.
- One Disabled members said that:

"(My employer has offered) additional well-being days but unable to take them due to increased workload created by Covid".

Women's equality on the trade union agenda

Women's inequality impacts women's ability to participate equitably in employment, access opportunities including leadership progression, and have a healthy work/life balance. Women's inequality is a workplace issue and should be of utmost concern to trade unions, especially to those representing professions where women are the majority.

Under the Public Sector Equality Duty, education employers must take steps to minimise any disadvantage suffered by people due to their protected characteristic, and, take steps to meet the needs of people from protected groups even when these differ from other groups. It is clear that women are differentially affected by workplace policies, or lack thereof, and linking this to the Equality Duty can be useful for Reps.

The One Thousand Women's Voices questionnaire asked members what more EIS could do to support women members during this time. One member said they wanted EIS to raise "*more awareness of the juggling women with families have to do during lockdown and petitioning workplaces to support them with these responsibilities*".

Furthermore, it is clear that women with intersecting characteristics such as being disabled or BAME, face additional or different challenges. These must be taken into account when addressing women's issues that will benefit *all* women.

Many respondents suggest more support and specific advice for lone parents and pregnant women is required, in addition to championing flexible working and LA policies that are women friendly such as around parenting, single parents, menopause, pregnancy and caring responsibilities. Some expressed frustration that a commitment exists on paper but is not followed up with proactive and practical implementation.

"I recently received an email from the council stating that they will be understanding parents need flexibility. What does "a degree of flexibility" mean? What does it look like? Give actual examples. Plural. And remember the single parent. Drowning in tasks. Constantly. No time for anything but childcare, work and housework."

Using risk assessments effectively

Many members will be fearful or worried about going into school, especially if they have increased risk factors. Very few members in our research mentioned risk assessments being used. Both in a meeting with the EIS BAME Members' Network, and the first meeting of the EIS Disabled Members' Network, members raised that often, risk assessments were not proactively or meaningfully implemented, with many stating they felt stuck in an uphill battle advocating for themselves.

"Management within the school have tried to be supportive and make reasonable adjustments but tell me they are hampered by a ruling from HR which amounts to a blanket ban on working from home making up even part of the mitigations and a personal risk assessment. A mixture of home, lone and socially distanced working was advised by doctor and OH report, but I am told this will not appear in my risk assessment under any circumstances."

- Bespoke risk assessments are available, but these must be proactively encouraged, rather than left up to the individual.
- Risk assessments should be fit for purpose for the individual members, rather than a one-size fits all.
- Mental health and wellbeing, as well as home situation and unpaid work responsibilities must be included when evaluating risk.

Flexible working

Trade Unionists cannot alone solve gender inequality, but we can do our part to ensure our activity is responsive to women's lives and prioritise interventions that will improve women's ability to participate more equitably in work.

There can be no doubt that since the pandemic, women have disproportionately struggled to balance work and homelife.

Flexibility in working arrangements, temporary reduction in hours, shifting work responsibilities or location are all measures that can be used effectively to ensure women do not lose out – and we can more equitably realise Fair Work for all members regardless of their gender.

For some members, the move to working from home has been a positive one, resulting in less commuting and more time with loved ones. How members have adjusted during the pandemic shows that flexibility in working is entirely possible, and can produce benefits if we learn from where this has worked.

"I have a high work ethic. I care deeply for my students. I also have my home life. It was impossible to combine all, and do each justice. My line manager has accused me in the past of playing the mum card, so I couldn't go to him. I've never felt as vulnerable as a woman and mother in my professional life as this. There was just no solution to the pressure."

- Employees have a legal right to request flexible working.
- Flexible working is beneficial for both the employer and employee.
- Flexible working offers should be adaptable to what works for the member and the workplace, not suggested as rigid alternative models.

Mental health

Reps can work to encourage a supportive culture for openness and care around mental health, recognising that so many are affected at this time. Beyond an individual issue, mental health is a political concern, and as a profession, teachers and lecturers have been adversely affected. In order to support members struggling with physical and mental health, temporary flexible working contracts can be implemented to aid workers' recovery, but beyond this – good mental health means reasonable workloads, clear expectations, adequate training and good communication.

- Stress risk assessments and wellbeing processes can be used effectively to work with schools to support members with mental health issues.
- Awareness campaigns around mental health impact can help shift culture.
- Flexible working can help those struggling, to recover.

Parental leave

The motherhood penalty starkly demonstrates why parental leave is an essential entitlement in order to close the pay gap and ensure women's equal participation in work. Until having a child does not involve detriment to women's equality, we will not achieve Fair Work for all.

Employers should take steps to mitigate against the motherhood penalty, by:

- Offering the same leave entitlement to all new parents regardless of gender, and,
- Ensuring leave entitlement is sufficient enough so that parents don't lose out on pay – and have to choose between caring for their child and working.
- Entitlements for all parents should include flexible working as default where beneficial, including phased hours, flexible hours, childcare assistance, breastfeeding leave, etc.
- Entitlements should be from day one, and supportively offered.

Conclusion

Everyone is under pressure during this time, but gender inequality means women are carrying a disproportionate burden. The gendered nature of the issues currently facing the teaching workforce clearly shows the detriment to women's equality, work and wellbeing. Prioritising issues that affect women simply means prioritising issues that affect the majority of the profession and ensuring our efforts are relevant.

In order for trade unions to be effective, these considerations must be taken into account in the mainstream union agenda, but also through dedicated projects to

campaign and raise awareness in our pursuit to demand better for women with regards to flexible working, healthy work/life balance, adjustments for working parents, carers and those most at risk during Covid-19 and lockdown, as well as mental health support for all.

If you yourself are affected by the issues discussed in this briefing, please know you are not alone. You can reach out to the EIS locally if you are a Rep and nationally if an LA Secretary, or contact one of the following helplines for support:

- Breathing space Scotland - <https://breathingspace.scot/>
- National Assistance Helpline by Ready Scotland - <https://ready.scot/>
- Rape Crisis Scotland - <https://www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk/>
- Samaritans Scotland - <https://www.samaritans.org/scotland/samaritans-in-scotland/>
- Scottish Domestic Abuse and Forced Marriage Helpline - <https://sdafmh.org.uk/>
- Scottish Women's Rights Centre - <https://www.scottishwomensrightscentre.org.uk/>
- Maternal Health Scotland - <https://maternalmentalhealthscotland.org.uk/>
- Scottish Women's Aid - <https://womensaid.scot/>
- SAMH for Scottish Mental Health- <https://www.samh.org.uk/>

Key messages

- Women are disproportionately burdened by unpaid care and domestic work, which has increased during this time, impacting women's ability to juggle paid work - and in turn exacerbating gender inequality.
- The impact of this is that an alarmingly high number of EIS women members are experiencing high stress, anxiety, and depression due to the pressures of work and homelife at this time - and lacking consideration of this from the employer.
- As a union, we should ensure that consideration of issues that contribute to women's inequality (unpaid care and domestic workload) are included as part of union activity at all levels and that our negotiation efforts include steps to minimise the differential impact on women. Steps can include flexible working, adjusted work, additional parental leave, stress and wellbeing risk assessments etc.