

# **Fair Work Convention's Response to: 'Exploration of the pay and career progression experiences of women aged over 50 in Scotland'**

**Undertaken by the National Institute of  
Economic and Social Research (NIESR)**

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# Introduction

The Fair Work Convention, an independent body promoting and advocating fair work in Scotland, has commissioned a qualitative examination of the pay and career experiences of women aged over 50<sup>1</sup>. This demographic has a higher gender pay gap than younger women and can face combined disadvantage in relation to their gender and their age. These disadvantages create barriers to fair work and a fulfilling career. For some, this results in an earlier exit from the workforce than might otherwise have been the case.

In commissioning this research, the Convention hoped to build a better understanding of the unique challenges and needs of women over 50, with the aim of identifying actionable workplace practices to improve their working lives while also bringing benefits for employers. The National Institute of Economic and Social Research (NIESR) were commissioned to undertake the research and have now reported their findings drawn from a series of interviews with women workers and employers. The full report can be accessed at: [www.fairworkconvention.scot/fair-work-convention-research/](http://www.fairworkconvention.scot/fair-work-convention-research/) It sets out the methodology used alongside the research findings on experiences of pay, progression, health and well-being in the workplace followed by NIESR's Recommendations.

Key insights include:

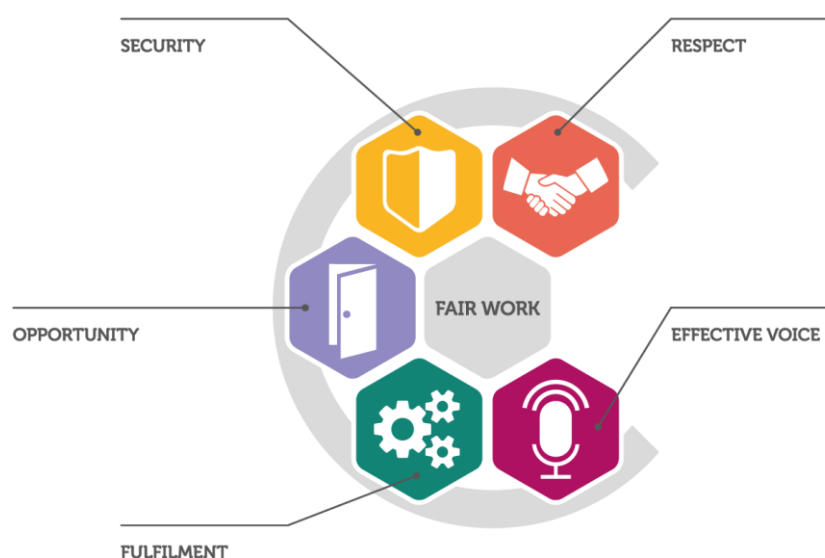
- A finding that age is **not** often considered as part of equality or diversity planning within workplaces. Age is a protected characteristic, but does not receive the same attention as other characteristics such as gender or race.
- A verdict that inequalities in pay and progression among women over 50 are **not only a legacy** of the gendered practices experienced by women early on in their careers, but that **current workplace practices are also having an impact**.
- A recognition that a combination of **caring responsibilities and personal health**, particularly the menopause, have significant impacts on many women's preferences for work, but that preferences are not fixed and women's aspirations for their careers vary though all can be supported through effective communication and training.
- A discovery that **few employers took time to engage well** with this part of their workforce to understand the barriers that exist and the changes that could be made to enable women over 50 to participate fully in the organisation.

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<sup>1</sup> We refer, throughout, to 'women over 50' in an attempt to limit any stereotyping that may fuel negative perceptions associated with the generic phrase 'older women'. For more on this topic, see: Centre for Better Ageing (2020), [UK's damaging views on ageing revealed in new report analysing language used across society](#)

# Response to the Research

The research highlights key areas where changes to workplace practices can be made to better support and enable women over 50. These each relate to the Convention's Fair Work Framework, which sets out five dimensions of fair work - effective voice, opportunity, security, fulfilment and respect.



## Boost Effective Voice

The research shows that women over 50 can face challenges across all five fair work dimensions. However, underpinning so many of the issues is a lack of effective voice in the workplace. There is not enough meaningful dialogue between managers and women over 50 and too many assumptions are being made about how women want to work. Effective voice is best supported by trade union recognition and membership and the use of collective bargaining alongside individual voice mechanisms.

The Fair Work Convention calls for employers to engage directly and meaningfully with their workers to understand the challenges they face and to design, with their input, more inclusive workplace practices. Without open and ongoing dialogue, employers are unlikely to fully appreciate the issues that exist amongst their workforce. Employers should work with women over 50 to:

- Discuss career management – recognising the different and legitimate choices that women might make to advance their careers or to scale them back.
- Design better training that responds to individual learning preferences.
- Facilitate discussions around retirement in a respectful and open way, supporting improved planning for everyone.



# Create Fair Opportunity

The research demonstrates it would be beneficial for employers to assess their practices through the lens of different worker demographics - particularly through the lens of women aged over 50 – and develop more age-inclusive practices. It is paramount that this is undertaken by employers of all sizes, from larger businesses with significant HR capacity through to small and micro businesses without a formal HR manager. While smaller businesses may have lower capacity to focus on equality issues, the nature of the business can also make delivering meaningful age-inclusive outcomes more straightforward. The Convention is clear that all businesses have the potential to improve practice and make gains in this area.

Key to improved practice is improved equality profiling and monitoring of age in terms of measures such as:

- Overall age profile (including across the management structure) to identify systemic gaps and under-representation;
- Equality of recruitment, pay and progression outcomes;
- Equality of access to training opportunities;
- How certain requirements (e.g. to travel for work or training) present barriers to progression for particular groups of workers.

This level of monitoring is crucial to supporting fair opportunity and the Convention encourages employers of all sizes to determine what scrutiny they can undertake. This should inform employers of priority areas for investment or change to workplace practice. For larger organisations with a headcount over 250 employees, collecting and reporting on some of this data is obligatory under the Gender Pay Gap (GPG) reporting requirements. However, the Fair Work Convention encourages larger employers to go beyond the statutory reporting of GPG data and publish a workforce diversity report annually<sup>2</sup>. The Fair Work Convention recognises that businesses may require support to commence this level of monitoring and analysis. However, much of the data should be readily available in the workplace and bespoke advice is available.

A further principal consideration under the opportunity dimension, relates to the requirement for many women over 50 to balance work and substantial caring responsibilities - for grandchildren, elderly parents and other family members. Employers and unions must work together to ensure that workplace policies offer flexibility to allow women to find a sustainable balance in terms of their patterns and hours of work to ensure they are best supported to combine their work and caring commitments. Flexibility should be considered as broadly as possible – from part-time hours and compressed hours, to job share and term-time only working.

There is also a national policy implication – many women over 50 in the workforce are playing a vital role in providing additional childcare provision for grandchildren to

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<sup>2</sup> The EHRC 'Diversity Report' is a good example of this - [EHRC \(2020\), "Our Workforce Diversity Report"](#)

support working parents. As such, any future refresh of government's early learning and childcare policies should directly assess the benefits to women over 50 that would be realised by an expanded childcare offering which provides more flexible support and an increase in hourly provision.

## Ensure Security

The women in this study did not perceive themselves to be insecure in their work. However, there were issues highlighted that, the Convention would argue, act to reduce security – lower pay (compared to men) and limited transparency of pay being two of the most important. Women often lack confidence to raise queries about unfair pay and this is, in part, fuelled by lack of transparency or evidence – i.e. women are uncertain if their suspicions of unfairness are justified and, therefore do not pursue the issue with managers. The Fair Work Convention believes that pay transparency should be the norm in businesses in order to support fair pay across protected groups. A good starting point is undertaking an Equal Pay Audit to compare the pay of men and women doing equal work in an organisation. However, equal pay and the GPG must not be conflated – there can still be a significant GPG even with equal pay for equal roles if, for instance, one gender is clustered in low paid jobs within the business, thereby pointing towards inequalities.

The Convention also has concerns about the number of women over 50 who face barriers to progression despite strong performance and appraisals, as well as those who are forced into retirement earlier than they would otherwise have chosen due to lack of fair and supportive work. Within their wider diversity monitoring, employers should consider how promotion and training opportunities are offered and taken up. Work should also be undertaken to ensure managers are having effective conversations that support career progression and wider questions of wellbeing. Ultimately, these approaches support workers to maintain their employment and advance in their career and therefore have a significant impact on enhancing security of work and income.

## Support Fulfilment at Work

Fulfilment as a dimension of fair work can be supported in a variety of ways: through forms of job design and work organisation that focuses on effective skills use, autonomy, opportunities to problem solve and to make a difference. Investment in training and development also has an important role to play in generating fulfilling work. The research picks up on a particular training challenge for women over 50 – training for the use of technology. There is a complex picture here – many women are concerned about their ability to use rapidly developing technology and systems and the knock-on effect on their ability to meet performance targets. Meanwhile, employers are concerned about the capacity of over 50s to use technology,

particularly compared to younger colleagues, but are also wary of how to provide targeted training without causing offence. In addition, the style of training is problematic for some women because:

- There is widespread use of online training without a tutor, which does not suit everyone's learning styles; and
- There are challenges with the "self-serve" nature of some training, where the onus is on the employee to find extra time on top of their normal workload to undertake the training.

The research also highlights a number of barriers to career progression for women over 50, which are compounded by overly complex and intimidating recruitment processes.

In both of these circumstances, there is a clear need for the provision of tailored training, support and guidance. Mentoring also has an important role to play – this demographic of women should be encouraged to access a mentor as well as acting as a mentor themselves. The Fair Work Convention calls for employers to review their training provision, including how employees are invited to participate. Additionally, the Convention encourages trade unions and women's organisations to offer targeted support to women over 50 to augment interview skills and confidence to seek recruitment opportunities.



## Enhancing Respect

The research highlighted ill health and the menopause as central challenges to fair work for women over 50. Women are, for instance, coping with the debilitating side-effects of the menopause (including hot flushes, brain fog, fatigue, mood swings) and do not feel comfortable to discuss these with colleagues or line managers.

Respect in the workplace is a key dimension of fair work and includes enhancing individual health, safety and wellbeing. The Fair Work Convention calls for employers to, firstly, consider how they provide opportunities for flexible work for all employees and, secondly, to develop a Menopause Policy for their workplace. Both would make a considerable impact on the experiences of women over 50.

The research also noted some friction between generations of worker, particularly where women over 50 were being line managed by individuals who were much younger than themselves. This was amplified by a perception that workplaces were becoming increasingly orientated towards young people. Women reported feeling disconnected from younger managers and, if they deemed these managers to be inexperienced or unprofessional, this disconnect could even extend to a feeling of insult. There was also a critical impact on feeling supported in the workplace – for instance, effective support for women experiencing the menopause often relied on the manager's personal experience of the menopause, either directly or indirectly. Younger managers were more likely to lack an appreciation of the potential severity of the condition. Addressing issues such as an uneven age profile across all levels of an organisation should go some way to support more inclusive and respectful

workplaces. However, employers must also consider, more broadly, the cultures that are being promoted to staff, the policies in place and a need for specific, compulsory management training.

## Summary

In summary, the Fair Work Convention calls for:

1. Effective voice in all workplaces that enables workers' voice – and especially the voices of those often overlooked, such as women over 50 – to be heard and to inform decisions;
2. Equality profiling and monitoring/analysis by age;
3. Tailored support and training for women over 50, which meets learning preferences (e.g. in areas of use of technology and application/recruitment processes);
4. Improved policy and practices around:
  - a. Tailoring Gender Pay Gap interventions to different ages;
  - b. Increasing opportunities for part-time work, home working and other forms of flexible work;
  - c. Improving transparency of pay and grading structures;
  - d. Adopting more age-inclusive recruitment practices;
  - e. Initiating and facilitating conversations about retirement;
  - f. Implementing a Menopause Policy and promoting conversations about the menopause;
  - g. Intergenerational respect in the workplace.

## Resources for Employers

As highlighted above, many of the desired workplace changes are best designed in collaboration with workers themselves. However, there many good resources to inform the process. Some are suggested below:

Recommended Workplace Change	Resources
Tailor Gender Pay Gap interventions to different ages	<a href="#">Behavioural Insights Team - How to improve gender equality in the workplace</a>  <a href="#">CMI – Blueprint for Balance</a>
Increase opportunities for part-time work, home working and flexible work	<a href="#">CMI – Flexible Working and the Gender Pay Gap</a>  <a href="#">Women's Business Council – 100 Ways to Work Flexibly</a>
Improve transparency of pay and grading structures	<a href="#">Behavioural Insights Team - How to increase transparency of progression, pay and reward</a>
Adopt more age-inclusive recruitment practices	<a href="#">CIPD and Centre for Better Ageing - Age-inclusive recruitment</a>

	<a href="#">Age Scotland – Age Inclusive Workplace Training and Matrix</a>
Develop guidelines on how to initiate and have conversations about retirement	<a href="#">Equality and Human Rights Commission - Managing Retirement</a>  <a href="#">Centre for Better Ageing – Transition to Retirement</a>
Implement a Menopause Policy and promote conversations about the menopause	<a href="#">CIPD - Let's Talk Menopause</a>  <a href="#">TUC – Menopause at Work</a>
Develop guidelines on how to promote intergenerational respect	<a href="#">OECD – Promoting an Age Inclusive Workforce</a>

## Conclusion

The focus of this research was women aged over 50. We know the challenges facing this demographic do not simply start when a woman turns 50, but instead that the impacts of policies and practices build over an individual's career. However, this research demonstrates that the intersection of age and gender is uniquely shaping women's experiences of work. The Fair Work Convention calls for the Scottish Government, employers, trade unions, women themselves and other stakeholders to participate in improving workplace practices to improve fair work for women over 50.





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