

South West named top UK region for women to work in

The South West has been named the best region of the UK for women to work for a third year in a row.

The annual 'Women in Work Index', by professional services firm PwC, found the region had the third-lowest female unemployment rate (3.7%) in the country, the second-lowest gap between male and female labour force participation rate (5%) and the highest female labour force participation rate (79%).

The analysis also took into account the gender pay gap, with the South West figure of 16% above the UK average of 15%. The region's female full-time employment rate of 55% was also below the national average of 61%.

PwC's report, published on [International Women's Day](#) (Tuesday, March 8), analysed data from 33 countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

The organisation said the UK's position on the index rose from 16th to 9th in 2020, placing it almost 10% above the OECD average in 2020. PwC said this reflected the country's largest annual improvement in the index's 10-year history.

Larice Stielow, a senior economist at PwC said this result needed to be treated with "caution", with the report also concluding the Covid-19 pandemic had set back progress towards gender equality "by at least two years".

Ms Stielow said: "We must be careful in interpreting this result as a real benefit to women's employment outcomes. A key driver was a temporary fall in men's median weekly earnings, likely due to the short term effects of the pandemic on wages and the furlough, skewing down earnings."

She pointed out men's earnings had since rebounded, with the gender pay gap in the UK widening again by two percentage points, back up to 14%.

"However, what is encouraging is that women's median earnings continued to rise during the pandemic and suggests gender equality in the UK continues on an upward trajectory," she added.

John-Paul Barker, market lead at PwC in the West, said it was a "special achievement" for the South West to be named the UK's top region for women to work in, but added there was a "need to guard against complacency".

Mr Barker said: "We still see inequalities based on gender and race, which won't be eliminated without addressing the skills gap but also addressing the systemic and structural gender and racial inequality which exists in the labour market."

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The report found 5.1 million more women were unemployed and 5.2 million fewer women participated in the labour force across the OECD because of the disruption caused by the Covid-19 virus in 2020.

After a decade of slow but consistent gains for women, the index fell for the first time in its 10-year history (by half a point between 2019 and 2020), confirming previous predictions that women's jobs were hit harder by Covid than men's jobs.

The two main factors found to be contributing to the fall were higher female unemployment and lower labour force participation rates during 2020.

PwC said OECD data showed women took on more unpaid childcare responsibilities than men during the pandemic, causing them to leave the workforce at higher rates. Mothers were three times more likely than fathers to report taking on either the majority, or all, of the additional unpaid care work created by school or childcare facility closures.

The report also found pre-existing labour market inequalities faced by ethnic minority women were exacerbated during the pandemic.

In the UK, between July 2019 and September 2021, the unemployment rate for ethnic minority women rose by 2.3 percentage points (pp), compared to 0.2 pp for white women, 0.3 pp for white men and 0.6 pp for ethnic minority men during the same period.

Ethnic minority women were also shown in the data to be over-represented in insecure, low-paid jobs and also experienced some of the largest percentage falls in employee numbers in

contact-intensive sectors, such as retail and hospitality, which were heavily impacted by national lockdowns and job losses.

Pay inequality was also found by PwC, with every £1 earned by a white man in the UK, a woman from an ethnic minority with the same occupation and qualifications earned 87p, while a white woman earned 89p.

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