

LEVELLING UP OUR FEMALE WORKFORCE

Minutes



Date	Tuesday 28 th of February, 2023
Time	17:00 – 18:00
Venue	Portcullis House, Room O and Zoom
Chair	Flick Drummond , Co-Chair of the Women and Work APPG and MP for Meon Valley
Speakers	Imran Hussain , MP for Bradford East Jill Partington , International Communications Manager at Assystem Professor Christopher Warhurst , Warwick Institute for Employment Research Professor Jill Rubery , Executive Director of the Work and Equalities Institute at Manchester University
Theme/ Background information	<p>At the Conservative Party Conference in October 2021, Prime Minister Boris Johnson set out his ambition for “uniting and levelling up across the UK.” He stated that existing inequalities between and within regions is “not just a question of social justice, it is an appalling waste of potential and it is holding this country back.” However, the government’s focus on inequality between places risks masking other forms of inequality, including around women’s employment.</p> <p>This session will ask what steps need to be taken to level up our workforce, to provide an estimate of how much this is costing and to discuss metrics to measure the Government’s Levelling Up agenda.</p>

NON-VERBATIM MINUTES

Flick Drummond began by stating that regional inequality remains a persistent issue in the UK, with the highest paying jobs centred in the capital; in 2019, IPPR North found that regional inequality in the UK was worse than in any comparable developed country. The Conservative Party launched its plans to “Level Up” regions across the UK at the Conservative Party Conference in October 2021, to combat this inequality, but this has rarely addressed how this regional inequality impacts on women.

Imran Hussain began by saying he would discuss the Labour Party’s plan to tackle inequality, and thanked the APPG. On Levelling Up, he said that this could have been more effective at tackling inequalities; for example, councils ended up spending money on consultants to help apply for more funding. He argued that the government should look at bringing about structural change to properly address the issues facing gender inequality. He pointed to a particularly high unemployment rate among women from minority ethnic backgrounds. Regional inequality has a

significant impact on all women, but especially for women of colour, with Pakistani and Bangladeshi women being particularly affected. The average wage in Bradford is £75 a week less than the UK average; due to the gender pay gap, this statistic is likely to be even higher for women in Bradford. Educational attainment is also a major factor. Due to a lower rate of academic success, high wage companies don't invest in Bradford. This has a brain drain effect. We need to close the gender pay gap and tackle low pay, especially for women of colour. The Labour Party New Deal for Working People will tackle gender inequality.

Jill Partington explained that the energy transition is bringing jobs to a variety of regions; the latest data shows that Net Zero will create 1.7m new roles in the UK within this decade. Assystem's main sector is nuclear power, and their new site will create 25,000 jobs. There is also a gap of around 200,000 new skilled workers; they are fighting for job candidates. The energy transition is a regional story. Recent, important steps towards developing fusion power could put the UK on the map as the main site of fusion power generation. The supply chain is really the main source of roles in nuclear today. For example, Blackburn is a key site for this. 68% of their work on the small modular reactor (SMR) programme has been delivered by teams in Blackburn and Sunderland. Jill stated that the industry needs more project managers. There are many new access routes into these careers – it's not just about having an engineering degree. She argued that there is a need for a cultural shift. Jill explained that when she started in her role, there were far fewer women in the industry: now it's 31%. Thinking about the gender pay gap, we need more women working outside of support services roles. The industry is faced with a challenge due to low numbers of women studying STEM at university. Many female STEM students are international, and are more likely to leave the country. To significantly change the number of women in STEM, we have to start at school age. In summary, we need a sustained programme to attract women into STEM.

Chris Warhurst began by explaining that he would discuss Levelling Up more generally, so that Jill could focus on its impact on women. He argued that the Levelling Up programme targets infrastructure and transport, but could potentially go further on jobs and structural change. We know that low-skilled, low-wage jobs provide little scope for social mobility. A greater availability of high-skilled, high-wage jobs in areas targeted by Levelling Up could reduce inequality, and have other knock-on effects such as reducing ill health. In research, ReWage has called on the government to prioritise three things: first, helping people access and progress in work, such as through allowing regions to have more control over skills and training agendas, as the UK is very centralised. Second, making work better, such as through supporting managers, and helping raise employment standards locally. Thirdly, developing employment charters in order to get SMEs involved. In rural areas, SMEs are often the main drivers of employment. They are resilient during economic crises, and glued to their localities, so it is in our interest to support SMEs.

Professor Jill Rubery began by warning there's a danger that, looking at the data, people will say there's not a problem. Gender gaps might be smaller in deprived areas. Men have more access to high quality jobs, so where there are no high quality jobs, the pay gap is smaller. This does still matter, because if men's earnings are lower, women's become more important. Women are more tied to localities. Also, women are less likely to move for a better position. Childcare is a key piece of infrastructure, as much as roads and transport. The main issue with childcare is that it is expensive. Things have improved with the 30 hours of free childcare for 3 year-olds, but at the moment you can only get these if you have a job. Tying childcare to employment is harmful for people who are vulnerable. We need flexible childcare that fits around people's varying working schedules. On transport, there's an absence of a gender lens. Women need reliable transport, and made 1/3 more bus journeys than men in 2013. But the toolkit for Levelling Up transport makes no mention of women. Women often make multiple destination journeys. We need a

different lens to focus on these aspects. We need more predictability of working hours, with Jill arguing that flexibility could be an overused term. Most women with children need predictability so that they can fit childcare around their work. Women need notice to any changes to their hours. Decent work needs to be provided for essential services; in Levelling Up areas, public sector employment is likely to be even more important. Public services employ 60% of women with a degree. Women's pay has been eroded in real terms since 2010. To finally come back to skills, women need to be seen as a resource, especially when looking at skills shortages. Employers need to consider reskilling women when they suffer a skills shortage. Many jobs in STEM subjects need a combination of technical and relational skills. Diversity may help rather than hinder. We need to invest in women's skills, including women returners. Employers need to embrace family friendly conditions. Jobs women currently do are important, sometimes essential, and need to be valued. For example, social care workers need more recognition.

Jane van Zyl (CEO of Working Families) commented that most people who contact Working Families want to keep their jobs. They often work for SMEs, and do not always have a difficult employer. How do we support SMEs?

Chris Warhurst responded that ReWage had recently published a report on SMEs and support. The SME sector is incredibly varied. SME support is general and good for startups, but once they are established there is no tailored support for them. He mentioned that Professor Jill Rubery was working on a paper on flexible work.

Flick Drummond expressed an interest in the research on flexible work.

Professor Jill Rubery clarified that she was focusing on workplaces where you cannot use remote and hybrid working.

Jane van Zyl mentioned her own frustration that all discussion of flexible work focuses on offices.

Professor Jill Rubery pointed to the need for predictability. In France and Germany there is a legal requirement to give notice of changes to schedules. Without this, if you work part time, you could be required to change your hours suddenly.

Flick Drummond handed over to a guest.

A guest mentioned that some industries are incredibly short on workers. She suggested that for Levelling Up, we need to think local. Apprenticeships schemes can be dysfunctional. We want to build our workforce, but we need to be able to operate in a way in which doesn't put anyone out of business. Women need to get down the road cheaply and efficiently.

Imran Hussain argued that if we are to truly Level Up, there has to be a bottom up approach rather than top down.

A guest suggested that during discussions on the Windsor framework, women didn't seem to be at the table. In the UK, when these discussions are held we should make sure a committee analyses the impacts of legislation such as this.

Chris Warhurst stressed the importance of employment, particularly female employment. A decent job for a woman in Newcastle is not on the other side of the river Tyne; these jobs need to be close enough that you can reach the job and school. Women are more place-limited than men.

Baroness Uddin pointed out that there is lots of evidence that childcare is more expensive in the UK than the EU. Reports have looked at the employment of Muslim women, showing how they are poorly paid and less likely to be considered for roles. She suggested that student loans may have a role to play. To improve equality we need to reach the root of the problem.

Joseph Grey (Bloody Good Employers) thanked the speakers and asked all parties to address not just the menopause, but also menstruation, in conversations such as this.