



Close the Gap briefing for Scottish Government Debate: Long Covid

May 2022

Close the Gap is Scotland's policy advocacy organisation working on women's labour market participation. We have been working with policymakers, employers and employees for over 20 years to influence and enable action that will address the causes of women's labour market inequality.

1. Introduction

The latest data release from the ONS shows that an estimated 1.8 million people in the UK (2.8% of the population) were experiencing long Covid symptoms lasting longer than four weeks as of 3rd April 2022.¹ This data also shows that **long Covid was more prevalent among women**² which aligns with a previous **review of risk factors which found consistent evidence of an increased risk of long Covid amongst women**.³ While acute cases of Covid tend to be mostly male and over 50, long Covid sufferers are both relatively young and overwhelmingly women.⁴ **The emergence of long Covid has therefore exposed another way in which the pandemic has disproportionately affected women in Scotland.**

Women's experiences of long Covid and the barriers to accessing adequate support have again highlighted the persistence of structural issues around women's low-paid and precarious work; the inability of the social security system to meet women's needs; and the need for urgent reform of our employment injuries assistance system.

2. Long Covid and women's experience of the labour market

The latest data release from the ONS found that the prevalence of long Covid was greatest among those working in in social care (85% female⁵), teaching and

¹ ONS (2022) *Prevalence of ongoing symptoms following coronavirus (COVID-19) infection in the UK: 6 May 2022*

² Ibid.

³ REACT (2021) *Long COVID available at*
https://spiral.imperial.ac.uk/bitstream/10044/1/89844/9/REACT_long_covid_paper_final.pdf

⁴ David Cox (2021) 'Why are women more prone to long Covid?', *The Guardian*, 21st June 2021, available at:
<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/jun/13/why-are-women-more-prone-to-long-covid>

⁵ Scottish Social Services Council (2019) *Scottish Social Service Sector: Report on 2018 Workforce Data*

education (68% female⁶) or health care (76% female⁷).⁸ Women's concentration in these high-risk sectors thus increases the likelihood that women will experience long Covid. This creates challenges for women's labour market participation, particularly as employer responses to long Covid have made sustaining paid work particularly difficult. A survey by the TUC in 2021⁹ found that:

- **Over half (52%) of respondents said they had experienced some form of discrimination or disadvantage due to long Covid.**
- **One in six respondents (18%) said the amount of sick leave they had taken had triggered absence management or HR processes.** This could be particularly difficult for women, as evidence showed women have been forced into using their sick leave entitlement to undertake additional unpaid care during the pandemic, especially during school and nursery closures.¹⁰
- **Overall, one in 20 respondents said they had been forced out of their jobs because they had long Covid.**

ONS data shows that Long Covid symptoms were adversely affecting the day-to-day activities of 1.2 million people across the UK, with **346,000 people reporting that their ability to undertake their day-to-day activities had been "limited a lot"**.¹¹ Fatigue is the most common symptom reported as part of individuals' experience of long Covid (51%), followed by shortness of breath (33%) and difficulty concentrating (23%).¹² It is therefore clear why people experiencing long Covid may struggle to maintain paid work, particularly in the absence of employer support.

In addition to inadequate employer responses, many women experiencing long Covid will have missed out on Statutory Sick Pay (SSP). Despite women being more likely to be in jobs with high-exposure to Covid-19, women's concentration in low-paid and precarious work makes them less likely to be eligible for SSP. The UK Women's Budget Group found that **women hold 70% of jobs that are not entitled to SSP**.¹³ This adds to women's financial precarity, particularly as **women account 60% of workers earning less than the real Living Wage**.

For those who are entitled to SSP, **the continued low rate of sick pay has put women with long Covid, and their children, at increased risk of poverty**. Many women with long Covid are also reaching the end of their 28-week SSP entitlement,

⁶ NOMIS (2022) Annual population survey - regional - employment by occupation – teaching and education professionals

⁷ NOMIS (2022) workforce jobs by industry (SIC 2007) and sex - human health and social work activities

⁸ ONS (2022) *Prevalence of ongoing symptoms following coronavirus (COVID-19) infection in the UK: 6 May 2022*

⁹ TUC (2021) 'TUC calls for long Covid to be urgently recognised as a disability to prevent "massive" discrimination' available at <https://www.tuc.org.uk/news/tuc-calls-long-covid-be-urgently-recognised-disability-prevent-massive-discrimination>

¹⁰ Close the Gap (2020) *Disproportionate Disruption* available at

<https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/Disproportionate-Disruption---The-impact-of-COVID-19-on-womens-labour-market-equality.pdf>

¹¹ ONS (2022) *Prevalence of ongoing symptoms following coronavirus (COVID-19) infection in the UK: 6 May 2022*

¹² Ibid.

¹³ <https://wbg.org.uk/topics/covid-19/>

forcing women to access a social security system that doesn't meet their needs.¹⁴ This creates concerns for women's poverty in the longer-term. Women are more likely to be experiencing poverty and thus are less likely to have savings to rely on during periods where they are unable to work or have to reduce their working hours as a result of ill-health.

3. Support for women with long Covid

Current support is failing to meet the needs of women who are experiencing long Covid. Additional financial assistance and support is urgently required for those with long Covid symptoms in the workplace. **Close the Gap echoes calls made by the TUC for the UK Government to urgently recognise long Covid as a disability under the Equality Act.** Many individuals experiencing long Covid already meet the 12-month criteria for a 'long-term' condition.¹⁵ This would ensure that employers cannot legally discriminate against workers with long Covid while also placing a duty on employers to make reasonable adjustments that remove, reduce or prevent any disadvantages workers with long Covid face. We are concerned that a recent intervention by the EHRC on long Covid¹⁶ may make it harder for women experiencing symptoms to access the reasonable adjustments they need at work.

Long Covid should also be recognised as an occupational disease, providing women and their children access to protection and compensation if they contracted the virus while working. This is particularly vital for women who account for 79% of key workers in Scotland and thus have greater exposure to the virus in the workplace. Indeed, **figures from the HSE covering the period of April to September 2020 found that three-quarters of employer Covid-19 disease reports made in Scotland related to a female employee.**¹⁷ While the recognition of long Covid as an occupational disease would be welcome, this would need to be accompanied by wider changes to the current system of Employment Injuries Assistance and Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit (IIDB) which does not meet women's needs and is ultimately unfit for purpose.¹⁸ As highlighted within our response to the proposed Scottish Employment Injuries Advisory Council Bill, women workers face significant challenges in receiving support through the current system and these issues are likely to come

¹⁴ Partridge, Joanna (2021) "'Your body just stops': long Covid sufferers face new ordeals as sick pay runs out" *The Guardian*, 24th June 2021, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/24/your-body-just-stops-long-covid-sufferers-face-new-ordeals-as-sick-pay-runs-out>

¹⁵ TUC (2021) 'TUC calls for long Covid to be urgently recognised as a disability to prevent "massive" discrimination' available at <https://www.tuc.org.uk/news/tuc-calls-long-covid-be-urgently-recognised-disability-prevent-massive-discrimination>

¹⁶ Geddes, Linda (2022) 'Alarm after EHRC says long Covid should not be treated as disability', 9TH May 2022, *The Guardian*, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2022/may/09/alarm-after-ehrc-says-long-covid-should-not-be-treated-as-disability>

¹⁷ HSE (2020) *Technical Summary of Data on COVID-19 Disease Reports*

¹⁸ Close the Gap (2021) 'Covid-19 has put health and safety at the heart of fair work, but women's needs remain under-researched, under-reported and under-compensated' available at <https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/news/blog/covid-19-has-put-health-and-safety-at-the-heart-of-fair-work-but-womens-needs-remain-under/>

to the fore in the context of long Covid.¹⁹ **At present, only 16% of those claiming IIDB are women.**

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¹⁹ Close the Gap (2021) *Response to Scottish Employment Injuries Council Bill Consultation* available at <https://www.closethegap.org.uk/content/resources/Close-the-Gap-response-to-the-Scottish-Employment-Injuries-Advisory-Council-Bill---January-2021.pdf>