

Women in rail**Adeline Ginn**

Women are disproportionately impacted by the pandemic's economic fallout and the crisis has widened gender inequalities but continuing our efforts to build a gender balanced and diverse workforce will be key to our recovery

Adeline Ginn MBE, Group Strategy and Legal Director at CPMS and Founder and Chair of Women in Rail, explains why supporting the diversity and inclusion agenda is key to our industry's recovery

We are told that COVID-19 doesn't discriminate but evidence proves otherwise: more men are dying from the coronavirus than women, minority ethnic groups are disproportionately affected by the pandemic and both the elderly and people with chronic diseases are facing the highest risk.

The crisis affects different groups in the UK. For women, there is a real danger that it could deepen further existing gender inequalities.

In the UK, women count for the majority of frontline workers (77 per cent), low paid employees (69 per cent) and people with caring responsibilities, paid and unpaid. They undertake, on average, 60 per cent more unpaid care work than men and, generally, 70 per cent of the housework and 66 per cent of childcare duties.

Women are expected to bear the brunt of the recession and widespread job losses, especially those who are self-employed, on zero hours contracts (who account for the majority of such workers), part time workers, single mothers and pregnant women. As women leave employment, they are also predicted to return to a lesser wage

(seven per cent less than employees who never left the workforce) which may further widen the gender pay gap.

The issue of gender imbalance and lack of diversity at work were present well before the global pandemic. Despite the impact of Black Lives Matter protests and companies' pledges to support diversity and inclusion, the financial pressures resulting from the crisis could lead to these programmes being sidelined.

In rail, women count for less than 17 per cent of the workforce, with a majority in non-managerial positions. However, our sector has worked hard in the last few years to increase female and minorities representation at mid and senior levels. There is a lot we can do as an industry to ensure all our efforts are not obliterated by the pandemic.

Rail companies have demonstrated an unprecedented agility in responding to the crisis. The rise in digital working and the need to manage virtual teams has opened up the full spectrum of new ways of working remotely and efficiently. The ability to work from home has also broadened our sector's employee geographic reach, creating opportunities to increase the participation

of people with disability, caretaker responsibilities and women with childcare duties.

Research has repeatedly shown that gender balance, ethnic diversity and inclusion go hand in hand with better decision making and economic performance. As we begin a gradual return to "normal", we have an opportunity to incorporate positive changes to our working practices and ensure we attract the diverse talent we urgently need to help support our recovery. It is also a chance to hone in to diversity and inclusion, find innovative ways to manage virtual teams and create a sense of community where everyone feels included.

As harrowing the last few months have been for all, COVID-19 has shown we can do things differently. We have an opportunity to reflect, adapt and evolve and a very real prospect of creating a more gender balanced and diverse workforce and an equitable future for all.

Adeline Ginn is Group Strategy and Legal Director at CPMS and Founder and Chair of Women in Rail.

To find out more about Women in Rail, visit www.womeninrail.org.