

Female essential workers report poorer job quality and well-being during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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UCD and NERI publish the Only Study of its Kind on Essential Workers' Job Quality and Well-being during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

New research, published today by University College Dublin in partnership with the Nevin Economic Research Institute, has found that female essential workers' health and well-being was substantially more impaired than that of male workers while working during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A fundamental element of the response to the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic emergency involved the provision of critical services. Just under half of the workforce was expected to leave the relative safety of their homes to go to the site of their work in order to keep our health services and economy functioning. We came to refer to this group of workers as “essential workers” or “frontline workers”, terms which we had little or no concept of prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The report, entitled “*Essential Workers' Experience of Work during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Ireland*”, uses data from the UCD Working in Ireland Survey to examine the risks encountered by workers in contracting COVID-19 while at work, the demands placed upon them, the consequences for their health and well-being, and how effectively management and trade unions supported them.

It is the only study of its kind in Ireland and it offers a detailed insight into the realities of the work performed by nurses, doctors, care staff, retail workers and other essential workers during the pandemic.

Key findings from the report are:

- Essential workers' well-being was substantially impaired during the COVID-19 pandemic. This was manifested in pronounced levels of reported anxiety.
- Female essential workers were at a greater risk of contracting the virus than were their male counterparts.
- Female workers' well-being was significantly more impaired and was evident in their more intensive work effort levels and more pronounced levels of anxiety and stress.
- Almost seven in ten essential workers voiced their worries about contracting the virus to their employer. However, only half reported that their organisations fully addressed their concerns.
- COVID-19 mitigation strategies were better implemented for high earner essential workers than they were for essential workers on lower wages.
- Training and development provision helped to sustain essential workers' well-being and health, particularly in respect of their anxiety levels.
- Essential workers employed in workplaces where they trusted their management and believed they were treated with fairness and respect, and where there was trade union representation, were more likely to report lower levels of work intensification and anxiety. In such workplaces, too, there was a greater likelihood of staff voicing their concerns in respect of COVID-19 and of these being addressed by their employer.
- Essential workers' perceptions of trade union influence during the pandemic are generally positive.
- There is a significant correlation between a union presence in the workplace and low levels of perceived risk of contracting the virus.

Policy lessons emanating from the report

While the Irish people rightfully applauded and extolled essential workers for their work and bravery during the pandemic, public debate since then has neglected to reflect upon and learn from essential workers' experiences so that they might be better supported in future health emergencies. The report offers the following policy lessons:

- The report shows that those who did not experience intensive work effort levels had lower levels of anxiety. Workforce planning is therefore crucially important. Organisational level interventions that can be implemented and would be helpful include adequate staffing levels and reasonable workload allocations, the inclusion of sufficient rest breaks and ample time off between shifts, effective training, and paid leave policies to allow essential workers to convalesce and recuperate.
- Organisations are also called to pursue interventions that can contribute to building a psychosocially safe workplace, chief among them being breaking through the stigma related with seeking mental health supports. The World Health Organisation has encouraged employers and governments to own their duty of care not only in respect of workers' physical health and safety, but also their psychological well-being. This can be done by providing high quality mental health supports and strengthening human resources management practices focused on employee well-being.
- The health sector, where many essential workers are located, is routinely faced with periods of acute disruption due to seasonal viruses and cyclical pressures, which are exacerbated by already intolerable levels of patient overcrowding, reduced bed capacity, and staff recruitment and retention difficulties. The report's findings point to the need for adequate resources to increase staffing and capacity, and generally to build greater resilience into the health care system to avoid the negative outcomes for staff that have been identified in these findings.
- Finally, the circumstances of workers beyond the workplace in terms of building their resilience cannot be ignored. Caring responsibilities and other work-life balance issues are important and, if not properly addressed, can create the kind of gendered negative outcomes outlined in the report. To date, much of the policy focus has been on supporting work-life balance for remote workers. Public policy should also acknowledge the importance of work-life balance for essential workers.

Commenting on the report, one of its authors, Professor John Geary of UCD, stated: *the report is critically important. It is the only study of its kind to look at the work experiences of essential workers. While the pandemic was difficult for everyone, unlike most other workers, essential workers working on the frontline did not have the luxury of working from the relative safety of their homes. They had to meet the pandemic head-on and each day they went to work, whether that was in a hospital, care home, meat factory or supermarket, they faced the very real possibility of contracting the virus and bringing it home to their families. We applauded them and we are forever indebted to their courage and hard work. But we must now acknowledge the risks and effects this work had on them, and put in place policies which would reduce and mitigate the harmful effects any such health emergency would have on them in the future. We owe them that.*

Full report available at:

<https://www.smurfitschool.ie/t4media/Essential%20Workers%20Report%20September%202023.pdf>

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