

EQUALITY COMMISSION FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

Briefing Paper

Equal access to and equal opportunities for all at work

March 2023

1. Introduction

The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (the Commission) has noted changes to the workplace and labour market over the course of the past three years, particularly with the outworkings of the UK's decision to leave the EU, the impacts that the Covid 19 pandemic has had on the workplace, as well as a range of structural changes in workplace practices that have been noted since the Commission undertook its assessment of key inequalities in employment that it published in 2018.

The purpose of this briefing paper is to provide a high level overview of the available literature on the issues identified in employment and work that may be affecting the equality groups and those who are members of the equality categories, who enjoy rights and protections in the equality legislation. This briefing refers to these groups in terms of Section 75 equality groups¹.

This briefing paper does not provide an in-depth review of the data or sources referred to for each s75 group; the reader should refer to the references at the end of this paper for the full source information.

The paper contains the following sections:

- Information on the profile of the labour market in Northern Ireland and labour force participation;
- An identification of risks and barriers in accessing employment and work, and ensuring equality of opportunity in employment and work in Northern Ireland.

2. Profile of the NI Labour Market

Overview

The early stages of the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic in 2020 had a dramatic effect on the United Kingdom's (UK) labour market as a whole, with a large fall in employment and measures such as the furlough

schemes in place. Unemployment and economic inactivity (people not in work and not looking for work) both increased². By the start of 2021, Northern Ireland employment and unemployment levels began to improve but economic inactivity continued to grow³. Overall, measures of total employment (e.g. employment rate – that is, the proportion of people aged 16 to 64 in work - and hours worked), unemployment and economic inactivity had not returned to their pre-pandemic position (2019)⁴.

The Labour Force Survey (LFS)⁵ estimates for Northern Ireland, for the period April-June 2022, show that:

- the Northern Ireland **employment rate** (69.7%) **increased** by 1.0 percentage points (pps) from the rate recorded in the previous year⁶. In 2022, the UK employment rate was estimated at 75.5%;
- the Northern Ireland **unemployment rate** (2.7%) **decreased** by 1.6pps from that recorded in 2021. The UK unemployment rate was estimated at 3.8%; and
- the Northern Ireland **economic inactivity rate** (28.3%) (the proportion of people aged from 16 to 64 who were not working and not seeking or available to work) **increased** by 0.2pps between 2021 and 2022. The UK economic inactivity rate was estimated at 21.4%.

The reason unemployment is falling while employment is slow to recover is because fewer people are in the labour market. This is mainly due to a rise in people becoming economically inactive. Office for National Statistics (ONS) figures for the UK show that the main reasons for the increase in economic inactivity since the start of the pandemic were long-term illness or being a student⁷. Northern Ireland has historically had higher rates of economic inactivity compared with the UK average and other UK regions. Most recent data (2021/22) shows that economic inactivity in Northern Ireland increased by 11% (from 2019) compared to between 1% and 3% in England, Scotland and Wales⁸. Similar to the UK as a whole, the main reasons noted in terms of the increase observed were higher levels of long-term illness and students⁹.

In 2022, the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) estimated that one in ten people who developed long Covid in the UK have had to stop working¹⁰. A Resolution Foundation¹¹ survey (2021) found around 600,000 adults aged 18 to 65 had either left the UK workforce or were working fewer

hours because of long Covid or fear of the virus. Another 600,000 were working less because of poor mental health.

Further surveys have found that the Covid-19 crisis has hit the self-employed, lower paid workers¹² and others in insecure and non-traditional forms of employment especially hard¹³.

Labour Force Participation

By gender

Using LFS estimates, the profile of the Northern Ireland workforce by sex/gender in August 2022 was¹⁴:

- the male (age 16 and over) **unemployment rate** (3.0%) decreased by 2.6pps over the year; and the female (age 16 and over) unemployment rate (2.5%) decreased by 0.6pps over the year;
- the female (aged 16 to 64) **employment rate** (66.0%) decreased by 2.2pps over the year and the male (aged 16 to 64) employment rate (73.4%) increased by 4.2pps over the year; and.
- the female (aged 16 to 64) **economic inactivity rate** (32.3%) increased by 2.7pps over the year; the male (aged 16 to 64) economic inactivity rate (24.3%) decreased by 2.3pps over the year.

In 2021, the **self-employment rate** for women was 7.5%, compared to the male rate of 18.1%¹⁵.

The employment of women in Northern Ireland in 2022 is highly concentrated in sectors which have been relatively insulated from the economic impacts of Covid-19. For example, employment in public administration, education and health accounts for almost half (48%) of female employment, compared to just 17% amongst men¹⁶. Women are overrepresented in frontline and low pay sectors, which have been the hardest hit by the pandemic¹⁷.

Those sectors traditionally linked with the employment of men, like construction and manufacturing, have seen a decrease in numbers in employment¹⁸.

By age

Younger workers (those aged 16-24) have been the most affected by the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, according to available statistics compiled by NISRA¹⁹; they accounted for almost 80% of the fall in employment levels in Northern Ireland from January-March 2020 and July-September 2020. The University of Ulster²⁰ found that males aged under 35 accounted for almost one-quarter (24%) of those furloughed or laid off, despite representing only 18% of total employment, suggesting this group has been disproportionately impacted. A recent observation by the Resolution Foundation, in 2021, found that the share of UK workers aged 18-24 on insecure contracts was beginning to rise²¹.

The IFS Deaton Review²² and ONS²³ have highlighted that young people in the UK have been most effected by job and income loss during the Covid-19 pandemic. During the stated periods, young people have experienced:

- A fall in employment levels of 13,000 (72% of total job losses).
- an increase in unemployment of 6,000 (43% of the total); and
- an increase in economic inactivity of 8,000. All other age groups have seen economic inactivity decrease.

Almost three-quarters of people working as waiters / waitresses in Northern Ireland are under the age of 25²⁴. These individuals are in relatively low paid roles. They are likely to have been significantly impacted by the restrictions on the Northern Ireland's hospitality sector during the Covid-19 pandemic²⁵.

The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on young people may last throughout their working lives. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, McQuaid, R., Hollywood, E., Canduela, J. (2010) stated that youth unemployment is associated with lifelong problems, such as worklessness, poverty, limited employment opportunities, low wages, lower average life satisfaction and ill health²⁶.

By age and gender

A gender divide in employment among younger workers can also be observed. In 2021, UK labour force participation among males aged 25-44 decreased by 1.1 percentage points but increased by 1.8 percentage points among women in the same age group, particularly amongst

mothers. As a result, in 2021, women accounted for 48% of the UK workforce²⁷.

Labour force participation has also decreased among older workers (45-64)²⁸. This has been more marked for UK women aged 50 and over, whose employment rates fell by 2.1 percentage points (to 73.8 per cent), unemployment rise by 0.7 percentage points (to 2.4 per cent), and economic inactivity rise by 1.4 percentage points (to 23.8 per cent).

NISRA (2019) 29 shows that population ageing will also profoundly impact Northern Ireland's workforce, with the share of people aged 65 and above expected to increase from 17% in 2020 to 21% by 2030. Compared to the rest of the UK, Northern Ireland will see the largest percentage increase in those aged 65 years and over and the largest percentage decrease in children (aged 0-15) between 2018 and 2043³⁰.

By disability

In 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a fall in the overall UK employment rate for disabled people and an increase in the employment gap (difference between the percentage of disabled and non-disabled in employment)³¹. Recent figures (April - June 2021) indicate that the overall UK employment rate (52.7%) for this group is returning to its pre-pandemic level and the employment gap (28.4 percentage points (pps)) is also starting to narrow again³².

The overall UK employment rate at the period (April - June 2021) was 75.0%, for disabled people in Northern Ireland it was 37.3% (2021)³³. In 2021, the disability employment rate gap for Northern Ireland was 41.1pps, compared to 28.4pps for the whole of the UK. The disability employment gap in Northern Ireland has consistently been wider than the overall UK and when compared to other regions of the UK.

Northern Ireland had the second highest rate (21.3%) of those who have a disability across the entire working age population (16-64) in 2020 in the UK (19.1%)³⁴. The overall UK trend (2014-2020) has been that women represent a higher proportion of people with disabilities (22.5%, compared to 17.2% for males)³⁵. For NI specifically when looking at working age 16-64 there is a consistently higher percentage of the female population classified as disabled (24.1%, compared to 18.4% males)³⁶. In 2020, the Women's Budget Group (UK)³⁷ found that disabled women were less likely to be employed; 53.5% of disabled women are employed compared with 78.2% of non-disabled women.

Disability Action (2020)³⁸ found that the rate of increase in joblessness for disabled people in Northern Ireland, while increasing at the same rate as the overall UK figure for all workers, is taking effect on an already depleted pool of employed people³⁹, having a disproportionate effect on the disabled community. This highlights a continuation of the position identified in the Commission's Statement of Key Inequalities (2018)⁴⁰ which showed a persistent employment gap between people with and without disabilities.

By age and disability

Northern Ireland has consistently had the highest percentage of those aged 50-64 classified as having a disability, in 2020 the figures were 32.4% compared with the UK average of 26.8%⁴¹.

In contrast to the overall employment rate for disabled people and that for those aged 50-64 years, Northern Ireland has had the lowest percentage of younger people (16-34 year olds) (12.6%) identify as disabled across all UK countries (15.1%) during the period 2014-2020⁴².

By ethnicity

Irish Travellers continue to be less likely to be in employment⁴³ and more likely to be economically inactive⁴⁴ than other ethnic groups. Traveller women, in particular, are less likely to participate in employment and are more likely to be economically inactive⁴⁵ than women from all other ethnic groups.

UK employment rates for minority ethnic groups are now higher than they were pre-pandemic, rising to 68.3% in 2022 from 68.0% in 2020 (January-March), mainly due to decreases in economic inactivity rates, falling from 27.4% to 26.5% in the same period⁴⁶. People from White ethnic groups, saw a fall in employment rates from 76.3% in 2020 (January-March), to 75.6% in 2022 (January-March), with a rise in economic inactivity rates from 19.2% to 20.5% in the same period⁴⁷.

The Trades Union Congress (TUC)⁴⁸ identify two main drivers for a **drop in economic inactivity** for UK workers from minority ethnic groups:

- A fall in the number of students from minority ethnic groups who were economically inactive.
- A fall in the number of workers from minority ethnic groups who were economically inactive due to looking after the family home⁴⁹.

The overall UK unemployment rate among Black and minority ethnic (BME) people is significantly higher than it is among white people (6.3% compared to 3.6% in 2022)⁵⁰. In 2018, the Commission found that migrant workers face considerable barriers to sustaining employment and progressing in employment⁵¹.

The House of Commons, Women and Equalities Committee (2020)⁵² reported that throughout the coronavirus pandemic, Black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) people in the UK, have been more affected by pre-existing inequalities across a range of areas, including health, employment and housing, with many of these underlying inequalities worsening as the pandemic progressed, compared their White counterparts.

The McGregor Smith review⁵³ observes that the overall UK employment rate figures of BME groups, masks variances across regions including Northern Ireland. Whilst the LFS includes data on different ethnic groups, the numbers of those in minority ethnic groups in Northern Ireland are at such a low level that an analysis may not be reliably undertaken at an individual group level⁵⁴. Further, the LFS does not include data on Irish Travellers. As a consequence of low, or unknown numbers, little data is available on minority ethnic groups with regard to employment in Northern Ireland and limits comparisons with the UK⁵⁵.

By sexual orientation and gender identity

At the UK level, the National LGBT Survey (2018)⁵⁶ found that employment rates are considerably lower for trans and non-binary people, with only 63% of trans and non-binary respondents having a job in the 12 months preceding the survey. This compares to an overall employment rate of 75% for all those who were economically active, aged 16-64 in the UK at the time⁵⁷.

By community background

The Commissions latest Monitoring Report⁵⁸ (2020 returns) shows that there were 556,495 employees in the monitored workforce in Northern Ireland, similar to that observed in 2019 when it was 564,826⁵⁹. Members from a Protestant community background continued to comprise the majority of the workforce at 50.2%, compared to members from a Roman Catholic community background 49.8%. The Labour Force survey (2020)⁶⁰ of estimates of available labour, notes that the

Roman Catholic employment rate was 51.0%, 1.2 percentage points higher than that observed in the NI monitored workforce.

3. **Barriers and risks identified in access to and equality of opportunity in the labour market**

Overview

The following risks and barriers to accessing employment and the labour market have been identified and this section is structured to present the information collated as follows:

- **Contractual structures** - Zero-hour contracts, terms and conditions of employment including pay rates and “platform working” or the “gig economy”.
- Accessible and affordable **childcare**.
- **Structural bias** - which can start with the recruitment processes, and continue in employment, with barriers to career progression, learning and development opportunities
- **Gender, ethnicity and disability pay gaps** - There are persistent pay gaps, and at the most senior levels of employment, along with failures to adequately report levels of pay and address the pay gaps.
- **Prejudicial attitudes** - Prejudicial attitudes both within and outside the workplace are experienced by people with disabilities, women, Trans people, lesbian, gay and bisexual people, people from minority ethnic groups, migrant workers and those of different religious beliefs.
- **Skills shortages** and **underemployment** cross the labour market for specific sectors.

Contractual Structures

TUC (2022)⁶¹ analysis estimates that 3.7 million people in the UK are in insecure work, which includes:

- those on zero hours contracts
- agency, casual and seasonal workers (but not those on fixed – term contracts)

- self-employed workers who are paid less than the National Living Wage (£9.50 – as of 2021).

The TUC analysis⁶² shows that insecure work is particularly prevalent in Northern Ireland (12.2%) compared to the overall UK figure (11.5%). Further, it highlights structural inequalities with UK BME workers (14.6%) more likely to be in insecure work, than white workers (11.1%).

Zero Hours Contracts

Research for the Resolution Foundation (2017), prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, states that the use of ‘Zero Hours Contracts’ - which do not guarantee a worker a minimum number of hours - is a practice that has mushroomed in recent years⁶³. The latest figures from the ONS (2022) show more than a million UK workers are on insecure zero hours contracts⁶⁴ and are more likely to be young (16-24 years), women or in full-time education when compared with other people in employment⁶⁵. The TUC (2019) highlights that whilst the nature of this type of contract offers flexibility for many, it prevents workers planning for childcare and they face ongoing employment insecurity⁶⁶.

In 2022, Northern Ireland figures show that 9,000 people aged 16 and over were on zero hours contracts, this has fallen from a high of 18,000 observed in 2020⁶⁷. The ONS (2022) showed that the use of zero-hours contracts remains more prevalent among women (3.6%) than men (2.8%)⁶⁸ and for those aged 35-49 had grown at a greater rate than any other age group⁶⁹. In 2021, the Resolution Foundation found that the share of UK workers aged 18-24 on insecure contracts was beginning to rise⁷⁰.

IPPR (2018)⁷¹ identified that the use of zero-hours contracts — was higher in social care than other sectors. ONS figures (2022) show two sectors accounted for nearly half of all those on zero hours contracts — Accommodation and Food (26.7%) and Health and Social Care Work (19.5%).

The Kingsmill Review⁷² (2015) highlighted exploitative employment practices including workers’ not being paid for their travel time and being given zero-hours contracts, exacerbating the impact of low pay. Most recently, the Social Care COVID-19 Taskforce report for England (2020)⁷³ stated that 40% of homecare workers were on zero-hours contracts. Many were on a compulsory basis and, in some cases, they were prevented from working for other employers.⁷⁴

A UNISON (2017)⁷⁵ survey of UK homecare workers found that 63% were only paid for contact time, and not for travel between the homes of people they cared for. Guidance from HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC), according to the IPPR research in 2018, states that this should be treated as working time and paid accordingly⁷⁶. A recent report by the Resolution Foundation (2023)⁷⁷ reported that this practice was contributing to domiciliary workers being paid less than the National Minimum Wage at the time.

In 2018, the Equality Commission⁷⁸ reported that migrant workers are vulnerable to exploitation, which can impact on their ability to sustain employment and progress in employment. Many migrant workers who are agency workers are confined to temporary and irregular work, including zero-hour contracts.

Platform Working / Gig Economy

Another area of work, often associated with self-employment is the 'gig economy' or 'platform working'. The gig economy has been referred to as the trend of using online platforms to find small jobs, sometimes completed immediately after request (essentially, on-demand)⁷⁹. This way of working has been found to be controversial given that workers are classed as self-employed, rather than as employees of the platform⁸⁰, therefore not entitled to the minimum wage among other employment rights provided to workers or employees⁸¹.

In 2020, in a case brought against Uber, the Supreme Court found, that Uber could no longer rely on contracts with workers that were misleading: it had to implement employment rights including the minimum wage and holiday pay⁸².

An RSA (2017)⁸³ study grouped UK gig work into three main categories⁸⁴:

- Professional, creative or administrative services (59%)
- Skilled manual or personal services (51%)
- Driving and delivery services (20%)

In 2019, it was found that one in seven (15.3%) of the working age population surveyed – equivalent to nearly 7.5 million people – have undertaken platform work at some point⁸⁵. Data from 2019 shows that the number of people doing work via gig economy platforms at least once a week, had doubled in the preceding three years to 1 in 10 (9.6%)

working-age adults in 2019, compared to around 1 in 20 (4.7%) in 2016⁸⁶.

In Northern Ireland, approximately 15% of the working age population engaged in platform working between 2016 and 2019, this compares to 21% in Greater London and 9% in the East Midlands⁸⁷.

In general, research studies undertaken between 2016 – 2019 suggest that the gig economy workforce in Great Britain is young and male, with:

- nearly two-thirds (60%) of intensive (at least once a week) platform workers were aged between 16 and 34⁸⁸;
- gig workers more than twice as likely to be men (69%) than they were to be women⁸⁹ (31%)⁹⁰; and
- highly skilled, with as many as 44% holding university degrees⁹¹.

Low Pay

In 2019, the TUC highlighted that BME employees within the UK are over-represented in the lowest paid occupations and underrepresented in the highest paid occupations⁹². Furthermore, their analysis found that BME people tended to be paid less than white workers with the same qualifications and that they were more likely to work in low-paid, undervalued jobs on insecure contracts⁹³. In 2018, the Equality Commission⁹⁴ found that migrant workers are over-represented in low paid, low status jobs, and in low-paid industry sectors.

In a 2021 briefing, the Northern Ireland Women's Budget Group⁹⁵ stated:

- that there are twice as many women as men in the bottom 10% of UK earners,
- those in low-paid work were twice as likely as those in higher income jobs to be placed on furlough or have their hours reduced,
- women were overrepresented in frontline and low pay sectors, which have been the hardest hit by the pandemic.

Equinet,⁹⁶ the Women's Budget Group,⁹⁷ LSE⁹⁸ and the Fawcett Society⁹⁹ have all highlighted the disproportionate impact of lockdown during the pandemic on women on low incomes, with this group most likely to be at risk of losing their job, given school / childcare closures. Lower earnings of women are further reflected in the gender pay gap, covered in a later section in this report¹⁰⁰. The Fawcett Society (2021)¹⁰¹ observed that the jobs and livelihoods of mothers, including those on

low-incomes, women of colour and disabled mothers, have been particularly adversely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic.

People with disabilities are more likely to be employed in elementary occupations, caring, leisure and other service occupations or sales and customer services occupations¹⁰². In Northern Ireland, for every qualification level, disabled people have a lower employment rate than non-disabled people with the same qualification level¹⁰³. In 2020, the Women's Budget Group (UK)¹⁰⁴ found disabled women were more likely to be underemployed and in low-paid jobs.

Accessible and affordable childcare

In 2021, ONS (UK) highlighted that women spent more time than men on unpaid care and childcare during the Covid-19 pandemic¹⁰⁵. The Northern Ireland Women's Budget Group (2021) found that women in Northern Ireland were 4 times more likely to take on the majority of active childcare duties than men (56% vs.13%)¹⁰⁶.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies found that by May 2020, UK mothers were 1.5 times more likely than fathers to have lost their job or quit since the start of the lockdown. However, this had changed by 2021: 74% of mothers of 0-3 year olds were in the UK workforce in 2021 compared to 68% in 2019¹⁰⁷. Further, around half a million women went from part-time to full-time work over the course of the Covid-19 pandemic¹⁰⁸. Evidence suggests that women with caring commitments have increased their economic activity over the pandemic, because of more flexibility and options to work from home¹⁰⁹. A recent UK survey by the Resolution Foundation¹¹⁰ found that 10% of mothers aged 25-44 in a couple, found remote working meant they could enter work or increase their hours since February 2020.

Further research suggested that whilst the increase in working from home opportunities were welcomed, there was the potential for it to reduce women's visibility in the workplace, toughening the glass ceiling and reducing career progression¹¹¹, and for it to reinforce traditional gender roles in the home¹¹².

The NISRA (2022) report 'Women in Northern Ireland 2021' highlighted that it remains that females with dependent children of any age are more likely to work part-time than those without, while the opposite was true for males¹¹³. Further the same report found that, women (28%) were

more likely than men (6%) to state looking after family and home as the reason for economic inactivity in 2021¹¹⁴.

A survey in the UK (2020)¹¹⁵ found that among those who were still working for pay during the pandemic, mothers reported being interrupted by their children 50% more frequently than fathers. Thus, spending more of that working time between paid work and other activities, principally childcare. The University of Ulster¹¹⁶ highlighted that existing barriers to appropriate childcare are likely to disproportionately impact female labour market participation. In particular, lone parents, who are predominately women.

Carers UK¹¹⁷ found that the number of those caring for older people and people with disabilities in Northern Ireland increased substantially during the Covid-19 pandemic, from 212,000 to 310,000 in 2021.

Structural Bias

Structural bias in employment has been shown to be persistent for women and black and minority ethnic groups, starting from the recruitment process¹¹⁸. The TUC (2020) highlighted that the higher unemployment rate among BME groups, is in part because BME people continue to face discrimination when applying for jobs¹¹⁹. A 2019 report by the Centre for Social Investigation at Nuffield College found that, despite having the same skills, qualifications and work experience, job applicants from ethnic minority backgrounds had to send 60% more applications than white British candidates before they received a positive response¹²⁰.

The McGregor-Smith Review¹²¹ into race in the workplace, found that the barriers ethnic minority women experience from progressing in work, drain their skills, waste their talent, and prevent full participation in life as equal citizens. A recent TUC¹²² study found that nearly one-third of BME women reported that they had been unfairly denied access to training and development opportunities which would enable promotion, this rose to more than half (52%) of disabled BME women.

DfC (2022)¹²³ has recently identified that key challenges for disabled people remaining and progressing in work include: levels of employer support (i.e. adjustments needed, provision of ongoing support to employers), fear of disclosure, skills, confidence, ongoing health issues and the benefit system. In 2018, the Commission¹²⁴ stated that people

with disabilities may face additional barriers to employment, such as access to transport and the accessibility of the physical environment. An accessibility audit by the Inclusive Mobility Transport Audit Committee (IMTAC) (2017)¹²⁵ highlighted a persistency of unnecessary physical barriers. Further, Eurofound (2021)¹²⁶ noted that transport difficulties affect rural areas more intensively and are still not being adequately addressed by the use of alternative and adequate forms of work such as teleworking, even in the light of COVID-19.

Workforce and industry structures

The University of Ulster (2020)¹²⁷ considered the occupations most affected by furlough or unemployment during the pandemic:

- the top three impacted occupations for men were construction and building trades (8% of the total); sales assistants and retail cashiers (7% of the total); and road transport drivers (5% of the total).
- the top three occupations for females were sales assistants and retail cashiers (22% of the total); other elementary services occupations (11% of the total) and hairdressers and related services (8% of the total).

The top three impacted occupations for females accounted for over two-fifths (41%) of females furloughed or laid off. In contrast, the top three male¹²⁸ occupations accounted for only one-fifth (20%) of all males impacted. Further, female employment was more concentrated in a narrow group of occupations (sales, administrative and services) compared to males.

In the UK in 2020, women accounted for up 6% of CEOs of FTSE 100 companies,¹²⁹ 21% of the civil service boards and 35% of civil service permanent secretaries. However, none of these were women from black minority ethnic groups¹³⁰. Thus, this may assist to explain some of the pay gap between women of colour and white men and women¹³¹.

SAGE (2020)¹³² in its review and recommendations on 'Disparities in the impact of COVID-19 in black and minority ethnic populations' concluded that there was considerable evidence that COVID-19 amplified pre-existing inequalities on ethnic minority groups. Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Black African and Black Caribbean men were all much more likely to have had jobs in shutdown industries, such as the restaurant sector and taxi driving¹³³. In 2018, the Equality Commission¹³⁴ reported that

migrant workers, particularly those from Eastern European countries, are subject to industrial and occupational segregation and many face poorer terms and conditions than local workers and are vulnerable to poor employment practices.

Self-employed Workers

In 2020, in written evidence submitted to the Women and Equalities Committee Inquiry: Coronavirus and BME people, the Traveller Movement stated that many Irish Travellers are self-employed and unable to work at this time¹³⁵ due to the COVID-19 crisis hitting the self-employed and others in insecure and non-traditional forms of employment especially hard¹³⁶. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation¹³⁷, Resolution Foundation¹³⁸, and the House of Commons Women and Equalities Committees¹³⁹ have highlighted that certain BME groups are over-represented in low income self-employment such as taxi driving and deliveries which had been disproportionately affected by the pandemic shut downs.

A briefing by the ONS¹⁴⁰ using data from the LFS found that between April and September 2020, there was a large increase in reclassification by self-employed workers, which coincided with the introduction of the furlough scheme in the United Kingdom. The ONS briefing states that workers would previously have set up companies and therefore would have considered classifying themselves as self-employed. However, because they paid themselves through PAYE, once the furlough scheme was created they realised they were able to claim, and so started describing themselves as employed¹⁴¹. Business directors and partners, and those in high skilled occupations, were most likely to reclassify their status¹⁴².

Gender, Ethnic and Disability Pay Gaps

The Fawcett Society¹⁴³ highlighted that women, people from minority ethnic backgrounds and people with disabilities were more likely to be paid less than men. For these groups, there were persistent pay gaps at the most senior levels of employment, along with failures to adequately report levels of pay and address the pay gaps. Lower earnings of women, regardless of working pattern, were reflected in the gender pay gap, where it remains at 5.7 per cent in favour of men in Northern Ireland¹⁴⁴. There were differences in the gender pay gap by age, with

older women (50-59 and 59 or more) experiencing the greatest differences. The largest gender pay gap, in terms of median hourly earnings (excluding overtime) across all age groups occurred in the 50 to 59 age group, where men earned almost £2.50 more per hour than women (£15.33 compared to £12.87)¹⁴⁵.

In 2021, disabled people earned 19.6% less than non-disabled people; this was equivalent to £3,822 per year¹⁴⁶. However, the gap for disabled women was significantly higher at 36% (average median gross earnings compared to a non-disabled man)¹⁴⁷.

Unison (UK) observed that the ethnic pay gap widened during the pandemic¹⁴⁸. The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) has highlighted the ethnicity pay/employment gap and called on the Government for action¹⁴⁹. In 2020, TUC¹⁵⁰ analysis found that BME people tend to be paid less than white workers with the same qualifications and that they were more likely to work in low-paid, undervalued jobs on insecure contracts:

- BME workers were more than twice as likely to be on agency contracts than were white workers.
- BME workers were more likely to be on zero-hours contracts – one in 24 BME workers were on zero-hours contracts, compared to one in 42 white workers.
- One in 13 BME workers were in temporary work, compared to one in 19 white workers¹⁵¹.

Prejudicial attitudes

In 2018¹⁵², the ECNI Statement on Key Inequalities in Employment in Northern Ireland identified the inequality in prejudicial attitudes (unequal treatment, harassment, and discrimination), both within and outside the workplace, being experienced by people with disabilities, women, trans people, lesbian, gay and bisexual people, people from minority ethnic groups, migrant workers and those of different religious beliefs.

In 2020, the Equality Commission presented further evidence¹⁵³ to examine the nature of the prejudicial attitudes within the workplace, highlighting that people with disabilities, carers, people with other / no religion and LGBTQ+ people were less likely to feel that their workplace culture was welcoming and inclusive, with one in five (20% disagreeing compared to 14% of all respondents). The Commission found that

societal prejudice and stereotyping is a structural inequality that can have a major impact on the work environment and workplace culture¹⁵⁴.

Most recent studies continue to note the ongoing prejudice faced by many equality groups. Various research reports have estimated that between 20% and 50% of people with a disability feel that they have faced discrimination in employment.¹⁵⁵ Indeed, more than a quarter (26%) of people with disabilities stated their employer did not support employees with disabilities, which increased to a third (33%) when specifically asked does your employer support people with mental ill health (this compares to 13% and 21% of all respondents).

There is limited data available on the barriers faced by LGBT groups on access and opportunities to employment in Northern Ireland. The Equality Commission has previously noted that lesbian, gay and bisexual people often face negative comments and bullying at work due to their sexuality and may be reluctant to come out in the workplace due to fears of victimisation¹⁵⁶. Prejudicial attitudes may impact on the ability of lesbian, gay and bisexual people to participate in employment, sustain employment and progress in employment¹⁵⁷. At the UK level, the National LGBT Survey (2018)¹⁵⁸ found that employment rates are considerably lower for trans and non-binary people.

Prejudice towards women is often under-pinned by traditional stereotypes and gendered social values and norms¹⁵⁹. Research¹⁶⁰ has indicated a slow shift in gender stereotypes over the last decades throughout Europe, with progression towards the dual earner/dual carer model, improved respect for women and a rejection of negative models of masculinity by men. This has been reflected in the emergence of global movements such as '#TimesUp' and '#MeToo', which reject sexual harassment and violence against women, particularly in the workplace.

TUC research (2019)¹⁶¹ findings show significant numbers of BME workers in the UK experiencing discriminatory treatment across a range of areas in work.

The ECNI has previously stated¹⁶² that prejudicial attitudes and/or discrimination on the grounds of religious belief may impact on experiences within the workplace. Prejudicial attitudes toward those of different religious beliefs is present in Northern Ireland, particularly sectarianism¹⁶³. Most recently, the ECNI (2020) found that more than a

quarter (27%) of people with other / no religion found their employer did not respect individual identity¹⁶⁴.

Skills Shortages

The Open University's Business Barometer Report (2020)¹⁶⁵ showed that more than three quarters (83%) of businesses surveyed in Northern Ireland reported a skills gap which had worsened as a result of the pandemic and Brexit.

According to a review of inequalities by the Institute of Fiscal Studies, the Covid-19 crisis has also left a generation of lower-educated workers with large gaps in their work experience and training¹⁶⁶. Prior to the Covid-19 crisis, a 2018 study¹⁶⁷ showed Northern Ireland had the lowest rates of career progression (people moving from low-skilled jobs to medium or high-skilled jobs) across all skill levels.

Older workers leaving the workforce

As reported earlier¹⁶⁸, labour force participation has decreased among older workers, with women aged 50 and over most affected. Previous evidence shows that when older workers leave their jobs it is more likely to be a permanent exit from the workforce, takes longer to find new employment and often risk pay cuts¹⁶⁹. Population ageing can lead to labour shortages, with fewer qualified workers and skills shortages amongst those wanting to enter the workforce.

Underemployment in those entering the workforce

Gig/platform workers tend to be highly skilled with as many as 44% holding university degrees¹⁷⁰. This may suggest issues of underemployment (i.e., workers performing tasks that they are overqualified for). For example, there may be recent graduates in gig work while trying to find a job in their field¹⁷¹.

During the period 2008-2012, there was an increasing number of graduates working in non-graduate jobs, resulting in rising graduate underemployment, relative to their skill levels¹⁷². Consequently, raising the probability of unemployment amongst young people with lower qualification levels, by squeezing them out of the labour market¹⁷³.

End Notes

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- ¹ [Section 75](#) requires public authorities to have due regard for the need to promote equality of opportunity between: persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation men and women generally; persons with a disability and persons without; persons with dependants and persons without.
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- ⁴³ [The Commission's analysis](#) of Census 2011 data revealed that 20.0% of Irish Travellers were employed compared to: 57.6% of White; 64.0% of Asian; 56.7% of Black; 54.4% of Mixed; and, 58.5% of Other ethnic groups.
- ⁴⁴ [The Commission's analysis](#) of Census 2011 data revealed that 69.0% of Travellers were economically inactive compared to 33.9% of White; 27.8% of Asian; 26.3% of Black; 29.8% of Mixed; and, 28.3% of Other ethnic groups.
- ⁴⁵ [The Commission's analysis](#) of Census 2011 data revealed that, among women, 77.9% of Irish Travellers were economically inactive compared to 38.7% for White; 33.2% for Asian; 32.2% for Black; 30.7% for Mixed; and, 35.6% for Other ethnic groups.
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