

Status of Young Women in Scotland 2020/2021

Contents

PAGE 2	INTRODUCTION
PAGE 5	CHAPTER 1: YOUNG WOMEN, EMPLOYMENT AND THE PANDEMIC
PAGE 11	CHAPTER 2: ARE YOUNG WOMEN SUPPORTED WHEN THEY ENTER WORK, AND DO THEY FEEL SUPPORTED WHEN THEY GET THERE?
PAGE 19	CHAPTER 3: FEELING VALUED, CONFIDENT AND SAFE IN THE WORKPLACE
PAGE 23	CHAPTER 4: WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE FOR ALL YOUNG WOMEN IN SCOTLAND TO BE ABLE TO ACCESS WORK?
PAGE 28	CHAPTER 5: WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE FOR ALL YOUNG WOMEN IN SCOTLAND TO BE BETTER SUPPORTED AT WORK?
PAGE 33	CHAPTER 6: COMMITMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS
PAGE 35	METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This is our fifth Status of Young Women in Scotland report. Due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic it spans two years, 2020 and 2021, during which our lives have changed beyond recognition. It is imperative that the experiences of young women in Scotland are captured in these unprecedented times. We knew that there was one area beyond all others that we needed to investigate - employment in the context of the pandemic. The past 15 months have brought many challenges. Young women are disproportionately affected economically by the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated pre-existing inequalities in the labour market. These include: struggling financially before and during the crisis; taking on additional debt; being more likely to be on zero-hour contracts and in insecure work; the unaffordability of childcare, and closure of childcare provisions.



BECAUSE OF THE PANDEMIC,
 1 IN 12 YOUNG WOMEN WERE MADE REDUNDANT,
 40% DID NOT FEEL SECURE IN THEIR CURRENT WORK,
 AND 60% HAD TO CHANGE THEIR CAREER PLANS.*

We want to support young women in Scotland through this volatile job market and wider economic upheaval, and at the end of this report you can find our commitments to do so. We encourage you to do the same, as an employer, decision-maker, mentor, supporter. The crisis is not over yet and we will undoubtedly feel its impacts for many years to come.

OVER 50% OF YOUNG WOMEN FELT
 VERY OR EXTREMELY STRESSED AND
 ANXIOUS ABOUT APPLYING FOR
 NEW WORK OPPORTUNITIES.*

The combined effects of the global pandemic and the recession in the UK's job market mean that young women seeking employment are likely to face multiple rejections, leading to detrimental effects on their mental health and confidence.

25 OF YOUNG WOMEN FELT THEY
WERE NOT SUPPORTED AT ALL
BY THEIR EMPLOYER TO LOOK
AFTER THEIR MENTAL HEALTH*

The move to home working for many demonstrated that alternative ways of working are possible. We are talking more than ever about better work-life balance. The Scottish Government has pledged “to allow companies to pilot and explore the benefits of a four-day working week to explore whether the changes in working practices created by the pandemic can improve wellbeing and productivity”. Our own organisation is transitioning to this new model of working in July 2021. Young women told us clearly that flexible working is key to their feeling more supported at work - either in terms of flexible hours or opportunities to work from home to fit with their lifestyles, health needs, and caring responsibilities. Young women in Scotland want to see equal pay, equal educational opportunities and equality within the workplace. They want to feel safe from harassment when they go to work.

Finally, many participants mentioned general improvement of working conditions. This varied from better maternity leave/pay, increased childcare support, improved health care, the removal of unpaid internships and zero-hours contracts and increased pay across the board. We believe that Scotland can achieve all of this, and hope you will support us and young women who shared their stories with us to make this vision a reality.

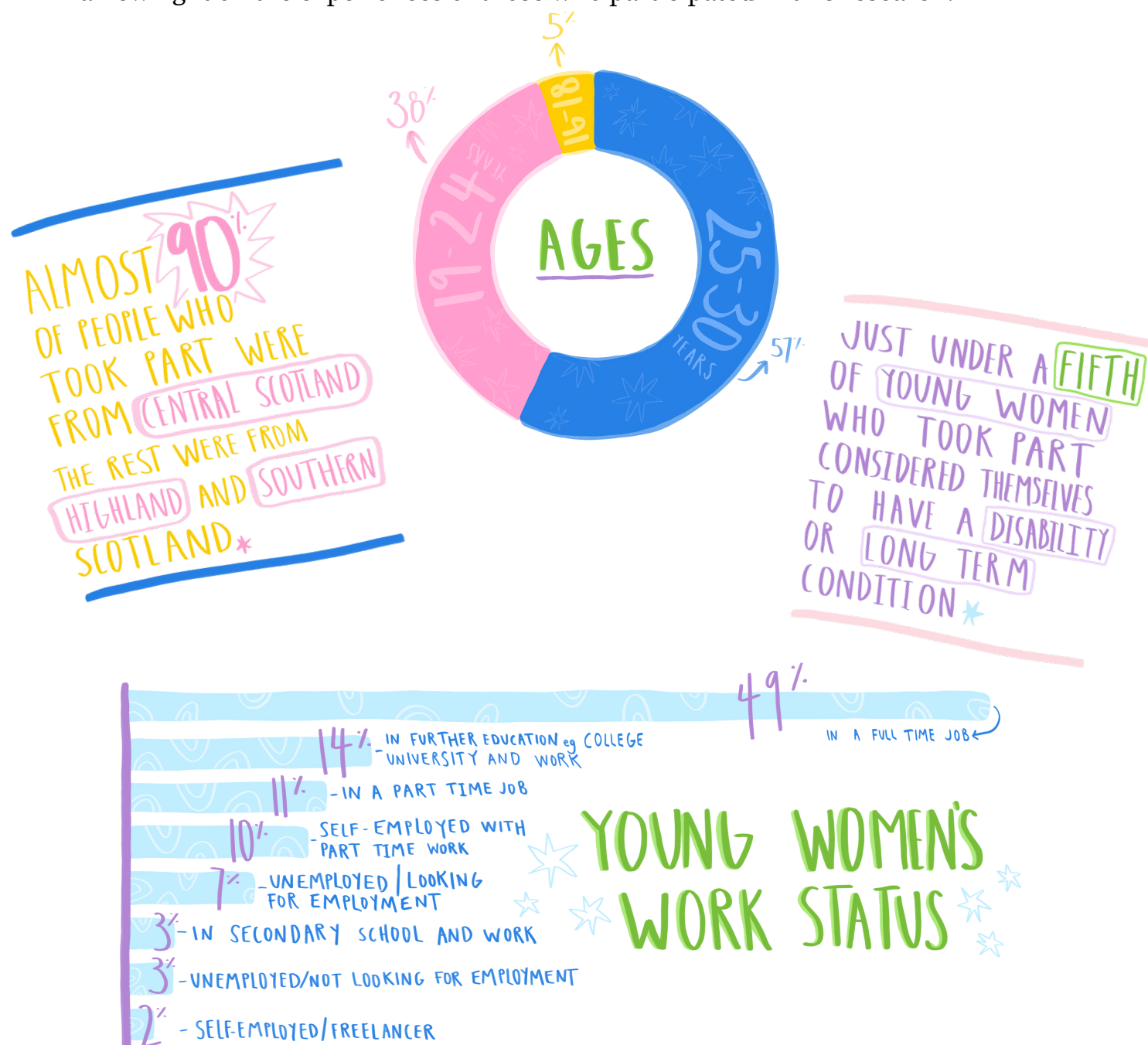


Dr Patrycja Kupiec
CEO

YWCA Scotland - The Young Women's Movement

Who took part

202 young women (192 survey respondents and 10 focus group participants) from across Scotland shared their views with us in focus groups, through social media, and in an online survey. We are grateful for their honesty while discussing difficult topics during what was for many an extremely challenging year, and we owe it to them, and to all young women and girls in Scotland, to create a more equal society. The research was managed by our staff team and a dedicated team of young women volunteers. This report presents the findings; including quotes and stories from the young women we spoke to. As always, we strived to ensure that we reached diverse young women from all over Scotland, and the findings, while not representative of the experiences of all young women in Scotland, shine a new light on the experiences of those who participated in this research.



1: Young women, employment and the pandemic

The pandemic affected employment stability for over half (51%) of the young women who took part, with 25% being furloughed, 8% being made redundant, and 20% not being able to find work during the pandemic.

15% felt other impacts directly related to the pandemic, such as having to work more hours due to redundancies, employment start dates being pushed back or cancelled, not being eligible for the furlough scheme, freelance work drying up, temporary pay cuts, very short term work contracts, and employers not being supportive of additional mental health impacts of the pandemic.

Just over 40% of young women did not feel secure in their current employment.

"Since then, I've been looking for work, but with not much success. It's things that, you know, even places that I've worked before I've been applying for and not hearing back, and it's like, well, how could I be any more qualified if I worked there before?"

Changes in career trajectory

Career plans have changed for 60% of those who took part as a result of the pandemic.

"I can no longer consider a career change - given the current climate I have a fear of redundancy if I move company due to shorter work history."

"My job is secure but I feel as though I am ready for a new challenge or career progression opportunity. But doing this in COVID is risky and challenging, there's not a lot of opportunities being advertised and I feel it would be a risk to go for another job. I have redundancy entitlement and a good pension contribution with my current role but this security would be taken away if I move organisation. But there are no new opportunities where I currently am."

"I had to finish my degree during the pandemic. I had an interview for a job that was put on hold and is no longer hiring. I am currently working in a job that I used to do before university."

"I hated my job and was meant to have an interview the week before lockdown but this was cancelled so I felt trapped in my job working from home which was awful. Eventually I quit and I feel like if we hadn't gone into lockdown I might not have quit."

A few young women pointed to other external factors that, compiled with the pandemic, made them uncertain about making a career change. Brexit dominated these conversations.

"I planned to do a Masters in Europe (Netherlands) before Brexit (fees increase and possible visa requirement would make this much harder for 2021). Uncertainty over lockdowns/restrictions and second wave, as well as shift to online learning meant I decided not to go in Summer 2020."

For some young women the pandemic gave them the opportunity to refocus; offering opportunities they had not considered before. Some started businesses (especially in the creative sector), others followed progression opportunities in their current workplace due to the increased demand in certain fields.

"I actually have been able to get a promotion due to the increased opportunities and demand on the public and third sector."

"I have decided to take the next step and set up my own freelance company to further my career as there is no progression or opportunities within the company I currently work for."

"Working at home in a job I didn't love forced me to finally make a move and try to get a job in something I do love. I'm unsure if I would've even looked for something new if it hadn't been for the circumstances brought about by the pandemic and our unstable funding situation at work."

For some young women the pandemic gave them the opportunity to refocus; offering opportunities they had not considered before. Some started businesses (especially in the creative sector), others followed progression opportunities in their current workplace due to the increased demand in certain fields.

"The pandemic has shown me that the pressure of the job I am in is not something I can handle for prolonged periods of time due to its effect on my mental health so I am looking for other employment opportunities."

Starting a new job whilst working from home

Young women who were able to secure new positions during the pandemic acknowledged that while they felt lucky to have been able to do so, working from home without knowing their teammates was often an isolating experience. One participant said:

"I have not had the opportunity to build... relationships with others. I can't go for lunch or go for a drink after work. I just feel almost isolated."

They also talked about lack of support mentoring opportunities, and softer ways of learning in new roles.

"... when you have questions, it's not as easy for us because we can't just turn to the person sitting beside you in the office, there's no-one to turn to... it's not easy to make contact with people who don't know you."

"Going straight to working from home and having no one to interact with has been, I feel like a big change, I live alone. So if I don't talk to someone on a screen, I talk to no one that day... I started a job working from home, so I don't feel like I've had the same kind of introduction to work as a lot of people have had. So this is my first office job and I do it in my pajamas most days. It feels really strange to me. And I almost feel like I don't want to go back into an office because I've never had the office experience now"

We spoke to young women from different groups about their experiences of employment in the context of the pandemic: young women in precarious work; with caring responsibilities, with disabilities and long term conditions and those from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Young women in precarious work

We spoke to young women in various jobs that were unpredictable or insecure, ranging from zero-hours contracts, to freelance work, and sex work. The overarching theme was a lack of stability, not knowing what their income was going to be, and a lack of support and protection through various government schemes introduced in response to the pandemic.

A young woman who worked for a large cinema chain and was furloughed during the first lockdown told us:

“When the furlough scheme [was uncertain] we were asked if we wanted to take unpaid leave or take redundancy, so I voluntarily took redundancy but then again in the coming days, the furlough scheme was extended so I would have been better off being on the books and getting furlough but they wouldn’t rehire anyone back”

Sex workers discussed the difficulty of having to choose between their safety, earning a living and abiding by restrictions:

“Lockdown makes it very very complicated as a full service sex worker, I’ve essentially had to choose between earning money at all or following the law, it’s not a fun choice to have to make”

“Small businesses have been given grants and stuff... Supposedly, that also existed for sex workers in the form of the Encompass Fund, which was supposed to be like a low threshold place, you could apply for money if you needed to cover rent or bills or whatever if you're a sex worker that can't work because of the pandemic, but they made it incredibly difficult to apply... they essentially only gave out food stamps and then further redirected you to something else that was some kind of victim fund and to apply to that you essentially had to say that you were a victim of a crime to be able to get money. And a lot of sex workers do not see themselves as being victims of crimes just because they are working within the sex industry.”

The experience was challenging for those who worked in the creative sector, those with shorter term contracts or those who were self-employed:

“I work in the theatre industry as a designer all my contracts in March 2020 just got decimated so there was nothing coming up the horizon, there was no money coming in, so I started doing call center work... and then just as things were starting to show they were going to open up, I did bit of development here and there in September, I quit that job thinking I had enough to tide me over until the new year and then jobs got canceled again so back to square one.”

“I had a few opportunities to kickstart the beginning of my career as a freelance filmmaker but they have been cancelled due to Covid . I was planning to go part-time in my current barista job but since the opportunities are gone and as a 25-year-old I do not qualify for the government kickstart scheme or most apprenticeships in media and TV, I am staying full time as a barista for now.”

Young women with caring responsibilities

1 in 10 young women we surveyed said that there was zero support for those with caring responsibilities in their workplace, making juggling work and care difficult and stressful.

A lot of additional support services for young carers stopped during the pandemic. The additional caring responsibilities often fell to young women who were in full time education. This was also highlighted by one young woman who already was a carer to her parent but had to become a carer to her grandparent after their cancer diagnosis during the pandemic as there was no other formal support available.

Young women who cared for their relatives they did not live with also felt they would be penalised for continuing to provide this support because of lockdown restrictions, and felt that their unique circumstances were not accurately recognised in the government guidelines. For some young women, being a carer also meant that they were more reluctant to apply for new opportunities for fear of being discriminated against because of their caring responsibilities.

“Because if something did happen, that was a real emergency, I would just have to be like sorry, I really have to go because that is obviously a priority over that work at the time. So legally my employer can't say no, if I need to leave. But there's a difference between knowing and understanding and feeling confident and asserting that which is really hard to do. Sometimes from the very get go you're interviewing you feel like you need to say that actually, I'm a carer and that may impact what I'm able to do. And part of you knows in your head, they're not allowed to discriminate, because it's part of the equalities act, even though it's not a protected characteristic.”

“I would probably feel better phoning work and saying I need to take a day off because of my own health than I would because of my caring, and that's in a job where what I do is support carers. It's just not easy to talk about”

Young disabled women

Young disabled women and those with long-term conditions spoke about fears of impacting their health negatively if they continued to work, a lack of clear guidelines around shielding, and a lack of PPE equipment for frontline workers.

"I thought I can apply to some jobs that involve retail or hospitality, if it's like a small cafe where I can sit down or there's a seat at the till, and I can fake it till I make it with my disability in order to get paid. But in the height of the pandemic, I thought, there's no way I could even do that. I would just be risking my own health because I'd be face to face with customers all day."

"It was much more difficult than I thought to find a job involving working from home. And at that point, people with my disability were really, really unclear as to whether or not we're meant to be shielding and the government had said that we weren't on the official shielding list, but anyone who considers themselves immunocompromised should be given the option to work from home."

"I ended up unemployed for about six months, that's when I was living back with my family because I had no other choice and couldn't pay rent. Until I managed to start working with a care home, which was really nice and they were able to accommodate my accessibility needs... But this was at a time when there was a lot of concerns around PPE. Unfortunately, I did catch COVID going to my place of work, despite them knowing that I was immunocompromised, and all the extra measures that they tried to put in place with little support from the government... I had COVID in December, and I ended up having to quit my job in March, when I realized that I had long COVID, and things just became too much."

While working from home was something that had been explored previously by some participants, and had been refused, the accessibility of virtual meetings or online learning was a challenge, sometimes resulting in young women having to leave work or education.

"My work was probably the thing that was hit hardest... I thought I'd be going back to university. But I knew having sat in on those meetings or virtual learning would not work for me and probably wouldn't be as accessible as I wanted it to be."

"The university... didn't have a secure plan in place for what learning would look like for shielding students. I decided that I didn't think that this university was going to be able to accommodate my needs. Without the subtitled lectures, I may as well not be there, because I used to have a scribe for in person lectures to pick up on all the bits that I can't hear or process."

2: Are young women supported to enter work, and do they feel supported when they get there?

43% OF YOUNG WOMEN FELT THEY DID NOT HAVE EQUAL ACCESS TO WORK OPPORTUNITIES.*

The main factors that contributed to this experience of access inequality in the workplace were discrimination due to gender, age, disability, ethnicity, and class. All these factors led to pronounced negative impacts on young women's mental health when they were jobseeking.

49% felt extremely or very stressed when applying for jobs, and 56% felt extremely or very anxious.

Half of all young women felt not at all or only slightly positive about applying for jobs, and 45% felt not at all or only slightly hopeful.

Discrimination based on age

Some young women shared experiences of the difficulties of accessing work opportunities which they felt was due to the perception that they were inexperienced because of age.

“I feel like entry-level jobs are being taken by people with more experience due to the pandemic and it keeps me in a stalling position. I have applied to hundreds of jobs and have had zero interviews. Most times, the feedback would say that they decided to go with people more experienced than me. When I asked if they could give me any advice on how to get the experience, no one ever answered me.”

Ethnicity

Young women from ethnic minority backgrounds felt they had to work harder than others for the same positions. Some young women also talked about the fear of their applications being rejected due to prejudice or fear about visas.

“I sometimes feel patronised because of my status as a young immigrant woman.”

“I find that foreigners usually have a harder time finding jobs either because of prejudice or fear about visas.”

“I don't want to presume anything but I fear that employers might be reluctant to look further into my applications due to my foreign last name.”

Our Young Women Lead Report 2019/2020 provides detailed recommendations for the Scottish Government and employers to create more inclusive workplaces for young BAME women.

Caring Responsibilities

Young women who had caring responsibilities told us about part-time work often being their only option and not being offered the same promotions or training opportunities as full time staff.

“In my workplace, being part-time means I am not in line for promotions and progression. My reasons for working part-time include living with an anxiety disorder and caring responsibilities, both of which very disproportionately affect women, and I think many workplaces can create a facade of equality without truly engaging with the reality of what holds women's career progression back.”

“After having my first child I returned to work and was advised that because I was part time I wouldn't receive training that every other full time member of staff was receiving.”

Young women carers also spoke about not having had as many opportunities as their peers to gain unpaid work experience through volunteering or internships.

“If there was a way people could understand that I didn't have time to go out and get experience but I am still really interested in the job.”

Disability

Having a disability has meant that some young disabled women felt that they were not considered for opportunities due to adjustments that it would require for the employer, and even if it was not explicitly stated, it was often hinted at during the recruitment process. As a result, some young women were advised not to disclose their disabilities or not to ask for any adjustments until they were offered the job and passed their probation period. Young disabled women also feared that employment gaps due to periods of illness would make them less hireable.

One young woman we spoke to who has autism and a physical disability shared the barriers she'd experienced when applying for jobs.

"The thing that I struggle most with in applying for a job is putting down all my details on paper... I know that I feel more confident in job interviews. So when I'm given that opportunity to go to the job interview to prove myself. When it's not a guaranteed interview scheme [for people with disabilities], I tend to get rejected before the job interview stage."

"When I applied to these sorts of (customer service) jobs, and was offered it, and then told them that I'm autistic, they usually would come back with things like, 'oh, we're actually looking for someone who's really personable', or asking questions like, 'is there any medication you can take that'll maybe help that so you can work here'. It just felt really uncomfortable. When they'd met me and knew that I was good at talking to people, all of a sudden, like this diagnosis on paper changed who the person was that they'd met"

"What I've noticed is despite having multiple disabilities I'm really privileged in that I can mask it, I can choose what information I'm going to give. Whereas some of my friends who are visibly disabled or use a wheelchair full time have said we can't even get that far. I know some people who are blind, who never said anything on the job application, because it was for a job where they felt they didn't really need a lot of additional support. And they have a different sort of look to their eyes due to their visual impairment. So when the job interview started, the person immediately tried to cut it short"

Necessary adjustments such as working from home or part-time hours also meant that disabled young women were further disadvantaged, for example by not being able to network with other team members. They felt that these adjustments also often made them seem less favorable for promotions and in some instances support was taken away or more difficult to access during the pandemic.

Precarious Work

Young women doing freelance work also talked about contracts including a health declaration form, putting them in a difficult position of having to choose between disclosing a condition and knowing it might limit their chances of getting a job in a very competitive market, or not disclosing it and not being paid if they needed time off due to illness.

"They weren't able to accommodate part time role hours at all. And that became more necessary when I was diagnosed with long COVID. So that's when I realized I can't keep working full time and if they're not able to offer part time hours I just have to sign off."

"When I sign on to freelance jobs, I have to fill in a health declaration form, it's happened to me three times now, and the declaration at the bottom always says 'if you don't disclose something on here that may cause you to not be able to complete contracts, it will be void, or you won't get paid'. So I'm having to now disclose information to a company, really private things, to someone that isn't medically trained."

Class

Young women from working-class backgrounds did not have access to the same kinds of networks to build connections, find mentors or gain work experience. Working-class young women talked about not knowing what their options were and what kinds of jobs were available to them.

"I feel that those who come from wealthy backgrounds have better access to creative work opportunities, as most entry level jobs are unpaid positions."

"I am from a disadvantaged background and haven't been able to access the same work experience opportunities due to the associated costs of undertaking unpaid internships or low paid ones."

"I think coming from a poorer/working class background has limited what feels open to me; my peers from wealthier backgrounds had the time (not having to work to support themselves) and funds (from family) to take up internships or extra volunteering roles. I had no knowledge of the kinds of 'professional' jobs available or connections in any field, so feel like I've been playing catch up in the 4 years since I graduated and am therefore behind in terms of work opportunities."

We also wanted to know how supported young women feel when in work. There was variation in responses, suggesting experiences range across sectors and situations. Some key insights are that 25% of young women do not feel at all supported to look after their mental health. More hopefully, 40% were supported to look after their general wellbeing. Encouragingly, 44% felt supported or very supported to develop their skills at work.

Support from managers

Some young women emphasised that the support they received was due to a positive relationship with a manager. However, this has not always translated into organisation wide-policies, or similar levels of support available across the organisation.

It was felt by many respondents that the best way to achieve better work support is through increased and improved communications, better dialogue with managers so that issues both personal and professional can be discussed without fear of any repercussions, more space to discuss mental health and wellbeing, and more opportunities to learn from each other. It was also important that managers themselves model these positive behaviours by looking after their own mental health and wellbeing.

“During lockdown, my managers did not make an effort to check-in with me and make sure I was coping with work alongside the stress of the pandemic. Because I didn't have caring responsibilities, and they did, I felt they didn't think I was struggling. It resulted in me taking time off on sick leave because I felt I couldn't be honest with them about how my mental health had deteriorated. I felt so unsupported.”

A concerning trend arose in conversations with young women in precarious work. While they often felt supported by their colleagues or line managers, some reported feeling disposable in the way they were treated by their companies, especially in the context of COVID-related pay cuts and redundancies.

“It did just really put into perspective what working for a big company is like, how disposable you are.”

Flexibility

Flexibility was key for young women to feel supported with their additional caring responsibilities or to enable them to look after their mental health and general wellbeing. This was especially highlighted during the pandemic, when home working became the norm for many, but was not universally available to those who might have needed it the most due to health reasons. These inequalities were acutely felt by young women we spoke with.

Mental health support

Respondents reported that one of the main ways they would like to be better supported is through improved mental health support. While some employers on paper were supportive of mental health issues, young women noted that when these behaviours are not modelled by senior staff they would still feel reluctant to take time off due to the fear of judgement or letting the team down.

“Taking a sick day due to anxiety is completely okay in theory and I know I would get one if I asked, but there is a pressure to not (even if it’s unspoken), none of my colleagues have done that and there is a feeling that we are all struggling so why should I take the day off?”

Some respondents also experienced judgement or questioning when they took time off due to physical health issues, and this in turn would make them less confident to ask for time off for mental health. Those who started work during the COVID-19 pandemic also felt that they would be less likely to ask for time off as they had not yet developed relationships with their co-workers, which would make talking about mental health more comfortable.

“I was questioned on why I was taking a sick day when I was suffering from a stomach bug (I work in hospitality and the policy is 48hrs symptom clear before returning) This does not make me confident in calling in for mental health related issues.”

“My current workplace praises itself in all these mentioned options but I still never feel 100% comfortable asking as I have never met anyone in person and feel it comes across as I’m faking as they don’t know me personally.”

When young women reported that workplace mental health support was non-existent it often led to exacerbated mental health issues, limited progression opportunities, or having to leave the job either voluntarily or involuntarily.

“I was asked to resign from my previous job (working in mental health) after disclosing my struggle with depression.”

“I took six weeks mental health leave over the summer. I was given the time off and my boss stayed in touch with me throughout. I was disciplined for poor performance (I was very down and not myself) but things have improved more recently.”

Examples of good mental health support included dedicated mental health days, frequent and regular check-ins, senior management taking time off for mental health and openly talking about it, having a work buddy system for more informal conversations, and external support, such as apps or work counselling.

"My employer is extremely supportive, and in particular my line manager. We are encouraged to openly talk about mental health and we have check-ins with the head of the team about this every quarter. I don't think others in different teams experience the same level of support but I feel very lucky to have such a good network around me. I've found that it's really rare to find an environment like that."

"My boss actively asks about my mental health as he is aware I live alone and work from home, he keeps in regular telephone contact."

Wellbeing

1 in 3 respondents felt unsupported to look after their general wellbeing, and this was exacerbated by the pandemic. The pressure to continue delivering, while working from home, dealing with additional stress, additional caregiving responsibilities, and absorbing workloads of furloughed staff was challenging for many young women we spoke with.

"Very little emotional or wellbeing support offered during lockdown - even though I stated that it was needed for the whole staff team and even volunteered to invest time to look for resources or offer support."

40% of surveyed young women felt that their employers supported their general wellbeing, through wellbeing groups, additional time off, encouraging stepping away from their desks, and digital team-building and wellbeing activities. However, it is important to note here that these only worked if they happened during work hours, and when staff were given time to create and participate in these activities rather than adding to their already difficult to manage workloads.

*"They do a lot for general staff wellbeing and nice things, but so much on top of our roles is expected all the time and we are guilted into volunteering for things. We do not get paid enough for *all* of the work we do. It's way more than our actual role."*

Professional development

1 in 3 surveyed young women did not feel that they received adequate support to aid their personal development through training, work shadowing, and mentoring opportunities.

Young women also spoke about the COVID-19 pandemic putting them in a more precarious position of not feeling able to ask for personal development opportunities while their job might be on the line, and training and mentoring not being prioritised, while the workplace was focusing on the response to the pandemic. Respondents also spoke about being underpaid, and being given additional responsibilities without training or pay rise.

"My work never provided me with proper training. Any concerns I have had about my lack of shifts have been dismissed. I have often been underpaid. I have been in situations that have made me uncomfortable, working in situations I didn't like and when I expressed this to my boss she wasn't so nice about it and did nothing to improve the situation."

"Offered opportunities outside of my remit, and took on board additional responsibilities, however this was not reflected in my salary or job description."

"Extremely unsupported. Recently hired in September meaning I am new to my role, putting me in an extremely precarious position. Working on a zero hours contract on minimum wage, I am constantly being given more responsibility however can be given my notice at any stage completely at my employers discretion during my probation period. I feel unsupported and undervalued. I need a decent living wage that covers my rent, amenities without constant worry."

"Despite being a trainee, I am offered next to no training. If I wish to take part in any training, I have to really convince my boss. Also, even asking for my holiday ENTITLEMENT, my boss makes me feel like he's doing me a favour."

"In previous years I know that they have had a mentor programme, but because of the pandemic everyone is so busy so there hasn't been one."

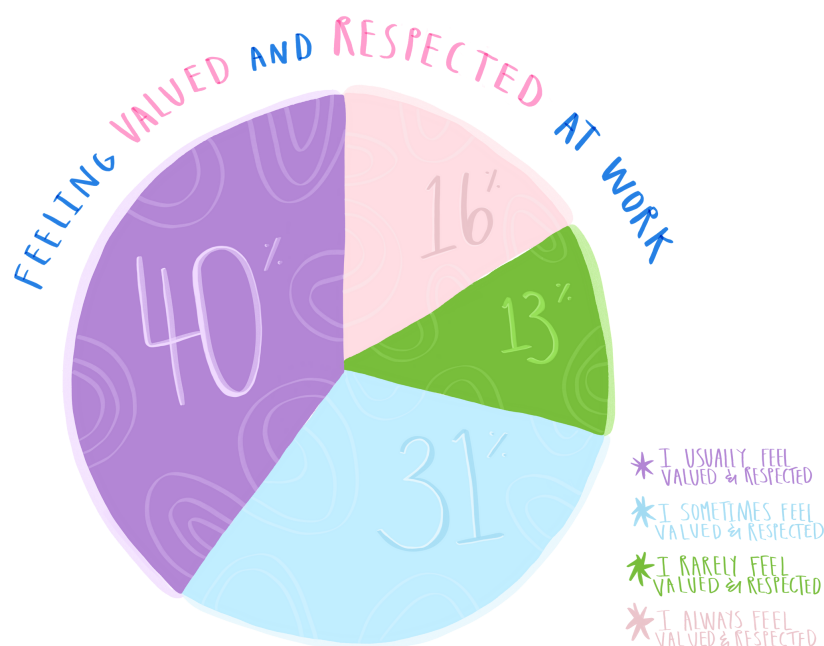
Those who felt more supported emphasised frequent and open communication with senior staff about personal development goals, and positive encouragement to seek out these development opportunities themselves.

"My work are incredibly supportive - suggest courses, reasonable adjustments, ask me regularly what I want for developments and opportunities."

"My supervisors at work are extremely supportive and understanding. I have a lot of opportunities for training/development, but you have to be proactive about seeking out these opportunities. For one of my jobs (part-time work that I carry out alongside my full-time work) I received no training, so I felt unsupported there, but in my full-time job I am mostly supported (except financially, as I feel I am underpaid)."

3: Feeling valued, confident and safe in the workplace

Understanding how young women felt in the workplace was important. On the whole, people usually or sometimes felt valued and respected, notably though, no one always felt valued and respected.

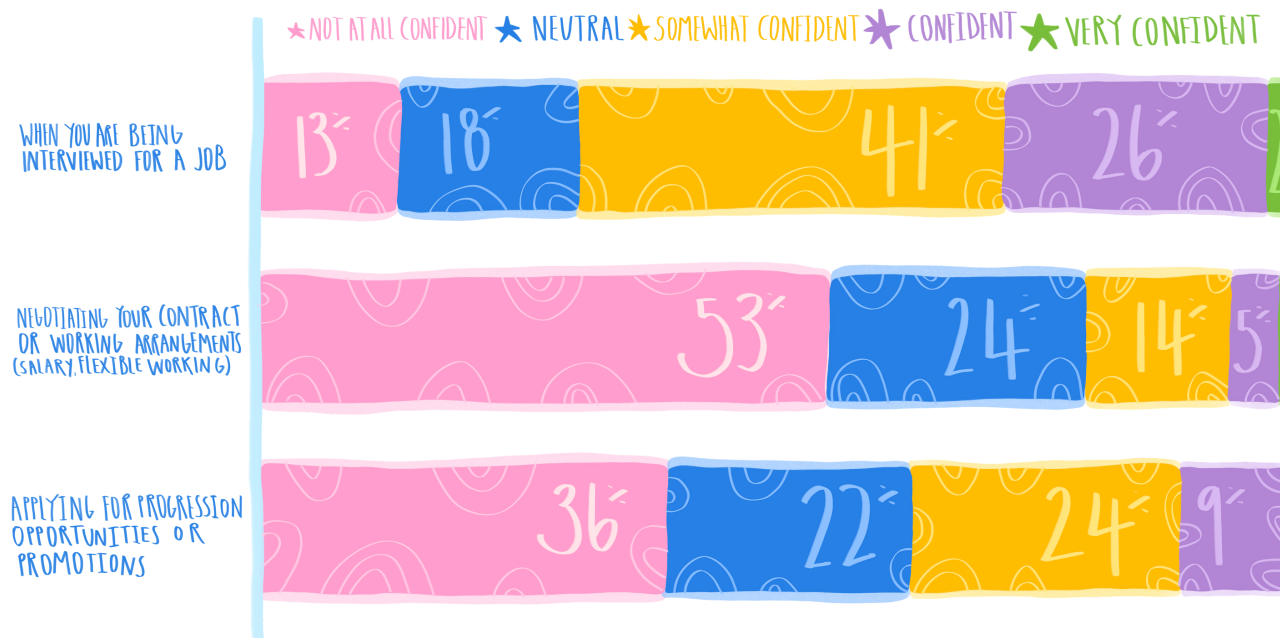


"I think young women, especially, can be afflicted by imposter syndrome. Am I good enough to be in this work environment? And when you're doing your job, you're like, do I need to be better at this? Do I need to maybe work extra hours then what my contract states and try to prove myself continually or can I just be?"

OVER 90% OF YOUNG WOMEN WE SPOKE TO HAD EXPERIENCED 'IMPOSTER SYNDROME' AT WORK. THE FEELING OF 'SELF DOUBT' OR 'FEAR' OF NOT LIVING UP TO OTHERS' EXPECTATIONS.*

"Women need to be helped confidence wise to apply for roles and promotions that seem outwith their skill set, just as men do, rather than waiting until they tick all the criteria."

From feeling undermined and undervalued to experiencing bullying and harassment, young women we surveyed shared their experiences of being held back, made to feel unsafe and less confident at work. The below chart shows confidence levels in relation to important stepping stones at work.



1

Imposter syndrome and low confidence can be symptoms of unfair treatment in the workplace.

Harassment

44% of young women had experienced workplace harassment or bullying.

Some shared experiences of the nature of the harassment, which ranged from microaggression, manipulation, gaslighting and being undermined, to sexual harassment, racism and ageism.

"In retail jobs I've had, where you've had someone abusing you, and you just have to keep a straight face, and you're being constantly undermined by your managers... a manager will come and immediately give someone an apology and refund, and you're not allowed to defend yourself... they want you to be a robot when people aren't robots, and the 'customer's always right' attitude has tainted a lot of that kind of work."

1 - Doesn't apply to me was ticked by 2% of respondents for 'being interviewed for a job, 4% for negotiating contract and 9% for applying for progression opportunities.

Feeling threatened in the workplace can make young women hesitant to challenge and report toxic behaviours, meaning that culture change is even harder to achieve.

"I don't like confrontation, I don't like difficult situations like that, obviously, in a workplace environment, that has to happen sometimes. Right now, I wouldn't feel very confident in having them."

All of this not only contributes to young women not feeling valued and respected in the workplace, but feeling like it can be difficult to be true to themselves at work. Not being able to be your authentic self in the workplace can have a negative impact on wellbeing, stress levels, and job satisfaction.

"I know people who had to put on a particular voice that works. So when they are talking to friends they tend to use a lot of slang. And especially because they're not white, they have to put on a white person voice."

"Every job... I feel like I had to be on a totally sort of fake self rather than just be more of myself."

Gender Pay Gap

38% of young women who took part did not feel they were paid a fair wage or salary for their work.

Young women told us about evidence of gender pay gaps within the workplace. Most commonly, the gender pay gap is evident in positions of power which are positions more likely to be held by men (see, for example, Engender's Sex & Power in Scotland 2020 report). Some respondents also discussed gender pay gaps between themselves and male colleagues doing the same role. It was also discussed that there is a pay gap between different industries with "women's work" not being as well paid as other types of industries which are more dominated by men.

"I am in a sector of work (third sector) that is underpaid due to being typically 'women's work'. I am degree educated and experienced but don't feel my salary reflects this compared to other industries/sectors."

"Yes and no - at my stage of career (very early career) I have access to many opportunities - however, there is still the wage gap in my work & all of the people at the very top are only male."

"There is a blatant gender pay gap at my workplace"

Young women told us repeatedly that they felt like they needed to work twice as hard for lower pay, with limited progression prospects and often inflexible working conditions that made juggling other responsibilities extremely challenging.

“Or if you don’t have the confidence to like, which I think is a big thing, especially for younger women... that feeling of self-assuredness, to be able to actually reach out and ask for support from someone is a really big deal.”

“Part of a team of 2, both female, used to have a male colleague who got paid more than me for the exact same job.”

Progression opportunities

Some young women reflected that feeling undermined or undervalued at work also comes from a lack of progression opportunities. A few young women described the way their men colleagues were given priority for promotions even when they were not as qualified. Where women are offered promotions, it was often because they had to work harder for these opportunities.

“In my full-time job, men have consistently been promoted/advanced before me, even though I am more qualified and more skilled, and out-perform them at the role.”

“I have been in my job for nearly two years and have never received any training outwith induction, while my all-male peers have had thousands spent on them in the form of training courses, equipment and software to make their jobs easier. I do not receive an annual appraisal the same as my male counterparts.”

“One of the reasons I chose to leave was because I didn’t feel I was being treated fairly. I was being constantly compared to a male colleague with less experience. Higher profile visible opportunities were given to him and I had to fight for opportunities. At the start of COVID I was even criticised by this colleague to managers for not smiling and being friendly. When I chose to leave they promoted him after telling me financial constraints meant they could not promote me.”

4: What needs to change for all young women in Scotland to be able to access work?

Young women discussed what needs to change to create better opportunities for them to access work. In conversations and survey responses, they recognised this culture change is a big task and described ways to achieve it.

Flexibility

Calls for flexibility ranged from an increase in flexible working hours to working from home. Reasons for this included childcare, caring for a relative, disability, or juggling multiple work and education commitments.

“A lot of women drop to part-time once having children, when I think more working from home opportunities must happen as well as flexible working.”

“Employers need to do more to support young women with children and offer flexible working arrangements. There needs to be a culture that is more understanding around disability and more accepting of reasonable adjustments.”

Education and training

Some participants discussed the idea of the Scottish Government providing better development opportunities for young women, which included embedding confidence building and skills recognition training across the curriculum. In addition to this training, participants also put forward that it would be beneficial to give women more training on how to carry out interviews and prepare job applications. Fundamental to this was the idea that young women need to have confidence to enter the workplace, and that this is something that could be fostered through educational settings.

“Teaching confidence and skills recognition as part of employability as we know this is where many young girls struggle, I am lucky to work in an area that has a majority female presence and many young members of staff which helps it feel less intimidating.”

“Different methods of interviewing that suit those who might be long-term unemployed and struggle with confidence issues - for young women that feeling of not being good enough shouldn't mean they are unable to find work, it's the responsibility of employers and the Government to provide training and development opportunities in parallel with employment opportunities. A lot of the time it is a lack of confidence and belief more than a lack of desire.”

Better training programs to educate staff on intersectional inequalities that young women experience in the workplace were again proposed as one practical way that employers can create more inclusive workplaces. It was suggested that some workplaces do have toxic environments – and again more education for men employees could target this more directly.

“... more education and training for men (in terms of their toxic masculinity).”

“more disciplinary action towards men who intimidate or belittle women.”

“A change from both sides - women need to be taught their worth and told they can do these roles just as well, if not better than men. Men need to have their attitude changed to believe that women can perform as well as men in any role.”

Changes to the Application Process

Many participants expressed that current job application processes disadvantage women through either an unconscious bias employers may have or job descriptions which overvalue qualities perceived as traditionally masculine, like competitiveness or determination. Participants proposed to combat that by ‘blind recruitment’ with names and gender not included in applications, a major overhaul in the wording of job descriptions, and introducing quotas.

“There also needs to be a better understanding of employers of how black and brown women present in interviews, professional settings and that there shouldn't be a white benchmark for this.”

“More businesses should use anonymous application processes for their initial hiring stages. This gives women a fighting chance to progress to these stages by showcasing their talents, their hard work, their skills and knowledge for the job.”

“Alternative application processes. Traditional interviews are outdated and suited to a specific personality and learning style. There also should be diverse recruitment panels to reflect the job. If it's a job working with young people, young people should be on the panel!”

Inclusion and Equality

Young women in Scotland want to see equal job opportunities, as well as equal pay, equal educational opportunities and equal treatment in the workplace.

“I know quite a few people in Scotland, specifically who offer disability training sessions on equality in the workplace, and how to create successful workplaces. And I rarely see places take that up, unless they're already focused on disability, in which case, they probably have a good idea of how to make their space more accessible.”

Participants believed that ‘boys clubs’ existed within many workplaces (particularly workplaces in which men have traditionally dominated), which excludes women from the get-go. Furthermore there was some discussion that work should become more inclusive to people from disadvantaged backgrounds – with less of a focus on higher education - and to people who are from ethnic minority backgrounds, disabled people, or other protected characteristics.

“Changing norms around what is considered professional, because a lot of things that are tied to femininity are not considered professional, either you're not considered professional because you did do your makeup or you're expected to perform a certain level of femininity at all times”

“Societal attitudes towards disabled people and people with chronic and long-term illness needs to change... Employers and employees must commit to being anti-racist”.

Empowerment

By teaching women from a younger age that they are valued and capable, they would be more likely to take that attitude forward in their professional life.

“I think most importantly, believe in young women and their capabilities – most likely if they are saying they can do it, they have already run through it about 25 times and overcome their own self-doubt. Recognise potential, acknowledge risk, and nurture these projects and employees.”

“If young carers get support from 8-10 years old, they're more likely to attain better at school and actually end up at a workplace and positive destination”

It was also suggested that by empowering women the issue of imposter syndrome would be combatted, and young women would progress further through companies and careers, as they would be more confident to put themselves forward for promotions.

Increased opportunities

Some participants felt that there were just not enough jobs, and that it was the Scottish Government's responsibility to create more work for young women.

“More opportunities created that don't rely on working way up a company. Entry level opportunities are important for young women. I also think there should be a quota for employing women to ensure equal representation.”

“Equal access to education including availability of scholarships and diverse pathways to Further and Higher education. Paid internship and work experience opportunities, particularly for those women facing multiple barriers and particularly in sectors where women are underrepresented.”

The idea of women being given the chance to work at higher levels was also discussed considerably, with the hope of changing the dynamic of employment systems:

“Promote opportunities in every sector for women.”

Changing society

Some respondents believed that for women to access and succeed at work, a major societal shift was needed, particularly by overhauling the current capitalist system. Respondents also discussed the need to tackle existing power structures that keep women in lower paid and lesser valued employment, and thus ensuring that young women remain dependent on men, both financially and as power-holders in terms of women's careers and experiences in the workplace.

“We need a system overhaul, the system of work that we have in place was designed by men, for men. Tweaking around the edges to try and make women and their experiences fit in the model hasn't worked and it never will.”

This also linked to the attitude change with regards to the value our society puts on unpaid labour.

“A greater appreciation of the skills acquired by women in informal settings, skills that are often seen as womanly traits (compassion, empathy) and that women face different barriers to employment (insecurity in their ability).”

“Change in attitudes regarding unpaid labour. There should greater division of unpaid labour within the home which would result in fairer access to the paid labour market”

Role Models

It was imperative to respondents that women were promoted throughout companies in order to create a more varied power structure. Some participants went on to explain that a major benefit of this would be that new women employees would see women at high levels of management, and would therefore feel more comfortable within a workplace and more likely to succeed there.

“More opportunities to develop, learn and progress. Workplaces should have more women in positions of leadership, but not just white women - women of colour, trans women, queer women, women with a disability also need a seat at the table.”

“I am trying to break into the film industry and I have noticed that there are not many women in high positions. When I look at who got the job for some opportunities I have applied, it would very frequently be a man. I feel it's the same case in pretty much any work sphere. As long as there will not be on average just as many women as there are men in high, influential, decision-making positions, it will be harder for young women to access work.”

“Again, I think it comes down to leadership and change agents. We need there to be leaders that look and sound like young women of today.”

5: What needs to change for all young women in Scotland to be better supported at work?

Currently there are a lot of conversations happening around building back better post-pandemic, and we hope that these recommendations from young women in Scotland will form building blocks for new innovative approaches and more inclusive workplaces. The message from young women in Scotland is clear: we want more support in the workplace, so that we can do our jobs to the best of our ability without putting our health and wellbeing at risk. Young women's experiences make the workplace a richer place, but only when our suggestions are listened to and considered of equal merit by colleagues and managers.

Investing in robust support systems for more inclusive workplaces

Robust support systems were seen as key factors to improve young women's work experiences. These could also include mentorships specifically for young women, which were mentioned by a number of respondents.

"MENTORING! The Scottish Government has schemes to pair young employees with older ones, this needs rolled out and encouraged within all sectors. If young women are learning what they are entitled to, how they should be treated at work, how to ask for what they deserve from those who have that experience, and have someone that they can bounce off, ask questions and share experiences with, they are so much more likely to take up the space they deserve."

"Male leaders need to be trained on power dynamics especially when mentoring and managing young women. I think men, through no fault of their own as individuals, aren't aware of the inherent intimidation that stems from having a male (and male performing) manager"

Respondents noted that there needs to be a clear zero tolerance policy for any form of sexual harassment and sexism, and that there should be mandatory training to stop this behaviour and to highlight what is not acceptable.

Casual misogyny and ageism also need to be rooted out. Young women often felt that men in the workplace were less likely to listen to and take their views seriously than for men of the same age and experience level. It was important for respondents that men in powerful positions are made aware of unequal power dynamics. Suggestions for good practice across all sectors included developing workplaces with a culture of open conversations and calling out inappropriate behaviours without fear of repercussions, and more clear complaints systems in place. Respondents recognised that for some sectors or organisations, implementing these would require a complete culture shift.

"I would need my male colleagues in particular to not consider feminism as an optional extra - to take sexism every bit as seriously as they would racism, for example, and know that 'jokes' or 'mansplaining' is not acceptable!"

"Open and clear communication from the start. Ensuring that all staff and employees know who the right person to speak to about certain matters is key. Often in small businesses, there is only one person (owner) to bring personal or work matters to, and this person will often not know how to properly handle the situation, resulting in poorly handled matters."

Mental health support

Respondents reported that one of the main ways they would like to be better supported is through improved mental health awareness and support. The mental health theme had two strands: improved education and better provisions.

Many respondents did not feel that there was sufficient understanding of mental health issues and what impact they may have on members of the workforce. It was felt that employers should put more time and resources into mental health training for staff members, particularly those in more senior positions. Ill mental health stigma this creates was often discussed alongside the overarching issue of women's health being misunderstood in the workplace. There was also fear of young women being gender stereotyped as 'too emotional' or 'too sensitive' while discussing mental health openly.

"Mental health awareness only goes so far - we need acceptance and an environment that is less stressful. Women cannot have it all without burning out. A society where we are defined by our jobs and under so much pressure to be excellent and busy is not healthy."

It was reported that there were not enough mental health provisions in place within the workplace culture. Many of the respondents expressed a wish for a workplace that promoted talking about mental health openly and with provisions to make the workplace an easier place to navigate for those who need it. A number of respondents said that they would like to be offered specific mental health days that were separate from sick days.

Greater understanding of caring responsibilities and provision to support these

Employers should be more flexible with what is on offer in terms of childcare, hours that women need to work and training opportunities that are offered. Having a variety of childcare options would mean that more women would be able to stay and advance in work. These options would need to be affordable, so that women can afford to work and not miss out due to childcare costs. It was also suggested that there needs to be an entire culture change around how caring responsibilities are approached. Having more paternity leave would encourage men to not only take up these responsibilities but would also offer men personal experience of how the workplace and a gender-informed employment culture can benefit everyone.

Normalisation of different working patterns

Those working part-time or with more flexibility expressed that there was a stigma attached to these arrangements, whereby people may assume that they are not working hard enough, or with enough ambition. This is not the case however, and employers need to be more open to why people are choosing to work in these ways - whether due to caring responsibilities or for health reasons. Having a variety of different working patterns available means that more women are able to do the jobs they choose to do, and have greater opportunity to contribute in industries which are dominated by men.

“Flexible working arrangements should be the norm in any organisation where a specific work pattern isn't essential. They should not be reserved for caring duties only. At the moment, I think a lot of people think 'flexible working = less committed to their job / an inconvenience' which no doubt makes it harder for women, who disproportionately need flexible working for caring, to be supported. If it's encouraged to have a different working pattern for any reason, it takes the pressure off those who need to arrange work around their other commitments.”

Young women respondents wanted to see higher wages for women and more personal development opportunities. Another issue that came up was the fact that job adverts often have very little information in them regarding contracts and pay. Adverts need to be more transparent, as they are time-consuming and if the contract and pay are not viable for those applying, then this can waste time. Young women need to know what they are applying for so that they can fit their work into their life.

Employment protections and a just and fair workplace

Having an increase in trade union membership and powers would make some young women feel more safe in the workplace, and give them the confidence to tackle issues at work through official channels. Young women in Scotland would also like to see an end to zero-hours contracts as this exploitative contract method can lead to higher levels of stress, uncertainty, and financial instability.

It was felt that HR departments often do not have a good grasp on equality at work, and it was suggested that they should have to complete annual courses and reviews on equal opportunities and gender-balanced hiring practices. The same sentiment was applied to companies that do not have HR departments, and it was suggested that all employees should participate in training around equal opportunities.

"It should be compulsory for ALL employers with a workforce (maybe a team of 5+) to complete an annual short course on equal opportunities. A big issue in every industry comes from lack of knowledge and most businesses do not have an HR department to keep them right."

Blind recruitment was also suggested when applying for progression opportunities as fear of rejection might prevent young women from even trying:

"Even (or especially) for internal progression routes I think the first stages of the application process should be anonymous. The differences in how women and men have been raised and socialised means that there is a lot of shame attached to trying to progress within the workplace. Somehow, the idea of being rejected or found unqualified by people you already know and who know you and who you will have to continue working with even if they reject you is mortifying to us in a way that I don't think it is for young men."

Some respondents noted that this would create a work environment that was more comfortable for young women to join and socialise with their coworkers. Young women we surveyed also called out the culture of a “men’s club” with socialising that is not suitable for women with caring responsibilities due to out of hours nature of it, can be uncomfortable for young women who may be surrounded by men who belittle them, and a socialising culture that is linked to a drinking culture which is not inclusive.

6: Commitments and recommendations

This year's discussions have highlighted different ways that young women in Scotland experience inequality in the workplace and how it impacts on their health, wellbeing, family life, career prospects, and lifelong financial security. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these inequalities - young women who are in precarious work felt disposable and unsupported; young women with caring responsibilities struggled with having to juggle it all without recognition or support; young disabled women were putting their lives at risk by still going to work; mental health and general wellbeing suffered and was not adequately supported at work.

Many young women who took part in our research participate in the gig economy or do other types of poorly paid freelance work, and therefore lack a stable and protected income. They were also likely to undervalue their skills and experience and as a result undersell themselves to potential employers. Imposter syndrome and fear of rejection stops young women from applying for progression opportunities. The women we spoke to are also disproportionately affected by the need for more unpaid care, impacting their ability to do paid work.

This hardship is forecast to continue beyond this immediate crisis, and young women will continue facing multiple challenges, including rising unemployment and potential difficulties to access flexible working. Work adaptations during lockdown demonstrated that new ways of working are possible for some, but not all workers have the same opportunities or affordances depending on the types of work they do. Young women should be entitled to flexible working arrangements, employment opportunities where their skills are financially recognised and valued, and workplaces where young women feel safe and confident.

Below are our commitments to action, and we encourage you to make your own, as an employer, a co-worker, or an ally. These actions will only be effective if organisations truly commit to better supporting young women - if you want to explore how to do that through training and diversifying your governance structures, please do get in touch with us.

1

YWCA Scotland - The Young Women's Movement will continue providing leadership training to young women through our Young Women Lead programme, and we are committed to supporting every participant to take up a decision-making role within the voluntary, public or private sector, building a legacy of young women in Board, volunteer and paid leadership positions across every region of Scotland.

2

YWCA Scotland - The Young Women's Movement will deliver a bespoke Feminist Leadership Training to equip young women in Scotland with the knowledge and tools that will cultivate feminist principles in decision-making and influential positions across the workforce and wider society. It will focus on peer-to-peer learning to understand feminist leadership principles, the importance of role models, how feminist principles can guide young women's leadership approach and building a feminist leadership toolkit to support and grow young women's leadership. We will provide a safe space for young women to build confidence and networks.

3

The combined effects of the global pandemic and the recession on Scotland's job market mean that young women seeking employment are likely to face multiple rejections, leading to detrimental effects on their mental health and confidence. YWCA Scotland - The Young Women's Movement will roll out a new online wellbeing and employability support service for young women to help them identify their strengths, build leadership skills, build confidence, build resilience and strong mental health and take steps towards employment or training.

4

Flexibility and better work life balance were one of the key factors identified by young women in Scotland to create workplaces where they can thrive. YWCA Scotland - The Young Women's Movement is committed to leading in this field, and from July 2021 we will transition to a 4 day-week. We will share our journey and support other organisations to consider 4 day-week as a new way of working.

5

Platforming the voices of young women across Scotland to share experiences and engender tangible culture change is vital to ensure changemakers include the rich expertise and creative solutions young women offer. YWCA Scotland - The Young Women's Movement is committed to delivering an ongoing communications strategy focused on empowering young women to advocate for changes to their work experiences, workplaces and industries. This will commence with the digital campaign Our Work Counts, and will be supported further by communications work and events going forward.

Methodology

The key features of our methodology are described below.

The research team

YWCA Scotland - The Young Women's Movement were supported by a research consultant to carry out a robust mixed methods approach. Four young women volunteers who had experiences of employment difficulty during the pandemic supported the research design, facilitation of the focus groups, and data analysis.

Online survey

The survey was open from October until December 2020 and received 192 complete responses from self-identifying young women in Scotland between the ages of 16 and 30. The survey was used to generate both quantitative and qualitative data about young women's experiences of work and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. People who took part were asked whether they would like to contribute further to the research, and most focus group participants had taken part in the survey.

Focus groups

The focus groups took place in May 2021 and we spoke to a total of 10 young women. They were carried out in a safe online space. The focus groups were constructed around the themes; young women in precarious work, young women with caring responsibilities, young disabled women, young women from ethnic minority backgrounds. These themes were identified to draw out the nuanced and unique challenges for these groups in relation to accessing work and being supported at work.

Participant protection

The ethical issues of confidentiality, anonymity, data protection and informed consent were addressed in information sheets, privacy notices and consent forms. It was highlighted that no individual or organisation would be named or identified within the report or other forms of dissemination.

Analysis

Both quantitative and qualitative information were interrogated by the research team. First, the team familiarised themselves with the data, through the detailed notes and transcriptions of the focus group recordings. A coding approach was then taken to this data and the qualitative data from the survey. The quantitative results of the survey were exported and cleaned and analysed. The team then mapped a range of observations and themes from which a report structure was generated.

THANK YOU

Thank you to every young woman who took part in this research, without you this work would not have been possible.

Donors

Paul Hamlyn Foundation
Esmée Fairbairn Foundation

Coordination

Dr Patrycja Kupiec
Rhianna Mallia
Elena Soper

Volunteers

Zoë Chick
Joanna Cole-Hamilton
Sorcha McLaughlin
Eilidh Young

The YWCA Scotland team

Carol Cunningham
Amy King
Heidi McLean
Ange Melvin
Libby Smith

Cover + Spot Illustrations

Sophy Louise Illustration

Graph + Stat Illustrations

Zoë Paterson



WWW.YWCASCOTLAND.ORG

Follow us on Twitter,
Instagram
and Facebook



@YoungWomenScot

**Wellpark / Kirkhaven Enterprise Centre, 120 Sydney Street,
Glasgow, G31 1JF
Charity No. SC034132
Company Limited by Guarantee in Scotland No. SC246153
© Copyright July 2021 YWCA Scotland**