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## Call to Action: We Must Address Mental and Physical Needs of Female Staff



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The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a significant toll on women working in health and social care in the UK, a newly released [report](#) from the NHS Confederation's Health and Care Women Leaders Network has revealed.

The report outlines the results of a survey of more than 800 health and care workers in England who identified as female. The survey, carried out during February and March of this year, follows a similar survey launched last summer after the UK's first peak of Covid-19 cases. It found that 80% of respondents believed their job was having a greater negative impact than usual on their emotional wellbeing, due to the pandemic, up from 72% in June 2020.

Mental wellbeing was not the only area of concern highlighted in this report, a further 62% of study respondents said their job had caused a greater negative impact on their physical health, compared with 52% last year. The report noted that this deterioration was a "significant concern and suggests support may be either insufficient or absent", while adding that the finding could also be connected to the "prolonged nature of the pandemic and the impact of the second wave of infections".

"Stress, anxiety and pressure" were key terms used by respondents to describe how their job had impacted them since the start of the pandemic. Additionally, fears around burnout, isolation and persistently heavy workloads were also highlighted in the report.

This latest survey also highlighted that caring responsibilities outside work had grown since last summer for female health and care workers, with workers taking on an average of 12.81 additional hours every week of non-work caring responsibilities compared with before Covid-19. These additional responsibilities were reported more so amongst staff with children, which the report said was likely linked to the closure of schools.

Increased opportunities for flexible working, improved teamwork, and better access to technology, were a few of the more positive aspects female staff working during Covid-19 noted in the findings of the survey.

Positive points aside, authors of the network report said it was "quite clear that there is a long way to go before the situation improves" and called on the government to "commit to supporting the workforce not only through investment but through initiatives tailored specifically to the needs of the female health and care workforce".

"These survey findings underline the importance of the focus being placed upon the physical and mental health of NHS and care staff", said Samantha Allen, chair of the NHS Confederation's Health and Care Women Leaders Network and chief executive of Sussex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust.

"As the majority of the health and care workforce is female, a significant burden in overcoming the enormous challenges we face in recovering services will fall on the shoulders of women." She stressed the need for "tailored support specifically for the needs of female staff", noting that this should include recruitment, retention, flexible working and career progression. "We are concerned that if these issues are not addressed, it could intensify the impact on our workforce at a time when the NHS can ill-afford to lose any more staff," added Ms Allen.

Most respondents to the survey worked within the NHS, with the greatest number in management roles, followed by nursing staff and then allied health professionals, support and admin staff and doctors.

## Recommendations from the HCWLN Report:

### 1. Flexible working

- Provider organisations and integrated care systems must have a detailed plan to promote and enable greater flexible working practices, in particular to support staff with greater non-work caring responsibilities – who are almost exclusively women – to continue in their roles. Importantly, these plans must include details of how those who work flexibly can still be supported to progress in their careers.

### 2. Health and wellbeing

- The government must give specific focus to the impact of the pandemic on women working in health and care and target investment to address their needs, as they make up more than three-quarters of the workforce. This must include investment in ongoing tailored mental and physical health, and investment in recruitment to allow for flexible working and ease the burden on women.

- The findings of this survey show working through the pandemic is having a greater negative impact on staff now than earlier in the crisis. Health leaders and managers must be aware of staff's struggles through ongoing communication and must support where needed, including signposting to existing resources and introducing new measures as needed.

- Managers must work with female staff with long-term conditions to overcome the issues raised by these findings, making sure mental and physical health support is geared to their specific needs, as well as ensuring they feel safe to speak up, and that those who work remotely are fully supported to do so. ▪ The impact of childcare and other non-work caring responsibilities on working life for all female staff must be taken into account. Managers must be aware that these responsibilities may be greater for some female staff from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds and accommodate them accordingly. Recommendations continued

### 3. Career progression

- These findings suggest career progression may be hindered for female staff with children and other caring responsibilities. They must have equitable access to opportunities for progression, with an understanding of the vital contribution they make and of the additional demands on their time during the pandemic.

### 4. Home working

- While many women working in health and care will need to attend workplaces, managers and senior staff must also make sure staff feel able to share concerns about their personal safety at home and, where concerns are shared, staff must be proactively helped to seek support as appropriate.

- To reduce isolation and disconnection, which can worsen mental health issues, opportunities to connect for social support within teams should be encouraged.

In response to the report, an NHS spokesperson said: "While caring for 400,000 Covid-19 patients during the pandemic has inevitably impacted our hard working staff, huge efforts have been made to ensure they are well supported and cared for including through a mental health and wellbeing hotline and 24/7 text support, direct support at work through mental health and wellbeing hubs, and all NHS colleagues are entitled to flexible working so that where possible, they can work shifts that suit their busy lives."

Meanwhile, a Department of Health and Social Care spokesperson said: "We recognise the enormous pressure this pandemic has put on NHS staff." "The NHS increased its health and wellbeing support for staff from the outset, by offering a range of services, including a mental health helpline, a 24/7 text support service and a dedicated website which signposts to further materials and practical support." They added that through the NHS People Plan, the government would "strengthen the health and wellbeing support available to all staff, while making the NHS a better place to work and a modern and model employer that supports and promotes flexible working".

"This commitment will help the health service become a more compassionate and inclusive place to work, and somewhere that champions diversity in all its forms," the spokesperson added.

Source: [NHS Confederation](#)

Photo: [iStock](#)

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