

MINUTES
Mental Health and Wellbeing

Women and Work APPG Meeting, Monday 19 October 2020
3-4pm via Zoom

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

Parliamentarians in attendance:

- Caroline Nokes MP
- Baroness Garden of Frognal
- Baroness Uddin

Minutes

Co-Chair of the Women and Work APPG, Jess Phillips MP convened the meeting, welcoming attendees and panellists. She introduced the meeting's topic, which was mental health and wellbeing. Jess said that for many, working from home is becoming tiring and, in some workplaces, there is a lack of motivation. She also cited research by the Centre for Mental Health, which showed that if the economic impact of COVID-19 is similar to that of the post 2008 recession, we could expect 500,000 additional people to experience mental health problems, with depression being the most common. She noted that the Institute for Fiscal Studies has also found that mental health has worsened substantially as a result of the pandemic and explained that this meeting would be an opportunity to explore some ways to improve this for women in the workplace. Jess then introduced the first speaker, **Helen Lamprell, General Counsel & External Affairs Director at Vodafone.**

Helen began by explaining that Vodafone believes diversity and wellbeing in the organisation are core principles of everyone's role, not just HR. She said Vodafone now has 50/50 gender representation on its board, has been named a top employer by Stonewall, and has had BAME directors on its board since 2010. Helen argued that this approach reflects an organisational belief that people are central to business and success, which is carried through to its policies on mental health and wellbeing.

Helen explained that the mental health agenda was becoming increasingly pressing, but the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated this. Until recently, she argued, the entire country struggled with open conversations about mental health, but that is changing now. Vodafone is placing explicit emphasis on mental health and encourages other organisations to come together and embrace the cause. She explained that peer-to-peer support is key, and Vodafone runs promotion and awareness days on all of its operational sites. It is seeking to raise awareness about a range of mental health-related issues, such as depression, maternal mental health and mindfulness. Helen stated that Vodafone has also trained employees as mental health first-aiders and established an employee assistance programme. She argued it has therefore facilitated proactive engagement and conversation around the issue.

Helen stated that these systems were in place prior to the pandemic, and that when lockdown was imposed, all of these interactions and events were halted. Everything was

moved online, which had some positive consequences, in that more people were able to access training and support portals more easily and cheaply. As an employer, Vodafone sought to be clear about trying to reduce the causes of stress and anxiety in the workplace and explicitly acknowledged that not everyone would be able to work during lockdown. Helen said those who could not work due to shielding were still paid, and acknowledgement that some people's productivity would be affected by caring responsibilities came from the CEO down through the company.

Helen explained that Vodafone has also sought to accommodate employees who feel their mental health has been negatively impacted by working from home and allow them to go into work. Vodafone is also facilitating explicit conversations with employees about the prospect of a second lockdown, which many feel will be worse than the first. Helen stated that Vodafone is now looking at how to pick up on signs that someone may be experiencing mental health difficulties without face-to-face interactions and is speaking to line managers about this.

Helen concluded by stating that prior to the pandemic, the country was already experiencing an "*epidemic of loneliness*" and argued it is important to understand the positive impact of people physically seeing each other and for businesses to take this into account.

Jess asked Helen how, as a national company, Vodafone is navigating having different sites under different levels of lockdown, as well as how to avoid presenteeism affecting women's progression if young men are the first to return to the workplace. **Helen** acknowledged that the tier system has made the company's operations more complicated, but most workers are still working from home, apart from those in retail. She said Vodafone is currently having discussion about how to create an environment where people feel united but can also work remotely.

Jess then introduced **Poppy Jaman, CEO, City Mental Health Alliance**. Poppy explained that her organisation's vision is to create mentally healthy workplaces. It was founded following the 2008/09 financial crisis, which had a severe mental health impact that businesses saw the need to address. Poppy stated that the company operates in four countries, and also seeks to inspire mental health creation. She argued that everyone should feel that their work is a part of their wellbeing toolkit, and it should not push anyone over the edge or make them feel mentally unwell.

Poppy stated that the City Mental Health Alliance uses a three-prong strategy to get business leaders talking about mental health. Firstly, they seek to normalise and socialise the mental health agenda by encouraging senior figures, particularly white men, to talk about their personal stories of mental health challenges and recovery experiences, therefore showing leadership and vulnerability. Secondly, they work to upskill the organisation in coping with mental health, particularly line managers. Poppy stated that 70-80% of line managers believe mental health and wellbeing is a key part of their responsibility but less than 30% are trained in it. She stated that they need to know how to ask about mental health and where to direct people if there is a problem. The third prong of City Mental Health Alliance's strategy is sustaining this work; ensuring that every board has a wellbeing strategy that includes benchmarking tools.

Poppy explained that the COVID-19 crisis is already having a huge impact on financial insecurity and social isolation, particularly amongst young people, Black and Brown workers, women, key workers, and those in less secure employment. She stated that up to 9% of employees sought help with their mental health through their workplaces during the pandemic, and argued that she wants to see that number grow and businesses look harder at their supply chains and how they contribute to local communities.

Jess thanked Poppy and asked why she thinks people find it so difficult to discuss how they are, as well as how employees' families and children are, particularly as getting support for children's mental health is so challenging. **Poppy** stated that her clients are working to take in the full picture of their employees' lives, including their children. She added that she has also created an initiative called "*Thriving from the Start*", which works to support young people early in their careers.

Poppy stated that young people and students are currently experiencing great uncertainty and a challenging mental health context, while the "*sandwich generation*" is also struggling to care for both children and parents at once. She said some of her clients, such as Legal and General, have also sought to support employees experiencing domestic abuse, by providing domestic abuse training for managers to equip them to spot the signs, apply restitution, or pay salaries in different ways to protect survivors. Poppy added that although there is a lot of great work taking place in many businesses, she is concerned about the gap between the "*haves*" and the "*have nots*" and that certain groups, such as Black women, will be worst off. **Jess** agreed with Poppy, adding that most of the women in her constituency are unable to "*afford a mental health breakdown*" as they cannot access sick pay but are more at risk because they may suffer abuse at work and struggle to have proper time for self-care.

Co-Chair of the Women and Work APPG, Laura Farris MP then introduced **Leyla Okhai, CEO of Diverse Minds**. Leyla stated that her organisation is a microbusiness and noted that she has known Poppy since 2013, when she trained as a mental health first aid instructor. Leyla said she wanted to talk about the "*holistic woman*", as women typically still undertake primary caring responsibilities for younger and older generations and are culturally socialised to feel obliged to do things for others more than men.

Leyla explained that the events of 2020 are likely to have impacted women more than men. Women are more likely to experience 'long COVID', and work in sectors that have come under more pressure, for example the creative industries or teaching, and women are also more likely to have experienced increased domestic and sexual violence through lockdown.

Leyla stated that the latest wave of the Black Lives Matter movement has meant that many Black women are having to educate people in their workplaces on racism, which is a huge burden and has meant some have had to take sick leave due to exhaustion. Leyla argued that workforces need to better embed diversity and inclusion and foster a better understanding of racism, as it is not a new issue. She added that many employers have also not been following guidance that women over 28 weeks' pregnant should be working from home.

Leyla then turned to the issue of home space and digital poverty, which is impacting adults and young people who are struggling to work and study in a quiet environment. She argued that incorporating digital connectivity into employee benefits packages would also help people to work better and assist working parents. Leyla added that better communication is needed from the Government, for example on the opportunity to receive tax refunds from the cost of working from home.

Leyla argued that there should be a budget dedicated to wellbeing and a shift in workplace policies as a result of the move to greater homeworking. For example, she stated, if someone is injured while working from home, there is a question of whose responsibility that should be. Leyla argued that although many managers feel they need to put their organisation first, this is problematic for mental health and they must be properly trained in supporting their colleagues.

Laura thanked Leyla and agreed that it is concerning when employees have to take responsibility for diversity conversations within their own organisations. **Jess** agreed and said feeling like you have to educate your workplace is a terrible burden. **Laura** added that nobody should have to explain why they should be valued. **Leyla** agreed and stated that people should not feel obliged to share their stories or make themselves vulnerable.

Q&A

Laura then invited questions from the audience. The discussion focused on the following key themes:

- The need for a more robust social security system that includes sick pay at minimum wage. **Jess** argued that if large companies are able to demonstrate that sick pay helps their organisation and that offering it for mental health absences helps people to come back to work this will make a big difference.
- How to demonstrate the economic value of wellbeing and ensure it does not fall by the wayside when times are tough. Panellists explained that there is a tangible economic benefit from investing in wellbeing, but **Helen** also argued that companies should do it simply because it is right.
- **Jess** argued that the Government should be more selective in the companies it commissions and only provide contracts to the best employers.

Laura thanked the panellists and participants and brought the meeting to a close.