

Living precariously: young women's experiences of insecure work

March 2025

Foreword

My name is Elspeth, and I am a peer researcher with Young Women's Trust.

Talking to young women and non-binary people about their experiences of insecure work has been a privilege, but one that I wish was not necessary.

Throughout the research, I was incredibly moved by the openness of everybody who participated. Every story was unique, yet many shared the same underlying feelings: stress, anxiety and uncertainty about the future. When you're unsure of when you will next be needed for work, whether you'll be employed within a month, or if you will be paid in time for the next bill, it's incredibly difficult to plan the future that you want. The impacts of insecure work are vast, affecting young women's mental health, relationships and finances.

One of the findings that stuck out to me is how the culture within insecure work allows for discrimination to go unchallenged. Almost half of young women do not feel able to challenge workplace discrimination due to repercussions such as losing work or having their hours reduced. Alarming, over a quarter of young women report putting up with sexual harassment in the workplace due to these fears. This emphasises the core theme of our report: insecure work is a feminist issue and deserves to be treated as such.



Elspeth Oakley, Peer Researcher,
Young Women's Trust

Despite our findings, I remain positive. I am constantly inspired by the people we speak to and how, despite everybody's unique situations, we all want change. Our report demonstrates that change is not just increased pay. It must start earlier, with young women given greater chances to explore the opportunities available to them, and information about how to challenge injustice within the workplace. Young women have so much to offer, and I hope this report highlights how change within this area can benefit everybody.

Elspeth Oakley
Peer Researcher, Young Women's Trust

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Executive summary

Insecure work is tough for everyone. Both young men and young women face low pay, unpredictable hours and earnings, and unfair and illegal practices.

Young women are more exposed to the challenges of insecure work because they are more likely to work in sectors where job insecurity is high. They are paid less, work fewer hours and endure last minute shift changes – putting them under financial and emotional pressure. For some, the flexibility, culture and autonomy of insecure work is appealing. However, for most, the negatives greatly outweigh the positives, with many young women left feeling disposable, undervalued and unprotected in insecure roles.

For many young women, taking on insecure work doesn't feel like a choice. A need for immediate income and a lack of other options is driving young women into insecure roles and keeping them trapped there. The increased flexibility of insecure work is appealing to many, but for some it is a necessity. And it comes at a cost. Young women who need a high level of flexibility in order to work at all are earning less, missing out on progression opportunities and working in stressful environments – just to remain in employment.

Discriminatory practices are more common in insecure work. Many don't feel able to challenge discriminatory behaviour and unfair treatment due to a fear of negative repercussions from their employer, including missing out on work. The high power imbalance in insecure work means that the stakes associated with reporting discrimination are high, and levels of trust are low. Even when young women do report unfair practice, meaningful action or follow up is rare. Young women's awareness of their rights

whilst working in insecure work is also low. These factors lead to a cycle of silence and acceptance which allows discrimination and unfair practice to continue unchallenged.

Young women are more likely to feel trapped in insecure work than young men, and less likely to have the support and access to opportunities for skills development they need to move on from insecure work. For young women with caring responsibilities, chronic illnesses and disabled or neurodivergent young women, insecure work is even more of a trap, as they struggle to find the flexibility they need in secure roles.

Insecure work has a negative impact on young women's mental health, levels of job satisfaction, wellbeing at work and self-belief. Worries about remaining stuck in low paid and low skilled insecure work can leave them feeling anxious, unable to plan for the future and less optimistic about their future careers.

So, what can be done about it? Whilst many young women said better pay in insecure work would help, it is by no means a fix-all. Young women want more rights and protections in insecure work, better enforcement of their legal rights, more opportunities for progression, and greater access to support – both within insecure work and to help them move on.

But insecure work is not the only thing that needs to change; young women are calling for employers to offer more flexible and part-time permanent positions, so that less of them feel forced into insecure work or end up stuck there.

Background & introduction

Our data tells us that worries about job security amongst young women are on the rise.

Every year, Young Women's Trust conducts an annual survey of a representative sample of around 4,000 young women and 1,000 young men, to help us understand their experiences of work and finances.

Almost two fifths (38%) were worried about job security in 2024 compared to a third (33%) in 2022 and almost 7 in 10 (68%) told us that they would like more regular or predictable working hours, compared to just over three fifths (62%) in 2022.

3.9m

UK working women are in severely insecure work

Insecure work is more common amongst women, younger people, racially minoritised people and people from working class backgrounds, and tends to be concentrated in the hospitality, retail and construction industries.¹ Our research shows that young women are more likely to have been offered a zero-hours contract than young men – 40% of young women in our 2024 survey, compared to 35% of young men.

Previous research suggests that people working in insecure jobs have lower job satisfaction, higher levels of anxiety, a sense of worthlessness, and are more likely to drop out of the labour market. Insecure work can create a culture of fear and uncertainty amongst employees, centred

around concerns about predictable or guaranteed hours, being laid off and a lack of financial stability.² For women in particular, the combination of low paid, insecure work leaves them more susceptible to ending up in poverty.³

Research by the Work Foundation examining the long-term effects of insecure work has shown that around four in ten (44%) workers fall into 'long-term insecurity' – remaining or becoming trapped in insecure work over a period of time, and that the biggest enabler to entering more secure roles is the ability to switch sector⁴. For young women, who are more likely to be working in sectors with high levels of job insecurity, this risk of becoming 'trapped' is high.

In this research, we wanted to understand more about the gendered nature of insecure work through an in-depth exploration of the experiences of young women in insecure roles. Only by centring the stories of young women and holding space for the complexity of their experiences can we begin to build an understanding of the changes and solutions needed to improve the working lives of thousands of young women trapped in job insecurity.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- ✓ How are young women experiencing insecure work compared to young men?
- ✓ What drives young women into insecure work?
- ✓ What is the relationship between insecure work and discriminatory practices and behaviours?
- ✓ What are the short and long term impacts of insecure work on young women?
- ✓ What could be different – what are the solutions?

DEFINITIONS

In this research, insecure work is defined as work that meets at least one of the following criteria⁵:

Non-permanent work
(casual, seasonal jobs, fixed-term and agency work)

Unpredictable pay or hours

Low paid⁶ self-employed / freelance work.

Zero-hours contracts (no specified minimum hours per week)

Underemployed (less than 16 hours per week with a desire to work more)

Our qualitative research also includes the experiences of young women with limited awareness of their employment status, those working without a contract and those working multiple insecure jobs concurrently.

METHODOLOGY

The research adopted a mixed methods approach which was co-designed and conducted in collaboration with our peer researchers.

At the start of the project we undertook a literature review to help us refine our research questions. Fieldwork was carried out in October and November 2024 and consisted of:

- ✓ A survey of 1,004 young women and non-binary people and 1,006 young men aged 18–30 living in England and Wales with experience of working in insecure roles within the last five years
- ✓ 2 in-person focus groups in London and Birmingham
- ✓ An online discussion forum
- ✓ Voice note submissions
- ✓ Remote interviews.

Young Women's Trust commissioned an external research partner, Censuswide, to conduct our quantitative survey. All of the qualitative fieldwork was facilitated by peer researchers, supported by YWT's research team. In total, 45 young women and non-binary people participated in the qualitative elements of the research.

OUR PEER RESEARCH APPROACH

At Young Women's Trust our peer researchers are at the heart of all our research. As experts in their own experience, empowering them to conduct the research on issues that concern them is crucial to creating meaningful research which catalyses change. Our peer researchers are all young women or people of marginalised genders with a diverse range of backgrounds, skills and experiences of work. We train them to equip them with the skills they need and support them to shape and conduct research with other young women to understand the challenges they face and the solutions they want to see.

A NOTE ON GENDER DIVERSITY

At Young Women's Trust we tackle sexism and misogyny, with and for anyone who has experienced this – including trans women and non-binary people.

We welcome all young women and people of marginalised gender identities in our work, and our research includes the experiences of trans young women and non-binary people. Whilst we aim to highlight the specific experiences of these distinct communities where relevant, for the sake of brevity we refer collectively to this group as 'young women' throughout this report.

Key findings

1

HOW ARE YOUNG WOMEN EXPERIENCING INSECURE WORK COMPARED TO YOUNG MEN?

SUMMARY

Insecure work is tough for everyone. Both young men and young women face low pay, unpredictable hours and earnings, and unfair and illegal practices. Young women are particularly exposed to these negative experiences because they are more likely to work in industries where job insecurity is high. They are paid less, work fewer hours and endure last minute shift changes – putting them under financial and emotional pressure.

For some, the flexibility, autonomy and culture of insecure work is appealing and insecure work can offer a positive experience. However, for most, the negatives greatly outweigh the positives with many young women feeling disposable, undervalued and unprotected in insecure roles.

Young women are more likely to be working in insecure roles in low paid sectors than young men. Retail was the most common industry for insecure work amongst both young women (26%) and young men (27%) who responded to our survey. However, young women were more likely to be employed in insecure contracts in hospitality, health and social care and education – some of the lowest paying sectors in the UK⁷.

Industry	Young women	Young men
Hospitality	24%	12%
Health & Social Care	13%	8%
Education	8%	7%

TABLE 1: % of young men and young women working in insecure roles in low paid sectors

1. EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG WOMEN AND YOUNG MEN

Young women work fewer hours than young men in insecure work. In our survey, the largest proportion of both young women and men report working between 9 and 15 hours per week. However, as the number of working hours increases, the number of young women working decreases relative to young men. In contrast, more young women report working 8 hours or less – 25% of young women compared to 15% of young men.

25%

of young women in insecure work are working less than 8 hours a week, compared to 15% of young men

Young women in insecure roles are paid less than young men – and for both young men and young women, the younger they are the less they are paid. The majority of young women and young men are paid between £11 and £15 per hour. However, young women are less likely than young men to earn more than £15 an hour and far more likely to earn between £5 and £10 per hour. The majority of young people who told us they earned up to £10 an hour were 18 year and 19 year olds – 46% of young women and 34% of young men in this age category. This is explained by the lower National Living Wage rate for 18-20 year olds, which, at the time of writing, is £8.60 per hour, compared to £11.44 per hour for those over 21.

Whilst the number of younger women (aged 18 and 19) who responded to our survey was slightly higher than younger men (14% of young women compared to 11%) the lower levels of pay amongst young women can be better explained by the overrepresentation of young women in low paid sectors.

FIGURE 1: Number of hours worked in insecure work by gender.

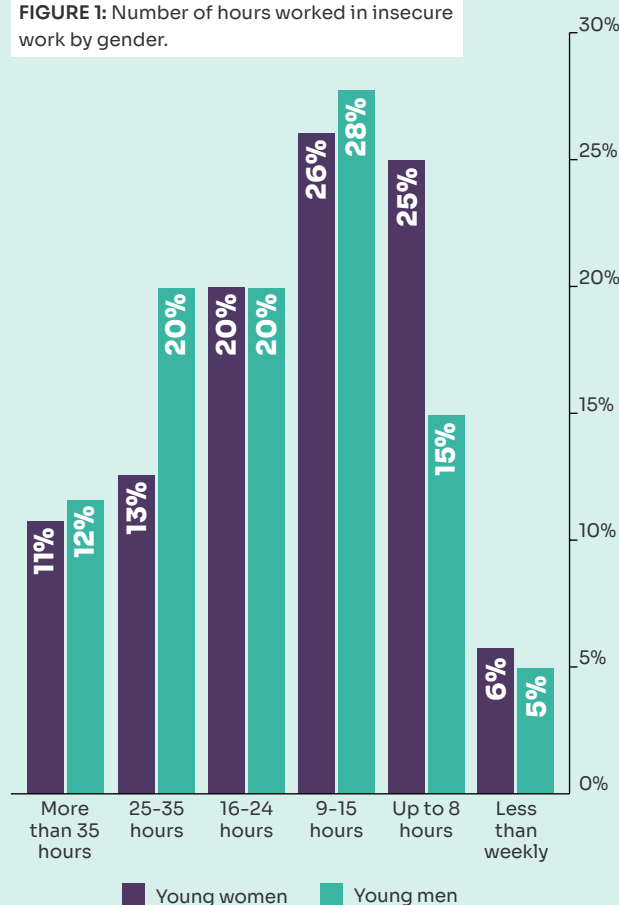
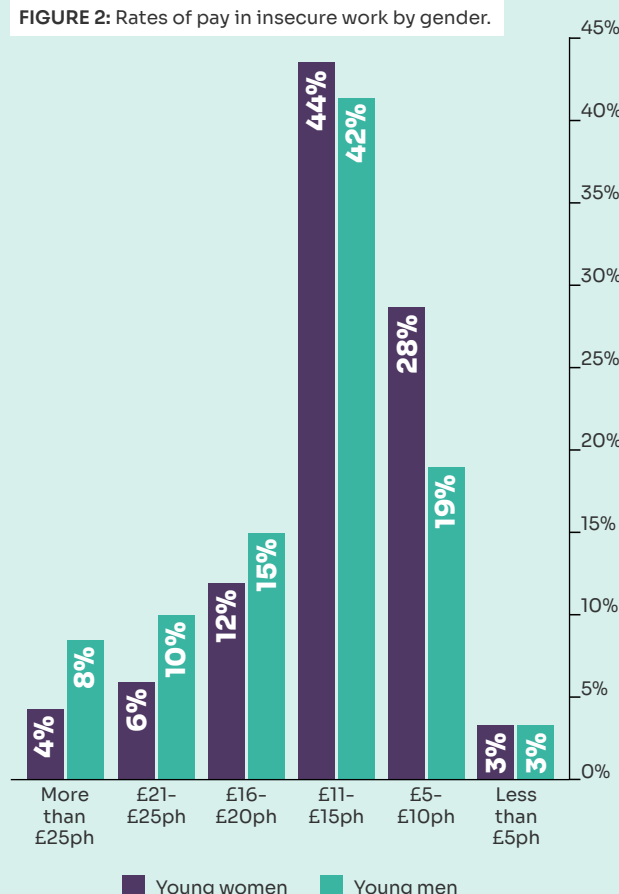


FIGURE 2: Rates of pay in insecure work by gender.

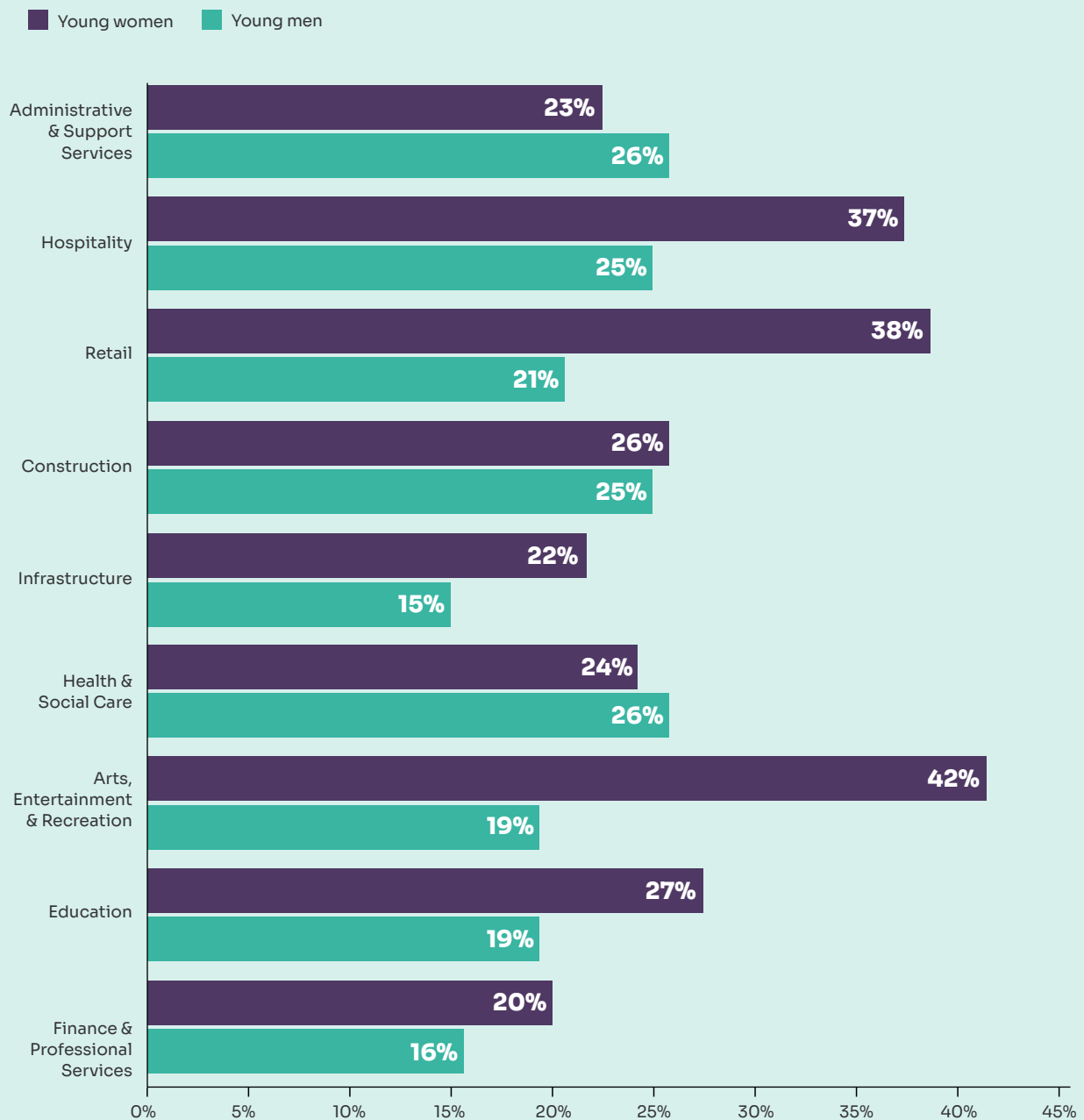


1. EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG WOMEN AND YOUNG MEN

The retail and hospitality industries employ the highest numbers of young women in insecure contracts on the lowest rates of pay.

- ★ In retail, 38% of young women told us they earned up to £10 per hour, compared to just 21% of young men.
- ★ And in hospitality, 37% of young women told us they earned up to £10 per hour, compared to 25% of young men.

FIGURE 3: Percentage of young men and young women earning less than £10 an hour by sector.



1. EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG WOMEN AND YOUNG MEN

A greater proportion of young men are able to work remotely in insecure jobs than young women. More than 2 in 5 (42%) of young men told us that they have/had the option to work remotely whilst in insecure work, compared to just a third (33%) of young women. Again, this appears to be down to differences within sectors. Having the option to work remotely was least likely amongst those working in hospitality (22%) and retail (33%) – sectors where we know large numbers of young women are employed on insecure contracts. This presents additional challenges for certain groups of young women (e.g. those with childcare responsibilities, disabled or chronically ill young women, neurodivergent young women) for whom flexible ways of working are often a necessity.

Unfair and illegal practices are common in insecure work – for both young men and young women.

- ★ Over 3 in 5 (61%) of respondents had been given less than a weeks' notice on shifts, hours or work schedules (including cancellations), and 44% had been given less than 24 hours' notice.
- ★ Over half (51%) had worked more hours than they were contracted for or had agreed.
- ★ Almost half (48%) had not received pay when off sick.
- ★ 46% had been paid late or at inconsistent times.
- ★ 44% have worked a trial shift for free.
- ★ Over 2 in 5 (42%) had been paid cash in hand or employed without a contract.

A third (33%) of young women and 37% of young men who took our survey told us that they had been paid less than the minimum wage they were entitled to whilst working in insecure work. This compares to just over a fifth (22%) of young women and a fifth (20%) of young men across all forms of employment who told us this in our [2024 Annual Survey](#). This suggests that illegal practices are more prevalent in insecure work.

3 in 10 (30%) of young people who took our survey told us that they had been dismissed unfairly or without reason whilst working in insecure work. This was also a prominent theme amongst young women who took part in our qualitative research – with many telling us they felt powerless to take action.



I've been let go from temp jobs and felt I had no right to question it because I put myself in an insecure position."



I have often been given very little or no notice – I once got let go from a job while on holiday abroad. This has happened to me multiple times, so from the first instance I since asked managers for decent notice of termination to allow me time for look for new jobs but it's happened again and again. It's demoralising and has made me feel I wasn't good enough."



1. EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG WOMEN AND YOUNG MEN

Although typically contracted for fewer hours than young men, young women are more likely to work more hours than agreed, and the pressure to do this is high.

Over half (54%) of young women said they had worked more hours than they were contracted for, compared to 48% of young men. Young women expressed that long and intense hours were exhausting and could lead to burn-out, with many sharing stories of lengthy or back-to-back shifts.

54%

of young women have worked more hours than they were contracted for, compared to 48% of young men

Young women are also more likely to have their shifts changed or cancelled or be offered work at short notice. Almost half (49%) of young women had been given less than 24 hours' notice of shifts, hours or work schedules (including cancellations) compared to 39% of young men. This was higher for young women across all types of insecure work and, perhaps unsurprisingly, was most common amongst those working in hospitality (59%), health and social care (54%) and retail (51%). This is a key source of financial and emotional stress for young women in insecure work.

Young women who took part in our qualitative research told us about the anxiety of waiting for 'the call' to be offered last minute shifts. Those with financial pressures felt obliged to take up every shift offered, even if this made it difficult for them to balance work with other responsibilities. Several young women also raised concerns about the implications of turning down shifts, feeling that saying no might result in a reduction in the number of shifts they were offered in future or could lead to them being contacted less often or not at all. Some worried that turning down shifts would harm their relationships with other staff or managers or lead to company benefits being revoked.

There were many examples of how bad shift and rota management could also create a poor working culture and conditions. Having to deal with last minute changes often leads to understaffing, which creates overwhelm for young women who may then have to cover multiple roles, work longer shifts or change their work location.



I ended up working in social care. I did 24 hour shifts – 10am to 10am the next day. That was awful, horrendous.”



It was just very... ruthless – or a bit cutthroat in a way, that your rota could just be changed.”



They shoved me into that role very last minute, telling me that ‘oh, X person hasn’t come in... we trust you and believe you can handle it.’ – I had a full on mental breakdown”.



1. EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG WOMEN AND YOUNG MEN

While some young women spoke about the positives of working in insecure work, for most, the negatives greatly outweighed them.

The positive aspects of insecure work were centred around three key themes:

Flexibility

Greater autonomy

A sense of community

Young women working whilst studying were particularly positive about the flexibility and additional income that insecure work offered them, as well as the ability to move quickly from one role to the next. Those working in freelance or self-employed roles also appreciated the sense of agency in their work and valued the ability to choose their work based on a number of factors, including what they found most interesting.

Interestingly, a number of young women highlighted the sense of community they felt in insecure work, which they hadn't always experienced in more secure (typically office based) workplaces, where they described the culture as 'toxic'. This was particularly noted amongst racially minoritised young women working in health and social care who felt that there was more diversity in this type of work and a greater sense of acceptance and 'looking out for each other'. This adds to a growing body of evidence which suggests that traditional workplaces are not serving the needs of people from minoritised communities, and may at least partially explain the overrepresentation of people from minoritised backgrounds in insecure work, where the trade-off can be costly.



I enjoyed the community and team work but it was physically demanding and I worked very late and long hours. My sleeping and physical health has definitely improved since leaving."



1. EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG WOMEN AND YOUNG MEN

Young women told us they often feel undervalued and isolated in insecure work.

Young women working alongside staff on permanent or more secure contracts shared stories of feeling like an outsider and many young women working in all types of insecure contract expressed not feeling part of a team. Ever-changing work patterns and the uncertainty of shifts creates a sense of being disposable, and the absence of professional development or opportunities for progression points to the lack of investment in staff.

Young women employed on fixed-term contracts or in agency work particularly highlighted the tension that could occur between temporary and permanent staff. Many felt that, as temporary workers, permanent staff weren't interested in getting to know them, which made it difficult to communicate or work together effectively. Others described being excluded from team events, social occasions and training opportunities.



They don't look at you like someone who is a part of the team. I'd been there for three quarters of the year, and I wasn't allowed to the Christmas party because I was a temp."



A lack of financial protection in insecure work creates additional pressure and affects young women's ability to plan for the future.

Young women highlighted a number of specific challenges associated with insecure work which could often leave them struggling financially:

- ★ Limited or no access to holiday or sick pay can leave young women feeling unable to take days off which often leads to burn-out.
- ★ No reimbursement for expenses (e.g. work-related travel) adds extra financial pressure to young women already on low pay.
- ★ Lack of maternity pay can impact young women's decisions about starting a family.
- ★ No clear recourse to legal support if payment is not received for completed work.
- ★ Unclear tax processes and a lack of support/guidance in relation to self-assessment creates stress and can lead to unexpected outgoings or fines.
- ★ Lack of stable income can limit options for housing (both with regards to home ownership and renting) and makes it difficult to make long-term financial decisions.
- ★ Juggling multiple insecure roles and managing diaries requires emotional and administrative labour, which takes up unpaid time.

1. EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG WOMEN AND YOUNG MEN

Different types of insecure work can bring different challenges:

Contract type	Key challenges
Agency work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ★ Poor relationships between agency workers and permanent staff creates a sense of isolation and challenging working conditions. ★ Lack of direct line management can lead to over- or under-work. ★ Concerns that pay deductions for agency services can result in a lower salary without any of the benefits associated with a permanent role.
Zero-hours contracts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ★ Last minute shift changes or cancellations without payment. ★ Anxiety about when and how much work will be offered. ★ Pressure to accept every shift offered. ★ Concern that turning down shifts will negatively affect access to future work.
Fixed-term contracts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ★ Uncertainty about contract length or potential to be offered a permanent contract. ★ Pressure to overperform in order to prove that a permanent contract is 'deserved'. ★ Always having to think about the 'next step' - which often means working whilst applying for jobs and navigating the emotional labour of uncertainty. ★ Changing priorities and financial positions amongst employers means that 'promised' contract extensions or permanent positions aren't always honoured.
Self-employed or freelance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ★ Being paid late or not at all makes it difficult to plan and leaves young women financially vulnerable. ★ No clear recourse to challenge employers when payment isn't received. ★ Lack of pay transparency in the freelance community means young women often undersell their services. ★ Feelings of isolation and loneliness. ★ High levels of unpaid labour associated with finding work can be particularly challenging for young women with limited financial resources or access to networks.

WHAT DRIVES YOUNG WOMEN INTO INSECURE WORK?

SUMMARY

For many young women, taking on insecure work doesn't feel like a choice. A need for immediate income and a lack of other options is driving young women into insecure roles and keeping them trapped there.

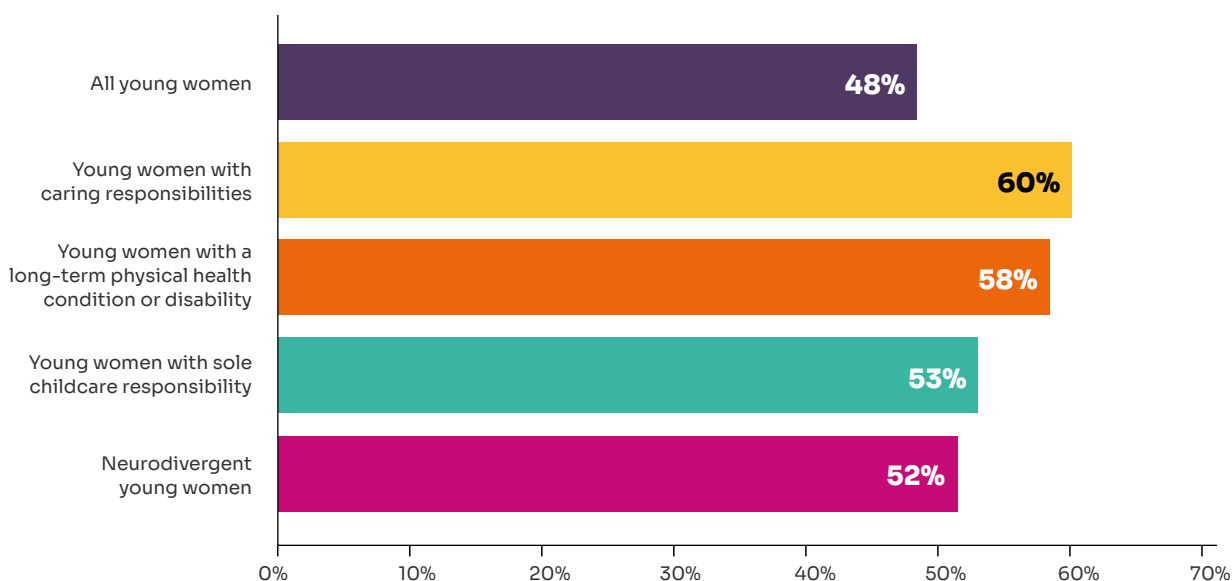
The increased flexibility of insecure work is appealing to many, but for some it is a necessity. And it comes at a cost. Young women who need a high level of flexibility in order to work at all are earning less, missing out on progression opportunities and working in stressful environments – just to remain in employment.

Many young women take on insecure work as a way of meeting their immediate financial needs. Needing to find work quickly was the most common reason given by both young men and young women for taking on insecure work – 3 in 10 (30%) young women and just over a quarter (26%) of young men said this was the case. Over a quarter (27%) of young men and young women said they took on insecure work to support their financial needs.

For some, insecure work offers the opportunity to make extra money quickly. But for many, it isn't a choice. Almost a quarter (23%) of young women who took our survey told us that they took on insecure work because there was nothing else available.

And nearly half (48%) of young women told us that they had felt forced into insecure work because of their needs. For young women with caring responsibilities, chronic illnesses and disabled or neurodivergent young women, this is even higher.

FIGURE 4: Percentage of young women who have felt forced into insecure work because of their needs.



2. DRIVERS

Insecure work is often seen as a ‘normal’ part of career development. In particular sectors such as arts, healthcare and law, insecure contracts are common but can leave young women feeling unprotected and uncertain about their futures. Others described the competitive nature of application processes, with many turning to insecure work as a ‘stop-gap’ whilst attempting to find permanent work in their chosen field. However, balancing the challenges of insecure work and other responsibilities often meant young women struggled to commit the time and mental energy needed to secure a permanent or more desirable role.

For many young women, flexibility is not just a preference, but a necessity. Young women in education rely on the flexibility of insecure work to fit around their studies. But for many disabled or neurodivergent young women, as well as those with chronic health conditions or caring responsibilities, traditional workplaces just aren’t meeting their needs. Insecure work offers a level of flexibility that young women often aren’t able to access in permanent work – but it comes at a cost. Young women from minoritised communities are more likely to miss out on progression opportunities, experience discrimination and end up stuck in low paid work because there are limited options for meaningful and fulfilling work that fits their needs.

Young women often feel under pressure to work. They often take on insecure work to avoid criticism from family, because they are worried about being a financial burden, or because they are worried about the implications of having gaps on their CV if they aren’t working. There is a sense that ‘any job’ is better than not having a job at all, and when permanent positions are limited and young women feel pressurised to find work quickly, insecure work can often feel like the only option.



The work roles that exist do not accommodate or tailor to me. So when I do find work that fits my needs I take it – even if it is low hours, low pay, low support and no chance of progression.”



I just needed to find something quite quickly. And that [insecure work] honestly seemed like the only option at the time. Also, not wanting to have any gaps in my employment. And family and friends as well – you don’t want to disappoint them. You don’t want them to worry that you’re struggling.”



WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INSECURE WORK AND DISCRIMINATORY PRACTICES AND BEHAVIOURS?

SUMMARY

Both young men and young women are more exposed to discrimination in insecure work than secure work. But young women feel less able to challenge discriminatory behaviour and unfair treatment due to a fear of negative repercussions from their employer.

The high power imbalance in insecure work means that the stakes associated with reporting discrimination are high, and levels of trust are low. Even when reports are made, meaningful action or follow up is rare and the consequences can be detrimental. Young women's awareness of their rights whilst working in insecure work is also low. These factors lead to a cycle of silence and acceptance which allows discrimination and unfair practice to continue unchallenged.

Our data suggests that both young men and young women are at greater risk of facing discrimination in insecure work. More than 3 in 5 (68%) young men and young women told us that they had been discriminated against whilst working in insecure work. In our [2024 Annual Survey](#), over half (53%) of young women and 2 in 5 (40%) of young men had experienced discrimination across all forms of employment.



The manager was very discriminatory. She would make personal comments about me being too thin. And racist comments – judging me about my background. And the supervisor would also discriminate against me based on age.”

Shockingly, almost 4 in 5 (79%) of racially minoritised young men and women have experienced discrimination whilst working in insecure work. This compares to just over three fifths (61%) of racially minoritised young women who told us they had experienced discrimination in our Annual Survey. This is particularly concerning given that people from racially minoritised backgrounds are more likely than White British workers to experience severely insecure work¹⁰ – with racially minoritised women (26%) being the group most likely to be in severely insecure work among all worker groups¹¹.

3. DISCRIMINATION

Disabled workers – another group who are amongst those most likely to be in severely insecure work – also experience shockingly high levels of discrimination. 86% of young men and women with a long-term physical health condition or disability have experienced discrimination whilst working in insecure work. Young women are slightly more likely to experience discrimination as a direct result of their disability. Almost 3 in 10 (28%) of disabled young women have been discriminated against because of a physical health condition or disability compared to just over a fifth (21%) of young men.

Young women are more likely to experience discrimination on the grounds of their sex and age. Over 3 in 20 (16%) of young women have experienced sex-based discrimination whilst working in insecure work, compared to half (8%) the number of young men. Almost a fifth (19%) of young women in insecure work have experienced discrimination because of their age – but this is less than the almost 3 in 10 (28%) who told us they had experienced age related discrimination across all types of employment in our [2024 Annual Survey](#). This is perhaps due to the higher numbers of young people in workplaces where insecure work is common.

Young women are often treated differently to their male colleagues and are more exposed to sexualisation in insecure roles. In our qualitative research, young women described feeling under pressure to present in a highly feminised way, particularly when working in retail or hospitality. Some discussed how roles that overtly sexualise women, e.g. certain sales events, are often better paid, leaving them in uncomfortable positions and vulnerable to harassment. One focus group participant described an experience of working at a vape event, where she was required to wear sexualised clothing and expected to behave flirtatiously towards male customers to encourage sales.



The university that I work for is supposed to be doing a lot in terms of accessibility for people with disabilities and health conditions, and I'm just not seeing that reflected. And part of me feels like it's because I'm not an employee – I'm a temporary contract worker, that they feel like they don't have to. It's like the same rules don't apply for me, because I'm only going to be here for eight weeks anyway."



3. DISCRIMINATION

Young women are less likely to feel comfortable challenging their employer when they experience unfair treatment. Nearly half (47%) of young women agreed or strongly agreed that they don't feel confident to challenge discrimination when working in insecure work, compared to 44% of young men. One of the main reasons for this reluctance was due to concerns about being let go or not getting the hours they needed if they raised an issue with their employer:

- ★ **Almost half (45%) of young women have put up with unfair treatment whilst working in insecure work because they were worried about not getting the hours they needed if they challenged it.**
- ★ **Almost two in five (37%) have put up with an unsafe work environment.**
- ★ **Over a quarter (26%) have put up with sexual harassment for the same reason.**



It's a zero hour contract. They don't have to give me work. So I feel like if I say something that upsets them or pisses them off, they're just not going to give me work."

Young women also described toxic work environments where discrimination and harassment were commonplace. This leads to further reluctance to report or challenge unfair or harmful treatment, for fear of being dismissed or not taken seriously.



I wouldn't have known where or who to go to, to challenge any discrimination or breach of my rights. I probably wouldn't have felt confident enough either."



I was sexually assaulted by one of my colleagues, and that had happened around a context of sexual harassment being very, very commonplace and normalised to the point that, you know, you feel silly for calling it out, because it was just so laughed off by everybody."



3. DISCRIMINATION

Levels of trust in insecure work are low, which leaves young women feeling isolated, vulnerable and unsure where to turn for support. Many young women described a sense of feeling ‘disposable’ or like ‘an outsider’ in insecure work which left them struggling to form positive relationships with colleagues and managers and therefore less likely to voice their concerns. Trust was a common theme that emerged in our qualitative research – young women expressed a lack of trust within their teams and a scepticism of HR, meaning that their confidence in a positive outcome if they reported unfair practice was low. Young women told us they were also reluctant to devote time and energy to the process of making a complaint or filing a report when they did not plan to stay in the role long-term. High staff turnover is common in insecure work and contributes to discriminatory practices going unchecked.

Many young women don’t have the information they need about their rights at work. A lack of knowledge or understanding about what employees on insecure contracts are entitled to is another factor that contributes to the underreporting of discrimination and unfair treatment.

★ **Almost half (48%) of young women told us that they don’t know their rights when working in insecure work.**

★ **Almost the same number (45%) said they did not know where to find the information they needed.**

This is despite the majority (86%) reporting having accessed or attempted to access information about their rights at work, predominantly through informal sources such as Google (37%), social media (31%) and friends, family or colleagues (30%). Our data suggests a lack of clear, easily accessible information which would support young women in insecure work to understand and advocate for their rights.



I just remember feeling like, this doesn’t feel right. But then I was also the only person in the team that was Muslim... there’s no one else in my team that I can speak to.”



I kind of thought, or a few people had even said to me, after two years, you’re entitled to certain things. You’ve got more rights than you did before. But I haven’t really been able to find out any information about that.”

3. DISCRIMINATION

When young women do report discrimination, they are often dismissed or ignored. Many described instances of reporting serious instances of discrimination or harassment to their managers, only to receive no further follow up.

For some young women, it is easier to leave a job than deal with the stress and rigmarole of pursuing a complaint. Young women in our qualitative research described how, despite approaching Acas and receiving useful advice, they found themselves unable to pursue legal action against their employers or dropping a complaint in order to protect their mental health. Stories of change being enacted as a result of reporting unfair treatment were rare. But when a complaint did bring about positive action, young women noted that it was primarily down to their tenacity and strength of will in the face of limited (or no) support and murky processes.



When I had that conversation [with her managers] - they were sympathetic to the assault, but far as I know, they didn't escalate that to HR."



4

WHAT ARE THE SHORT AND LONG TERM IMPACTS OF INSECURE WORK ON YOUNG WOMEN?

SUMMARY

Young women are more likely to feel trapped in insecure work than young men, and less likely to have the support and access to opportunities for skills development they need to move on from insecure work. For young women with caring responsibilities, chronic illnesses and disabled or neurodivergent young women, insecure work is even more of a trap, as they struggle to find the flexibility they need in secure roles.

Insecure work has a negative impact on young women's mental health, levels of job satisfaction, wellbeing at work and self-belief. Worries about remaining stuck in low paid and low skilled insecure work can leave them feeling anxious, unable to plan for the future and less optimistic about their future careers.



Finding flexible work that fits around having three young children is really, really difficult. I've got that flex, which is really why I've put up with it for so long. So I kind of feel like I can't really leave."



Young women are more likely to feel trapped in insecure work than young men and less likely to feel confident that they can move out of insecure work when they need to.

In our survey, a third (33%) of young women agreed or strongly agreed that they had felt trapped in insecure work, compared to 29% of young men. Almost 3 in 10 (27%) young women said they did not feel confident to move out of insecure work when they need to, compared to less than a quarter (23%) of young men.

Young women told us about a number of key barriers or challenges that can prevent them from transitioning into secure work.

A lack of options for secure flexible employment is keeping young women trapped in low paid insecure work that offers them the flexibility they need. A quarter (25%) of young women told us that they couldn't find other work that offers the flexibility they need. Disabled or neurodivergent young women and those with chronic health conditions or caring responsibilities find it particularly difficult to leave insecure work - with a lack of flexible options in secure work cited as one of the main barriers. Over half (56%) of young women with a long-term physical health condition or disability and the same number of neurodivergent young women told us they encountered barriers or challenges when attempting to leave or move on from insecure work, compared to 37% of young women overall. More than two fifths (42%) of young women with caring responsibilities said the same.

4. SHORT AND LONG TERM IMPACTS

In our qualitative research, young women shared how navigating complex accessibility needs and/or caring responsibilities could radically reduce the employment options available to them. For some, remote working was a necessity. Others required flexibility at short notice to manage their health or care for a family member and some had tight restrictions around the hours and times of day they could be available to work. Despite the flexibility offered by insecure work, most agreed that they would prefer to work in permanent part-time work that offered more financial security and opportunities for personal and professional development.

23%

of young women said that not being able to afford further education or training was a barrier to progressing to secure work

Limited opportunities for progression or professional development in insecure work can leave young women feeling ill-equipped to enter permanent employment. Almost a quarter (23%) of young women said that not being able to afford the further education, training, internship or voluntary work needed to progress into secure work was a key barrier to moving on from insecure work. Financial responsibilities and the high cost of living keep young women stagnating in insecure roles where they aren't supported to gain skills which might help them transition into secure work. Whilst younger women were more likely to perceive insecure work as a 'foot in the door' or a way to gain experience, the longer young women spend in insecure work, the greater the feeling of being trapped. Young women worry about how employers might perceive insecure work on their CV's. Many also expressed feeling poorly placed to apply for permanent positions, particularly when they involve moving sectors.



Finding work that fits around barriers or other needs such as caring responsibilities or health challenges is hard. And the world is not set up for me, but for a typical 9-5 person who is healthy and able to manage time."



There were no training initiatives. They didn't really care about what you wanted to learn, or if you had an interest in something. And so you kind of just stayed in one place, and there wasn't really any opportunity for progression. Which I found has always been a real downfall [of insecure work] and has limited my career progression in general."



If you hop around insecure work too much then it looks bad on your CV - like you can't hold a secure job down."

4. SHORT AND LONG TERM IMPACTS

Competitive application processes and limited job opportunities mean that even when young women do apply for permanent work, they often aren't successful. A quarter (25%) of young women told us that struggling to get past the application or interview stage was a key challenge preventing them from moving on from insecure work. This is only exacerbated by the lack of progression and skills development insecure works offers; meaning that the longer young women stay in insecure work, the harder it can be to get out. In our [2024 Annual Survey](#), almost half (49%) of young women told us that there aren't enough job opportunities available to them in their local area. It's no wonder, therefore, that young women are struggling to move on.

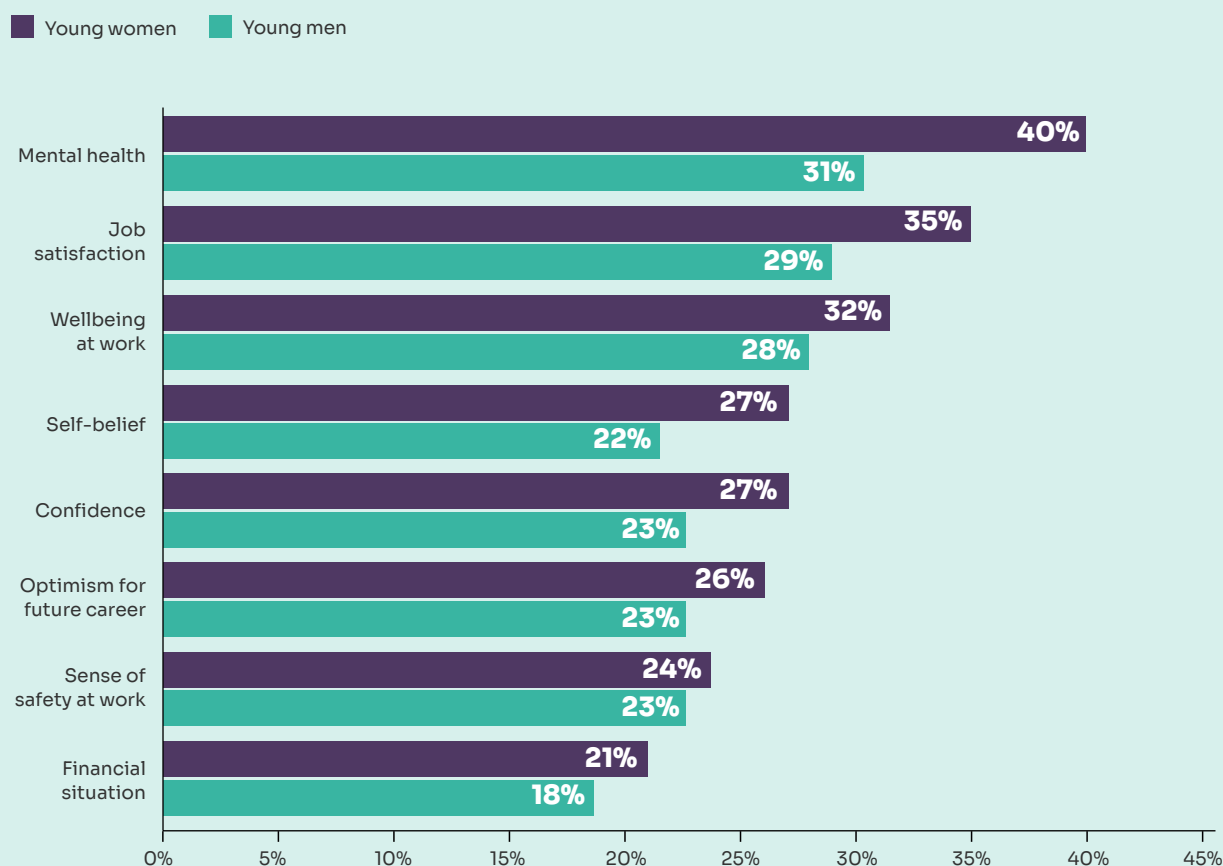
49%

of young women said that there aren't enough job opportunities available in their local area

Young women seem to be having a worse time in insecure work than young men.

Across all of the measures in our survey, more young women than young men said things got worse for them whilst working in insecure work.

FIGURE 5: Percentage of survey respondents who said that aspects of their lives had got worse whilst working in insecure work.



4. SHORT AND LONG TERM IMPACTS

Insecure work is having a detrimental impact on young women's mental health. 2 in 5 (40%) young women told us that their mental health got worse whilst working in insecure work, compared to just 16% who said it got better. Job insecurity appears to affect young women's mental health to a greater degree than young men's. 3 in 10 (31%) young men said that their mental health got worse whilst working in insecure work.

2in5

(40%) of young women said that their mental health got worse while working in insecure work

Unpredictable earnings and hours, concerns about being laid off, and feelings of isolation and powerlessness all contribute to young women feeling stressed, anxious and undervalued. Young women told us that financial stress plays a big part in worsening mental health. The uncertain nature of insecure work also makes it difficult to plan for the future. Young women shared stories of living hand to mouth, taking on debt or struggling to gain financial independence.

Toxic work environments and low job satisfaction are also making young women's mental health worse.

★ **Almost a third (32%) of young women said that their wellbeing at work got worse whilst working in insecure work, compared to just 1 in 5 (20%) who said it got better.**

★ **And even more young women (35%) told us that their levels of job satisfaction declined whilst working in insecure work – compared to just 1 in 5 (20%) who said that they increased.**



The income wasn't stable and consistent, so I was always on edge, which would impact my mental health. Sometimes there was more work and sometimes there was less, and I got sick and tired of living off something that was playing around with my mental health – giving me no security, stability or safety."



4. SHORT AND LONG TERM IMPACTS

Insecure work can erode young women's confidence and self-belief and leave them feeling less optimistic about their futures.

Experiences of insecure work can positively or negatively affect young women's confidence. 3 in 10 (30%) young women who took our survey said their confidence improved whilst working in insecure work. However, a similar number (27%) told us that whilst working in insecure work, their confidence got worse. Slightly more young women experienced a decline in self-belief whilst working in insecure work than felt an improvement – over a quarter (27%) said their self-belief got worse, compared to just under a quarter (24%) who said it got better.

The extent to which insecure work can grow or diminish confidence seems to be influenced by a number of factors, including the working environment (including the quality of management support), motivations for taking on insecure work, and career stage. Young women entering work for the first time, or using insecure work as a 'stepping stone' to more desirable work are more likely to gain confidence boosting skills and life experience which make them feel better equipped for the world of work.

But for young women who feel forced into insecure work, have negative experiences with managers, customers or colleagues, or who struggle to move into permanent employment, insecure work can exacerbate feelings of low self-worth and leave them feeling like they're not good enough.



It also does affect my confidence. When people are messing you around or not really giving you any feedback. You don't know whether you're doing things wrong."

Neurodivergent young women and young women with long-term physical or mental health conditions were most likely to experience a dip in confidence as a result of working in insecure work. Almost two fifths (38%) of neurodivergent young women, a third (33%) of young women with a long-term physical health condition and 3 in 10 (30%) young women with a long-term mental health condition said that their confidence got worse whilst working in insecure work.

This is yet more evidence that those who are most likely to need the flexibility that insecure work offers are being failed by workplaces that aren't designed or equipped to support them.



I feel like I've put a lot of pressure on myself to find a full-time, permanent job. But as I've only ever been able to get fixed-term or zero hour contracts I feel as though I'm not good enough to be considered."



4. SHORT AND LONG TERM IMPACTS

Young women can become trapped in a cycle of poor mental health and job insecurity. More than 1 in 5 (21%) young women said that poor mental health was a barrier to applying for secure work. The longer young women stay in insecure work, the less confidence they have in their ability to move on.

Because of this, many young women are struggling to feel optimistic about their futures. Over a quarter (26%) of young women said their optimism for their future career got worse whilst working in insecure work. For young men, this was slightly less (23%). The challenges associated with obtaining secure, permanent employment, coupled with the experiences of discrimination and unfair treatment that often go hand in hand with insecure work are leaving young women feeling hopeless.

Young women are less likely than young men to make use of support networks to help them move into secure employment.

Almost 3 in 10 (28%) young men who had been able to move into secure work used their network of family and friends to find and apply for jobs, compared to under a quarter (23%) of young women. Over a fifth (21%) of young men had got support from a charity or jobs/career service to help search and apply for jobs, compared to just 16% of young women.

This builds on findings from our [2024 Annual Survey](#), where young men were far more likely than young women to say that they have the support they need to progress in their careers. Just 56% of young women across all types of employment said they had the support needed to progress, compared to 64% of young men.

When entering secure work, young women are more likely to go it alone and take more traditional routes into employment. In our survey, less than a fifth (19%) of young women who had transitioned into secure work had done so by being promoted or moved into a secure role by their current employer. Instead, almost half (45%) of those now in secure work had applied directly and been successful. For young men, this figure was lower, at 36%.



Because it's so insecure, it's hard to stay positive. And it's hard to stay positive and motivate a team if they are asking questions, you know – ‘Why are we on six month contracts?’ ‘Are we going to lose our job?’ It's hard to reassure them when you can't even reassure yourself.”



I guess for me, a big part of struggling to find something permanent and secure and all that kind of stuff is that I just have such a mental block when I apply for a job. Because I feel so, like, hopeless about it. I suppose that it's just time and energy that goes nowhere and that just gets lost.”

4. SHORT AND LONG TERM IMPACTS

Young women feel under pressure to be independent, self-sufficient, and ‘prove themselves’ to family, friends and employers. Young women are also more likely to be in situations where they need to take care of others. This often stops them from seeking support and prevents them from accessing the benefits associated with having a wide network of contacts to draw upon. This was felt particularly strongly amongst self-employed young women, especially those working in creative industries; where networking can be an important part of gaining access to opportunities and potential clients. One self-employed young woman described herself as feeling ‘invisible’ in her industry because, coming from a working-class background, she did not have access to the financial support or personal and professional networks that would make it easier to forge a career in her chosen field.

Young women who had received career guidance or coaching through charities (including Young Women’s Trust) were positive about this sort of support and called for it to be more widely available. None of the young women who took part in our qualitative research had used the National Careers Service or other services provided by the government, suggesting low levels of awareness of and/or trust in government-run support.



And I’ve never, sort of, learned to depend on anybody other than myself. My parents have always taught me to sort of be independent...”



There’s a vacuum of support for young women struggling in insecure work.”

SUMMARY

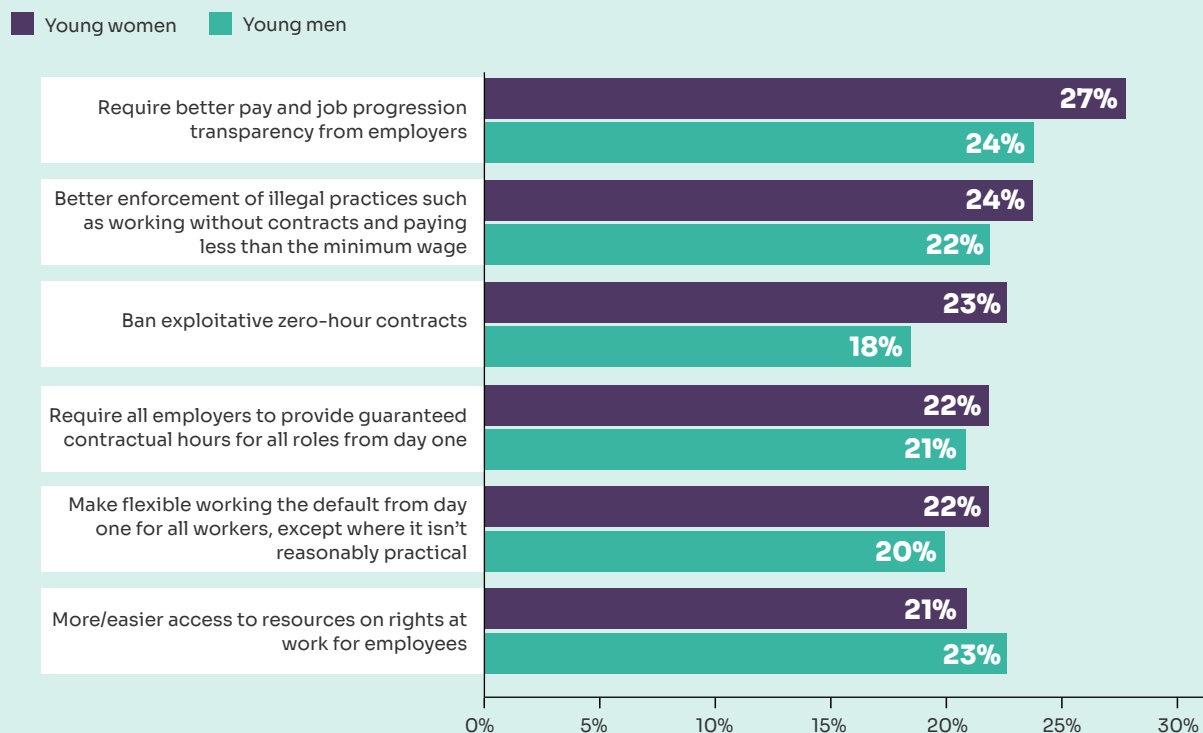
Whilst many young women said better pay in insecure work would help, it is by no means a fix-all. Young women want more rights and protections in insecure work, better enforcement of their legal rights, more opportunities for progression, and greater access to support – both within insecure work and to help them move on.

But insecure work is not the only thing that needs to change; young women are calling for employers to offer more flexible and part-time permanent positions, so that less of them feel forced into insecure work or end up stuck there.

Young women want better pay, greater transparency from employers about progression opportunities in insecure work and more consistent action against illegal and unfair practices.

In our survey, we asked respondents to select up to three measures they felt were the most important for policymakers and employers to put in place to support people in insecure work to move out of low pay.

FIGURE 6: Top six most important measures policymakers and employers should put in place to support people in insecure work to move out of low pay, according to young men and young women who responded to our survey.



5. SOLUTIONS

Both young men and young women believe that higher rates of pay in insecure work and greater transparency from employers about opportunities for progression are the measures most likely to make a difference for people struggling on low pay. Low rates of pay and high workloads are common in insecure work – taking a heavy toll on young women’s financial and emotional wellbeing.

Many young women shared stories of ‘promised’ contract extensions or permanent roles that never came to fruition and a lack of investment in skills development. Greater transparency about opportunities for progression could help young women who are feeling hopeless to see a light at the end of the tunnel; or allow them to make more informed decisions about their next steps.

Whilst better pay is important, it’s not the only solution. Almost a quarter of young women (24%) and a similar number (22%) of young men think that there should be more action against illegal and unfair practices and better enforcement of their rights whilst working in insecure work. This is consistent with the high levels of discrimination, illegal and unfair practice that we know are common in insecure work and have spotlighted in this research.

Opinions on zero-hours contracts are mixed. Young women who took our survey were more in favour of banning exploitative zero-hours contracts than young men. Almost a quarter (23%) felt that this was one of the most important measures policymakers and employers should put in place to support people in insecure work to move out of low pay, compared to under a fifth (18%) of young men.



When I took on insecure work in health care, I had no other choice. If I wanted to qualify as a clinician, I’d have to “work my way” to stability and certainty, spending the first few years of my career with low pay, uncertain hours and plenty of unpaid overtime.”



You’re presented with a six month contract, with this, kind of, promise of a permanent contract in the future. They said to me after the first year – ‘we’ll renew it one more time, but then we’ll make it permanent’. And then they said the same thing last time in June. They said ‘oh, well, by December, we’ll make it permanent’. But now I’ve been told again, no.”



I would like to see more rights and protections for temporary workers. When my contract was terminated, they had a policy that people on a temporary contract cannot appeal their termination, which I thought was bad.”

5. SOLUTIONS

At the time of writing, the government's definition of 'exploitative' remains unclear, which makes reaching a consensus on the 'best' way forward difficult. Amongst the young women we spoke to, zero-hours contracts were considered to have some positives – for example, for students looking to earn money around their studies or those new to the workforce. But bad experiences whilst working in zero-hours contracts are common, and there is a strong call for better rights and protections for workers in this type of work. Some young women were concerned that banning zero-hours contract would only lead to employers finding other ways to exploit employees. Over a fifth of young women and young men think that providing guaranteed contractual hours for all roles from day one would help people in insecure work to move out of low pay; a far more tangible recommendation, for which there seems to be greater agreement.

Young men are more likely than young women to want investment in skills and career development and easier access to resources to help them understand their rights.

Investing in services which retrain, upskill or support career development was the third highest priority for young men who took our survey, but one of the lowest for young women. More or easier access to resources on rights at work for employees was the second highest priority for young men, but only the sixth highest for young women. This reflects the greater reliance of young men on informal networks and support services to access employment and the tendency for young women to 'go it alone'.



I guess what they're trying to do is try to get rid of zero-hours contracts. But obviously companies will probably try and skirt their way around it. But yeah, I definitely think the government should eradicate zero hour contracts, because it's not going to benefit anyone. Like, yes, they benefit students to a degree, where it's more flexible, but a lot of companies could just be more flexible with like, students."



5. SOLUTIONS

Young women do want information and support, but services need to work harder to reach them. Young women who took part in our research indicated a number of ways that services could support them, but many shared negative experiences of careers guidance services at school or university, and levels of trust in government-backed services are low. Because of this, building confidence in support provision and developing ways to encourage young women to access the services that are available to them must be a priority.

Young women need more information about their rights in insecure work and support to understand the options that are available to them. Many young women told us they had been funnelled into insecure work with very little understanding of how it differed from secure work, what rights they had, or what other options were available. Understanding more about their rights and how to take action when they are violated felt like an important priority for young women who took part in our research. Young women also wanted support to make more informed choices about the type of work to take on and to explore pathways into other employment routes.



They talk about jobs at school, but not in a way that is particularly helpful or encouraging. From what I remember, they maybe talk about, you know, five different careers, and the boys will pick one, and the girls will pick one, and that's kind of it."



There's something about really making people aware of their options, and how to get into fields, how to get into sectors, how to build networks, how to work out what's right for them, what's an inclusive place, what's good for people with disabilities. You know, how, how do you work all that out? I think more support is needed, really."



Charities cannot really fix insecure work itself, but can help people to get out of it, or to at least if they cannot get out of it, to ask for their rights and give them that support to know their rights and what they can ask."

YOUNG WOMEN'S IDEAS FOR CHANGE

The table below summarises young women's ideas on what policymakers, employers and services can do to address some of the issues associated with insecure work:

WHAT CAN POLICY MAKERS DO?	
Take action against illegal and unfair practices and better enforce workers' rights.	<p>Young women think the government should work harder to prevent and take action against:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ★ Employers that pay less than minimum wage. ★ Unequal pay. ★ Jobs that require employees to work long hours and back-to-back shifts. ★ Late or missed payments for people who self-employed or freelance.
Improve rights and offer better protections for insecure workers.	<p>Young women want more rights and better protections against the uncertainties of insecure work. This includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ★ More rights in relation to sick pay, holiday pay and expenses. ★ Better protections around dismissal. ★ Compensation for last-minute shift cancellations, earlier access to rotas and more notice about shift changes. ★ Banning unpaid trial shifts. ★ Regulations that prevent employers repeatedly extending fixed-term contracts without offering a permanent position. ★ Reviewing practices in industries where insecurity is high (e.g. hospitality) to understand how they can offer better job security.
Provide more information and support with tax processes.	<p>Several young women spoke how unclear tax processes and a lack of support for completing tax returns left them with unexpected tax bills or fines.</p> <p>There was a call for more easily accessible information and greater support from both government and employers to help people in insecure work understand their tax responsibilities.</p>
Improve access to apprenticeships as an alternative to insecure work.	<p>Young women spoke about apprenticeships as a potential alternative to insecure work, particularly for young women in the early stages of their careers. But apprenticeship schemes can be exploited by employers and are often poorly paid with limited progression opportunities, making them unappealing to young women.</p> <p>Young women proposed that more investment in high quality apprenticeship schemes could help channel young women away from insecure work and into more secure, fulfilling career pathways.</p>

YOUNG WOMEN'S IDEAS FOR CHANGE

WHAT CAN EMPLOYERS DO?	
Be more transparent about job application processes, contract terms and opportunities for progression.	<p>Many young women told us they would benefit from employers being more transparent and offering more clarity about their processes and practice. This includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ★ Providing information about contract type and salary at application stage. ★ Clear and transparent application processes. ★ Only advertising jobs when there are roles available. ★ Supporting insecure workers to understand the terms of their contracts and what they mean in practice. ★ Being upfront about opportunities for progression and skills development, including the likelihood of being able to transition into a secure role.
Offer more opportunities for progression, training and skills development.	<p>Young women want to see more employers offering more opportunities to undertake training in insecure roles, and more investment in upskilling and developing inexperienced workers to improve their chances of progressing.</p> <p>Young women also want employers to put more effort into integrating temporary staff into their teams and finding ways to show that they are valued. Suggestions included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ★ More involvement in team activities, including social events. ★ More structured relationship building. ★ More consideration for the wellbeing of temporary staff.
Offer more part-time and flexible opportunities as an alternative to insecure work.	<p>Many young women are being driven into insecure work due to a lack of other options that offer the flexibility they need to manage caring responsibilities, health needs or studying commitments.</p> <p>Young women are calling for employers to offer more flexible and part-time permanent positions, so that less of them feel forced into insecure work or end up stuck there.</p>

YOUNG WOMEN'S IDEAS FOR CHANGE

WHAT CAN SERVICES DO?	
Increase young women's awareness of their rights whilst working in insecure work and help them understand how to report illegal and unfair practice.	<p>Young women want easier access to simple, easily digestible information about their rights at work.</p> <p>Specific requests included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ★ Better signposting and more accessible information for people on Universal Credit navigating insecure work. ★ Clear guidance about what to do/where to go when insecure workers' rights are violated. ★ Community forums where young women in insecure work can support each other to challenge their employers or take action against unfair practice. ★ More information and support to understand insecure contracts. ★ Toolkits for freelancers offering guidance about what to do when payments aren't received.
Provide support and guidance to employers on best practice.	<p>Some young women felt that there is a role for services in supporting employers to manage and schedule shift work fairly and better support insecure workers. Providing easy to follow guidance on best practice could eliminate some of the guesswork for employees and encourage them to adopt processes and policies that benefit those in insecure roles.</p>
Offer more part-time and flexible opportunities as an alternative to insecure work.	<p>Many young women are being driven into insecure work due to a lack of other options that offer the flexibility they need to manage caring responsibilities, health needs or studying commitments.</p> <p>Young women are calling for employers to offer more flexible and part-time permanent positions, so that less of them feel forced into insecure work or end up stuck there.</p>
Make unions more accessible to young women.	<p>Levels of engagement with, and knowledge of unions amongst young women in insecure work is low. Many young women were unclear about how unions could support them.</p> <p>Some young women felt that providing free access to unions would make them more accessible and encourage more young women to join.</p>

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN?

Young Women's Trust's top recommendations for government:

BAN ZERO HOURS CONTRACTS

The **Employment Rights Bill** currently going through Parliament will go a long way towards improving job security for many thousands of young workers, particularly the ban on exploitative zero hours contracts. This will give some legal rights to job security, with workers being entitled to a contract reflecting their regular hours worked over a 12 week reference period (workers who wish to remain on a zero hours contract will be able to do so).

However, greater clarity is still needed on some elements of the ban. Importantly, the government must ensure adequate mitigation against potential loopholes. Without this, employers could let workers go after 12 weeks in order to avoid offering a regular hours contract.

The Bill will also ensure that employers provide reasonable notice of shift cancellations and changes. As we have seen in this report, short-notice changes can leave workers either under- or over-worked, and unable to plan their lives or have stable earnings, so this provision is welcome. However, it is still unclear what 'reasonable' means. We echo the **Living Wage Foundation's Living Hours campaign** call for at least 4 weeks' notice, with guaranteed payment if shifts are cancelled

within this notice period. We would also go further than this and recommend that employers cover out of pocket expenses that could leave young women short-changed if shifts are cancelled last minute – in particular, childcare which they may have booked but which can't be refunded.

STRENGTHEN ENFORCEMENT

There is substantial evidence in this research that rights that workers currently have – including the right to equal pay, the legal minimum wage, and protection from discrimination – are widely being ignored and flouted. This is particularly the case for insecure workers, in part because the power imbalance leaves workers reluctant to raise issues for fear of not being given any more work; and also because the short-term nature of contracts makes it less worthwhile for young women to report concerns. When they do, they rarely see action taken.

The current enforcement system is under-resourced and overstretched, and not working to uphold these rights as it should. Without significant improvements, including more funding and stronger powers, the new rights in the Bill could make very little material difference.

There is a long backlog for tribunals – the

main route to redress for most worker's rights violations – leaving many people waiting over a year for their case to be heard. If this is to remain the main route then funding and resource must be dedicated to clearing the backlog.

The EHRC, which currently ensures compliance with rights under the Equality Act, has seen a four-fifths budget cut in real terms since 2008-9 and cannot regularly proactively investigate employers suspected of non-compliance and only infrequently issues fines.

The Employment Rights Bill proposes a new **Fair Work Agency** which will simplify and strengthen labour market enforcement under a single, recognisable brand. We welcome this in principle. However both it and the EHRC must be provided with adequate funding and powers to properly enforce both existing and new rights, including greater powers to investigate employers suspected of non-compliance and issue stronger sanctions. As well as being better for workers, this will also benefit businesses who want to do the right thing and are currently being undercut by rogue employers.

In practice, with the EHRC still responsible for rights under the Equality Act alongside the Fair Work Agency overseeing other labour market rights, it may still be complicated for workers to navigate the system. There should be a single shop-window for all rights at work issues, and an awareness raising campaign to ensure workers know their rights and where to go.

We would also like to see workers, including young women, as a group who have a lot to gain from a better enforcement system, involved in the design of the new agency to ensure it genuinely works for them.

Finally, enforcement of the requirement in the Employment Rights Bill for employers to give reasonable notice of shift changes and compensation for short-notice

cancellations needs a simpler mechanism than tribunal. It is unlikely that young women (and others) will go through the time-consuming and emotionally draining process of a tribunal to recover pay from a lost shift – even without the current waiting time.

RAISE AWARENESS OF WORKERS' RIGHTS AND PATHWAYS TO ENFORCEMENT

As the evidence here shows, many young women don't know their rights at work in the first place and so may not be aware when they're violated. If they are, the routes to redress are hard to navigate.

Alongside the new rights in the Employment Rights Bill, the government should invest in awareness-raising activities to reach workers (and future workers) where they are and provide accessible information about their rights and what to do when they're violated.

As well as awareness campaigns and partnering with organisations who can help to reach young workers, the National Jobs and Careers Service currently being planned (merging two existing services, the National Careers Service and Job Centre Plus) could provide information to workers about the nature of different types of contract, the implications of these for things like getting a mortgage, and their rights.

Young Women's Trust's top recommendations for employers:

IMPROVE FLEXIBILITY ACROSS ALL WORKPLACES

Many young women in our research, particularly those who are disabled, neurodivergent and who have caring responsibilities, were forced into insecure work because of a lack of other, more secure options which offer the flexibility they need.

Greater flexible working options across all workplaces will help these workers avoid having to make the costly trade-off between flexibility and security.

We welcome the introduction of the day one right to flexibility included in the Employment Rights Bill, and echo calls from the Fawcett Society and others to introduce an advertising duty, requiring employers to advertise flexible working options during recruitment.

IMPROVE TRAINING, SKILLS DEVELOPMENT AND INTEGRATION FOR INSECURE AND TEMPORARY WORKERS

The lack of opportunities to develop skills in insecure jobs is a major factor keeping young women stuck in insecure work. Over time it also knocks their confidence, further compounding the problem.

Employers should consider how they might better support workers on temporary contracts with training and skills development, and support them to progress into other jobs within their

organisations. This could bring benefits to the business as well as to the young women's prospects.

Young women also highlighted a sense of isolation within insecure work – saying they aren't treated as part of a team, and are even excluded from social events. This adds to the feeling of precarity, alienation and being 'disposable' that all too often accompanies insecure work. Employers should offer temporary workers opportunities to build relationships with colleagues, take part in social activities, and access wellbeing initiatives in the same way that they would permanent workers. Doing so would significantly improve workers' experience, mental health, and could help them to develop their skills and experience by being exposed to other areas of a business.

BE TRANSPARENT ABOUT THE NATURE OF CONTRACTS AND REALISTIC OPPORTUNITIES FOR PROGRESSION

It's common for young women to be unaware of the specific nature of their contracts and the accompanying rights (or lack of them). Employers should provide more clarity at the outset about the terms of the contract and the implications of this. They must also avoid giving young women false promises of progression or contract extensions that they may not realistically be likely to honour.

Young Women's Trust is campaigning for better rights at work for young women and stronger enforcement.

[Find out more](#)

Young Women's Trust also provides information for young women about their rights at work.

[Find out more](#)

Endnotes

1. UCL (2024): 'Almost one in ten UK workers increasingly trapped in precarious work', [Almost one in ten UK workers increasingly trapped in precarious work | UCL News - UCL - University College London](#)
2. TUC (2018): Living on the edge, [insecure work report final final.pdf \(tuc.org.uk\)](#)
3. EIGE (2017): Gender, skills and precarious work in the EU, [ti_pubpdf_mh0217250enn_pdfweb_20170503163908.pdf \(europa.eu\)](#)
4. Work Foundation (2024): No progress? Tackling long-term insecure work, [No Progress - tackling long-term insecure work](#)
5. Those that met more than one of these criteria were only counted once.
6. Earning less than two thirds of the median hourly wage.
7. Low Pay Commission (2023): The LPC has updated its definition of 'low paying sectors', <https://minimumwage.blog.gov.uk/2023/09/11/the-lpc-has-updated-its-definitions-of-low-paying-sectors/>
8. Work Foundation (2024): The UK Insecure Work Index 2024, <https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/media/lancaster-university/content-assets/images/lums/work-foundation/UKInsecureWorkIndex2024.pdf>
9. Work Foundation (2022): The UK Insecure Work Index – Two decades of insecurity, <https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/media/lancaster-university/content-assets/documents/lums/work-foundation/UKInsecureWorkIndex.pdf?>
10. Work Foundation (2024): The UK Insecure Work Index 2024, <https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/media/lancaster-university/content-assets/images/lums/work-foundation/UKInsecureWorkIndex2024.pdf>
11. Work Foundation (2022): The UK Insecure Work Index – Two decades of insecurity, <https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/media/lancaster-university/content-assets/documents/lums/work-foundation/UKInsecureWorkIndex.pdf?>