

Living Wage Week twitter chat: Gender equality and the real Living Wage

Introduction

Living Wage Week 2020 has seen the real Living Wage hourly rate increase to £9.50, benefitting over 11,300 workers at 264 accredited Living Wage employers in Wales. But what does this increase mean for women workers, and what other aspects of their working lives need action? To answer these questions and more, we invited leading organisations and individuals to a twitter chat looking at these issues in the context of gender equality.

Joining us were:

- Natasha Davies, Policy & Research Lead for Chwarae Teg
- Deborah Hann, Senior Lecturer in Employment Relations at Cardiff University
- Mike Payne, Senior Organiser at GMB Wales & South West
- Hilary Watson, Policy and Communications Officer at WEN Wales
- [Chair] Victoria Winckler, Director of the Bevan Foundation

Why are so many women paid less than they need to live on?

Chwarae Teg argued that pay is a structural issue caused by a “*persistent undervaluing*” of jobs which tend to be dominated by women, such as in social care. Dr Hann noted that women are more likely to undertake part-time work, helping to drive up the number of women on low pay. WEN Wales argued that women are often forced to work part-time because caring responsibilities tend to fall on them, as highlighted by the pandemic.

How would the real Living Wage benefit women workers?

Victoria Winckler argued that Living Wage could result in a larger pay uplift for women than would be achieved by closing the gender pay gap, as seen in [our 2019 report](#). Dr Hann explained that as two-thirds of real Living Wage recipients are women, women workers will benefit more from increases in the real Living Wage. Alongside encouraging real Living Wage take-up across Wales, Victoria Winckler and Chwarae Teg both agreed that increasing trades union representation is critical to ensure women workers’ voice is heard. Chwarae Teg noted the increase in insecure and low hours work, which could be addressed through a ‘living hours guarantee’.

How can more employers be encouraged to pay the real Living Wage?

Victoria Winckler raised the prospect of ‘naming and shaming’ those employers who pay below the real Living Wage. GMB replied that often unions and other organisations do this, going on to consider whether this is an effective method to change workplace cultures. They concluded that its relevance as an option is entirely dependent on each specific case, only being used when the employer has made it clear it will not engage in discussions.

Dr Hann signposted us [to research](#) from Cardiff Business School on the benefits that employers can get from signing up to Living Wage accreditation. WEN Wales promoted this as part of a foundation to build expectation from the public for this as a minimum, and agreement from employers. GMB argued that while willingness from employers is key, so too is capacity to deliver this. They promoted their own role as being able to work with employers to understand what it means for them in practical terms.

Chwarae Teg recognised that ultimately power lies with the UK Government to raise the statutory minimum National Living Wage to the real Living Wage rate. However, until then the Welsh Government fair work requirements should be given “teeth” alongside a campaign of convincing employers of the benefits of signing up for accreditation.

Dr Hann identified anchor organisations as having a leadership role to play in encouraging Living Wage accreditation, noting the example of Cardiff University in leading every other university in Wales to sign up for accreditation. The Welsh Government and local authorities also have key roles in convincing employers to sign up.

What other aspects of women’s working lives need action?

GMB described continuing difficulties for women in the workplace, ranging from being assaulted to being paid less than male workers. They highlighted their work to end the stigma around the menopause and support workers who are going through this, with some employers building policies based around their toolkits. Ultimately, union membership was presented as the best way to end discrimination in the workplace.

Victoria Winckler listed issues including sexual harassment, pregnancy discrimination, and a lack of paid care leave. Dr Hann agreed that women need better care options, as often women will choose less than ideal jobs simply because they accommodate caring responsibilities. WEN Wales explained deficiencies evident in the current childcare offer, and that in some cases the high costs of childcare force many women to stop work altogether.

Chwarae Teg described the current system as designed around a norm which does not reflect the needs of either female or male workers, and that a radical re-think may be needed about what the world of work should look like.

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