



Unequal Impact

Coronavirus (Covid-19)

Existing structural inequalities and multiple disadvantage have been brought into sharp focus during this global pandemic, from the higher death rates among men and unequal economic and social impact on women, to the higher risks faced by the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) community, to the loss of services and support for disabled people.

Yet the Government has not published an equality impact assessment (EQIA) for any of its key policy decisions relating to the coronavirus pandemic. The fact that the Government failed to address the issue of childcare in its recovery plan reinforced the importance of conducting an EQIA.



Impact on Women

Existing gender inequality means that the challenges caused by the outbreak are affecting men and women differently.

- With schools and nurseries partially open, it is women who are taking on most of the unpaid care work, reducing their hours or giving up paid work, turning the clock back on gender equality.
- Many women are on the frontline, delivering essential services, usually the lowest paid or in insecure work.
- Many women will be trapped in their homes, self-isolating with an abusive partner.
- It's women who are also more likely to care for older or disabled relatives and neighbours.

Childcare, Caring Responsibilities and Work

The Institute for Fiscal Studies has released *new data about parenting during lockdown*, which shows that mothers are more likely to have quit, lost their job or been furloughed and they are spending less time on paid work and more time on housework.

This strongly echoes what we are hearing from women across Northern Ireland. We know anecdotally women in Northern Ireland have had to make similar stark choices between losing employment or leaving young children at home alone, or presenting health risks to grandparents where no other care is available. The risks are increased for women who are key workers in low-income positions in care, cleaning and retail, or other essential positions such as nurses, teachers, as childcare for all key workers was not fully implemented and many parents were forced to risk being infected due to the nature of their work.

Access to childcare is a key part of our economic infrastructure and it is necessary for people to be able to return to workplace settings, and for those working from home, and is a key component to any pathway to recovery. It will not be possible to transition to a stage where the lockdown is fully lifted without childcare being treated as a major factor in being able to do this.

Insecure and Low Paid Work

The COVID-19 virus has caused governments to shut down large sections of the economy in order to contain infection whilst also being clear that there are essential services necessary to have a functioning society. In these sectors, workers have been expected to report to work as normal in order to maintain life, health and recovery, food and energy supply as well as vital public services. What the crisis has shown, is that there are thousands of workers who are essential to our economy. Our society cannot survive without the labour that these workers provide, this is surely the definition of an 'essential worker'.

Given this definition, one would expect that a society which recognises the indispensability of these workers would seek to ensure that we have an economy which rewards these workers commensurate with the value that we place on their labour. This is not the case.

Instead, we have an economy where essential workers are among the lowest paid people in employment. In many instances, some of these workers also face the most precarious forms of employment so that the inadequate reward they receive for their labour is also highly uncertain.

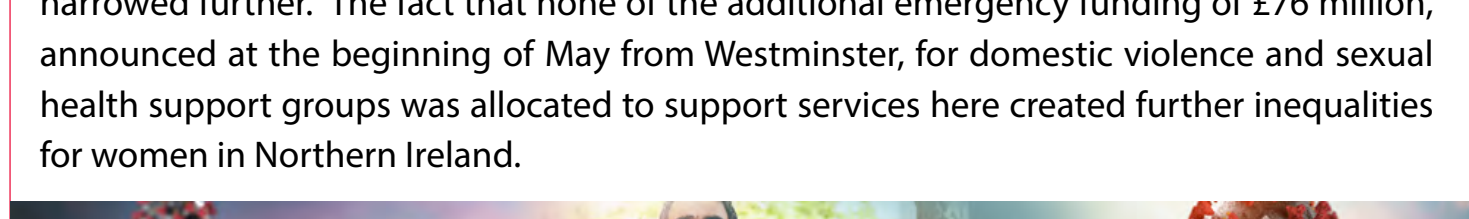
In many cases these low paid but essential workers are female and this is the driving force behind the persistent gender inequalities in our labour market.

The Irish Congress of Trade Unions has identified (<https://www.livingwage.org.uk/what-real-living-wage>) workers in food manufacturing, residential care and workplace cleaning as being especially vulnerable to low pay with women in those sectors particularly vulnerable. 62% of women working in food manufacturing earn below the Real Living Wage (RLW), 55% of women in residential care earn below the RLW whilst it is estimated that around 60% of women working as office cleaners earn below the RLW.

In other words, workers who we deem to be essential are not paid a wage that is sufficient to support a basic standard of living.

Domestic Violence

In the months since lockdown began, reported domestic violence incidents have surged and three women have been murdered by their partners. The latest report by the Police in Northern Ireland shows a stark increase in the number of *domestic abuse calls* received since Covid-19 lockdown measures were introduced on 23 March 2020 compared to the previous year. The level of *domestic abuse incidents and crimes* have been the highest ever recorded since the start of the data series in 2004/05. Homeless women, women with insecure immigration status have been particularly vulnerable, as regular support structures are limited during the lockdown. Ordinarily, the window for women to seek help is extremely limited. During periods of lockdown with their perpetrators, this window has narrowed further. The fact that none of the additional emergency funding of £76 million, announced at the beginning of May from Westminster, for domestic violence and sexual health support groups was allocated to support services here created further inequalities for women in Northern Ireland.



Impact on Disabled People

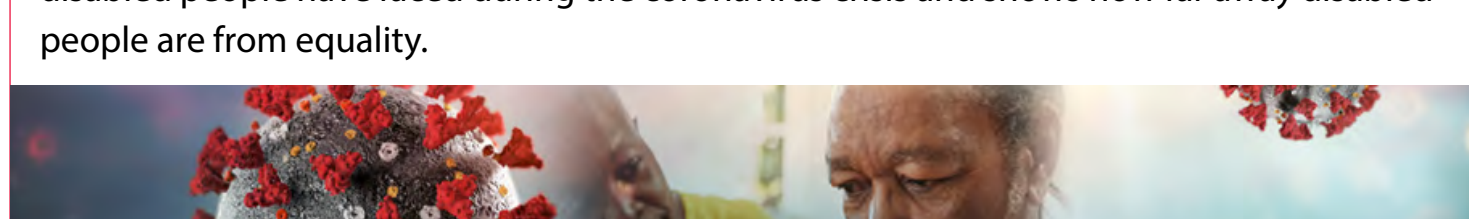
During the pandemic disabled people saw their rights diminished, they experienced resource rationing and blanket policies. This led to many disabled people struggling to get bare necessities, losing support and independence and living in fear of their lives. This was the findings of a report by *Inclusive London*.

The pandemic has shone a light on the long-standing structural inequalities and discrimination that deaf and disabled people experience. The dreadful disparities are reflected in the *grim data* released by the Office for National Statistics, which says disabled people were about twice as likely to die from Covid-19.

Among some of the key themes in the report were:

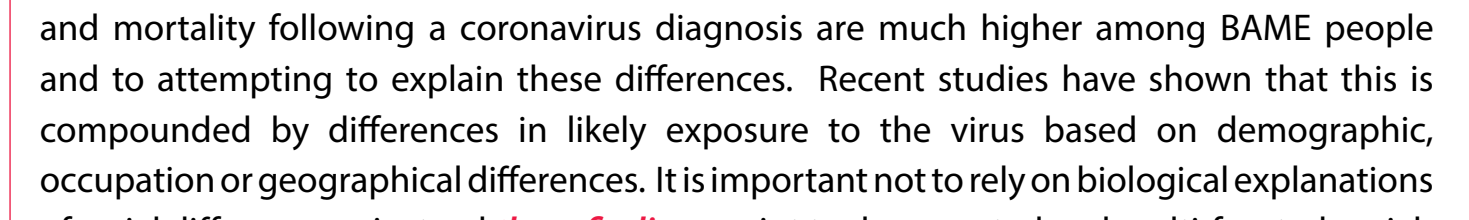
- Over 60% of disabled people questioned said they had struggled to access food, medicine and necessities.
- Over 35% of respondents talked about increasing levels of psychological distress.
- Nearly half of the respondents talked about inaccessible information, confusing guidance and lack of advice.
- Disabled people feel abandoned and neglected.
- Cuts to services and support.

The coronavirus pandemic has thrown into stark relief the extent of the discrimination and exclusion disabled people face. It is a depressing account of the struggles and discrimination disabled people have faced during the coronavirus crisis and shows how far away disabled people are from equality.



Impact on BAME People

The impact of coronavirus on BAME people has laid bare multiple areas of systemic disadvantage and discrimination. People from BAME backgrounds have been highlighted as particularly vulnerable to the economic and social impacts of the crisis. Coronavirus infection and mortality rates are much higher among BAME people and among BAME men. However, increasing attention is being paid to the extent to which rates of infection and mortality following a coronavirus diagnosis are much higher among BAME people and to attempting to explain these differences. Recent studies have shown that this is compounded by differences in likely exposure to the virus based on demographic, occupation or geographical differences. It is important not to rely on biological explanations of racial differences – instead *these findings* point to deep-seated and multi-faceted social-economic inequalities linked to structural racism.



Impact On Carers

In Northern Ireland, gender segregation and the unequal distribution of caring responsibilities is prevalent. Women are more likely than men to be forced out of the labour market by unpaid, domestic work or caring responsibilities and 69% of carers are women. Women in NI also have a 70% chance of providing care in their adult life, compared to 60% for men and by the age of 46, half of all women have been a carer (11 years before men). *Research from Carers NI* shows that Northern Ireland's carers save the economy £4.6 billion per year; whilst unpaid carers across all the UK provide social care worth £57 billion per year. What women have always known, and what has now been more unavoidable as the world tries to cope with the pandemic, is that care work, which is predominantly undertaken by women and girls, is central to the functions of every economy; yet it is still treated as a private issue and undervalued as contributors to economies.

Research on the rise of unpaid carers in the UK during COVID-19 highlights that the pandemic has led to an increase of 4.5 million people providing unpaid care; which is an almost 50% increase in the number of unpaid carers since the crisis began. Many new unpaid carers are drawn from the working population, as 26% of all carers are now juggling work and unpaid care; an increase from one in six to one in four. Significantly, this highlights where future carers may come from if there is not sufficient investment in carer and support and significant investment into the redistribution of care work, and supporting unpaid carers, is needed urgently.

This *research* also found that in Northern Ireland:

- 15% of respondents said they were already providing care before the COVID-19 outbreak (212,000 people) and a further 7% stated that they have started caring since the outbreak (98,000 people). Using population projections, it can be estimated that there are as many as 312,000 unpaid carers,
- 59% of respondents stated that unpaid caring responsibilities was having a detrimental impact on their ability to do paid work,
- 54% identified the financial impact of additional care costs as a key concern,
- 49% expressed high concern over not having anyone to talk to about the challenges of caring,
- 54% of respondents in NI stated that they are now more aware of the role of unpaid carers than before and 74% thought that carers were not well valued or valued at all,
- 72% of respondents in NI do not believe that unpaid carers have been supported by the Government during the COVID-19 pandemic,
- 74% of NI respondents also believed that the government should increase support; for example, though increased financial support, investment in care and support services so unpaid carers can take a break and through further investment in social services.

It is clear that the Northern Ireland Assembly needs to urgently address unpaid caring responsibilities in any recovery planning and longer-term economic modelling. Given the disproportionate levels of unpaid caring responsibilities taken on by women, and the drastic impact this can have on women's participation in paid work and life time earnings, a gendered lens is needed in addressing the segregation of care work to prevent further embedding gender inequality.

