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**YOUNG
WOMEN'S
TRUST**

A policy briefing from
Young Women's Trust



A message from young women

As young women, too often we're forced to put up with low pay, insecure contracts, or even being discriminated against, just to keep our jobs.

If we speak up, we risk being labelled 'difficult', or pushed out. Whereas men are more likely to be called confident for doing the same. It's especially hard when we're just starting out or working in industries where we feel replaceable. We're told to "be grateful" or "not make a fuss," especially in entry-level roles.

Instead of pursuing careers we're qualified for, we often end up taking jobs with fewer responsibilities – but not because we lack ambition or ability. This means we're not using our education, experience, or skills in the ways we hoped. We're paid less, stuck in roles far below our potential, and some of us are still trying to pay off student debt, which adds to financial pressure. Over time, this chips away at our confidence, mental health, and sense of self-worth. This travels alongside women throughout the course of our working lives.

When we don't feel safe to speak up, we start to believe that being treated unfairly is just part of the job. It's not just about "a bad day at work", it shapes how we see ourselves and what we believe we deserve. We start believing that being spoken over, underpaid, and disrespected is normal and somehow our fault.

We lose all confidence, drive, and hope for the future and things improving. Sometimes we end up playing it safe, avoiding certain sectors, or simply giving up. In many cases it can lead to us leaving our employment.

Many of us don't know who to turn to, or we worry nothing will be done.

Policies should reflect how power shows up in the workplace, especially for women who are young, Black and racially minoritised, working class or disabled. We want protection that isn't only available once things get really bad, but instead helps us before we hit breaking point.

We need quicker, safer, and more accessible ways to report issues. We need to be believed, supported, and protected.

Policies should be shaped by those of us who know what it's like – young women in insecure or low-paid work. If we're not at the table, our rights won't be either.

Policies should also recognise that certain industries present particular challenges to young women – such as the arts and creative and healthcare sectors, which can be notoriously underpaid and insecure, reliant on freelance and short term work and zero hours contracts.

Knowing our rights shouldn't be something we have to research ourselves when things go wrong; we should be made aware of them from day one. If young women felt secure in our rights from the beginning, it would increase our confidence, make us feel respected, and help us build a healthier relationship with our workplace. A fair and transparent start helps us trust the systems around us and lets us focus on developing our skills, rather than defending our basic dignity. This would give us the foundations to explore new opportunities, develop ourselves, and succeed, in and out of the workplace.

**Firdaus, Mia, Saffron and Zarka
Rights Here, Rights Now campaigners**

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We should all expect to be treated fairly at work. It's not radical – it's the law

But for young women workplaces are far from fair. Discrimination, being paid less than the minimum wage, and being paid less than men for the same work are still happening. Rogue employers are breaking the law and getting away with it.

The reforms in the Employment Rights Bill are a huge step forward for young women, who are overrepresented in low paid, insecure jobs. But without stronger enforcement, the Bill risks falling short of its promise.

It's time to make our laws work in practice, not just on paper.

What we're calling for:

1. A new, independent, Fair Work Commissioner to stand up for workers' rights and hold employers to account.
2. Stronger enforcement of laws protecting workers, through a system that is easy to navigate, information for young women about their rights and protection for those who speak up.
3. A ban on asking about previous salaries, and a legal requirement to show the salary in all job ads, to make our right to equal pay real and help close the gender pay gap.

Why this is needed

Laws that are supposed to make our workplaces fair are failing to protect young women:

- **3 in 10 (30%)** HR decision makers are aware of instances of young women being discriminated against in the past year.¹
- **61%** of racially minoritised young women have experienced discrimination in some form whilst working or looking for work.²

- **More than a fifth (22%)** of young women told us that they have been paid less than the minimum wage they were entitled to.³
- **Almost a quarter (23%)** of young women told us that they had been paid less than male colleagues in their workplace who do the same or similar work.⁴
- **Nearly one fifth** of large employers don't carry out gender pay gap reporting, despite this being a legal requirement.⁵

Rogue employers are getting away with illegal behaviour, while young women are the ones who face the consequences.

- **Almost a quarter (24%)** of young women would not feel comfortable to challenge or report instances of discrimination in the workplace.⁶
- **Almost 2 in 5 (38%)** young women would not feel confident to challenge pay inequality in the workplace.⁷

Too often, young women are silenced from standing up for their rights, because if they do they might lose their job.

- **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.⁸

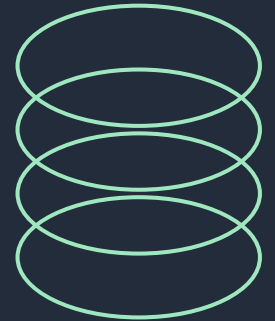
This is pushing young women out of work, breaking their confidence and wrecking their mental health. They are being held back not by lack of ambition, but by broken systems that ignore their rights and silence their complaints. It's costing them their futures. And their lost potential is costing us all.

How Government can support young women's rights at work

This briefing outlines **three key policy areas** that will strengthen protections for young women and other workers while supporting the Government's growth agenda by **unleashing young women's ability to fully contribute to the economy.**

For the biggest upgrades in worker's rights to really deliver for groups of workers like young women, **effective enforcement, accountability and tackling the gender pay gap will be vital.**

1. More accountability and better coordination between enforcement bodies



We support the creation of a single enforcement body in the Fair Work Agency. But it must have the resources and powers it needs to do its job well. Workers, especially those at greater risk of exploitation and discrimination, must be informed about, and supported to access their rights.

And the Fair Work Agency must work closely with the EHRC, so rights at work for women and other marginalised groups don't fall through the cracks.

What the Government should do:

- **A new Fair Work Commissioner role** should be established to promote and protect the rights of workers, scrutinise the enforcement of workers' rights and publish annual reports on workers' rights.
- **The Equalities and Human Rights Commission and Fair Work Agency** must be required to produce a joint annual report outlining key data on the gender pay gap and enforcement of workers' rights particularly impacting on marginalised groups of workers – including young women. The Secretary of State for Business and Trade should be required to present this annual report in Parliament.
- **Introduce a Duty to Collaborate** for the Equalities and Human Rights Commission and Fair Work Agency on enforcement for employers who contravene workers' rights legislation and equalities legislation more than once in a year.
- **Ensure that data on employment rights** is disaggregated by sex and age.
- **There should be a representative** for young women workers on the FWA Advisory Board.

What would a Fair Work Commissioner role look like?

A Fair Work Commissioner would promote and protect the rights of workers across England and Wales. This independent role would scrutinise the enforcement of employment rights, identify areas where workers are being let down, and publish an annual report on the state of workers' rights, including those of marginalised groups such as young women. It would work with other agencies such as the Equality and Human Rights Commission to ensure the rights of all workers are being enforced effectively.

Similar to existing roles such as the Children's Commissioner, the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, and the Domestic Abuse Commissioner, this new role would bring a dedicated, authoritative voice to champion workers' rights.

The Fair Work Commissioner would need a clear remit, strong powers and resources, and guaranteed independence to be effective — with a duty placed on public bodies and enforcement agencies to cooperate with them.

This role will help ensure that the rights of workers, including young women, are not only protected in law but properly enforced in practice.

Outcomes:

Rogue employers held to account and a level playing field for all businesses to succeed.

Workers will be aware of their rights and know how to report illegal practice with the confidence they will be protected.

More young women staying in work, and being able to succeed and progress – supporting and contributing to economic growth.

2. More effective enforcement

As it is, the enforcement system isn't working for young women. It's underfunded, overstretched and too complicated to use. Many young women don't know their rights, and even when they do, fear of repercussions stops them from speaking out.

- **More action against illegal and unfair practices** and better enforcement of their rights whilst working in insecure work was ranked by young women and young men as the second most important measure that policymakers and employers should put in place to support people in insecure work to move out of low pay.⁹
- **Almost half (48%)** of young women told us that they don't know their rights when working in insecure work.¹⁰

We need an enforcement system that works for all workers, including young women.

What the Government should do:

- **Ensure adequate funding** for the Fair Work Agency.
- **Workers should be entitled to whistle blow** to the Fair Work Agency if their employer is contravening any of their employment rights.
- **Workers should be protected from recrimination** under legislation if they whistle blow to the Fair Work Agency.
- **A duty to protect the rights of marginalised groups** – including young women – should be placed on the Fair Work Agency.

- **The Fair Work Agency** should be required to have a specific programme of work that scrutinises the enforcement of the rights of marginalised groups – including young women, and to publish an annual report on this.
- **The government or Fair Work Agency** should fund and deliver a national marketing campaign to advertise worker's new rights – particularly to young women.
- **Employers should be required** to inform all new employees of their new rights under the Employment Rights Bill and who to contact for information, support and to whistle blow.

Outcomes:

A robust enforcement system is the backbone of a fair labour market for everyone.

Young women will be better supported to do well at work.

Employers who do the right thing will have a level playing field on which they can succeed.

And our economy will gain from the skills and talents of young women.

3. Make the right to equal pay real



We know that this Government are invested in closing the gender pay gap. We have the first woman Chancellor who has notably stated this is her mission.

One of the biggest barriers to closing this gap is unequal pay which is perpetuated by a culture of silence about salaries. Leaving salaries open to negotiation disadvantages women and racially minoritised candidates, who can be discriminated against in negotiations; while basing pay on a candidate's previous salary just increases inequality, because women earn less to start with.

- **Less than half (48%)** of young women in employment think that their employer is making efforts to tackle the gender pay gap.¹¹
- **44% of HR decision makers** told us that jobs are often advertised without details of the salary level.¹²

What the Government should do:

- **Introduce a legal requirement** for all employers to show the salary on all job adverts.
- **Introduce a Salary History Ban** – making it illegal for employers to ask about previous salaries when hiring.

Outcomes:

The UK will be in line with the rest of Europe, where salary transparency is now mandatory.

We will come closer to closing the gender pay gap.

Women's unequal salaries will no longer follow them from job to job, increasing women's incomes with a knock-on effect on women's poverty levels and the gender pension gap.

Endnotes

¹ [Young Women's Trust Annual Survey 2024](#)

² [Young Women's Trust Annual Survey 2024](#)

³ [Young Women's Trust Annual Survey 2024](#)

⁴ [Young Women's Trust Annual Survey 2024](#)

⁵ [CIPD](#)

⁶ [Young Women's Trust Annual Survey 2024](#)

⁷ [Young Women's Trust Annual Survey 2024](#)

⁸ [Young Women's Trust Insecure Work Survey](#)

⁹ [Young Women's Trust Insecure Work Survey](#)

¹⁰ [Young Women's Trust Insecure Work Survey](#)

¹¹ [Young Women's Trust Annual Survey 2024](#)

¹² [Young Women's Trust Annual Survey 2024](#)

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For further information on this briefing or the work of Young Women's Trust, contact our Policy and Campaigns lead: ↓↓↓

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