

RESEARCH CENTRE

DON'T KEEP US DOWN

Young women's experiences of discrimination in the workplace

November 2023



Foreword

As a peer researcher, I had the privilege to be directly involved in the research into young women's experiences of employment related discrimination.

As an entry level candidate, and a woman of colour with chronic illnesses, I could relate to the accounts of participants. It has been an ongoing challenge to navigate the still very biased recruitment process, and through this research, I've learned it's not just a personal issue, but a systemic one.

I've experienced (from all genders, ages and levels) several forms of traumatic bullying, unfair dismissal, misogyny, comments over appearance, negative assumptions, stereotyping, inappropriate questions, hostile behaviour and racism, all without any justice. And it's very difficult to get out of a vicious cycle of long-term unemployment, and its associated barriers.

Laws against these unfair practices are being broken, far too casually, and the consequences are not stringent enough, to the detriment of young women. Employers should only claim to be a equal, disability confident, diverse and progressive, if they are truly practising, living and breathing it. Actions do speak louder than words.

Brilliant candidates are being hindered; they absolutely shouldn't have to accept and endure this. Our rights should be respected, and our efforts should be rewarded. I echo the voices of peers who state that just because discrimination has always existed it doesn't mean we should remain silent out of fear.

I am immensely grateful to those employers who are actively making work fairer for all, including fantastic individuals I've had the pleasure of meeting at Young Women's Trust's networking events this year. Your participation is crucial because the better standards you set will surely influence others to follow suit thus allowing more young women to thrive.

I feel a deep sense of pride for the honesty, bravery and vulnerability that young women have shown in sharing their experiences and thank Young Women's Trust for their dedication to much needed change.

Isha

The Young Women's Trust peer researchers who worked on and contributed to this research were:

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Introduction

Each year, in the Young Women's Trust annual survey young women have consistently reported high levels of discrimination in the workplace, to the extent that in 2023 fully half of all the young women we surveyed said they'd experienced this.

Discrimination is clearly a force shaping young women's experiences of the workplace, and contributing to a persistent income gap of around a fifth between young women and young men.

But to what extent is it impacting their futures? What does it look and feel like? And crucially, what can be done about it?

In this qualitative research, Young Women's Trust's peer researchers have found that young women are facing discrimination on the basis of multiple aspects of their identities – including gender, race, age, disability and caring responsibilities. But being young and female means being in a particularly powerless position in the workplace, making it harder to challenge.

Young women shared that they can internalise discrimination – blaming themselves rather than the structures they find themselves within. This has an impact reaching far into their futures – with young women leaving jobs, changing career paths, doubting their own abilities and losing self-belief. And crucially, the discrimination goes unchallenged and unchanged.

But the onus should not be on young women to lead change. Employers could and should do more to make it easier to report discrimination, and to show that there are consequences. Young women often feel that nothing will be done or worse, reporting it will make their lives more difficult. Most employers agreed that while policies in place, they could be more visibly and clearly communicated. Doing this is a simple step that could make a big difference.

Creating workplaces free of discrimination is about culture as well as policy. Many young women spoke of workplace cultures where indirect and subtle forms of discrimination – sexist comments passed off as banter, young women being belittled and dismissed – are allowed to go unchecked. Visible leadership from senior staff and colleagues alike in showing zero tolerance for these behaviours is needed.

Young women have so much to offer the workplace and they deserve to have jobs where they can thrive. It's not right that they're being kept down and forced out. But the solutions are here – it's time for us all to act.

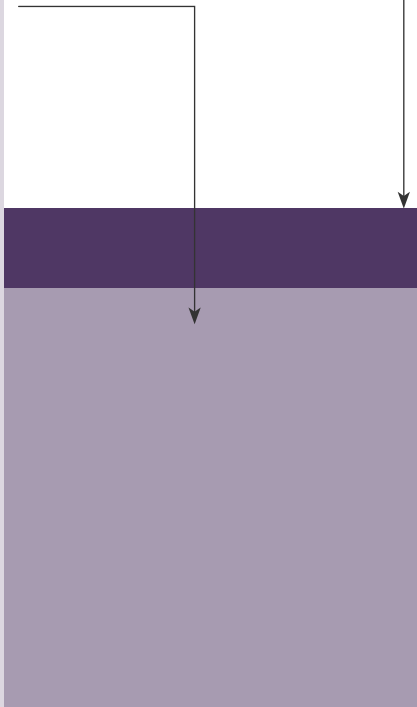
Methodology

- In our annual survey, we heard from 4011 young women aged 18-30, and 911 professionals with sole or joint responsibility for recruitment and/or HR decision making within their organisation.
- The overall sample of young women contains 73 responses from trans young women and 64 responses from people who identify as non-binary. For the sake of brevity, we will refer to this group as 'young women' throughout the report.
- Between 26th September and 13th October 2022 our peer researchers interviewed 25 young women about their experiences of discrimination
- 70 employers responded to our survey between 17th January and 19th February 2023 and told us about their approach to tackling discrimination in the workplace.

Discrimination in the workplace is widespread, and seems to be on the rise

50% of young women who took our survey have **experienced discrimination whilst working or looking for work.**

This has risen from **42% in 2022.**

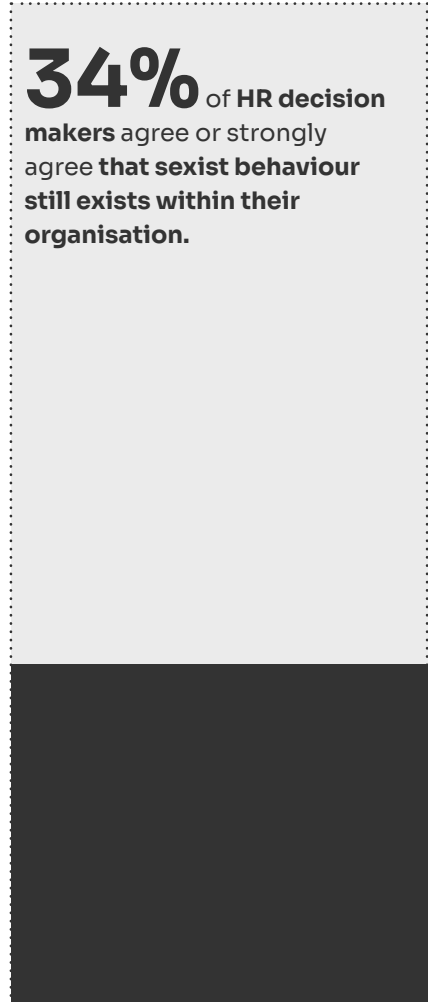


34% of HR decision makers are **aware of instances of young women being discriminated against** in the past year.

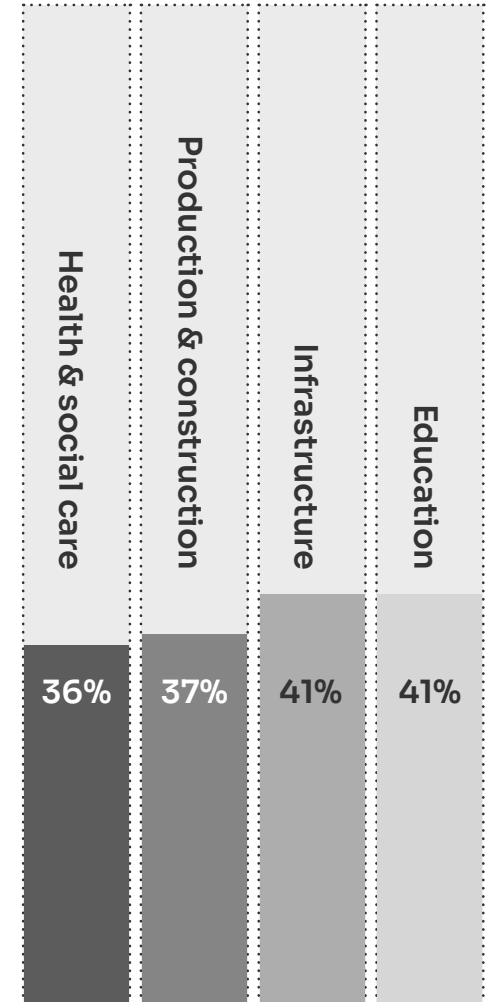
This increases to **47%** of respondents working in the public sector.



34% of HR decision makers agree or strongly agree that **sexist behaviour still exists within their organisation.**



HR decision makers in these sectors were most likely to agree that **sexist behaviour still exists in their organisation:**



Discriminatory behaviour takes many forms

The types of discrimination most commonly described by young women in interviews were:



And our survey results support this:

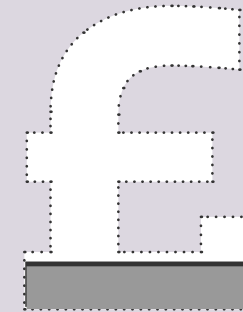
27%

of young women who took our survey told us that they have **experienced sexual harassment in the workplace.**



23%

of young women have been **paid less than young men for the same work.** There has been only a marginal downwards shift from **24% in 2022.**



13%

of HR decision makers are **aware of women being paid less than men** for jobs at the same level, a slight rise from **11% in 2022.**

“I found out that one of my colleagues who was a male, he’d been in the business a lot less time than me, and he was, I think he was about six months older than me. And I found out kind of by accident that he was getting paid more than me. Like quite a bit. And, like I say, his experience and length of time in the company, it just didn’t match up. And I thought that was quite upsetting, you know, with the responsibilities that I had at that time. I was getting underpaid.”

| Interview participant

Young women's experiences of discrimination are complex and often directed at multiple aspects of their identities

But age and gender are common factors which exacerbate discrimination and make it harder to challenge.



Young women described being overlooked, patronised, disrespected and taken advantage of because of their age or perceived lack of experience

“I would go into meetings and I would be the only woman and I’d be the only person under 40. It was very clear that people didn’t respect me and they didn’t respect my expertise, and they doubted that I had the expertise to do the job.”

| Interview participant

“I think it started off with my manager. So I had a manager, he was a male. And because I was young and am less experienced than him, he thought he could overpower me and exert his power over me.”

| Interview participant

“I definitely felt like people just overlooked me and just saw me as like a stupid, stupid kid, a stupid little girl who didn’t have anything worth contributing. And I mean, it was all from the men as well. I’d come up with ideas, and then people would go oh, that’s rubbish. And then the same person, I brought the ideas up with would bring them up in a meeting and then get the credit for them.”

| Interview participant

Young women who took part in interviews described being discriminated against due to their ethnicity, appearance, mental health, disability, religion, class, sexuality, gender, age and having caring responsibilities

“General sexism, it’s just horrible, the way women are treated. It’s so much run by men. It’s not just about being LGBTQ+, it’s also age and gender and race, and everything coming together.”

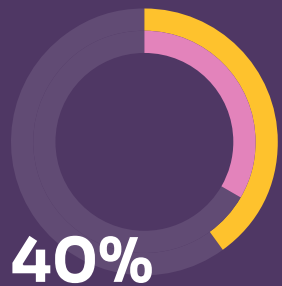
| Interview participant

“I think it affects young women from lower class backgrounds. Essentially you have the double thing of being female - like, you can go to Cambridge, or, you know, university, but you’re still kind of on the back foot in terms of class. Which is the same for men as well, so I’m not suggesting that’s just women, but if you’re a young woman from that background then those two things intersect.”

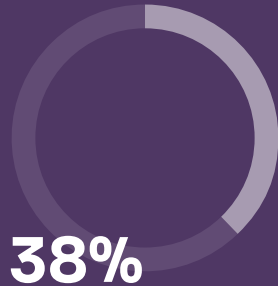
| Interview participant

The top five reasons young women report being discriminated against whilst looking for work are:

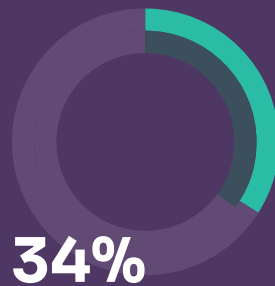




40% of **young Black women** and almost 3 in 10 (**29%**) **young women from Asian backgrounds** have been discriminated against because of their ethnicity.



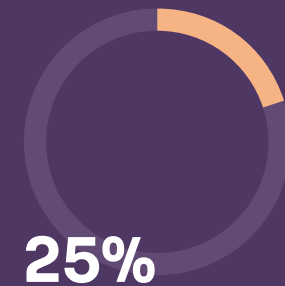
38% of **trans young women** have been discriminated against because of their gender identity.



34% of young women with a **long-term mental health condition** or **neurodiversity (35%)** have been discriminated against because of their mental health when working or looking for work.



30% of young women with **sole childcare responsibilities**, **20%** with **joint childcare responsibility** and **19%** of **adult carers** have been discriminated against for having children or other caring responsibilities.



25% Almost 1 in 5 young women with **childcare responsibilities** have been discriminated against for being pregnant, on parental leave or returning to work after parental leave.



“I will say that I have been discriminated against my sex. I’ve been discriminated against my race. I’ve been discriminated against my age, and I’ve been discriminated against because of my disability.”

| Interview participant

Some young women described being singled out. However, for many, the discrimination they experienced was part of a wider culture of discriminatory behaviour where others from minoritised communities were also treated unfairly

Sometimes this culture was quite subtle and difficult to articulate, but other young women described an overtly toxic culture.

“So, the culture within the civil service, everyone knows there’s a lot of bullying, harassment, discrimination, you know, that they say they’re trying to tackle. I don’t really see them actually doing that, but they say that they are. A lot of people at the senior level – it’s very white, male-dominated from a middle class, or upper middle class background. So, me coming from an ex-polytechnic, being black, having disabilities. I was from a low income background. I was, you know, very different. So yes, there’s a big organisational change that needs to happen.”

| Interview participant

“...It’s just subtle. I think it’s on very rare occasions where people do it directly. But indirect discrimination and the general company culture, that really affects it, and it’s just such a subtle way of grinding people away, and I think it’s time that we acknowledge those things more, because where things are that indirect, and subtle, it’s harder to slash out specifically and provide, you know, a strong case of evidence of that happening, but it does really affect your wellbeing.”

| Interview participant

Young women told us that the discriminatory behaviour they experienced mostly came from management, but some young women experienced discrimination from colleagues and a small number were discriminated against by customers/clients.

Surprisingly, a number of young women described how older females were often responsible for discriminatory behaviour in their workplace or not supportive of young women who reported discrimination at the hands of male colleagues/managers.

“I have found that actually, when it comes to direct discrimination, it is worse from the women. That kind of shocked me because I just think that naturally, women will stand up for women. You know, that whole idea of being a girl’s girl and supporting other women. But even though my mum did warn me, she did say to me, ‘Watch out. Sometimes the female managers are way worse than males.’ A lot of them, they want you – they want to be the only woman there. They aren’t letting any other woman come in and I do think that’s quite true. There are some women that, you know, really help and really do champion progress and stuff, and there are other women who are horrible and make the situation much worse to work with.”

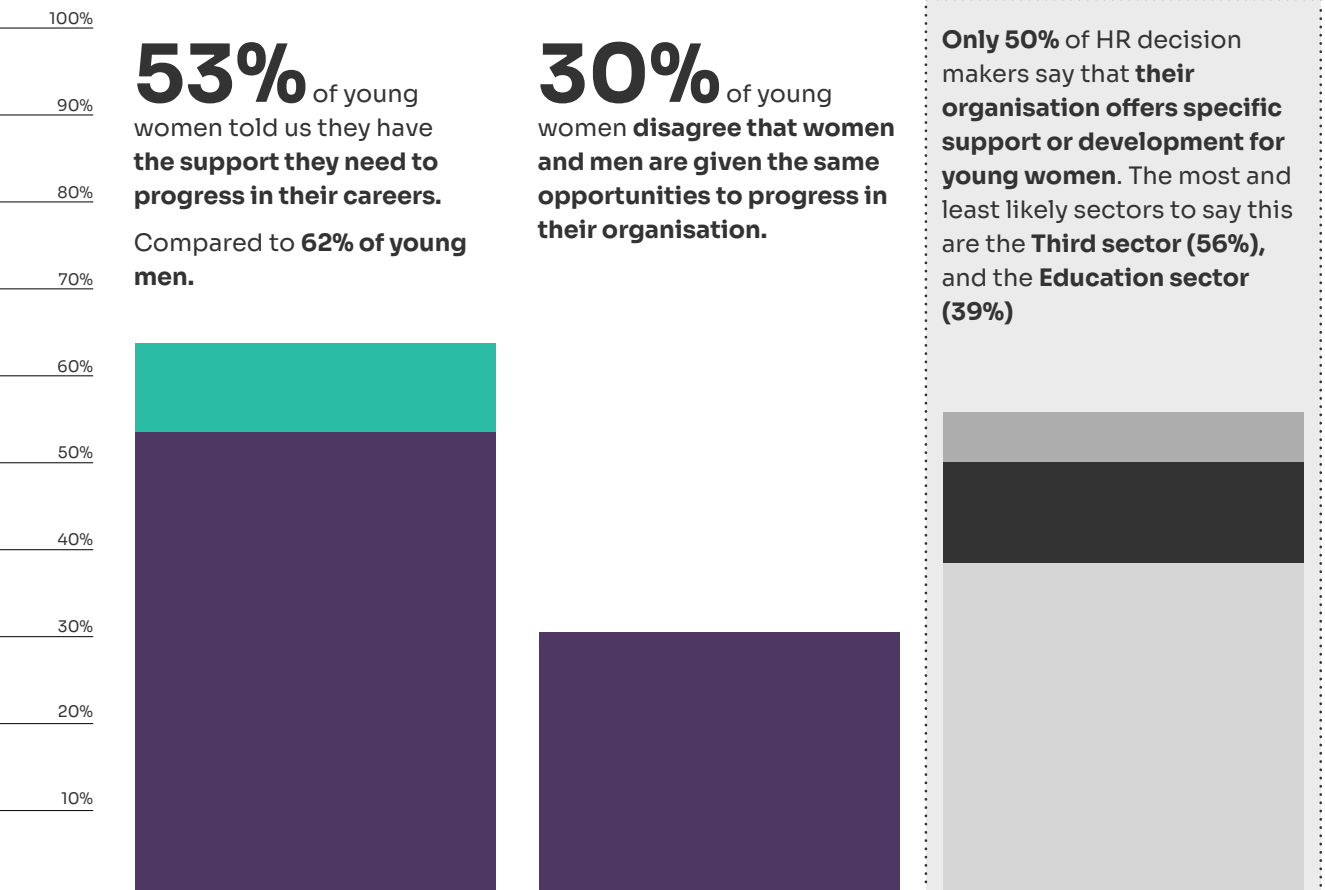
| Interview participant

Even when young women do have secure work, there's a 'broken rung' on the ladder which stops them progressing as fast as their male peers

53% of young women told us they have the support they need to progress in their careers. Compared to **62%** of young men.

30% of young women disagree that women and men are given the same opportunities to progress in their organisation.

Only **50%** of HR decision makers say that **their organisation offers specific support or development for young women**. The most and least likely sectors to say this are the **Third sector (56%)**, and the **Education sector (39%)**



Many young women described workplaces where men were treated differently to women and offered more opportunities to progress.

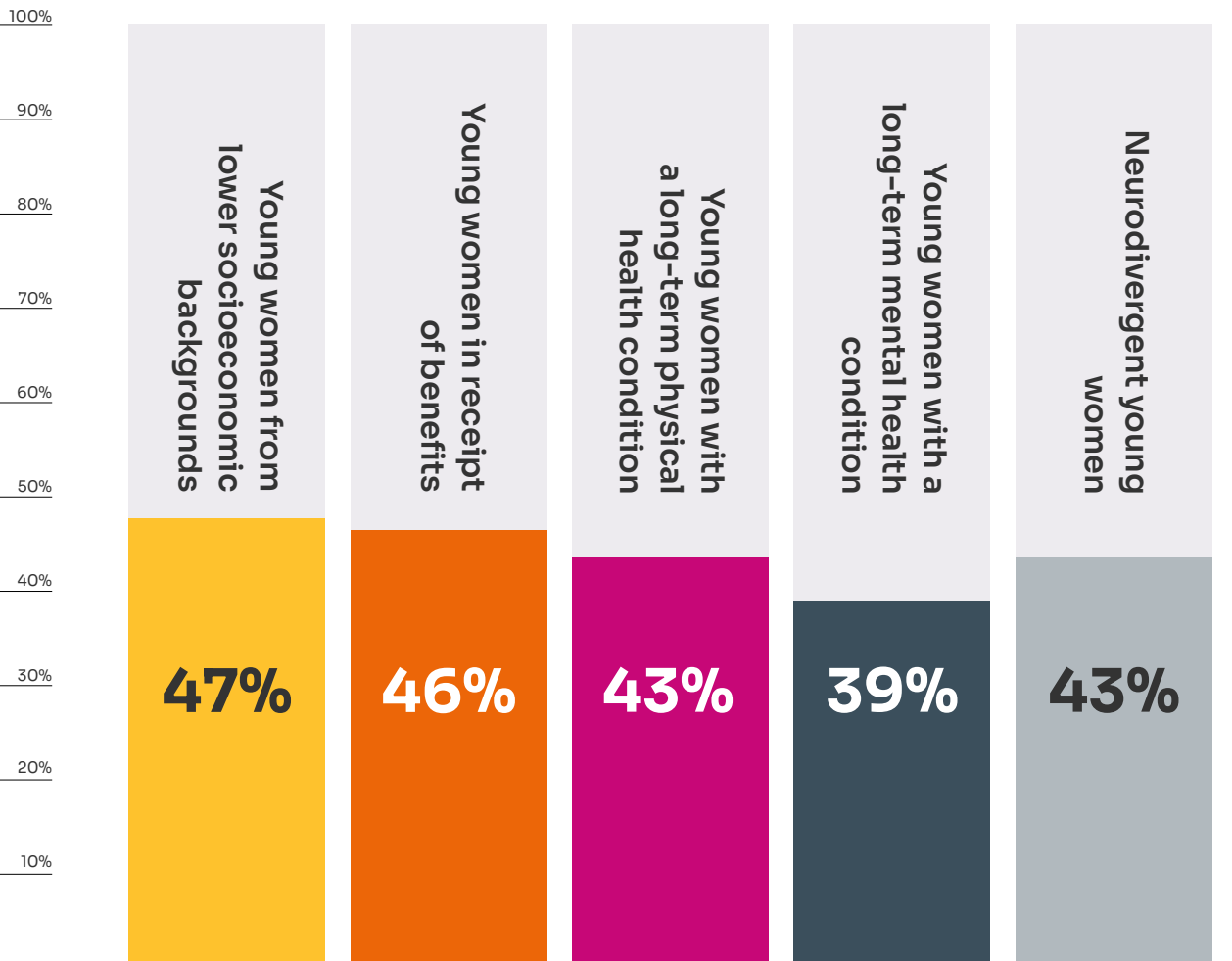
“You’ve got a situation where young people and young women, in particular, are all at the bottom and it’s extraordinarily difficult to move up, I think there is inherently discrimination baked into the system, and you inherently have lower value for people who are at the bottom and higher value for people at the top. And people will really run out of breath trying to contradict you there. But it’s true, if you valued me more, you would literally value my labour more, you would pay me more. Until that point that you pay me more, I don’t believe that you value me more.”

| Interview participant

“I was in a situation where I wasn’t the only woman... I tended to have been the only woman in the room or in the company quite a lot of times. And it’s not until I was in it. I had an experience. I saw a younger girl than me, in a similar role. When I saw it happen to her it made me realise that it was their problem not mine.”

| Interview participant

Certain groups of young women are even less likely to have the support they need to progress in their careers, including:



“In my current company, we have future leaders. They’re really trying to, you know, support and push people to gain extra skills to be better managers or to be successful in getting to that level. However, it’s predominantly white, and it’s predominantly male. And I think that’s very interesting when I look at the landscape of my company. It is predominantly male, it is predominantly white. They’re not creating a pipeline for opportunities for people of colour, for LGBT, for women even”

| Interview participant

Discrimination has far reaching impacts for young women

The biggest impact reported by young women was on their confidence and self-esteem.

Many doubted themselves and minimised their experiences of discrimination – placing the blame on themselves.

Young women also told us they had experienced periods of anxiety and depression as a result of the discrimination they had faced.

“When these things happen, over and over again, you just think, is it me? Is it my fault? You know, am I the one that’s being – am I being fussy? Everyone seems to be being really horrible and not treating me well. Then if I try and question or call them out on it, they just don’t take any responsibility for it.”

| Interview participant

“I’ve had negative thoughts about myself, thinking I’m difficult to work with, or, you know, those kinds of things. And it has massively impacted my confidence. Like just low self-esteem when it comes to work, you know, and it can take a really long time actually to build that back up.”

| Interview participant

“Yeah, I think it literally made me really depressed, like, genuinely depressed. I’ve literally had so much therapy because of it. I’d come home when I finished work, and I’d be crying because of how people would make me feel.”

| Interview participant

Young women also talked about:

Feeling as though they have to hide aspects of their identity to fit in.

Feeling defeated – giving up trying (especially when they voiced concerns and they were not listened to).

Feeling as though they have to prove themselves.

“I constantly had to change the way I dress, I kept being told I looked scruffy. I would go in and I’d be wearing formal clothes, proper expensive clothes. I spent, like, £600 changing my work clothes because I was told that I needed to be smarter. Even though everybody was wearing trainers and smart casual clothes, I was proper smart, and then I realised that really the issue was really about my hair because it was natural and I wasn’t wearing a wig. That was why I was being told that I should smarten up. So yes, even in terms of the way I dressed changed.”

| Interview participant

Discrimination also has an impact on young women's career progression

- Many young women told us that they had left roles or changed careers completely as a result of discrimination.
- Young women who have experienced discrimination describe finding it difficult to trust – especially when they have experienced discrimination from managers.
- Young women are more careful about which employers they work for as a result.
- The impact on career progression was felt particularly strongly for young women at the start of their careers.

“It makes you not really want to talk to people in the workplace, because you don't know who to trust, and that's really quite significant. Because of the comments that were being made. I kind of kept myself to myself, which has an impact on things like promotions. Salary rises are somewhat also dependent on you making good connections, like, and relationships within the workplace to get them.”

| Interview participant

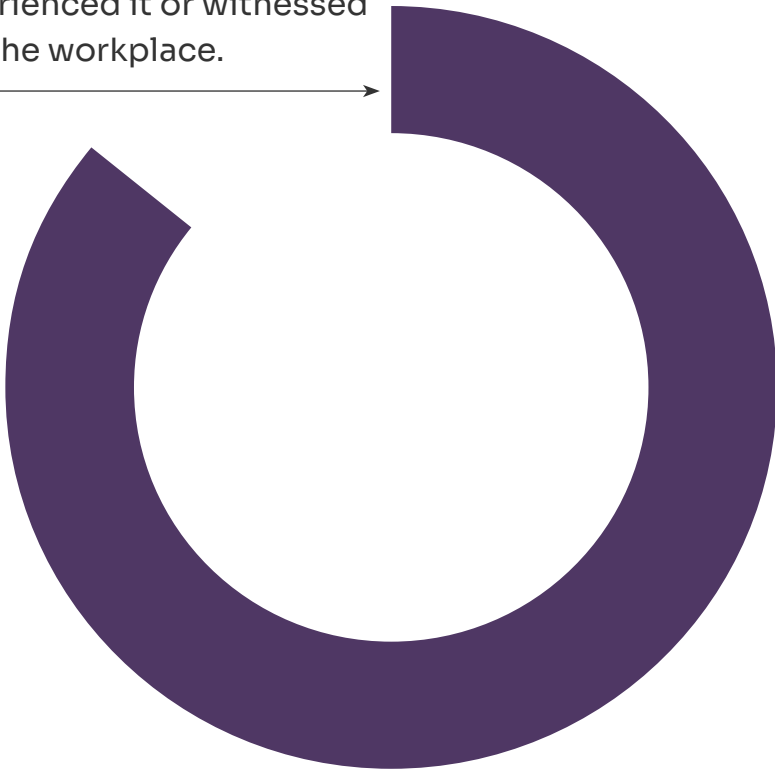
“When you work in a school, people ask you about your progression. And I'm just completely adamant I will never be senior leadership. And I think it's probably because of my experience with seniors. You know, I don't I don't want anything to do with that kind of thing.”

| Interview participant

Discrimination experienced by young women often goes unreported

86%

of young women feel they'd be able to **recognise discrimination** if they experienced it or witnessed it in the workplace.

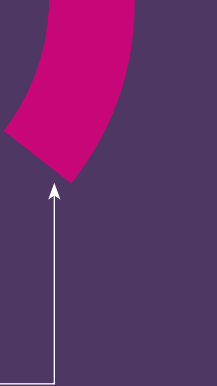


But young women, especially those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or in insecure work, told us that they were too scared to report their experiences of discrimination due to the fear of losing their job or the impact on their career.

25% of young women would not feel comfortable to challenge or report discrimination, compared to **17%** of young men.



32% of young women with a **long-term mental health condition** and **neurodiverse young women** would not feel comfortable to challenge or report discrimination in the workplace.



Young women often minimised their experiences of discrimination or were afraid of not being taken seriously

“It was a lot harder to get taken seriously, because I was afraid of being sacked, or getting worse comments if I had reported them. Then they probably would have tried to turn the whole gym against me. And then I would have no clients and everything like that.”

| Interview participant

“And, yeah, I think I was just, you know, I don’t want to, I don’t want to cause trouble. I don’t want to make things more difficult for myself, you know, I don’t want to speak up and get a target put on my back, you know, for being argumentative or difficult or whatever. So I thought, just shut up, don’t say anything.”

| Interview participant

These fears were often well founded

- Responses to reports of discrimination were often invalidating
- Young women told us they were frequently made to feel bad for raising a concern
- Some young women who reported discrimination were advised to leave rather than trying to find a solution
- The majority of young women told us that no or little very action was taken as a result of them reporting their experiences of discrimination.
- However on the rare occasions when young women were taken seriously, this was very powerful and validating experience.



“If you try and raise a complaint, you just get quite a sarcastic comment, or you’re not taken seriously. And if you raise issues, you’re seen as a troublemaker. And if you get seen as a troublemaker, then they want you out of the organisation. So when I raise concerns they say ‘if you don’t like it, you can leave?’ Yeah. That’s not the solution. Yes. I mean, surely we should be working together on how can we make things better?”

| Interview participant

Young women are not always aware of how to report discrimination

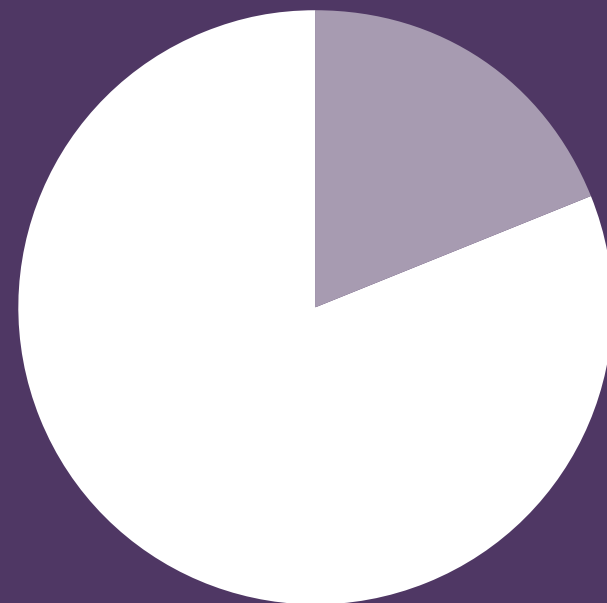
Many young women told us that they did not know how to formally report discrimination and were not aware of any policies relating to it in the organisation where they experienced discriminatory behaviour.

Many of those who reported the discrimination they experienced did so through informal channels but would have preferred a clear, confidential reporting process for reporting and dealing with discrimination.

The majority of employers who took our survey told us that their organisation had clear policies and processes for reporting discrimination – many of these through independent and/or anonymous channel.

67% of employers said information about how to report discrimination was 'quite easy' or 'very easy' to find.

However, when asked what could be improved, employers most frequently told us that more **clarity, visibility** and **independence** would improve their processes.



19%

of young women **don't know their rights** in relation to workplace discrimination.

Policies are often unclear or not acted upon

Young women who were aware of diversity and inclusion policies in their organisation told us that these **often were confusing, unclear or only covered the 'bare minimum'**.

Many young women felt that **policies were not adhered to or were not reflected in the culture of their organisation**. This was particularly true of those working in larger (typically retail) organisations.



“I think we’ve got an EDI policy, but it’s kind of like a work in progress still. I mean, I’ve been here for like two years, so it’s still progressing.”

| Interview participant

Both young women and employers told us that there are a lack of policies/processes that tackle or respond to microaggressions.

Employers told us that key barriers to tackling and preventing discrimination against young women in their organisations included:

Changing an **embedded culture of misogyny and sexism**.

Resistance to change and lack of buy in from the top – particularly in male dominated industries.

Financial constraints and lack of resource.

60%

of employers told us that their organisation has **measures in place to prevent discrimination** and create a fair and equitable environment for young women.

However, **25%** told us that they don't think these are effective.

13% don't know how effective they are.

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN?

Stronger processes for reporting and tackling discrimination

- Employers often have policies dealing with discrimination in place. But they should ensure these are made more visible.
- They should consult with young women as they develop these policies.
- When discrimination happens there should be clear consequences.

Workplace cultures where discrimination is challenged

- Culture change has to be led from the top. Young women want to see a clear message from leadership down that discrimination is not OK, and that challenging it is encouraged.
- All colleagues should be encouraged to call out discrimination when it happens, including more subtle discrimination that's too often dismissed as 'banter'. This could be communicated at induction, to set the tone.
- There should be training and education for all managers about preventing and addressing discrimination.
- Managers and senior staff need to create cultures of openness and transparency, with open door policies allowing young women to raise worries and concerns informally as well as formally.

Better support for people who have faced discrimination

- Young women want and need more information about their rights and support with challenging and reporting discrimination when it happens.
- They also need more support with rebuilding their confidence and planning their next steps after discrimination has happened.
- Employers could create opportunities for peer networking for young women and others from marginalised groups, to share experiences and support each other.

CONTINUED

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN CONTINUED...

Preventing discrimination through fairer recruitment, pay and progression

- Employers should have transparent policies in place to ensure that recruitment and promotions are done in a fair and inclusive way. This includes having clear pay bands and progression routes, and showing the salary in all job adverts.



“To be open and transparent, I mean genuinely open and transparent and to be more approachable and open to being challenged and to answer questions. To have more stable managers that can actually cope with and encouraging of being challenged .”

| Interview participant



“Yeah, just letting young women know their rights. Like, giving them the courage and the skills to stand up for their rights. Like even just saying no. Sometimes at work, you know. And giving them the power and the confidence to say, like, No, I have the right to say no, or No, I don't support that. No, I'm not going to accept that. ”

| Interview participant



““I think it's important to have regular training. Once you are hired, you usually do an EDI training and you read a couple of policies, but you're so overwhelmed with all of the new bits of information. So, I think actually, like an annual EDI test would be really good and maybe regular, like quarterly or twice a year meetings, where you'd send a whole staff team to a webinar where they encourage you to think about EDI and how to like have a more fair and diverse and tolerant workplace.”

| Interview participant

ADVICE FOR YOUNG WOMEN

Our peer researchers asked the young women they interviewed what advice they would give to other young women experiencing discrimination in the workplace. Here's what they said:

Look after your mental health – even if this means removing yourself from the situation

Get support

Don't be afraid to speak up

Don't dismiss your feelings – they are valid

“Keep speaking up to share your experiences and do whatever it takes, however small however big, however much you can. Speak up about it, report it, do what you can. And the more people that are doing it is the more awareness it is bringing.”

| Interview participant

“First of all, I will tell them that it's not in their head. Like, I believe it, I see it, I stand with them. And that it is a fight that you've got to keep fighting it like, it's a fight that you can't just give up on because of the how hard the journey is, or how long the journey is gonna take. It is a long road to change the way people have been living and having their views for many, many years. But it doesn't mean necessarily, because it's going to take years and years and years for people to change their attitudes that you must stop addressing it, stop doing things about it”

| Interview participant

“Staying, and making change is not in your best interest sometimes. I mean, sometimes it is, but sometimes it's better to leave and make a complaint, you know. And understand that you don't have to change. You, like, you don't have to fight against it and endure it. Like sometimes, it's ok just to walk away or find something else. You know, just take yourself out of the situation. The most important thing is your own mental health.”

| Interview participant



RESEARCH CENTRE

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