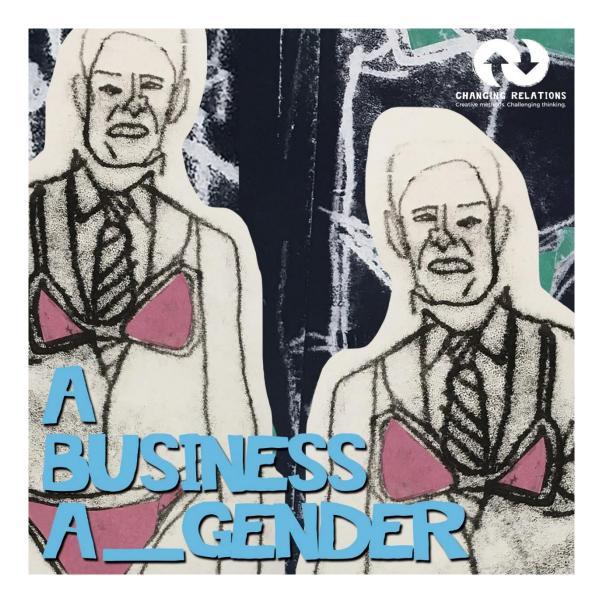# A Business A_Gender

Building Gender Equality in the North East
Business Sector in the Wake of Covid-19

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Research Report - May 2021

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Contents

Executive summary

This research explored how the business sector in the North East of England is addressing gender equality issues, and how these have been affected by the Covid-19 crisis. It is based upon an in-depth **survey** conducted between **25th November 2020** and **1st February 2021** with **72 people**, of whom 78% were women and 22% were men, working in a range of businesses.

The vast majority of respondents felt that their organisations have a **workplace culture that encourages gender equality and inclusivity**, with 38% agreeing and 46% strongly agreeing this was the case, and only 6% disagreeing. This is a highly positive finding, though it is important to note that people already working in businesses which prioritised gender equality may have been more likely to complete the survey. Most participants (70%) felt their **workplace culture had not changed since the pandemic**, however 22% felt that it had actually improved (for example because there was more care, support and solidarity among colleagues and more recognition of personal as well as professional needs), whilst 9% felt it had got worse.

Most respondents believed their organisation does a good job of **addressing sexual harassment** in the workplace, with 21% agreeing and 40% strongly agreeing this was the case. However, a large amount were unsure (33%), suggesting that in many cases it had not been something discussed within the organisation (for example through training), and 5% disagreed or strongly disagreed. All respondents either strongly agreed (73%) or agreed (27%) that an **equal and inclusive workplace culture has a big impact on employee wellbeing**, and the vast majority strongly agreed (73%) or agreed (24%) that it has a **big impact on organisational effectiveness**.

We also asked respondents what they felt made a **successful organisational leader**. Many of the factors they suggested went against traditional norms which closely associate business leadership being with ideas of masculinity. Instead, the descriptive words they used most frequently were: communication (used 11 times, with communicator also used 5 times), clear (11 times), listening (10 times), empathy (9 times), open (6 times) and team (6 times).

We asked respondents whether they felt that **women and men in their organisation had been affected differently** by the pandemic in relation to a range of issues. Where respondents believed there had been a difference in experience, it was felt that women had been affected worse for every single issue. Women were felt to have been most detrimentally impacted in relation to **responsibilities outside of work** (such as childcare and home-schooling); 38% felt there had been no difference, but 25% felt that women had been affected worse and 32% much worse. Respondents described a range of ways in which increased caring responsibilities during Covid-19 had in their experience disproportionately fallen on women, which in turn made it much harder for them to do their jobs, and was placing considerable pressure and stress on them. In some cases, it meant that women had to stop working or reduce their hours, and across the UK during the crisis mothers have been more likely to lose their jobs than fathers, and women have been more likely to be furloughed than men. Other issues where a particularly detrimental impact on women was noted were **productivity** (55% felt there was no difference but 22% felt women were affected worse and 13% much worse), and **career progression** (67% felt there was no difference but 19% felt women were affected worse and 9% much worse).

In spite of this, most respondents disagreed (37%) or strongly disagreed (21%) that the pandemic would **hold back gender equality** in their business. However, 25% were not sure, whilst 11% agreed and 6% strongly agreed that it would. Several felt that the pandemic had led to some

positive impacts on gender equality in their organisations; 20% agreed with this and 9% strongly agreed. In particular, it was felt that Covid-19 had led to greater flexibility from employers, and more attention towards employee wellbeing. However, 19% disagreed and 10% strongly disagreed about these positive impacts, and 43% were not sure.

A concerning finding was that a large number of respondents (54%) were unsure whether their business had taken any **steps to address gender inequalities during the pandemic**, whilst 16% disagreed and 4% strongly disagreed that their organisation had done so. Some did appear to be taking action however, with 14% agreeing and 11% strongly agreeing. One issue seemed to be that in some organisations, gender inequality simply wasn't discussed or recognised as a major workplace issue in the first place, or if it was, the impacts of the pandemic had not been considered in relation to it.

Respondents felt that the types of support that could most help their businesses to become more gender equal were: an **awareness raising campaign** (31%), training (30%), team coaching/mentoring (29%), and e-learning (17%). 29% selected 'none' for this question, which could suggest that some businesses are already successfully addressing gender equality issues. However, it could point to a degree of complacency in some cases, especially given the uncertainty regarding many of the other questions. Meanwhile, respondents believed the most important **factor to promote gender equality in an organisation** was support from leaders and managers (65%). A key finding across the survey was that gender issues being **_"Championed by leadership"_** was seen as vital. Other factors respondents felt contributed towards a more equal business included a supportive organisational culture (54% - with several discussing how they had personally been impacted by sexism and bias in the workplace during their careers), a diverse workforce (42%), structural and operational change (such as new policies and procedures - 41%), inclusive recruitment processes (31%), and support from male staff (18%).

Most respondents disagreed (27%) or strongly disagreed (33%) that their organisation had a **gender pay gap**, whilst 17% agreed and 7% strongly agreed, and 16% were not sure. 13% were concerned that their gender pay gap would get worse due to the pandemic. However, the majority (65%) felt it would stay the same, and 5% that it might get smaller. It is vital for businesses to monitor this, given that many factors contributing to the gender pay gap, such as women's careers being more disrupted by childcare, have been **exacerbated by Covid-19**.

Most respondents felt their business does a good job of **responding to staff health and wellbeing issues** particular to men and women (such as male mental health or the menopause), with 34% agreeing and 28% strongly agreeing. However, 17% were unsure, and a relatively large number felt this was not the case, with 17% disagreeing and 4% strongly disagreeing. Meanwhile, 45% were unsure whether their business does a good job of **addressing domestic abuse**, 16% disagreed and 3% strongly disagreed, whilst 26% agreed and 14% strongly agreed. Given that many victims' experiences of domestic abuse have got worse during Covid-19, and are likely to have impacted more on the workplace, it was concerning that most respondents were unsure (41%), disagreed (33%), or strongly disagreed (9%) that their business had taken more steps to address it since the pandemic began.

Several respondents emphasised that more should be done to **engage men** in promoting gender equality in the business sector. 31% of respondents disagreed and 14% strongly disagreed that men in their workplace **see gender equality as an issue for them**, whilst only 14% agreed and 7% strongly agreed. This is underscored by the fact that only 22% of those who completed

the survey were men, and that male respondents were more likely to feel their organisation was already successfully addressing different gender issues, that women and men had not been affected differently by Covid-19, and that gender inequality was not a major problem for their business to be concerned about. Most respondents believed that women in their organisations do see gender equality as an issue for them, with 39% agreeing and 20% strongly agreeing. However, 14% still disagreed, 7% strongly disagreed, and 20% were unsure, illustrating that even among many women, there may **insufficient awareness** of gender issues in the workplace.

An argument made by numerous respondents was the need for staff at all levels to have more **education and dialogue** about gender equality, because without an awareness about gendered issues, organisations will not be able to recognise and tackle them. This chimes with the fact that large numbers of respondents were **uncertain** about several of the issues raised in the survey. Some responses also suggested a degree of **complacency** about gender equality, which is concerning given that there is always more work that can be done to promote inclusion, equity, and the health and wellbeing of all staff in the workplace.

The survey illustrated some concerning findings about how gender equality may be **moving backwards** in the North East business sector during the pandemic, and that many businesses may not be aware of the extent to which different gendered issues can arise in the workplace. However, it also demonstrated that there are **many examples of good practice** in the region, and that lots of people in the North East business sector are determined to build more gender equal workplaces, because they recognise that doing so **benefits everyone** - including businesses themselves. As this survey has underlined, taking up this work is more important than ever in the wake of the Covid-19 crisis.

1. About the research

This research was conducted to explore how the business sector in the North East of England is addressing gender equality issues in the workplace, and how these have been affected by the Covid-19 crisis. Many have expressed concern that there is a real risk that women's positions in society and in the workplace may move backwards as a result of the pandemic - and societal responses to it - in the UK (Fawcett Society, 2020). For example, sectors in which women are more likely to work have been hardest hit by Covid-19 lockdowns (Joyce and Xu, 2020), women have been more likely to be furloughed (HMRC, 2020), mothers have been more likely to lose their jobs or reduce their hours than fathers (Andrew et al., 2020; Xue and McMunn, 2020), and many new mothers and pregnant women have reported experiencing discrimination (TUC, 2020). We therefore wanted to apply a lens specifically to the North East of England, to find out more about the key issues here. For instance, around 45% of working women across the North work in sectors that have seen the largest negative impacts during the pandemic, such as health and social care, retail and hospitality (Qureshi and Longlands, 2021).

We were particularly interested to explore what could and should be done to build more gender equal workplaces in the wake of the pandemic, because the consequences of this crisis should not be seen as inevitable. We can all play a part in ensuring that the progress made towards gender equality in the UK in recent decades is not undone; that this is an issue which is prioritised in the aftermath of Covid-19, and that in the years to come we work harder than ever to create a gender equal society. All businesses have a great deal of power in this regard, to ensure that all of their staff are always equally valued and respected, that their health and wellbeing is prioritised, that they work in a culture which is welcoming and inclusive to all, and that their workplaces set an example to others.

The research is based around an in-depth online survey, conducted through the platform OnlineSurveys.ac.uk between 25th November 2020 and 1st February 2021. 72 individuals completed the survey in total. Ethical approval for the research was granted by Durham University Department of Sociology Ethics Committee. Respondents were assured anonymity and confidentiality regarding themselves and their businesses so they felt able to speak as openly and honestly as possible about their experiences, so are not named in this report.

1.1 About the survey respondents

We sought to hear the views of anyone working in the business sector in the North East of England for the survey. However, in practice most respondents were Directors or in Management positions in their organisations. 78% of respondents were women, and 22% were men. This does mean that the views of men are underrepresented in the survey, however this is perhaps unsurprising, given that women tend to express a greater concern for gender equality issues (Ipsos & GIWL, 2019). This may also indicate that the research sample was subject to a degree of selection bias, in that people who encountered and took the time to complete the survey may have been more likely to already care strongly about gender equality issues, or belong to organisations which do.

91% of the respondents belonged to a White British background, so the sample was not hugely diverse, though it was slightly more diverse than the North East population more broadly (which is the least diverse region of England), of whom 93.6% are White British (ONS, 2018). 2 respondents identified as being from an Asian background, 2 identified as being of Mixed ethnicity, 1 identified as being from a Black background, and 1 identified as being from an other

White background. The respondents belonged to a variety of age groups ranging from 20-29 to 60-69. The largest age group represented was 40-49 (32%), followed by 30-39 (30%).

1.2 About the respondents' organisations

The respondents worked in a wide variety of different sectors and industries; the most commonly selected answer to this question was 'Other' (36%), with many of these respondents working in business support and consultancy, in the charity/voluntary sector, or in the arts. The next most frequent answer was public services (15%), suggesting that a substantial minority of respondents were working in a public sector organisation, or for a private company delivering public services. Other common sectors included media and culture (10%), education (10%), and information technology (6%). All business sizes were represented among respondents, with the largest group being in a micro business of 1-9 employees (37%), followed by a large business of 250+ employees (26%). These differences are important to highlight, because they will inevitably have impacted on the survey responses; gender equality issues play out differently in different types of organisations and a small business will require a different approach to a large business. For instance, some of the respondents described working in an all-women business, in which an issue such as the gender pay gap would not apply internally.

Businesses had a mixed geographical spread in terms of where their employees were based; from international, to national, to regional, to local, but the majority of respondents worked for a business with a regional spread (48%). Respondents were working in organisations based in almost all parts of the North East, with the largest groups being based in County Durham (38%) (which is unsurprising given that this is where the researchers were located and thus where we had the strongest networks), followed by Newcastle-upon-Tyne (17%) and Sunderland (10%).

The respondents' organisations had clearly been affected significantly by the pandemic, with 44% functioning online only at the time of responding, or in a mixture of online and the workplace (38%). 10% of respondents' workplaces were open to staff, 4% were open to staff and public, and for 3% their business was temporarily closed. Many respondents' organisations had received government financial support during the pandemic (41%), whilst 37% had not, and 21% weren't sure whether or not this was the case. In most cases, this was financial support to pay staff wages (79%), for example through the furlough scheme, whilst 41% had received cash grants and 38% had received loans from the government.

2. Findings: Creating equal and inclusive workplace cultures

2.1 Gender equality and organisational culture

First, we asked respondents about their workplace culture, and how this had been affected by the pandemic. The vast majority felt that their organisations have a workplace culture that encourages gender equality and inclusivity, with 38% agreeing and 46% strongly agreeing that this was the case. Only 6% disagreed that their workplace culture was inclusive, and 10% were not sure. This is a highly positive finding, though it is important to note that people already working in a more gender-equal business may have been more likely to complete the survey.

2.2 Changes in workplace culture during Covid-19

Interestingly, several respondents (22%) felt that their organisational culture had actually become more inclusive due to the pandemic, whilst 9% disagreed with this, and 70% felt there had been no change. This perception of positive change was primarily explained around the idea that the pandemic had increased care, empathy and support within organisations for the

health and wellbeing of colleagues, and broken down some boundaries in bringing together aspects of people's personal as well as professional lives:

> "COVID has brought about more tolerance and understanding. More flexibility in terms of supporting those in need."

> "Working from home has made us all talk to one another more and make more of an effort to keep in touch, I have never spoken to my team as much."

> "In regards to the impact of the pandemic it feels like a more family friendly and work life balance culture has been instilled. I see that this will only benefit the gender playing field being levelled in the long term, should we retain those ways of working post pandemic."

Some organisations had taken steps forward in working to improve their culture during this time, too:

> "I started my role as CEO in April 2020, during the pandemic. Since then, we have made significant changes to our organisation's culture, with written pledges to the Keychange EU programme, committing to a minimum 50% of all our staff, governing board, facilitators and participants in projects to be women or gender minorities. We have also re-written a number of organisational policies to reflect a greater gender equality. All staff have also taken part in LBGTQ+ and gender equality training."

Some respondents pointed to the difference that one person, such as a supportive manager, can make to an organisation's culture:

> "Before I joined the organisation there was a strong feeling that equality was important. Since I joined I have taken it from being implied to explicit."

> "New leader at same time as pandemic. Improved inclusion procedures and policy. Increased diversity of team/staff, views, opinions, leadership."

However, there was also some discussion of the obstacles to creating a more equal and inclusive organisational culture, and how in some cases, respondents had observed this situation get worse during the pandemic, for example because some members of staff felt less included:

> "Although we have female management they are unaware of the sexism in the establishment."

> "Our industry is typically male dominated so a gender equal and inclusive workplace culture is difficult but we have mutual respect and understanding for each other over all else. Since the start of the pandemic the driving school has been hit hard, we're all isolated from each other so keeping in touch and keeping positive outlook has impacted everyone. Our female instructor has seen her work reduce due to the type of pupil she has (predominantly female with caring responsibilities) reducing lessons and by government decisions on education impacting her caring responsibilities too. Our male instructors have not had as noticeable impact on their jobs. We have a zero tolerance policy on sexual harassment in the workplace and this is strongly enforced."

"My employers' inclusive culture was good before the pandemic, not perfect but good but felt less included in the pandemic."

"I find my current organisation to be extremely neutral and not even raise gender or inclusivity as an issue openly and therefore there is not an openness to even suggest discussion about these issues. In terms of the pandemic, no consideration has openly been presented with regards inclusivity but I do think there has been many concessions to support all staff in the best way in order to get through this. If anything there has been lots of discussion around mental health and stress levels...however despite this and other issues the organisation has tried to accommodate, the work still needs to be delivered!"

Some comments also highlighted that changes to the nature of work during the pandemic could have both positive and negative consequences for employee wellbeing and workplace culture, for example: *"'banter' has become less - work is now much more transactional."* Whether this is positive or negative depends on the nature of the 'banter', for example whether it includes sexist gender stereotypes. Work being more 'transactional' could have negative implications in terms of the time staff feel their managers have to address employee duty of care issues such as mental health or domestic abuse.

2.3 Tackling sexual harassment

The majority of respondents felt that their organisation does a good job of addressing sexual harassment in the workplace (something which hasn't gone away during the pandemic, and has moved online in many cases - Rights of Women, 2021) with 21% agreeing and 40% strongly agreeing that this was case. For example:

"We have a clear onboarding policy and procedure that makes it very clear that all individuals are to be treated with respect. We will tolerate zero harassment on any grounds. Any complaints go to myself or [name of colleague] and it is made explicit that these will be dealt with in a timely and appropriate manner."

"Our organisation encourages gender equality by allowing home working and flexible hours so those with caring responsibilities are not disadvantaged. We have weekly 121 meetings with all staff, Managers sit within their teams, all Directors operate an open door policy and have regular interaction with all team members. We are confident that this will stop and/or allow us to address any issues with any sort of harassment."

However, 5% disagreed or strongly disagreed that their organisation did a good job of addressing sexual harassment, and 33% weren't sure, which suggests that more could be done by businesses to raise awareness among staff about the issue and how they treat it as an organisation. Several respondents said that they had simply never encountered sexual harassment in their business. Given how prevalent this problem is - TUC (2016) research found that 52% of women have experienced some form of workplace sexual harassment - could in part point to how these issues can be brushed under the carpet or how victims can find it difficult to come forward about experiences they have had. This was recognised by some respondents: *"Regards sexual harassment, there are policies to manage these sorts of things, but in practice how comfortable people would be in speaking out is unclear to me."* Another remarked: *"There has been no sexual harassment discussion ever or any issues I'm aware of so I'm not sure if they*

are doing a good job...probably not if it's just something buried in an HR policy somewhere!". Meanwhile, one commented:

> "Very much a culture of equality when it comes to senior positions. While there are significantly fewer women in management positions, it is not for lack of progression opportunities for women. ... I have witnessed terms like 'culture' or 'banter' being used to excuse some behaviour that could be perceived as harassment. Although there haven't, to my knowledge, been any serious incidents."

2.4 The impact of workplace culture on an organisation

Figure 1

As can be seen in Figure 1, all respondents either strongly agreed (73%) or agreed (27%) that an equal and inclusive workplace culture has a big impact on employee wellbeing. The vast majority also either strongly agreed (73%) or agreed (24%) that it has a big impact on organisational effectiveness, with just 3% not sure. This demonstrates how important building gender equality is for running a successful business, both for the organisation itself, and for the people working in it.

2.5 Gender and business leadership

We also asked respondents what three things they felt, from their own experiences, made a successful organisational leader. A range of factors were described here, and interestingly, many went against the traditional masculine norms often associated with business leadership. Instead, skills such as empathy and care, active listening and good communication, and prioritising inclusivity and wellbeing were all frequently highlighted as important factors. The most commonly used descriptive words in response to this question were: communication (used 11 times, with communicator also used 5 times), clear (11 times), listening (10 times), empathy (9 times), open (6 times) and team (6 times). The following are examples of some of the more in-depth descriptions provided by respondents:

"Self-awareness - real deep self-awareness that allows the leader to understand their impact on others and to be open to their own strengths and weaknesses. Open and honest communication that does not rely on policy and procedure to address issues. Leaders who are comfortable having 'human' conversations. A well-being strategy that ensures all staff feel able to be themselves. This promoted by the leadership. Too many organisations scratch the surface of wellness by merely covering smoking, alcohol and drugs. We need to appreciate that people have lives outside of work and may be coping with aging parents, anti-social behaviour, menopause, domestic violence, working poverty...the list goes on."

"Coming from a previous role in a company with good overall equality levels to one which is struggling, it has become clear how (in my opinion) management needs to be a team effort, with a diverse management team. Individual managers are best when they have experienced a diverse workplace."

"Honesty and transparency, keeping promises, and being interested in people - I know that's four! Honesty covers everything including ethics and how you treat people. Leadership is about listening to everyone and making sure they all have a voice but importantly then acting on what you hear."

"- Someone who is able to listen to their employees, partners or other colleagues and adapt to new ideas and opinions
- Someone who is passionate about their field of work
- An ability to manage relationships - this includes being able to be diplomatic and understanding in difficult situations or be confident to present an idea to others and follow through on delivering that."

3. Impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic

3.1 Gendered impacts on staff

We asked respondents about whether they felt that women and men working in their organisation had been affected differently by the pandemic, in relation to a range of issues. For almost all of these, most felt that there not been a major difference in how people had been impacted, as can be seen in Figure 2. However, where respondents felt there was a difference, it was perceived that women had been affected worse for every single issue asked about.

The issue where women were felt to have been most detrimentally affected, by a substantial margin, was responsibilities outside of work (such as childcare and home-schooling); whilst 38% felt there had been no difference in people's experiences, 25% felt that women had been affected worse and 32% that they had been affected much worse. Only 3% thought that men had been affected worse, and 3% were not sure. The other issues where the biggest differences were perceived were productivity (22% felt women were affected worse and 13% much worse, 1% felt men were affected much worse and 4% much worse, and 55% felt there was no difference), and career progression (19% felt women were affected worse and 9% much worse, and 67% felt there was no difference).

The issue about which there was the biggest concern regarding impacts on men was returning to the physical workplace (which is associated with being at greater risk of contracting Covid-

19), where 6% felt men were affected worse. However, even here more respondents thought that women had been more detrimentally impacted, with 11% believing that women had been affected worse and 6% much worse, whilst 74% perceived no difference.

How have women and men in your organisation been affected differently by the pandemic?

Categories (top to bottom): Job retention, Recruitment, Inclusion in decisions, Access to flexible conditions, Leave arrangements, Returning to workplace, Career progression, Productivity, Responsibilities out of work

Legend: Not sure, Men affected much worse, Men affected worse, No difference, Women affected worse, Women affected much worse

Figure 2

Several respondents described how women in their workplace had been disproportionately impacted by the increased caring responsibilities brought about by Covid-19 restrictions (which nationwide research has also illustrated, e.g. ONS, 2021), such as schools and childcare facilities being closed for lengthy periods, as well as the need to care for elderly or unwell relatives:

> "Women seemed to be the lead on all childcare and home-schooling therefore their work was impacted more due to these added responsibilities and pressures."

"Unfortunately, women are still expected to take on the lion's share of the caring burden. With home-schooling and lack of extended care bubbles, this has disproportionately affected women."

"Women appear to be taking the brunt of additional childcare and family commitments during this pandemic while trying to work from home."

"There are a few examples where members of the same family work here and the bulk of the childcare has fallen to the woman. Especially where the woman can work from home, therefore had simultaneously worked and looked after children."

"I don't know of any men that did home-schooling. It was left to the female to juggle both."

"Extremely difficult managing home-schooling of 3 children, elderly relatives caring responsibilities and working full time all from home. Difficulties are invisible to the organisation as seen as coping."

This is closely connected to gender norms in families and relationships, in which women often continue to be expected do the bulk of caregiving and housework, despite now playing a substantial role in the labour market. Gender roles and stereotypes are often reinforced and reasserted during times of crisis and uncertainty, such as pandemics (Rosenfeld & Tomyama, 2021). The additional responsibilities that many women were having to deal with were described as affecting their work in numerous ways:

"It seemed as though a lot of childcare duties were undertaken by women during the pandemic which affected the hours they could work and meetings they could attend."

"Mothers with kids have been absent from team meetings much more than those without - or even dads."

"Most of my immediate colleagues are women and as they have had to work from home they have found it harder to be productive without the conviviality of colleagues. They have also had to contend with children at home more and household issues made more difficult by lockdowns - this responsibility has fallen more on them then their partners."

It was pointed out that the extent of the load falling on women, in trying to balance being a good parent and a good employee, was having a detrimental impact on their mental health:

"Women seem to have the lion's share in terms of childcare and home responsibilities during COVID - consequently, ability to be as present, manage their own mental health and workload."

"We are used to remote working therefore the impact has not been significant for us. Juggling work with home schooling has been very stressful for females with school aged children."

"Not just in my organisation but much more widespread…women have taken on a lot more of the home schooling and childcare. This in turn has a negative impact on productivity, career progression, recruitment (as less likely to take on new challenge with home schooling proving a challenge in itself) and leave arrangements due to the fact annual leave has been taken on a regular basis throughout the pandemic to give quality time to my younger child especially. I found it to be a balancing act of trying to keep up with work commitments, home schooling whilst ensuring mental wellbeing of my children did not suffer. Annual leave this year has been used out of necessity rather than to have a break. I am feeling bogged down as a result."

There were also concerns about the longer-term fallout of inequalities in caregiving during the pandemic for women's job retention:

"Women are taking the responsibility at home, home-schooling etc. jobs are sought after and with job insecurity rife I would say that women with family commitments are becoming dispensable."

"Every female colleague with children, including myself is delivering home schooling rather than their partner. Only 1 male colleague I know is delivering home schooling and he is a former teacher whose wife leaves the house for work (in NHS) everyday! As a result of this, productivity is naturally affecting women more. Those who don't have children/family commitments also seem to be drawn to being less productive and not taking on additional responsibilities or offering to help colleagues. I've wrote 'unsure' around retention as no one has left our organisation since the pandemic started…however the more time I spend with my children, the more this becomes a real stressor for me…it is in the back of my mind constantly alongside the guilt of not being a good mother and offering all my time to my children! Perhaps this is particularly pertinent as we are a team who are all in funded positions…I feel like because I'm not demonstrating myself all the time in comparison to make colleagues that I'm at risk."

"We provided as much flexibility as we can when we were allowed to be open. No one has left yet but if this continues I can see us loosing people. Our female instructor has been unable to expand her training due to caring responsibilities and government restrictions to the industry."

It was highlighted by some respondents that many men were playing an increased role in caregiving during the pandemic as well (in some cases to the same extent as women). This could be one positive development, if it leads to more men becoming more actively involved in fatherhood in the long-term (which businesses can support by providing and encouraging strong take-up of paternity and parental leave by men, for example).

"Generally the flexible working and childcare requests have come from women that I know of, but equally I understand that male staff have been home-schooling and working from home at times as needed too."

"Some of the men in the organisation have health conditions that prevent them returning to the office. As well as this, some of the men in the organisation have caring responsibilities which affect them more greatly when they have no respite from their home environment."

"I have had both men and women struggling to come into work when their children have been sent home from school due to a Covid bubble. I see no difference that it has affected women or men differently."

Some respondents described ways in which their organisation had taken steps to try and alleviate the detrimental and unequal impacts of the pandemic, such as the increased amount of caring responsibilities outside of work, on their employees:

"We are mainly working from home which has given greater flexibility not battling the traffic to get to work after the school run, we have recruited successfully to several positions online, the home schooling and working from home was challenging but managers made allowances."

"My workplace have supported people to work flexibly from home, this has a bearing on childcare and in the event of home schooling meaning some women were trying to do everything and keep many plates in the air. My husband's work place would not have been so accommodating."

"All of our staff enjoy flexible working and none were expected to return to the workplace if they did not want to. Our furloughed staff had their salary made up to 100% so no one experienced a drop in salary. We have recently recruited new staff and that has been a mixture of male and female staff."

"Extremely flexible male or female. If time is needed, e.g. child sent home due to Covid bubble, we change them to home working, with company supplied laptops, chair, drop desk, PC."

The respondents described other ways in which they felt gender norms and stereotypes had impacted on the workplace during the pandemic, too. For instance, the association of masculinity with physical jobs, or with not showing weakness or vulnerability, appeared to be placing men at more risk of contracting Covid-19 in some cases:

"The majority of roles required to be physically in the workplace are predominantly occupied by men."

"The majority of our female staff are office based and therefore have the ability to be homeworkers and the majority of our male staff are drivers."

"Women are given much more leeway when it comes to phoning in sick or needing time off - men are expected to get on with it and come in or are criticised far more than women."

"In my company men and women do office jobs, but engineering work and labouring are done by men (there may be a woman I am unaware of, but that says it all). All practical people have returned to site but not office staff (hence worse for women). Flexibility has been excellently provided for, unless you have to be on site (hence worse for men). Several colleagues have had to use their annual leave for child care. For WFH colleagues it has been accepted they may have to work and care for children."

Some respondents appeared to feel that women were also being impacted more by increased support needs and reduced ability for social interaction among staff, perhaps connected to gender norms where women are often expected to be more social, communicative, and emotionally supportive:

> "The women miss the social interaction much more and online communication isn't the same, can make them feel isolated and down. They also tend to have more family responsibility pressure too."

> "Mothers requesting not to work, juggling childcare, diversity of circumstances and wider support bubbles. The impact of changes and needs to pivot. Extremely high pressured for female leaders who are also trying to support other female staff."

3.2 Consequences of Covid-19 for equality in organisations

Despite all of the issues raised by the previous question, most respondents disagreed (37%) or strongly disagreed (21%) that the pandemic would hold back gender equality in their organisation. However, 25% were not sure, whilst 11% agreed and 6% strongly agreed that it would. These responses may indicate that many respondents were working in organisations which particularly prioritised tackling gender inequality, or in some cases it may reflect a degree of complacency about the situation, given what we know from UK-wide research about the ways in which women have been disproportionately affected in the workplace by the Covid-19 crisis - especially given the uncertainty among answers to many of the survey questions.

Interestingly, the responses were more mixed about whether the pandemic had led to some positive impacts on gender equality in their organisations. 20% agreed that it had, and 9% strongly agreed. However, 19% disagreed and 10% strongly disagreed, whilst 43% were not sure. In particular, it was felt that it had led to greater flexibility from employers, which has to some extent been enforced with the government instructing people to work from home where possible. However, this could nonetheless lead to a wider embrace of flexibility and homeworking in the longer-term:

> "It is recognised that home working is possible in many roles without impacting efficiency."

> "Although we already operated a flexi system this was still very office hours based. Since working from home we have embraced the true way of working flexibly and I believe this has had benefits for many parents with childcare responsibilities - which are inevitably primarily women."

> "We are now operating more flexible hours and including some home working where suitable. This enables women to participate in a way that better meets their lifestyles. I do not employ any men with children, if I had I would have encouraged them to share the responsibilities with their partners."

> "In sector rather than organisation but I think employers will be more welcoming of women working flexibly in the future and hopefully this will be a more regular thing for men to do too."

It was felt by some respondents that this increased flexibility and home-working had also led to greater recognition and support from employers for their employees' personal needs and lives outside of work, such as their mental health and caring responsibilities:

> "Women are often the primary care givers and this can make the home/work balance difficult. Covid has acted like the elephant in the room in a way and it has forced some workplaces to act differently, act flexibly, work around other commitments and allow autonomy to be able to work at the times and the ways in which it works best for the full work/life picture."

> "There is a greater awareness of mental health in general and what affects that in all of us. Also, many of the more hidden jobs are being brought to light (day-to-day managing of a family, etc)."

> "We've always encouraged remote working at times to suit the business however I don't think we foresaw how well we could cope working remotely 100% of the time. This can make caring responsibilities easier (or harder depending on the way you look at it)."

The final quote illustrates that increased employer flexibility does not remove the challenges of dealing with both work and care responsibilities, especially when schools and childcare facilities are closed or inaccessible, as the following quote highlights:

> "There has been some greater flexibility in HR policies on leave and working patterns, but none of this reduces workload and pressure."

Some of the respondents also pointed to the increased sense of solidarity and desire to support staff as a result of the period of reflection the pandemic has led to, as well as due to the impact of social movements such as Black Lives Matter:

> "Time to reflect and make positive changes - going the extra mile to ensure understanding and inclusion."

> "Covering for one another during illness."

> "In light of BLM and other attacks on human rights this year, we have had to face head on our responsibility to play our part in addressing inequalities."

A few respondents also described steps their organisations had been taking to proactively try and support gender equality and promote women during this time:

> "We have specifically asked for placement students in tech roles to be female going into next year. Giving consideration to this for planned apprenticeship vacancy too."

> "Reviewed/improved recruitment approaches."

> "We have established a new business with female staff."

However, some respondents also discussed additional examples of how gender inequalities in their organisation had been exacerbated by the pandemic, or felt that it simply hadn't been taken into account in the first place, or had now been pushed off the agenda:

> "The majority of our ground level staff have been let go - the majority of which are women…Directors have not - a lot of whom are men."

> "Government decisions which fall predominantly on women are frankly hamstringing our industry. School closures, breakfast club closures, lack of affordable childcare in the area."

> "It just seems to continue to be something not discussed!"

> "Promised a restructure and promotion but that hasn't happened because of the pandemic and it not being a priority. Not sure if it will happen at all now."

3.3 Taking steps to address gender inequality

Figure 3

A concerning finding was that 54% of respondents were not sure whether their business had taken any steps to address gender inequalities during the pandemic, as it suggests that even if organisations were taking action, staff members were not being made aware of it. Meanwhile, as illustrated by Figure 3, 16% disagreed, and 4% strongly disagreed that their organisation was doing so. However, at least some businesses did appear to be working to address gender inequalities during Covid-19, with 14% agreeing and 11% strongly agreeing that this was the case.

As reflected in the previous section, some respondents talked about how organisations had sought to give their staff more flexibility, and understand the challenges they were dealing with outside of work. Respondents mentioned *"Some more flexible HR policies"* and *"we have allowed more flexibility for all staff"*, while offers commented:

> "Organisation has had a strong stance on employee welfare during pandemic - no gender difference."

> "Being mindful of the need for flexibility during a shifting time. We need to work around childcare needs. This is a situation that is outside of the control of our organisation, society needs to support parents better. Again we do not currently employ any men with caring responsibilities, the same offer would have been made available to them."

Others highlighted more structural steps their businesses had taken to try and minimise the unequal impacts of the pandemic:

> "We have committed to publish our gender pay gap report, early, alongside action plan."

> "2020 will not be considered when assessing those applying for grants (not relevant to employees)"

> "We've suspended franchise fees indefinitely and provided refresher training to support our female instructor once we can reopen. This support is also available to our male instructors however they have been less impacted."

> "Calling other people/organisations out when they promote male only podcasts/panels etc. Seeking external male and female advisors."

Some respondents discussed steps they and/or their organisations had taken to gain a better understanding about the various ways in which Covid-19 had interacted with and exacerbated existing social inequalities, such as by introducing more training, or:

> "Researched topic and started working with organisations like Gender and Entrepreneurship North East."

> "Just listening, understanding and tackling intersectional womxn inequalities. Instead of addressing "women" as a whole - I've been making changes looking at disability, race, LGBTQIA+."

The latter quote also illustrates how important it is to adopt an intersectional approach when tackling gender inequality. In other words, understanding the ways in which gender intertwines with other power inequalities, such as race, social class, disability and sexuality, in ways which can compound the marginalisation of people who experience multiple forms of oppression (e.g. if they are from a minoritised ethnic background, working class, have a disability, or are LGBTQ+).

Other respondents described how their organisations had not taken any action about gender inequality during the pandemic, in ways which indicated that there may have been a lack of recognition or awareness about the issue in the first place:

> "Never been asked if I would like to change my hours temporarily to suit childcare needs. Just told to do what I can which felt like more pressure of a full-time job and childcare and home-schooling responsibilities."

"There has been no open discussion about the inequalities women are facing during the pandemic, particularly in relation to caring responsibilities."

In some cases, respondents suggested that gender inequality simply was not an issue in their business, or that it was not one which was relevant to the Covid-19 crisis:

"No, because we have no perceived any or been made aware of any."

"They try to address this generally - but not more because of pandemic."

"There isn't inequality. As a parent I am given more flexibility and I am the highest earner. With freelance artists we employ, they're all paid the same rate."

"What do you mean by gender inequalities in this context? If one has legislated for these, why should the pandemic make a difference?"

"None needed."

These kinds of answers were somewhat concerning, as even if an organisation was a leader in promoting gender equality, there is always more work that can be done in this regard, especially during a crisis where there is a substantial body of evidence suggesting that women have been particularly harmfully impacted in many ways.

4. Building gender equality in the wake of Covid-19

4.1 What types of support would organisations benefit from?
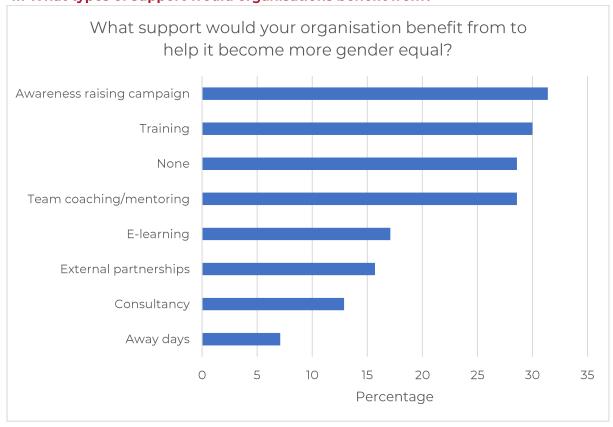

Figure 4

We wanted to find out from respondents what types of support they believed could most help their businesses to become more gender equal. As can be seen in Figure 4, the most common responses were: an awareness raising campaign (31%), training (30%), team coaching/mentoring (29%), and e-learning (17%). Interestingly, 29% selected 'none' for this question, which could suggest that some businesses are already successfully addressing gender equality issues - however, it could again point to some degree of complacency about the issue in some cases. Some additional ideas were provided for this question too, with an emphasis on *"Buy in from leadership"*, whilst one suggested "*Creation of forums to discuss the issues of gender equality.*" Another respondent highlighted the need to address broader societal norms:

> "General industry concerns that women are more generally in social care, health, education and charity working. Awareness of roles and impact at earlier ages may encourage boys and men to seek opportunities in the sector."

4.2 Factors which help to promote gender equality

We also asked respondents which factors they felt were most important to help promote gender equality in an organisation. The most popular answer here, as shown by Figure 5, was support from leaders and managers (65%). Meanwhile, 54% selected a supportive organisational culture, 42% a diverse workforce, 41% structural and operational change (such as new policies and procedures), 31% inclusive recruitment processes, and 18% support from male staff.
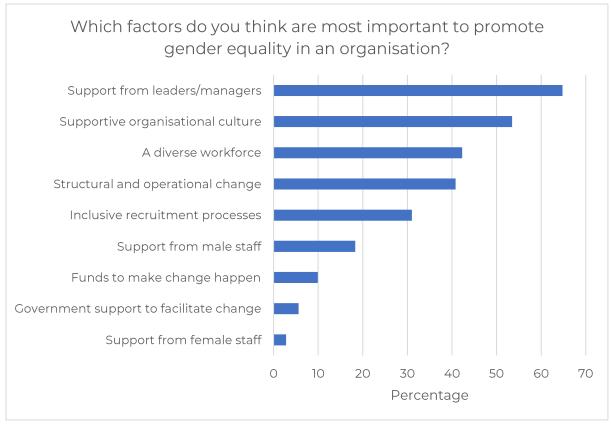

Figure 5

Several of the respondents described in more depth the obstacles that can arise if managers do not understand or take seriously gender equality issues, and why supportive leadership is vital to achieving change:

"Managers listen but do not respond."

"Traditional leadership style. Male dominated leadership."

"Operational leaders often leave it to HR. There needs to be a commitment from the top."

"For SME's and MSME's much depends on the business owner's own attitude and approach. Unfortunately, many people who set up their own businesses are poorly equipped and know little of these sorts of issues and instead focus on surviving or growing the business. Lots of business and management courses don't focus on people enough. Entrepreneurs are lauded in modern business and they are a sacred cow, but many "get away" with poor practice across a broad range of business functions. Business schools need to wake up to the fact that there is much more to business than IT and that there are thousands of firms who are "doing stuff and delivering services" with people every day. It's not all about web developing, coding and scaling - it's about people."

Another respondent underscored the need to address the attitudes of leaders:

"Facilitating leadership teams on how to work together and understand the personal influences of their own conscious and unconscious behaviours."

Some of the respondents talked about the importance of creating change in harmful, highly masculinised workplace cultures:

"The industry is male dominated and quite sexist in nature. This makes attracting more women to the industry very difficult. Better childcare support for women changing careers would really help. But the more women in the industry the better equality and the industry for that matter, will be."

"Some organisations are majority male staff so inclusivity and equality is difficult for women as the men may have certain belief systems or behaviour that needs to be unlearned through training to allow this to happen."

"It is still the case that in some business circles there is an unspoken rule that you must socialise outside of work hours to be part of the "team" and therefore move up the ladder. While women are held to be the primary carer this is obstructive to women."

Others described the need to tackle conscious and unconscious sexist attitudes and biases, and how these can hold women back in the workplace:

"Mainly institutional bias. If you always want to hire an experienced employee - but historically the sector has a bias towards male hiring - then in wanting experience you will inherit that bias even if you aim to be equal."

"The phrase/culture of 'the best person for the job' has always seemed to imply that people think women/other genders only get higher positions because of their gender as opposed to qualifications. I have in the past been told I only got the job because my manager liked to employ females. I guess the right phrase here is unconscious bias."

"I have been involved in recruitment where unconscious bias favoured the male candidate despite the fact he was clearly not good enough. I challenged and the decision was overruled. The panel was made up of 4 men and 1 woman (me)."

Some underscored that businesses still have much more to do to make it possible for employees with family and caregiving responsibilities to be able to manage these whilst also being successful in the workplace:

"I think managers/leaders who haven't had children or have older children/haven't been hands on with parenting cannot even comprehend the current pressures parents of younger children are under. I think even in 'normal' times conveying the pressures of working parents to managers and leaders is difficult. E.g. My daily commute is over an hour longer each way than it should be because I have 2 drop offs/pick-ups (school & nursery) and as a result I sit in peak traffic to then get to work or I have to leave at peak times to pick up children in time for closing times. As a result if I have deadlines or a high workload I have to work from home on an evening after bedtime to get it done!"

"Previously I was a single parent trying to formulate a career. The challenge of childcare in the holidays plus inflexible childcare (nurseries and childminders) alongside inflexible hours is hugely significant and probably something many do not get past. I moved into public sector for this reason and my work/life balance is so much happier and more productive."

Some respondents thus emphasised the need for organisations to examine their own structures, policies and processes, in order to be able to move forwards:

"I think it is hard for organisations to critically and honestly reflect on their recruitment processes or any policy and note that it causes inequality. The organisation thinks it is being the "same" to everyone and fair - without acknowledging or addressing the barriers folx face."

"A clear policy that everyone is aware of and a zero tolerance approach to inappropriate of unfair conduct."

Others pointed to the need for change to be instigated in wider society too, such as by addressing and changing gender stereotypes which continue to create a degree of gender segregation into different jobs:

"Early years encouraging of females to target my industry so that I have more female choice."

"I think problems are deeper than individual organisations, governmental policies need to change, women need to be promoted into leadership more regularly - access to shared maternity/paternity leave so that women are not 'a liability' at director/management level, affordable childcare to name but a few."

4.3 The gender pay gap and Covid-19

Interestingly, most respondents did not feel that their organisation has a gender pay gap, with 33% strongly disagreeing and 27% disagreeing that this was the case. This may have in part been because many were working in more atypical organisations where a pay gap may be less likely to exist, such as small businesses or businesses with a majority of female staff. However, in 2020 the UK as a whole had a gender pay gap of 7.4% among full-time employees, and 15.5% among all employees (ONS, 2020), so clearly the gender pay gap persists in many businesses across the country, and it is wider in the North than anywhere else in the UK (Johns et al., 2020). Indeed, 17% of respondents agreed and 7% strongly agreed that their organisation did have a gender pay gap. 16% were not sure about the answer to this question.

Meanwhile, 13% of respondents were concerned that their gender pay gap would get worse due to the pandemic, with 8% thinking it would become a bit bigger and 5% a lot bigger. However, the majority (65%) felt it was likely to stay the same, and a few (5%) believed it might actually get smaller. This is an important danger for businesses to take into account, as the increased caring responsibilities women are facing mean that many are likely to be finding it harder than ever to advance their careers and find better-paying jobs in numerous sectors. Furthermore, the government suspended the requirement for businesses to report their gender pay gaps during Covid-19 (they now do not have to do so until 5th October 2021), meaning this is not being monitored at a time when many of the factors contributing to it are being exacerbated.

4.4 Staff wellbeing

Most respondents felt that their business does a good job of addressing the health and wellbeing issues that might be particular to men and women in the organisation (such as male mental health, or issues related to the menopause), with 34% agreeing and 28% strongly agreeing with this. However, 17% were unsure, and a relatively large number felt this was not the case, with 17% disagreeing and 4% strongly disagreeing. This suggests that whilst awareness has grown in recent years about the duty of care businesses have to support different aspects of staff health and wellbeing, more attention could be paid to the gendered dynamics of these issues, and how female and male employees may have different physical and mental health needs and experiences, both for biological reasons and because of the impacts of gender norms and expectations (for example, some men may be reluctant to seek help for health issues they are experiencing for fear that this will be seen as 'unmanly'; Ruxton & Burrell, 2020).

4.5 Addressing domestic abuse

As shown in Figure 6, here was more uncertainty about domestic abuse, with 45% of respondents unsure about whether their business does a good job of addressing this, 16% disagreeing, and 3% strongly disagreeing. However, the survey does suggest some businesses are doing a good job in this regard, with 26% agreeing and 14% strongly agreeing.

Most respondents were unsure (41%), disagreed (33%), or strongly disagreed (9%) that their organisation had taken more steps to address domestic abuse since the pandemic began. This is quite a concerning finding, given that there is substantial evidence that domestic abuse has got worse during Covid-19 (Davidge, 2020; Bourgault, Peterman & O'Donnell, 2021), with many victim-survivors trapped at home with their abusers with fewer informal or formal sources of help (of which the workplace can be one important space away from the perpetrator) available. Staff members being subjected to domestic abuse is likely to be impacting on the workplace more than ever with so many people working from home, too (EIDA, 2020). Whilst anyone can be a victim of domestic abuse, this is a major gender equality issue, given that women make up

the majority of victim-survivors (ONS, 2020). However, 12% did agree and 6% strongly agreed that their business was doing more in response to domestic abuse during the pandemic.
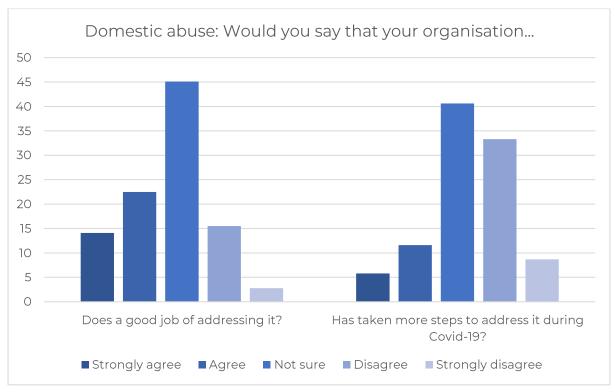

Figure 6

Some of the respondents described actions which their organisation has taken to address domestic abuse:

> "Mental health advocates and a forum at work. This is something that is always reiterated at meetings and support is regularly outlined."

> "Community centred/led organisation with focus on dedicated delivery programmes relating to these issues, which are reflected internally."

> "We have had a member of staff who was in an abusive relationship. We were able to support them and ultimately helped them to move on. This demonstrates to all staff members that our organisation is supportive in deeds not just words. Stress levels and stress management techniques are thought about and part of the routine here. It makes for a more productive work force."

> "Our work environment is open enough that people can discuss personal things and we have two mental health trained staff as well so staff feel they would not be judged."

> "We always take steps to deal with abuse or any other issues and have not seen an increase."

However, it is important to note in relation to some of these points that whilst it is vital to take into account staff mental health, this is not sufficient on its own in terms of addressing domestic abuse, which can impact on staff (who could be victims or perpetrators) and the workplace in

unique ways. Several respondents described positive general steps their organisation was taking to promote staff health and wellbeing - which is undoubtedly invaluable - but which does not necessarily equate to a strong awareness or approach to domestic abuse:

> "We have never had a policy to seek out abuse but have ambassadors within the organisation to look for signs for various issues. We also have outlets for staff to visit to speak about such personal issues privately with the full support of the company."

> "Personal circumstances are tolerated and supported on a case-by-case basis."

> "Generally more well-being discussions with managers as well as promoting employee health and support programmes. Flexible working and different shifts has allowed families to work to suit their needs."

> "I'm unsure, we know our instructors and their families very well, prior to the pandemic we had 6 monthly get togethers. Since the pandemic we've been unable to do this so I think this has distanced us quite a bit. Our instructors know we're there for them in any way they need us, even if it's just a chat or a spleen vent and they've done so. We've never directly addressed domestic abuse but I would like to think they know we're here for them if they need help."

Indeed, some respondents themselves made the point that whilst there had been conversations about wellbeing generally, these had not taken into account domestic abuse:

> "I've seen a lot of work being carried out on wellbeing but no mention of domestic abuse."

> "While we have ran a few 'mental health' days, I've never heard mention of any specific support or resources surrounding domestic violence."

Meanwhile, several of the respondents described how they were not aware of their organisation doing anything about domestic abuse:

> "My organisation have not done anything to address the possibility a member of staff could be suffering from domestic abuse. We are unaware of any abuse but the opportunity of support has not been shared for a impacted staff member to have the opportunity to reach out."

> "Domestic abuse has never been discussed, mentioned or is it in a policy now or during pandemic."

> "It's never been mentioned in any company awareness campaign."

> "Beyond mandatory safeguarding training and the safeguarding process, I'm not sure how adept the [name of organisation] is at being aware of possible domestic abuse at home."

> "The culture of the organisation is very 'stiff upper lip'. A lot of degree educated, privileged white males, who either don't wish to create a culture of openness or are not

comfortable with it. I therefore think it is hugely challenging for the female minority and/or HR to overcome this until we increase gender diversity at all levels in the business."

"I do not feel our well-being is cared for, it is just lip service."

For some of the respondents, they were simply not aware of any cases of domestic abuse within their organisation, to be able to know how it would be responded to:

"Many of my team are single and/or live with their parents. That is not to say that domestic abuse will not happen, perpetrators may be parents or a sibling. I have said not sure because we have never had to address any issues but issues may have gone unnoticed - which is more likely when teams are working remotely. The whole of my team have a detailed knowledge of safeguarding but if you don't see someone it is difficult to safeguard them."

"It is not something we have experienced so difficult to comment. We are a close team, know each other and our families well."

"I haven't seen anything specific (but I also haven't looked)."

"Not aware of any cases so cannot comment."

"I haven't been aware of someone suffering domestic violence so I have no experience in managing that process."

"We have never dealt with any of the above therefore we don't know how good we are."

"We haven't done anything specifically to address these issues however I'm not sure any of the team would know what to look out for and what to do if they suspected it."

As the last quote illustrates, there are things that all businesses can and should be doing to address domestic abuse *before* they even become aware of their staff members experiencing it. For instance, having policies and procedures in place, raising awareness about it among staff through training and campaigns, and having domestic abuse 'champions' in the workplace. Indeed, one respondent wrote that *"We are a micro business. However we've written about it"*, illustrating that there are actions any organisation can take, no matter how big or small. If these kinds of steps are taken, then they may find that more people's lives have been blighted by domestic abuse in their organisation than they realise. Meanwhile, one respondent mentioned that *"I've been the one to raise"* in relation to domestic abuse and the workplace, demonstrating the influential role that individuals can play in working to highlight and change how their organisation understands and approaches this issue.

5. Agents of change

5.1 Who sees gender equality as an issue for them?

One area in which it appears that more could be done is around engaging more men in speaking out about gender equality issues in the business sector. As illustrated in Figure 7, 31% of respondents disagreed and 14% strongly disagreed that men in their workplace see gender

equality as an issue for them. Only 14% agreed and 7% strongly agreed that this was the case, whilst 33% were not sure.
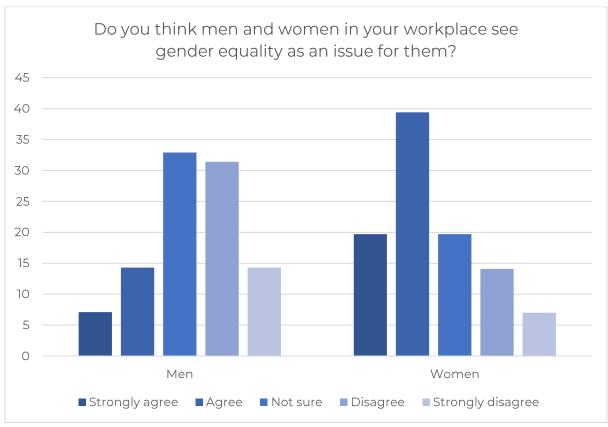

Figure 7

The fact that only 22% of those who completed the survey were men underscores that many do not appear to currently recognise that gender equality is an issue for them. It is notable that, of the 16 men that did take part, they were more likely than female respondents to feel that their organisation was already successfully addressing different gender issues, to believe that women and men had not been affected differently by the pandemic, and to deny that gender inequality was a major problem for their business to be concerned about.

Most respondents felt that women in their organisations do see gender equality as an issue for them, with 39% agreeing and 20% strongly agreeing. Although here too, some felt that this was not the case, with 14% disagreeing, 7% strongly disagreeing, and 20% not sure. This illustrates that even among many women, there may not be sufficient awareness of gender equality issues in the workplace.

Some of the respondents highlighted positive examples of how individuals or the organisation as a whole were actively working to build gender equality:

> "I think that both the men and women who work in our organisation are very aware of gender equality issues and are therefore acutely addressing these on a daily basis."

> "We employ many more females than males - even though we are in a male dominated sector. Chief exec is keen to bring in a variety of experiences to the business and so actively looks for all kinds of genders."

"I think gender equality is an issue that we're all passionate about in the team and as a small team we all get involved in unconscious bias training etc."

"I think folx are acknowledging the wider sector issues of inequality."

"Diversity and equality has a high priority in the organisation."

"All staff are paid the same for their grade and we have a fair and mixed workforce structure."

"There are examples of leaders both male and female and there is demonstrated career development for both sexes as well as positive supervision experience where people are listened to. Pay-scales are consistent and known to be in all hierarchy levels. Adverts all show salary and benefits. Flexible working is available."

"Regular consultation. Open dialogue, positive approaches to critiquing the organisation."

However, others discussed how, from their experience, gender inequality simply was not something which was talked about sufficiently in their organisations:

"It is not something that is discussed in open…"

"It's not an issue that is discussed so it's difficult to give accurate responses. Gender equality is discussed at board level in terms of pay and conditions but that's about it."

Something which was particularly highlighted here was that among men in the workplace, there is sometimes a lack of understanding or recognition of gender inequality as a problem, and they may be unaware of the impacts that their behaviours can have or how these may be undermining or exclusionary towards women:

"I think there is an attitude amongst (older) men that everything is sorted now."

"Men are often not aware of their behaviour/language and subconscious bias and women often accept what they should not through fear, but they also think it's someone else's responsibility."

"The men see no gender equality issues as they lead a charmed life in this respect. I and our female instructor do have to battle with mansplaining, 'silly woman' attitude and well-meaning male arrogance on a daily basis."

"I think men are comfortable with the status quo of gender equality not being talked about or tabled as an issue. The only reason I haven't put 'strongly agree' is because our CEO is female and so there may be room for doubt as some may see this as an issue. I know women in some teams feel gender equality is an issue but equally I think other teams that have a female bias (in terms of staff numbers) may be more comfortable and therefore gender equality and parity isn't obvious day to day for them."

The last quote indicates that the composition and dynamics of specific workplaces and teams can have a big impact in this respect. Indeed, respondents described how some workplace cultures can be more unequal and unwelcoming towards women than others:

> "Many of the women in the organisation have other freelance roles or have come from other organisations in arts and culture where they have experienced inequality, in our sector and work we are encouraged to be expressive and tackle political, social and moral issues."

> "Certain sectors such as manufacturing are heavily male orientated. I believe this is a sector where some leaders within it do not respect gender equality and effectively close the door on women playing a significant role within their organisation."

> "In my experience, the women here in technical roles (engineering, quality etc.) have all at some point in their careers experienced sexism in the workplace. However, in general we all want to be recognised for being good at our jobs, not for being females who are good at their jobs. Since starting here 8 years ago I can honestly say I haven't experienced any outright sexism and I and my peers have had the same progression opportunities as our male counterparts. There are just fewer of us! So perhaps more could be done to address that balance, hence choosing not sure."

A few of the respondents pointed to the role that senior leadership plays in influencing these dynamics, for example if there are *"more men in senior roles"*, even in organisations where the majority of staff members are women. Meanwhile, one respondent highlighted the complexities of these dynamics, in which in any workplace some men - and women - may act to support gender equality more than others:

> "Difficult question because some men do and some don't! Equally, some women do and some don't!"

Concerningly, some of the respondents appeared to deny that there was a need for individuals in their organisations to work to promote gender equality, for example because *"No issues ever raised"*, or because they simply felt that *"We don't have a huge issue with gender equality."* This suggests that it may be beneficial for some organisations to explore further whether it really can be the case that there are no gender equality issues that they need to worry about.

5.2 Engaging a greater range of voices in speaking out

We also asked respondents what they felt could be done to encourage a greater range of people to speak out in support of gender equality in their workplace. One key thing suggested here was improving staff members' awareness and understanding about gendered issues, in order for people to be able to act on them:

> "Raise awareness of it and encourage people to discuss it."

> "It's very difficult to make people care unless they have experienced it or their family or friends have, so training and awareness, doing role play/situational examples would help."

> "Just by encouraging others to attend events, debates and discussions."

"Addressing the unconscious bias and fostering an understanding of why a diverse workforce is a good thing."

One respondent felt that ultimately change was needed in wider society, but that greater awareness within the workplace about these broader social issues was also important:

"I'm not sure. I think some of the inequality stems from the home environment where women typically take on more domestic duties whilst trying to build their career. This coupled with childcare commitments can hold women back from realising their full career potential. Awareness needs to be raised universally to lighten the mental and physical load many woman have outside of the workplace."

Connected to this, some respondents felt it was particularly important that men speak out as allies to women in the workplace:

"Getting more men to see the issues and speak out about them. Receiving training and hearing stories from non-binary folks."

"I think the male voices need to make it clear that they are supportive of their female colleagues."

Another key group identified in this respect was that of management (where men also continue to be in the majority of positions), with respondents highlighting the need for *"Management encouragement"*, for gender equality to be *"Championed by leadership"*, and *"led from the top down"*.

"Top management has to be on board with the culture of improving diversity at all levels in the organisation."

"Again lead from the top. Organisation commitment and time made to dedicate to this."

Numerous respondents felt that organisations should work to change their culture in ways which would enable all members of staff to speak out about gender equality issues and discuss them openly, especially if they are experiencing a problem. Some mechanisms to help with this were suggested, such as *"Focus groups", "working/listening groups"*, or *"anonymous surveys"*:

"It needs to be discussed and listened to."

"More confidentiality and encouragement to speak up. Topic needs to be addressed and currently is not."

"Make change as a result feel possible and real - no more box ticking and virtue signalling. Encourage and incentivise openness and honesty around treatment and feelings. Remove it from hierarchy - give the team ownership."

"Being active and open as a topic staff can engage in."

"Currently we all have a voice however I understand that as the company grows this needs to be taken into consideration and deliberately encouraged."

In this respect, a few also highlighted the importance of the *"Encouragement of open dialogue"*, and avoiding dividing or polarising staff, or creating a sense of fear about saying the 'right thing':

"No crusades - educate and unite workforces - avoid the polarisation of the extremist viewpoint."

"Positive experiences in the workplace to share with others through a supportive culture. And focus on NOT talking about the negatives and differences but to accept people as individuals rather than with labels of any kind, including avoiding quotas or targets that increase tokenism. Allowing all to contribute to issues affecting everyone without pressure to conform in any way or them feeling unable to speak out for fear of saying the wrong thing."

Several respondents meanwhile pointed to the need for structural changes in organisations in order to be able to broaden the range of voices within them, such as *"Promoting more women."*

"A transparent pay scale system would help. More female engineers would be great."

"Campaign in public domain would be good."

"Ensuring recruitment is fair and unbiased. Introducing external voices to our small team."

"Improving our EDI policy currently. It is standard item on our weekly team meetings as part of diversity and inclusion."

"More information and examples of our industry would be interesting. We are a successful 66 year old family business but open to 21st century thinking. Our people are intrinsic to the continuation of our company alongside the stability of service and profitability."

Again however, concerningly some respondents simply felt that this was not something their organisation needed to worry about, either because they felt people were already speaking out sufficiently, or because they simply felt *"It isn't an issue at all"*.

"We have plenty of platforms and I don't think there are constraints to people speaking freely."

"I genuinely don't think it's an issue."

6. Building gender equality in North East businesses

Finally, we asked respondents if they had any other comments about what could help to achieve gender equality in the North East business sector. One simply remarked that *"it needs to be addressed as a priority."* Several emphasised the need for more education in the workplace about gender issues and people's experiences of them:

"There are two things that resonate with me.
1. Educating those who display parochial behaviours and views.
2. Keep it on the agenda for those who don't realise that there are still bias and prejudice. Sometimes because we are accepting ourselves, we lose sight of the reality of what is going on closer to the ground."

"Educate one another through self-awareness. I use i3 Profiling as a tool to encourage personal development and facilitate group discussion around behaviour at work with clients."

"Forcing it will only cause resentment - train, give experience and knowledge to let it happen naturally. It may take longer but will be accepted. Although equal pay should be dealt with at once."

"We have employed the services of 50:50 Future, a diversity & inclusion consultancy business based in the NE, to deliver workshops around demystifying diversity, unconscious bias and inclusive recruitment."

"Things are changing and have changed since I started out in my journey of business. I think sharing voices from all walks of business life - young/old, male/female, cross-sector, etc. will ensure that others entering or already in business will understand we have a rich equal tapestry in which to continue to build their business too. Sharing experiences will level up I feel."

Several felt that it was vital for much more to be done in wider society, too - such as educating young people about gender norms and stereotypes from a young age in order to be able to challenge and change them:

"Gender equality in the workplace really needs to start at an early age - during education. We need to be encouraging all young people to aspire to achieve the roles they want to. I grew up in a time when gender equality did not exist and have managed to forge a career in a heavily male dominated sector. This was because of my mindset - I didn't see that there were things girls or boys could do just jobs."

"Inspiring young people to dream of opportunities with successful people sharing openly their experiences. Finding ways or closing down the barriers made by local deprivation by engaging at school level with all sorts of career planning so real-life examples of what is possible. For many generations of unemployed within families, there may not be the idea of being equal or striving for more."

"I believe this needs to be tackled across the board, not just in the workplace. Equality should be structured into every aspect of life inside and outside of work. If leaders practice gender equality outside of work, they are more likely to do the same inside the workplace."

Akin to the last quote, one respondent again emphasised the importance of *"Strong leadership"* on tackling gender equality, whilst another highlighted the need for a good level of understanding at management level:

"Senior Managers/owners need to understand that staff are just "people" not men/women etc. and are all capable in their own ways and give re-assurance that they want everyone to be treated equally, so staff are comfortable in being true to themselves."

Meanwhile, some of the respondents focused on the need to engage more men in conversations about building gender equality, for example because the business sector is *"Still largely male orientated"*. In turn, this might help men to address gendered issues that they experience too (such as difficulties in talking about mental health issues for fear of being seen as 'weak'), as well as encouraging them to act as allies for women's equality:

"I think engaging more men is important."

"Manufacturing and construction and digital is very much male dominated. found out that construction workers are 1.6 times more likely to commit suicide."

"For white men to acknowledge their privilege and that they are often part of the problem."

Several respondents emphasised that fundamentally, more work needed to be done to improve women's positions within the North East business sector, for example through *"Positive promotion of female business leaders"*.

"More should be done to help women entrepreneurs, specifically with the difficulties surrounding women accessing funding streams. Also more should be done to encourage men to engage deeper in being the household manager and co-caregiver."

"Equality includes female disability too, this is always overlooked. Listen to females. Provide decent support and networking opportunities. Financing for female led start-ups that includes where there is no commercial premises, as predominantly women in business start their business from home which more often excludes them from government funding. Childcare grants."

"Promotion and support of female leaders is crucial to setting standards and demonstrating parity. Also mentoring and support, particularly for women around career progression."

However, one respondent also underscored that it is important to avoid prioritising entrepreneurialism and profit-making to the extent that ethics, the wider community, and social inequalities become relegated to secondary concerns:

"The North East is often subject to, as all business is, dynastic elites which permeate the business culture. These can perpetuate gender inequalities in their unique brand of group closure. Equally smaller operations struggle for survival amidst this "closed shop" provision and issues such as gender quality are sacrificed to the shortcuts deemed necessary for survival or simply have no priority. Strategies are needed across the piste. Entrepreneurialism is celebrated over ethics and its wealth creation such an end in itself that can justify exploitative means, gender inequality is along with other structural inequalities that are cast into the penumbra of priorities towards success. Greater focus

on the notion of mature community contribution of organisations to the areas they serve is perhaps a start."

7. Conclusion

This survey has produced a range of interesting and important findings about gender equality in the North East business sector during Covid-19. It has demonstrated that there is much good practice in the region, with many businesses and people working within them determined to create more equal and inclusive workplaces. However, the survey also highlighted a number of issues of serious concern currently, such as the extent to which women are being held back, and facing considerable pressure and strain, because of the disproportionate amount of caring responsibilities they have faced as a result of the government response to pandemic. There is a real risk that this will lead to longer-term backward steps in women's positions in the business sector unless concerted action is taken to support them, and organisations do whatever they can to prioritise and promote gender equality.

There are things that all of us can to do to help contribute to this. Particularly important is for business leaders to take this issue seriously; it was highlighted repeatedly by respondents that managers play a major part in setting the tone for the organisation as a whole. It was also emphasised that men have a key role to play as allies to their female colleagues, such as by mentoring and supporting their career progression, speaking out about the need for gender equality, and taking on a more equal share of caring responsibilities in their own lives. Indeed, the pandemic may have instigated greater involvement in caregiving among many men, so it is vital to encourage this shift further in the longer-term. It is also important to highlight gendered issues that men can experience in the workplace, such as not feeling able to talk about stresses they are facing, seek help for health issues, or ask about paternity or parental leave possibilities, for fear of not conforming to masculine expectations about being a strong, stoic, unemotional, 'workaholic' employee (Burrell, Ruxton & Westmarland, 2019).

Building gender equality in the workplace therefore benefits everyone, and it is the right thing for businesses to do, especially if they do not want to be seen as falling behind their competitors. It cannot be something which falls off the agenda during the pandemic, because as this research has shown, it is in times of crisis such as this that it is most at risk.

It is also notable that several questions in this survey yielded large numbers of 'not sure' responses. This in itself demonstrates that more needs to be done, for example in training and raising awareness among staff about different aspects of gender inequality, what they can do to tackle it, and what their business is doing to create change. It is vital never to fall into complacency when it comes to gender equality. No matter how much we think we may already have things 'sorted' in our workplace, there is always more that can and should be done, especially during a time of crisis when staff wellbeing is under so much pressure, and it is so easy to slip into 'traditional' ways of doing things. Might there be gendered connections we are not seeing, or issues which have not appeared on our radars, perhaps because those affected do not feel able to come forward? We can only address problems which we know about - so now more than ever, it is crucial that we all do what we can to build our understanding of the range of ways in which gender inequality continues to impact on people's lives, including in our own organisations - and get to work in changing this.

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