

Swept under the rug

**Young women's
experiences of reporting
unfair treatment at work**

November 2025



Foreword

As 2025 draws to a close, we mark 50 years since women gained the legal right to equal pay – and with it, the freedom to open our own bank accounts, control our income, and apply for mortgages in our own names.

Many of us belong to the third generation of women with the opportunity to build financial independence. Though we've made strides, our progress remains fragile.

Because our rights only protect us when they are respected.

Too often, decisions about young women's safety and opportunity at work are still made by those in power – often disproportionately men. Through this research, and from my own experience in education and entrepreneurship, I have sat on both sides of the hiring table and witnessed the injustices that young women face, particularly in sectors where HR is often absent and workplace protections are weaker.

Young women show remarkable courage in coming forward, but the emotional cost of seeking this justice has a significant impact on their mental health. The responsibility for resolution should also rest with the institutions designed to protect us. When concerns go unresolved, too many young women feel they have no choice but to step away from the workforce entirely – a heartbreaking loss of talent, leadership and the opportunity for recovery through new experiences.

Still, I remain hopeful. Mentorship and coaching have proven themselves to be vital support systems for young women, especially for those with less secure family networks. I hope these spaces for advocacy



Daniella, Peer Researcher & Project Group Member, Young Women's Trust

become places of lasting empowerment and change.

If you have made it this far, thank you, on behalf of the Young Women's Trust, for taking the first step to invest in long-lasting, meaningful change. Together, we need advocates and decision-makers in power to actively champion our cause, amplify our voices, and drive the journey to true gender equality at work.

Let's create a future where women work not only to survive, but thrive.

Daniella

Peer Researcher & Project Group Member,
Young Women's Trust

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Executive summary

Young women are being driven out of the workforce by a system that exacerbates the damage done by unfair treatment. A failure to acknowledge unfair treatment, bullying tactics when young women report it, and the creation of a hostile work environment for those who speak out all contribute to a mental health burden that is unmanageable for many. Furthermore, in too many cases the unfair treatment is not corrected, leaving young women with no choice but to leave when they can no longer bear it. When they have the same experiences at job after job and nothing ever changes, it's inevitable that for some, work becomes impossible.

The negative impact of reporting unfair treatment spreads through every area of a young woman's life, and has long-term, far reaching consequences. It affects mental and physical health, and can push young women out of their jobs and even their sectors. There is a financial impact for those left out of work, and it even impacts relationships with friends and family.

Management and senior leadership hold the key to young women's experiences of reporting unfair treatment. They have oversight of the information young women are given about how their workplace deals with reports, and are the first port of call for most young women who experience a workplace issue. They decide how complaints are handled, and how young women are treated afterwards. Unfortunately many are failing young women, through unclear and overly complex reporting processes, poor communication, and a lack of action when young women bring their attention to problems. In the worst cases, they are also responsible for intimidation and revenge actions.

There's not enough accurate information for young women on their rights. Too much of young women's knowledge about their rights comes via word of mouth, and doesn't reach those who need it. This is especially true for younger women, since not enough information is given in formal education settings. Crucially, young women don't have enough awareness of the help available to them through unions and support organisations.

Young women working in sectors where insecure, low paid roles are prevalent are suffering the most. Those working in hospitality, arts, entertainment and recreation, education, health and social care are consistently worse off in terms of the information available to them about their rights, the barriers to reporting unfair treatment, and the impact overall. These young women are already more vulnerable to the risk of unfair treatment due to the precarious nature of many of the roles available to them.

Our key recommendations

FOR GOVERNMENT

- Employers should be required to inform all new employees of their workplace rights and how to report unfair treatment.
- The Government or Fair Work Agency should fund and deliver a national marketing campaign to advertise workers' new rights.
- Employers should be held to a specific standard in terms of how they process claims of unfair treatment.
- Workers should be entitled to whistle blow to the Fair Work Agency and protected if they do so.

FOR EMPLOYERS

- Employees need to be made aware of their rights and how to report infractions.
- Line managers need comprehensive training in how to process claims of unfair treatment.
- Staff who have reported unfair treatment need to have their confidentiality respected and be protected from retaliation.
- Appropriate support needs to be offered or signposted to, and peer support initiatives should be encouraged and facilitated.

FOR SUPPORT ORGANISATIONS

- Schools, colleges and universities should ensure workplace rights are on the curriculum.
- Advice centres and unions should consider investing in social media campaigns to spread accurate information.
- Support organisations could collaborate with employers to develop practices that protect staff who've reported unfair treatment.
- Under-utilised unions and advice services should investigate ways to connect with young women and other marginalised groups.

You can read our detailed recommendations for Government, employers and support organisations on page 50.

Background & introduction

For young women workplaces are anything but fair. Discrimination, sexual harassment, and illegal pay practices are common, especially for young women in insecure work.

Legal rights to equal treatment and fair pay exist, and the Government's *Employment Rights Bill* will strengthen these. However, laws alone are not enough if they're not properly enforced.

Our [previous research](#) has laid bare the scale of law-breaking amongst employers:

- Nearly two thirds of racially minoritised young women still experience discrimination at work
- More than a fifth of young women say they've been paid less than the minimum wage
- And almost a quarter report being paid less than male colleagues doing the same or similar work.

The implementation of the *Employment Rights Bill* brings the opportunity for change. The new **Fair Work Agency (FWA)** aims to strengthen enforcement of new and existing employment laws.

Young women - who are overrepresented in insecure, low paid work, more likely to experience unfair treatment, and less able to challenge it - are one of the groups that have the most to gain if the **Agency** delivers on its promise. So their voices must be listened to in its design.

In this research, we wanted to understand more about the journeys young women go on when they choose to report unfair treatment at work, the barriers they face to standing up for their rights at work, and the impact that current enforcement processes have on their personal and professional lives.

These findings are the first step in understanding the changes and solutions needed to build an enforcement system that truly protects young women's rights and gives them the confidence to speak up when those rights are violated.

Research questions

1. How aware are young women of their workplace rights?

- How knowledgeable are young women about their entitlements, how to raise an issue, and the process of pursuing a complaint?
- Where and how do young women learn about their workplace rights?

2. What are young women's experiences of reporting unfair treatment at work?

- What is the process of reporting a violation?
- What are the barriers faced along the way?
- How do different groups of young women experience reporting an issue?

3. How are young women supported when they report unfair treatment?

- What support is available?
- What leads to a positive experience?

4. What is the impact on young women of reporting unfair treatment?

- How does reporting unfair treatment impact on mental health?
- How does reporting unfair treatment impact career or employment journeys in the long term?
- How does reporting unfair treatment impact young women's lives outside the workplace?



ACRONYMS

ACAS – the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service
HMRC – His Majesty's Revenue and Customs
HR – Human Resources
MHFA – Mental Health First Aid
SLT – Senior Leadership Team

METHODOLOGY

This research was co-designed and co-produced with our *'Rights Here, Rights Now'* campaign project group – 23 young women aged 18-30, all with lived experience of unfair treatment at work, who are trained as peer researchers.

Our research questions were established in collaboration with the group, and our qualitative fieldwork was facilitated by them with support from the Young Women's Trust Research and Voice & Involvement teams. Our quantitative data collection was conducted by an external survey provider, Censuswide.

Fieldwork was carried out from July to September 2025 and included:

- A survey of 1000 young women aged 18-30 across England and Wales who have experienced unfair treatment at work – half of whom had reported it and half who had not
- 2 focus groups with young women aged 18-30 who have experienced reporting unfair treatment at work – one online and one in-person
- 10 interviews with young women aged 18-30 who have experienced reporting unfair treatment at work – 4 online and 6 in-person
- 8 online interviews with stakeholders from organisations who support young women
- A series of polls on professional networking site LinkedIn.

OUR PEER RESEARCH APPROACH

At Young Women's Trust our peer researchers are at the heart of all our research. They are the experts in their own experience, and we know that meaningful research which catalyses change needs to be driven by them on issues that concern them.

Our peer researchers are all young women or people of marginalised genders with a diverse range of backgrounds, skills and experiences. We train them in research skills 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 AWARE ARE YOUNG WOMEN OF THEIR WORKPLACE RIGHTS?

SUMMARY

While young women generally know about some of what they're entitled to at work, they're much less well informed about what to do when things go wrong. Their information about workplace rights is more likely to come from friends and family or the media than from official sources or formal learning.

There's a link between knowing how to raise a workplace issue and being able to take action when something isn't going right, with lots of young women who lack the right information leaving their unfair treatment unreported. Young women in some of the most high risk sectors are the least likely to have information about how to report an issue.

YOUNG WOMEN'S KNOWLEDGE ABOUT WHAT THEY'RE ENTITLED TO AND HOW TO RAISE AN ISSUE

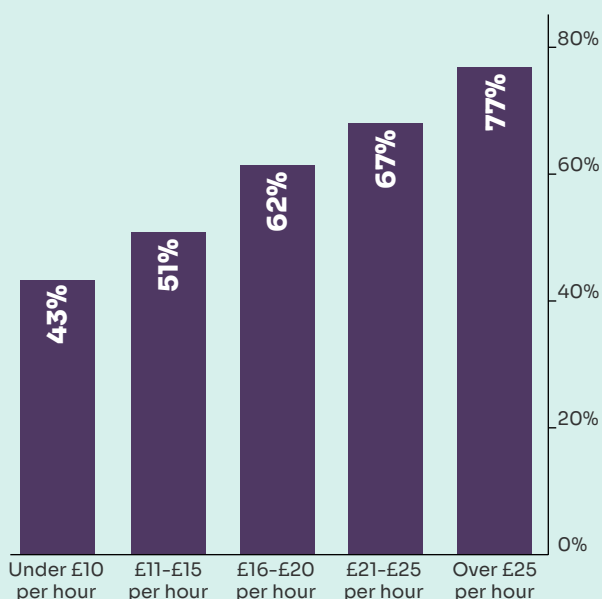
Promisingly, young women often do know something about their workplace rights, with 77% of young women telling us they had 'some' or 'good' knowledge. **However, nearly a quarter of young women (23%) are under-informed, with 18% saying that they had little knowledge, and 5% saying they have no knowledge at all.**

Our survey revealed minimal differences amongst levels of knowledge across different demographic groups - with the exception of disabled young women, who are less likely to know what they're entitled to at work. Almost a third (31%) of young women with a long-term physical health condition or disability are under-informed about their workplace rights, and almost 1 in 10 (9%) told us that they have 'no knowledge at all' about what they are entitled to.

Despite little difference in knowledge, there are some clear differences when it comes to how likely young women

are to report unfair treatment. Young women on low pay and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who took our survey were far less likely to say that they had reported their issue.

FIGURE 1: % of young women reporting their unfair treatment, by hourly pay.



1. YOUNG WOMEN'S AWARENESS OF THEIR WORKPLACE RIGHTS

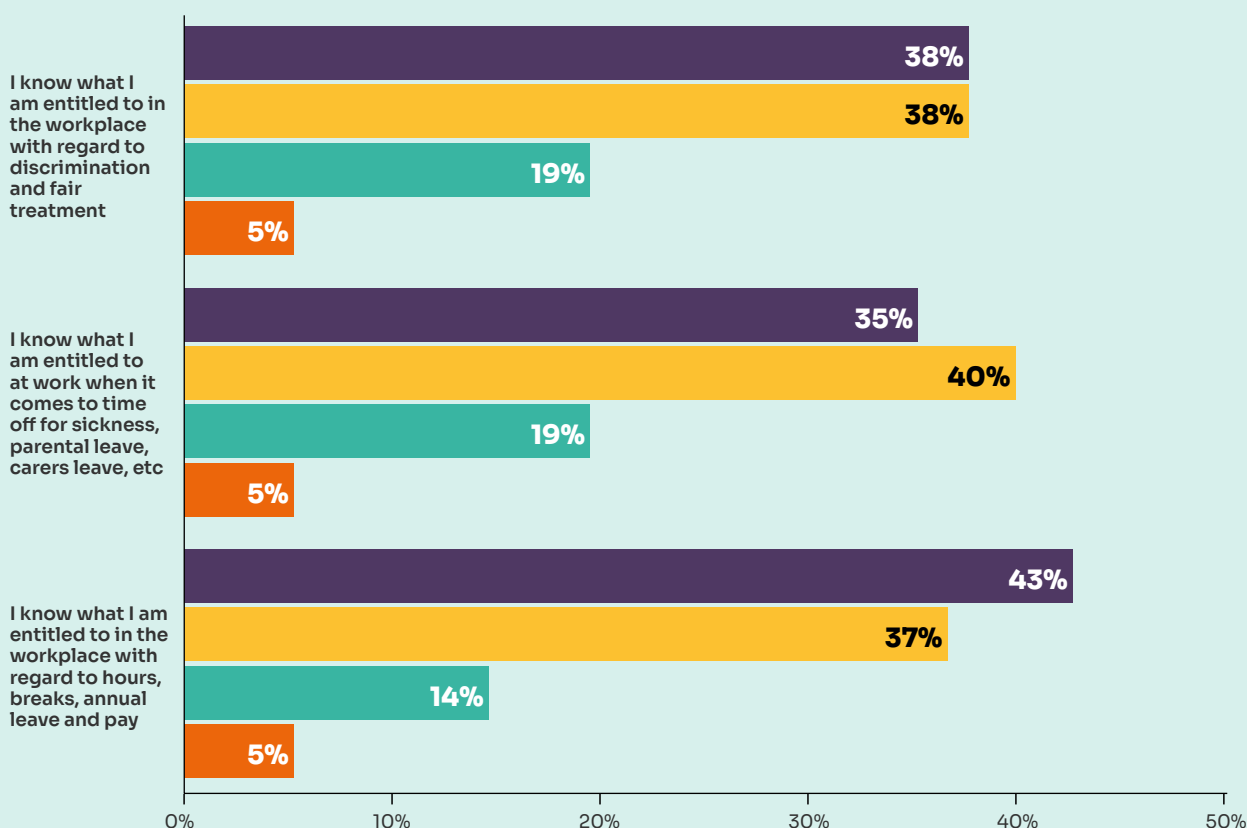
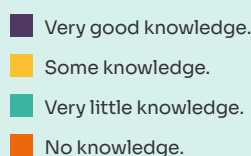
Older young women were also more likely to have reported the unfair treatment they experienced than those in the younger age group. Almost three fifths (57%) of young women aged 25–30 who took our survey told us that they had made a report, compared to just over two fifths (42%) of young women aged 18–24.

Young women are most likely to know what they're entitled to when it comes to **pay, hours, breaks and annual leave**. More than two fifths of our survey respondents (43%) felt they had 'very good knowledge' in these areas, compared with their rights around discrimination and fair treatment (38%) and time off for sickness or life events (35%).

43%

of young women had 'very good knowledge' of what they're entitled to when it comes to **pay, hours, breaks and annual leave**, compared to their rights around discrimination (38%) and time off for sickness/ life events (35%)

FIGURE 2: Young women's knowledge of their workplace rights



1. YOUNG WOMEN'S AWARENESS OF THEIR WORKPLACE RIGHTS

While young women feel that they have a moderate understanding of their workplace entitlements, in reality this knowledge may be limited. Interviewees from several organisations supporting young women described knowledge gaps among their clients, including around **their contractual agreements, where to go for assistance, what the law says is acceptable, and the limits around how it can actually help them.**



Very few people that I come into contact with [who have] employment issues actually know a lot about their rights."

| Interviewee, Help On Your Doorstep



People know about their top line rights, but they think their rights protect them, as opposed to giving them something to do in consequence of action."

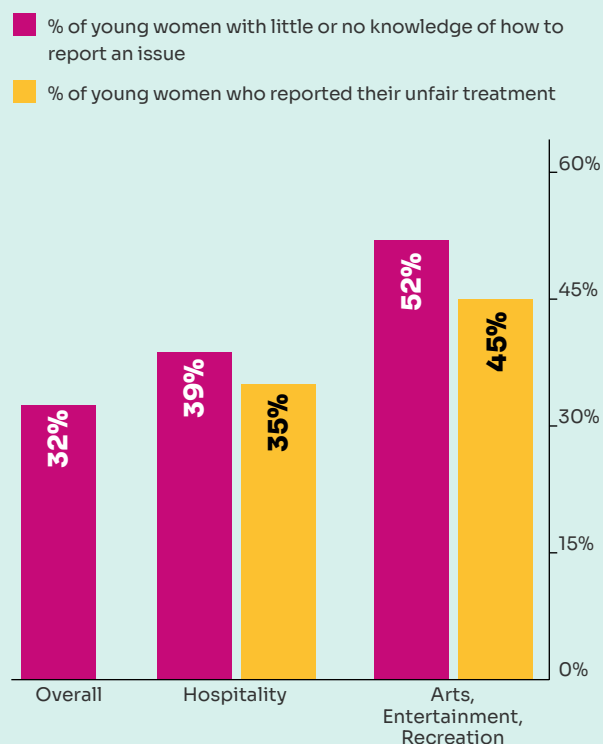
| Interviewee, London-based legal firm

Worryingly, many of the young women who responded to our survey – all of whom had experienced unfair treatment at work – **did not know how to report an issue**, with nearly a third (32%) telling us they had 'little' or 'no' knowledge in this area. A significant proportion of these were young women who **did not report their own unfair treatment** – 42% of young women who didn't report their issue said that they had little or no knowledge of how to do so.

Among young women working in **arts, entertainment and recreation and hospitality**, there is even less awareness of how to report a problem. Over half (52%) of young women in arts, entertainment and recreation told us they had little or no knowledge of reporting processes, with nearly two fifths (39%) of those in hospitality telling us the same.

Unsurprisingly, these are also amongst the sectors where young women are least likely to report their unfair treatment. Only 35% of young women working in hospitality and 45% of those working in arts, entertainment and recreation told us they made a formal complaint or officially reported their issue.

FIGURE 3: Young women's knowledge of how to report an issue at work and the likelihood of reporting.



SOURCES OF INFORMATION FOR YOUNG WOMEN ABOUT WORKPLACE RIGHTS

Young women responding to our survey most commonly reported **getting information about their workplace rights from friends and family** – 92% learned something this way, with just under three quarters (75%) saying that they'd learned either 'a little' or 'a lot'. But, as one organisation supporting young women points out, this isn't an option for all, and puts those who don't have access to friends and family, or whose support network doesn't have the right knowledge and experience, at a disadvantage.

Media is another valuable source of information, providing either 'a little' or 'a lot' of information for 71% of survey respondents. For responders to our LinkedIn polls, social media was the most common source of information, with over half (51%) saying that this is where they'd learned the most about their workplace rights.

Young women are getting some information on their workplace rights from their employers, with most (87%) reporting that they learned at least something at work, and over a quarter (28%) saying that they learned 'a lot'. However this isn't consistent across sectors – **young women working in health and social care, retail, and hospitality were more likely than other young women to say they'd learned nothing at all from their employers** (16% in health and social care, 13% in retail and hospitality and 11% overall).

Interviewees from organisations supporting young women told us that the **information shared by employers is variable, especially when comparing the public and private sector**. They say that public sector employees are more likely to have access to their workplace's policies through an intranet or HR department, whereas smaller private companies, particularly in the healthcare sector, tend to share less information with their employees. They also note that young women, especially those new to the workforce, might not have the confidence to ask when information isn't provided.



Some of our clients might have come out of a care home...they're particularly vulnerable because they don't have that parent or caregiver at home saying 'yeah but where's your payslip? Have you looked at your payslip? This is how you read a payslip. Have you got a contract? This is what it means'."

| Interviewee, London-based legal firm



I see a lot more coming through on TikTok about knowing your rights, and a lot of people who are doing that kind of influencing are women."

| Interviewee, Unite



Despite its role in getting young women ready for the workplace, **formal education isn't a reliable source of information** – 40% of young women told us they'd had very little or no learning about their workplace rights at school, college or university, with **nearly a fifth (19%) saying they'd learned nothing at all.**

40%

of young women told us they'd had **very little or no learning about their workplace rights** at school, college or university

Our research suggests that being given information about workplace rights at an early age could increase young women's confidence to report an issue when they enter the workforce. 63% of young women who reported their unfair treatment told us that they had learned 'a little' or 'a lot' about their workplace rights from lessons at school, college or university, compared to just 46% of those who did not.

Support organisations we spoke to talked about trying to plug the gap left by formal education provision. Union representatives felt they had a duty to educate young women on their rights – they described how schools failed to provide the necessary knowledge, and noted that it wasn't always in an employer's interest to keep employees informed. But **fewer than half (43%) of the young women who responded to our survey had learned 'a little' or 'a lot' from a charity or support organisation**, making it the least common source of information.



I'll represent members sometimes in the private sector, and they've never even been given a contract, so they're unsure of actually how many hours they're contracted to work a week, because unscrupulous private sector employers want a fluid workforce."

| Interviewee, Unison



I think [young women should be given information about their rights] as early as possible, probably like school, because it feels a little bit like learning to value yourself, especially because there's so much exploitation, especially when you're under 21 or when you're working, when you're young – when you're like 16."

| Interviewee, Musician's Union



CONCLUSIONS

While young women do have some access to information about their workplace rights, it's insufficient and inconsistent.

There's a lack of reliable information available to young women about how to tackle unfair treatment at work, with too many not knowing how to report an issue. This combined with less knowledge about rights around discrimination, fair treatment, and time off for sickness or life events, means that **young women may be unsure if what they're experiencing entitles them to make a complaint, or how to go about it.**

The lack of knowledge in the arts, entertainment and recreation, health and social care, retail, and hospitality sectors is especially problematic. Many young women working in these sectors are likely to be in low-paid, insecure roles, leaving them more vulnerable to exploitation. If they're not armed with accurate information about their rights, they can't defend themselves when employers try to take advantage.

Better provision of information on workplace rights in schools, colleges and universities is a key area of development which could benefit the youngest women the most, as they often enter the workforce without prior experience. There's also space to **standardise what information employers need to share, and how accessible they need to make it,** so that every young woman in the workplace has clear and easy access to knowledge about what she's entitled to and where to go if her entitlements aren't being met.

Social media is currently a vital source of information on workplace rights for young women, and has the capacity to reach those who might not have access to other resources, such as parental advice or employer-provided information. It also reaches those who may not have attended or completed formal education. Since information shared on social media travels fast and far but isn't always accurate, there is real scope for those who have the right information but are struggling to reach their audience to utilise this tool more effectively. **Unions, advice centres and external support providers might want to invest in this area, as might official or government information providers.**

2

WHAT ARE YOUNG WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF REPORTING UNFAIR TREATMENT AT WORK?

SUMMARY

When reporting unfair treatment at work, most young women try to address it through managers, supervisors, or HR departments first. Union support is under-utilised, possibly due to a lack of information or understanding of the union role.

Young women face a number of barriers when trying to take action over unfair treatment. Many face a culture of complicity and inaction, where management fail to react to complaints and those complained about are protected or even rewarded. Young women must often navigate a power imbalance, finding themselves ignored or mistreated due to gender, ethnicity, age or neurodivergence.

The reporting system is often difficult to navigate due to its complexity and lack of clarity over procedure – this can make young women vulnerable to damaging consequences such as breaches of confidentiality. The emotional burden of facing all this often leads to a loss of confidence and feelings of overwhelm, which can make it hard to keep pursuing action.

Young women may also find themselves facing negative consequences, such as the threat of or actual termination of their employment, or losing out on promotion opportunities.

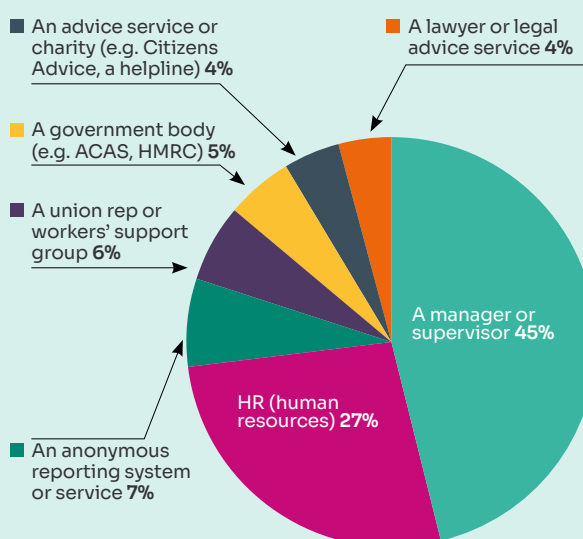
The situation is worst for the youngest women, neurodivergent young women, and young women with a long-term health condition. These women face fewer positive outcomes and more negative consequences when reporting unfair treatment at work.

THE PROCESS OF REPORTING UNFAIR TREATMENT AT WORK

A majority of young women who report unfair treatment at work first try to address it in-house – nearly three quarters (72%) of young women responding to our survey told us that they'd first approached a manager, supervisor or the HR department.

The first port of call is most commonly a manager or a supervisor – 45% said that this was their first step. Just over a quarter (27%) approached HR to make their complaint instead, but this varied significantly across different job roles and sectors. As many as 40% of young women working in administrative and support roles and production and construction first reported their issue through HR, compared with only 13% working in arts, entertainment and recreation. Young women working in hospitality and health and social care were also less likely to report through HR – around a fifth of young women in these sectors told us that HR were the first port of call for reporting an issue. This is unsurprising given the lack of information provided to young women in these sectors about their workplace rights by their employers, and the often informal working arrangements.

FIGURE 4: Initial reporting channels.



2. EXPERIENCES OF REPORTING UNFAIR TREATMENT

Young women are under-utilising the support available to them through external bodies such as unions, government bodies, and advice services. Only 6% of young women responding to our survey first reported their issue through a union representative, although 17% did approach a union after first making a report via another avenue. Just 5% first approached a government body, and only 4% approached an advice service or a legal service first.

The unions we spoke to explained that **the lack of clear processes in many workplaces leaves young women in the dark about the support they're entitled to.** This makes it easier for employers to keep the situation internal, where difficult issues can be downplayed, pushed aside, or tied up in endless back-and-forth.



When people do what they believe they're supposed to do, which is speak to the line manager...alerting them at that point lets them work out how to sweep it under the rug."

| Interviewee, Unite



A lot of the time we'll have young women come to us, and they'll have been in a meeting with their employer, not realising that they could have had representation. So sometimes they come to us when they're on the verge of something serious...their job might be at risk, and they've got right to that end stage when there's been stages before where they could have had representation."

| Interviewee, Unison

Young women who reported their unfair treatment directly to HR were more likely to successfully resolve their issue than those who prioritised almost all other reporting channels. Over half (54%) of young women who first contacted HR to report their issue were able to successfully resolve it, compared to 43% who first spoke to a manager or supervisor and between 30 and 40 percent of those who reported their issue to an external source.

The only avenue more likely to result in a successful outcome for young women was using a lawyer or legal advice service – although very few women made an initial report in this way. 55% of those who first reported their unfair treatment to a legal advisor and 63% who subsequently reported their issue via a legal advice service were able to come to a successful resolution.

BARRIERS FACED BY YOUNG WOMEN WHEN REPORTING UNFAIR TREATMENT AT WORK

COMPLICITY AND INACTION

Young women believe nothing will be done if they complain about unfair treatment at work – and they're often right. The most common reason given in our survey for not reporting unfair treatment was that young women didn't think anything would be done, with over a third (34%) leaving their issue unreported because of this. And for those who did report, over a quarter (28%) said that no action was taken as a result of their complaint.

over
1 in 3
young women who didn't
report their unfair treatment
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didn't think anything would
be done**

Many of the young women we spoke to said that after reporting their issue, they weren't contacted again regarding their case. They told us that they weren't given updates, or told whether procedures were being followed. Reporting pathways were kept unclear, and some young women were actively discouraged from reporting issues, or given the responsibility of fixing the issues themselves.

Some young women described **company cultures that worked to protect offenders and make life difficult for those who spoke out**. They described having their complaints belittled or not taken seriously, and told us about situations where staff who'd behaved in a discriminatory or inappropriate way were rewarded or promoted despite their reports.

Young women felt gaslit by managers who denied their issues, suggested they were exaggerating, or tried to justify and explain away complaints. The 'burden of proof' was especially challenging for these



This just feels like there's no consequence of bad behaviour. That's what I struggle with – that someone can be inappropriate with me and nothing happens."

| Research participant (young woman)



When I raised it... I was given a full telling off for being challenging and difficult."

| Research participant (young woman)



While this was all happening [the reporting process] and they were sort of messing about, this person actually got promoted to the head of the site."

| Research participant (young woman)



2. EXPERIENCES OF REPORTING UNFAIR TREATMENT

young women – our participants shared stories of sexual harassment and gender discrimination where the lack of concrete evidence meant their complaints could be minimised or ignored.

The situation is worst for young women in the hospitality, education, and health and social care sectors – 39% of survey respondents in hospitality, 35% in education, and 32% in health and social care told us that no action was taken as a result of their complaint.

And those in **hospitality and arts, entertainment and recreation** are least likely to have their issue resolved – over a quarter (28% in hospitality; 27% in arts, entertainment and recreation) said that their issue wasn't resolved at all, compared with 15% overall. While just over a fifth (22%) of young women overall said their



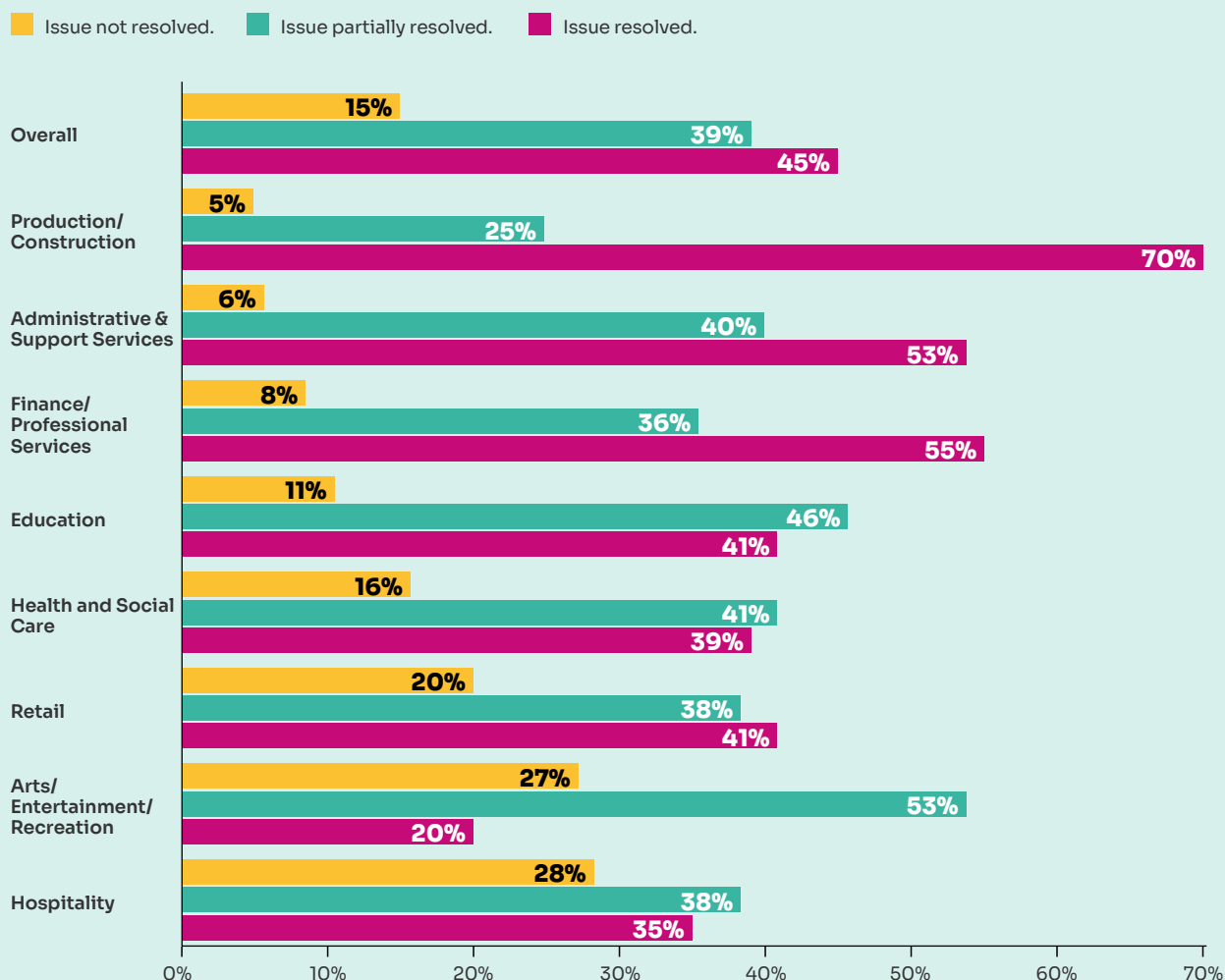
I did report it to the manager's manager... their response was that the footage had been deleted because they delete the footage after a certain amount of time."

| Research participant (young woman)



working conditions improved as a result of reporting their unfair treatment, this dropped to 14% for those working in hospitality and retail, and just 7% in arts, entertainment and recreation.

FIGURE 5: Resolution status, by sector



POWER IMBALANCE

For the young women we spoke to, one of the biggest barriers faced was **navigating a workplace in which they wielded less power than either those who'd treated them unfairly or those whose support was needed to address the issue**. This power imbalance often played out along **gender** lines – we heard about male managers belittling and even threatening young women who tried to report problems, as well as young women encouraged to behave in certain ways either to fit in with male colleagues or not to 'encourage' them.



When I'm interacting with male colleagues [I have to consider] 'am I doing anything that might make them think...something that's inappropriate' ... I'm just very aware of making sure that I am very professional at all times when I'm dealing with male colleagues."

| Research participant (young woman)

Young women told us that they were expected to prove themselves worthy against less-qualified male colleagues, or face having opportunities revoked or denied to them. In many workplaces, men were generally reported to be held to a lower standard of behaviour, with inappropriate or discriminatory actions allowed to happen without consequence.



There were literally staff members who were saying they don't want that [reported sexual harassment] to make people hate him, he just made a mistake."

| Research participant (young woman)



Gender isn't the only factor used to take power away from young women – our research participants also described being othered or made to feel less valued due to **age, ethnicity, sexual identity, and neurodivergence**. We heard about microaggressions in white male dominated workplaces, and instances where senior managers bullied or behaved aggressively towards them. Neurodivergent participants also spoke about having their complaints brushed aside because the issues they raised didn't impact the rest of the workforce in the same way.



They were misogynistic, they were homophobic, they were Islamophobic, and it made the workplace really toxic and unsafe... Most of the full time staff and all of the senior management were all white men, so it was really isolating for a person of colour, for a woman of colour, to be in that space."

| Research participant (young woman)

2. EXPERIENCES OF REPORTING UNFAIR TREATMENT

For some young women, reporting an issue is a way to reclaim some of that lost power, but for too many, **leaving the workplace is the only way they can see to take back control**. When reports aren't taken seriously and nothing is done to make the workplace safe for young women, walking away may be the only statement they can make, and the only way to be free of the unfair treatment that's making their workplaces intolerable.



Eventually I just felt like it was way too toxic, and [decided to] just step out of this and just look for other jobs. Because this is taking away my voice and my power – I can't work in this situation anymore. So I just resigned... But on the other side, I felt so empowered. I felt like now I could do anything that I want."

| Research participant (young woman)



If you're young, you can be batted off very easily. And you know, from an employer's perspective, if you're young, you'll just think 'yeah, what are they going to do? They're not going to take me to a tribunal, they're not going to take legal advice'. So you're quite vulnerable. An employer knows that you'd be quite vulnerable."

| Interviewee, London-based legal firm



DIFFICULTY NAVIGATING THE SYSTEM

The lack of clarity on procedure when an issue is reported makes it hard for young women to follow what's happening, but it also makes the process more dangerous for them. Several of the young women who took part in our research told us about occasions where they'd believed they were speaking about their issue in confidence, only to find that what they'd said was later shared within the workplace. In some cases it was clear from the start that **reporting the issue would mean giving up their right to privacy**. For many women, this is too much of a risk—of the young women responding to our survey who didn't report their unfair treatment, nearly a fifth (19%) said it was because they didn't trust anyone enough to do so.

19%

of young women didn't report issues because they **didn't trust anyone enough to do so**

The more practical aspects of navigating the reporting system also create problems for young women making a complaint. In many of the scenarios young women described, there was **no fixed pathway and no agreed procedure for updates or progress checks**. Some young women struggled to get in touch with the right staff, and nearly all found it difficult to get follow-up information. In several workplaces, it wasn't clear if there was a procedure at all.



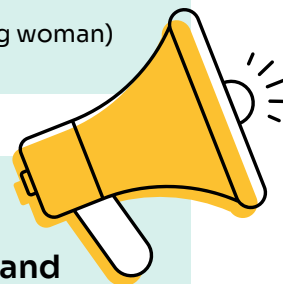
He told me the process, the protocol, and it was really elaborate and complex, and there was no way that I would not be exposed, my identity would not be exposed.”

| Research participant (young woman)



No clear governance and accountability for those people, no clear HR system, there isn't really HR.”

| Research participant (young woman)



I cannot possibly think of anything else I could have done differently that could have made it go better. And that's what's so frustrating... even if you do it, followed properly and do what you're meant to, it doesn't work.”

| Research participant (young woman)

2. EXPERIENCES OF REPORTING UNFAIR TREATMENT

Some young women also found the system set up in a way that **prevented or discouraged peer support**. Spaces where colleagues could come together to discuss issues or provide support for one another weren't readily available, and those who tried to create their own risk of being branded as 'troublemakers'. **This isolation makes the reporting process more stressful, but also makes it more difficult for others in the same boat to come forward.** Some women we spoke to didn't find out until late in their journeys that they weren't the only ones to have experienced or reported a particular issue.

EMOTIONAL BURDEN

While it's no surprise that experiencing unfair treatment at work has an emotional impact, **the stress of reporting is also causing a real detriment to young women's mental health, getting in the way of their capacity to navigate the process.** A quarter of young women (25%) told us they felt ignored and dismissed when reporting unfair treatment, with a fifth (20%) saying that their mental health got worse. The emotional drain makes it difficult for some young women to keep going with their complaints.

25%

of young women **felt ignored and dismissed** when they'd reported bad treatment at work



A few of us created a diversity inclusion group, and we had permission to do it, but there were restrictions and limits on what we could do. Like we weren't allowed to make it formalising (sic). We weren't allowed to tell people, so it was all by word of mouth, and had to be a bit weird and secret."

| Research participant (young woman)



It brings a lot of stress. Depending on what the scenario is, it can bring your issues public as well, which can be uncomfortable. And it creates a lot of pressure on the person as well, going through the case. I'd say, it can be quite overwhelming."

| Interviewee, Unite



2. EXPERIENCES OF REPORTING UNFAIR TREATMENT

Confidence was the area most impacted for the young women we spoke to, with some beginning to doubt their own skills and strengths. They experienced feelings of **isolation, exhaustion and overwhelm**, which left some **struggling to continue pursuing action**. With little or no emotional support available in the workplace, frustration, anxiety, sadness, and a sense of identity loss also led to a state of burnout for some.



The emotional impact it has on you, you just don't feel like yourself anymore. It's very hard if you're in a situation like 'I might actually have a legal case here', to do that when you're feeling your battery is minus 1000% - you just can't do it."

| Research participant (young woman)



It's about feeling safe at work and having that mental and emotional safety...I feel I didn't have that at that time, because you know, you've raised concerns and nothing's happened. You don't get an apology from anyone. You don't get any sort of confirmation that it's even been spoken about."

| Research participant (young woman)



Seems like these things have a knock-on effect. If you keep experiencing these situations, it's hard to remain resilient and confident."

| Research participant (young woman)

NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES

For many young women, the fear of being penalised or punished is a real barrier to reporting unfair treatment, and in many cases this fear is justified. In our LinkedIn polls, 36% told us that they wouldn't report unfair treatment for fear of appearing 'difficult', with 31% saying that fears over job security would stop them. And in our survey, over a quarter (27%) of those who didn't report their unfair treatment said it was because they were worried they'd lose their job, with the same number fearing it would lead to negative treatment from managers or colleagues.

36%

of young women **wouldn't report unfair treatment** for fear of appearing 'difficult'



He [my manager] was like 'but if you want to get promoted, you can't be engaging in things like that... when that letter came to the senior leadership meeting, [I thought] oh I don't know anyone stupid enough to sign something like that. And then they called out the names and your name was on it, and you can't be doing that kind of thing'."

| Research participant (young woman)



An hour later [after reporting] he pulled me into one of the studio rooms. It was just me and him...he said, 'my job is now threatened. You need to be careful. You're going to lose your job'."

| Research participant (young woman)

These fears were shared by many of the young women we spoke to, who told us **the reporting process had put them at risk of job loss and reputational damage**. Some were threatened by managers, who told them that pursuing action would affect their chances of promotion, or could lead to their employment being terminated.

For several of these young women, fears about negative consequences became a reality. They described **being denied opportunities at work, and being unable to work in certain places and times or participate in specific projects** due to the ongoing presence of the people they had complained about. In the worst cases, they found **work taken away from them or their positions terminated without warning**.



I went on to report it...I went into work the next day, no one spoke to me, and then the next day I was fired at midnight via email."

| Research participant (young woman)



2. EXPERIENCES OF REPORTING UNFAIR TREATMENT

Their experiences align with what organisations supporting young women say – that **both the fear of retribution and the actual negative consequences for young women on the receiving end of bullying tactics or vengeful actions interfere with their capacity to pursue an action to its conclusion.** They told us that the long, drawn-out nature of the process further compounds this – young women need to have both the financial resources and the emotional resilience to weather the intimidation. It's made more difficult by many young women's fears that the consequences will extend beyond the life of the claim, through a bad reference or a damage to reputation.



With young women and young workers as a whole, sometimes they haven't been in employment for long, and they fear for their job, because they're predominantly in rented accommodation, so any threat to their income, they're extremely worried about."

| Interviewee, Unison



There's only so much you can assert to someone that eventually we'll get there, but...you need to wait a year before you get what you're owed and there's a fair outcome, but in that meantime you need to deal with a completely hostile environment in the workplace. You're dealing with shifts getting cut, no minimum hours, all of these different methods of intimidation."

| Interviewee, Unite



SPOTLIGHT ON

Age

When reporting unfair treatment at work, younger women are more likely to have a negative experience, and receive less support along the way.

For young women aged 18–24 who report unfair treatment, the biggest impacts of making a complaint are negative:

- Nearly two fifths (38%) said no action was taken as a result of their complaint.
- A third (33%) felt ignored and dismissed.
- Over a quarter (26%) experienced worsening mental health.
- Over a quarter (26%) found it negatively affected their relationships with colleagues.

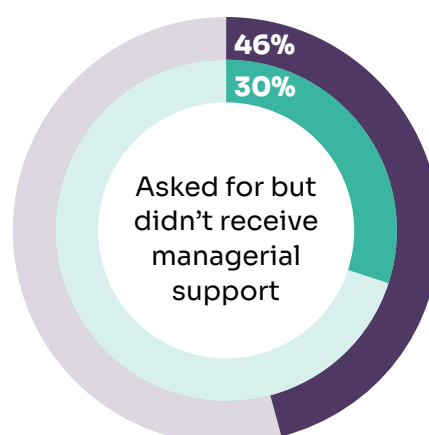
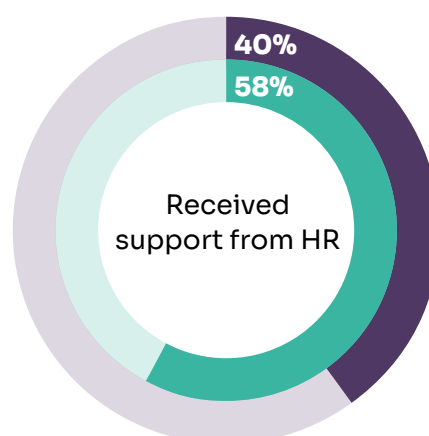
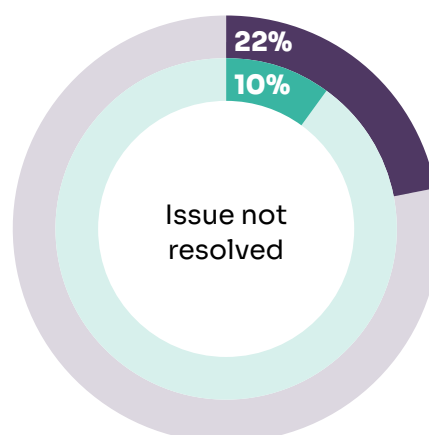
Additionally, younger women are less likely to experience an improvement in working conditions (15% compared with 26% for the older age group), and more likely to decide not to report unfair treatment in future (24% compared with 10% in the older age group).

For young women aged 25–30, the outlook after reporting is far more likely to be positive:

- Nearly a third (31%) found it gave them a better understanding of what they're entitled to at work.
- Nearly a third (31%) were more likely to speak up about unfair treatment in future.
- Over a quarter (26%) felt listened to and validated.

■ Young women aged 18–24

■ Young women aged 25–30



SPOTLIGHT ON

Racially minoritised young women

Our [annual survey](#) has consistently revealed that racially minoritised young women are much more likely to be affected by insecure work, discrimination and barriers to progression, so it is vital that reporting processes and enforcement systems work for them.

Whilst our survey findings showed minimal differences in the barriers faced to reporting and the outcomes of doing so across different ethnic groups, we did find some evidence to suggest that initial decisions about the reporting process may be influenced by race.

Amongst our survey respondents, white young women were most likely to first report their unfair treatment to a manager or supervisor (53%) and least likely to use an anonymous reporting service (4%).

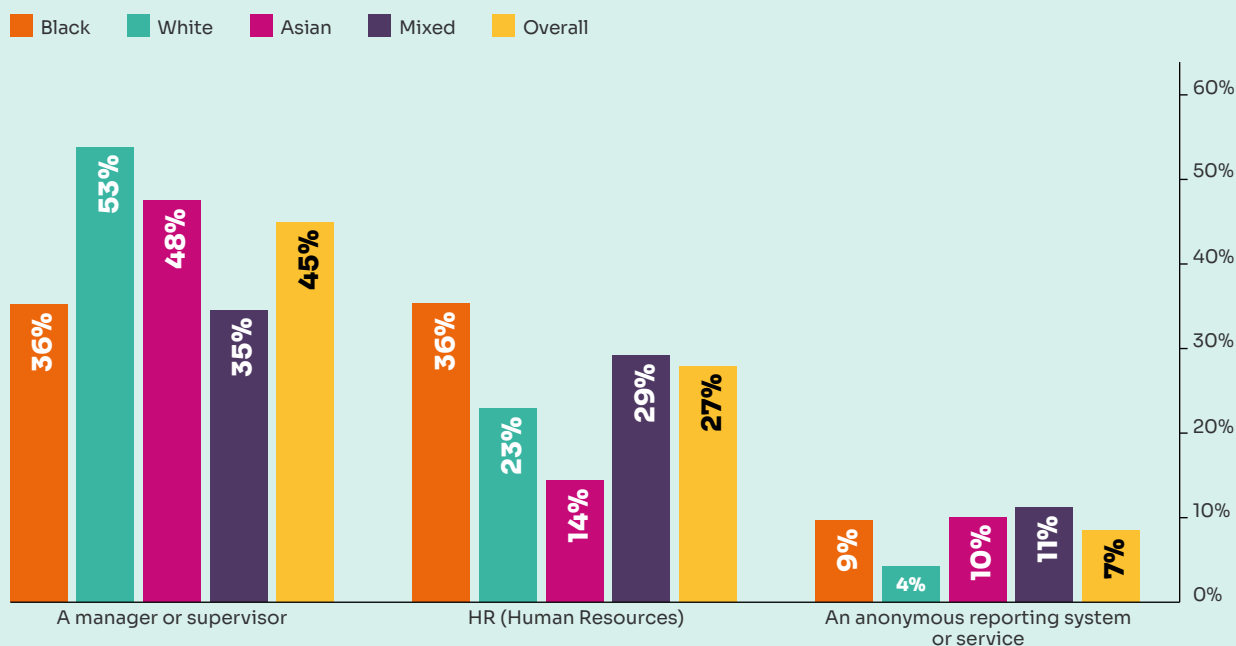
Black and mixed race young women were least likely to first report their unfair treatment to a manager (36% and 35%

respectively) with Black young women being the only group just as likely to first report an issue to HR as a manager or supervisor.

Although the numbers of young women using an anonymous reporting service as their first port of call are low, racially minoritised young women are more likely to prioritise this avenue than white young women.

These findings may be indicative of particularly low levels of trust in management amongst racially minoritised young women and/or a preference for more formal reporting channels. These patterns may also reflect the types of unfair treatment experienced by racially minoritised young women or the sectors they are more likely to be working in.

FIGURE 7: Initial reporting channels, by ethnicity.



SPOTLIGHT ON

Disabled and neurodivergent young women

Neurodivergent young women and young women with long term health conditions have a poorer experience at every stage of the reporting journey.

In our survey, young women with a long-term physical or mental health condition, and neurodivergent young women were the most likely to say they didn't report their unfair treatment because they didn't know how to.

For neurodivergent young women and young women with a long-term mental health condition, concerns about the negative impacts were also more of a barrier to reporting – 39% of young women with a long-term mental health condition and 36% of neurodivergent young women said they were worried about being treated badly by managers and colleagues, and 38% of neurodivergent young women who didn't report said it was because they were afraid of losing their job.

38%

of neurodivergent young women who didn't report unfair treatment said it was **because they were afraid of losing their job**

During the process, this group were least likely to receive adequate support at work – almost half of young women with a long-term health condition (47%) and over two fifths (43%) of neurodivergent young women asked their manager or supervisor for support but didn't receive it, compared to 36% overall.



It felt discriminatory, and it felt like it was only me... anyone else I talked to, the board, they went 'No, we don't have that problem'. It's like my problems were dismissed."

| Research participant
(neurodivergent young woman)



I have to be very creative in terms of where I find my support, and I've realised that support is not in the workplace. I don't think I will ever feel comfortable and safe reporting issues and my experiences to people within the workplace. My support comes from my therapist. I've also been under the mental health community team recently because of similar experiences."

| Research participant
(neurodivergent young woman)

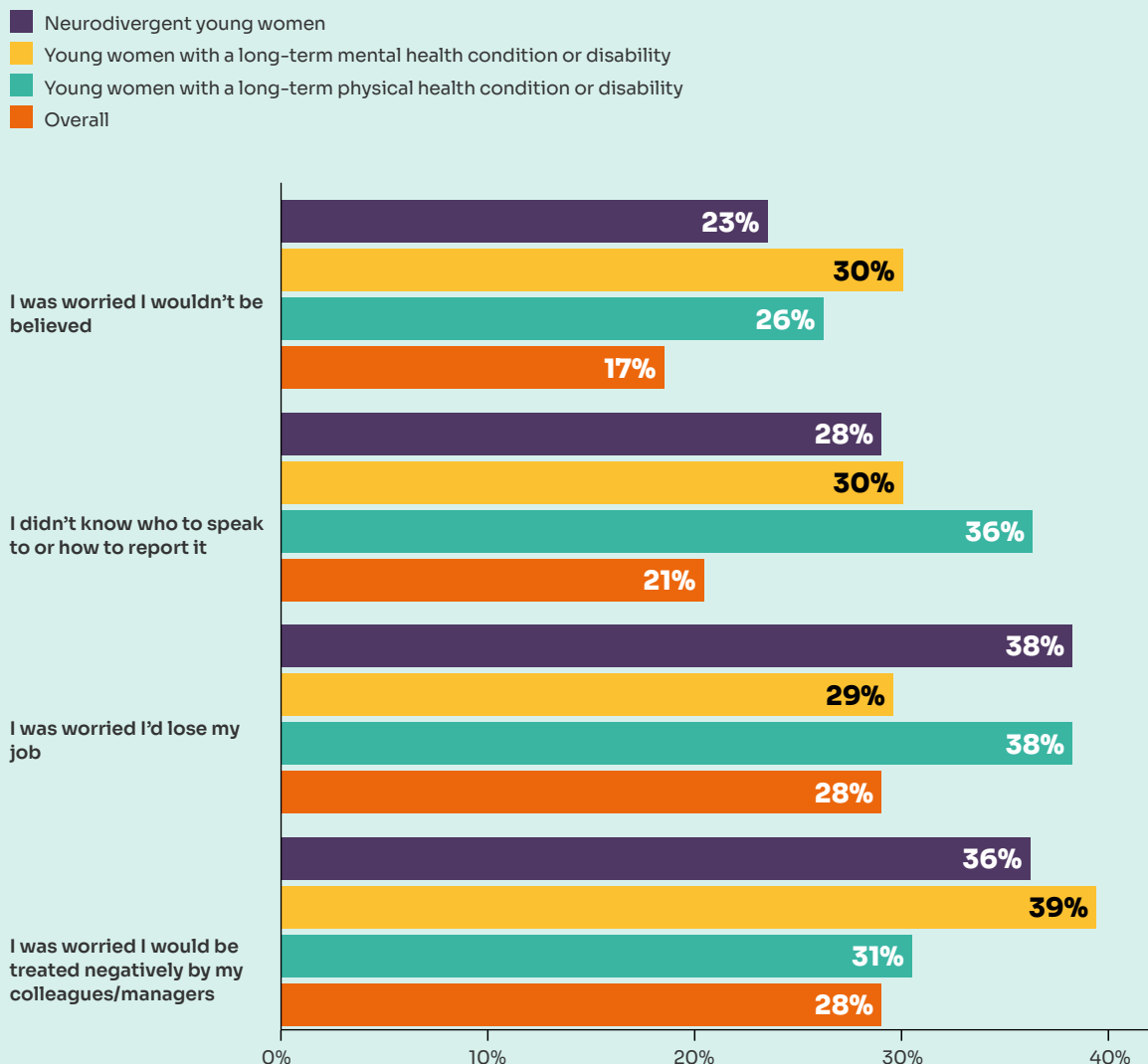
2. EXPERIENCES OF REPORTING UNFAIR TREATMENT

Over a third (35%) of young women with a long-term physical health condition and a third (33%) of neurodivergent young women asked HR for support but didn't receive it, compared to just over a fifth (22%) overall.

On average, around two fifths (40%) of neurodivergent and disabled young women reported feeling ignored and dismissed when they reported their unfair treatment, compared to a quarter (25%) overall.

Less than a third (32%) of neurodivergent young women said their issue was fully resolved, with a fifth (20%) saying there was no resolution at all. And two fifths (40%) of neurodivergent women and around the same number (38%) of young women with a long-term mental health condition said that their mental health got worse as a result of reporting their unfair treatment, regardless of the outcome, suggesting that the reporting process is particularly burdensome for young women who are already struggling with their mental health.

FIGURE 8: Reasons given by young women for not reporting unfair treatment



CONCLUSIONS

Young women need more from their employers when dealing with unfair treatment at work.

The first way young women typically seek help when they experience unfair treatment at work is to approach management within their workplace. This makes sense, since it's where the most change can happen with the least upheaval – **senior leadership have the greatest capacity to resolve an issue**. However, it's also the place where young women are being let down the most, **through a lack of accountability** that allows employers to brush complaints aside or drown them in non-functional and overly complex reporting procedures.

Young women need measures in place that hold employers to a specific standard when processing claims of unfair treatment. This needs to include not just rules or guidelines, but mechanisms to

promote compliance – it needs to be in employers' best interests to process claims fairly, respectfully, and in a timely manner.

The consequences of the current state of affairs are dire for young women. The treatment they face when they raise an issue is often just an extension of the unfair treatment they were trying to protest, especially for younger women, women of colour, neurodivergent women and young women with health issues. The double burden of navigating first, the unfair treatment and second, the struggle to get it addressed is burning young women out, **leaving too many with a choice between accepting unfair treatment and leaving the workforce.** This benefits nobody.

3

HOW ARE YOUNG WOMEN SUPPORTED WHEN THEY REPORT UNFAIR TREATMENT?

SUMMARY

Support can make a real difference for young women experiencing unfair treatment at work. Support from within the workplace is key, especially from senior leadership or HR, but unfortunately is often insufficient or entirely absent. Colleagues can also be an invaluable source of support under the right conditions. Young women find mentorship or counselling support through Employee Assistance or Mental Health First Aid programmes very helpful. Friends and family can also provide support, although there is a limit to what they can do.

What's needed going forward are clear, simple reporting procedures, senior leadership that takes the process seriously; spaces for colleagues to come together to provide peer support; and access to support networks where young women can be heard, learn about their rights, and feel empowered through access to a community.

SUPPORT WITHIN THE WORKPLACE IS CRUCIAL

When young women report unfair treatment at work, **the support they receive from management and HR can set the tone for the whole experience.** Around two thirds of young women who receive support from a manager or supervisor (69%) or HR (65%) are able to successfully resolve their issue. More than half (56%) of the young women who got support from their manager or supervisor told us that it 'significantly helped'.



What you need is some kind of ally at senior level. I think in an ideal world you'd have a senior leadership that was open to the whole process."

| Research participant (young woman)

Unfortunately, for many young women **this support isn't available.** More than a third (36%) of young women asked for managerial support and didn't receive it, with over a fifth (22%) having the same experience with HR. The young women we spoke to had predominantly negative experiences when trying to access support at work – they told us about **poor communication, a lack of guidance and a lack of follow-up from their managers.** For most of them **support wasn't offered, and they weren't signposted to any other sources,** while some **requested support but were ignored.**

3. HOW ARE YOUNG WOMEN SUPPORTED WHEN THEY REPORT UNFAIR TREATMENT?

Once again, young women in **hospitality, education, and arts, entertainment and recreation come off worst** – they are the least likely to receive support from a manager or supervisor during the reporting process. Over half (53%) of young women working in arts, entertainment and recreation, and nearly half (47%) of young women working in hospitality asked for this support but didn't receive it.

Young women told us that **support from colleagues can be really impactful**, especially in group settings. Colleagues know the environment where the unfair treatment has taken place and can provide much needed solidarity and affirmation. However, they can also be a source of discomfort. In some circumstances, **those who report unfair treatment can find themselves ostracised by their colleagues, or find it difficult to trust them**. Feelings of isolation can be really hard to manage, especially for newer members of staff or members of minority groups.



In terms of organisational support, there was none of it. And in terms of accessing support and then reporting mistreatment, there was also no help, no guidance.”

| Research participant (young woman)



The team that I was working with... they were very helpful. They would take me out and buy me coffees, and I'd sit there crying... because I didn't know what to do.”

| Research participant (young woman)



I wasn't offered any resources from work to be like 'Oh, you can talk to this person about it'...that was never offered.”

| Research participant (young woman)



I think the best support came from female colleagues of a similar level who were experiencing the same thing...you can start feeling like the mad one and the difficult one and things like that. So I think it is that sort of truth telling and holding each other accountable in terms of like 'no, you're right, you're not wrong, you're not difficult'. Like this is true, this is happening.”

| Research participant (young woman)



I didn't feel like I could open up ... and speak to them about such a major thing, because I'm the new person there and that's the boss, that's the manager, and they were all really close with each other...I kind of felt as if they might look at me and feel like 'Oh she's the new person trying to create problems here'.”

| Research participant (young woman)



UNION AND GOVERNMENT SUPPORT IS NOT REALLY TAPPED INTO OR RECOGNISED

Most of the young women we spoke to **did not contact a union or government body for support**. This was reflected in our survey too – three in five (60%) young women didn't ask for support from a government body, and nearly half (48%) didn't reach out to a union. **Older young women are much more likely to receive union support** – 43% of those aged 25–30, compared with just 18% of 18–24 year olds. This might be because they've had more time in the workplace and have better awareness of how to access this kind of help. However, a quarter (25%) of 18–24 year olds told us that they did ask for support from a union rep or workers' support group but didn't receive it, suggesting that union support may be less accessible to younger workers.

Young women told us they didn't always feel that union officials had the expertise needed for their case. In some cases, it was also felt that unionisation efforts might be blocked by those higher up, a sentiment echoed by the unions we spoke to. For others, accessing union support was seen as a commitment to a process that would force young women to face those who'd treated them badly, when all they wanted to do was escape.



If I have representatives confront [the employer], that would just bring me back to the same position. So I just wanted to get out of the place and not look back.”

| Research participant (young woman)



I think with younger women and younger people, it's also the older generation. Like I'm 50 this year so I saw strong trade unions when I was younger...so I saw that and the value of trade unionism. And I think now with younger people maybe not, and it's explaining the role of a trade union and how collective strength there is.”

| Interviewee, Unison



You say ‘these are the people that work in the place that you own, every single day, they know it inside out, they know what the customers are like, these people deserve a seat at the table, these people deserve the right to ask for what they're owed’. And it's met with ‘I'm not having some outside left-wing organisation coming in here and telling me what I can and cannot do’, because there's such a negative stigma attached towards the unions.”

| Interviewee, Unite

MENTORS AND COUNSELLORS CAN PROVIDE MUCH NEEDED SUPPORT

Some of the young women we spoke to were able to access **counselling** through Employee Assistance or Mental Health First Aid programmes. Others sought mentorship or coaching from outside organisations **They told us how helpful this kind of support can be, given its formal yet personal nature**, but they also cautioned that it's not always available. Some had trouble accessing the support their workplaces offered, with management either not offering or actively denying their requests. Others found that this type of support wasn't available in their particular industry.



I used to have a mentor, so I used to have regular meetings with her. I was able to share anything there was a struggle with, and if there was any kind of extra support I needed, she was like 'okay, you should maybe contact this person, or maybe we can have this action plan'. And so it was very helpful to have these sessions with her, because I think it was also a confidential space I was having to share these struggles."

| Research participant (young woman)



I went to the head of [the organisation] and said, 'I'm having these issues with work. They're affecting my work. Is there anyone like [the Mental Health First Aider] who I can speak to, because she was really helpful'. And he turned around to me and he said 'This is not psychotherapy'."

| Research participant (young woman)



It [workplace counselling] is available, but it just wasn't offered to me at the time...I wasn't offered any resources to deal with it."

| Research participant (young woman)

FRIENDS CAN PROVIDE SUPPORT BUT FAMILY MIGHT NOT BE SO WELL PLACED

Young women told us that **support from their friends helped them both emotionally and practically**. Being able to confide in peers outside work was really important, especially when young women felt unable to talk to colleagues or people in the workplace. In some instances, friends were able to provide encouragement to take action or report an issue. Friends also provided assistance at times when the reporting journey had led to financially difficult circumstances.

Family support could be a bit more tricky, according to some of the young women we talked to. While they did confide in their family members, the advice they received didn't always help them to address the workplace issues, and there were times when family members could grow weary of the constant focus on the unfair treatment.



Of course I did reach out to my friends and I sort of leaned on them for emotional support...they would validate my feelings and reassured me that I'm not the problem. That's the problem of the institution."

| Research participant (young woman)



I've got very good friends and I'm so grateful for that. And you know I've slept on their sofas and lived with their families, and I'm so grateful for that."

| Research participant (young woman)



She [my mum] did say it should not happen and things, but then obviously she did say, you need your job and you need earnings and things like that. So you know, she didn't really give me the advice to go tell anyone, or that I should mention it to someone."

| Research participant (young woman)



I think there was a certain time, especially with my family, where they just kind of, not got frustrated with me, but were just saying like you know, just forget about it. Don't let it play on your mind."

| Research participant (young woman)

SUPPORT THAT'S NEEDED

Support from any source is beneficial for young women reporting unfair treatment – on average, 85% of young women who receive support across all sources say it's 'significantly' or 'somewhat' helpful. But **the support they're receiving currently isn't enough**, with over half (54%) saying they would have liked more. **The youngest women are in need of the most support**, with those aged 18–24 most likely to say that they would have liked more support, and least likely to find the support they received significantly helpful.

The young women who participated in our research had clear views on the kind of support that would have made their reporting experiences more positive:

FROM HR AND MANAGEMENT

- The young women we spoke to want those in senior leadership to take the reporting process seriously. They asked for simple reporting processes, with regular updates, and accessible resources. They also felt that teams investigating complaints should be demographically representative.
- It was important to them that confidentiality should be protected, and that protections should be put in place for women at work.



They could have put better measures in place to protect female staff, and offered me resources or to talk to someone else independent.”

| Research participant (young woman)



There should be a proper mechanism, strict protocols that enable people to step forward and actually report it [unfair treatment], and also the whole process, the procedural mechanism of what would happen when a report is filed should be less complicated.”

| Research participant (young woman)



If people felt more supported and empowered in their workplace to report and to go through procedures, then we'd probably have a hell of a lot more [success]. Or maybe we'd have less, because people would feel less comfortable being awful in the workplace.”

| Interviewee, Unite

FROM COLLEAGUES

- Young women want dedicated spaces where they can confide in and support colleagues, and they want opportunities to build collaborative support communities.
- They also think it's vital that colleagues respect and protect confidences.

Overall, our research participants felt that more **support tailored to the needs of younger women was needed**. They also wanted **more support from government bodies** – nearly three in five (58%) told us they would have liked 'a lot' or 'a little' more support from agencies such as ACAS or HMRC.

58%

of young women told us they'd have liked 'a lot' or 'a little' **more support from agencies such as ACAS or HMRC**



Feeling like I had a collaborative space where I felt like I could voice my concerns and my experience and get the support that I wanted from different members of the organisation rather than maybe just my immediate person or my immediate team...yeah that would have been nice."

| Research participant (young woman)



I hate the idea that your colleagues are not your friends. I hate that idea because they are your friends, because there are times when you go through the exact same thing. And you have to be there for each other, you need to support each other, but you should also not break anyone's trust... That stops us from having this sense of solidarity or having the sense of collective identity, and you're just pushing it to be one person's problem, but secretly, a lot of people are going through it."

| Research participant (young woman)



I think that [community] is massively important, because it is very much the 'strength in numbers' kind of thing, and also just maybe a bit of confidence as well."

| Interviewee, Musicians' Union

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO A POSITIVE EXPERIENCE OR OUTCOME

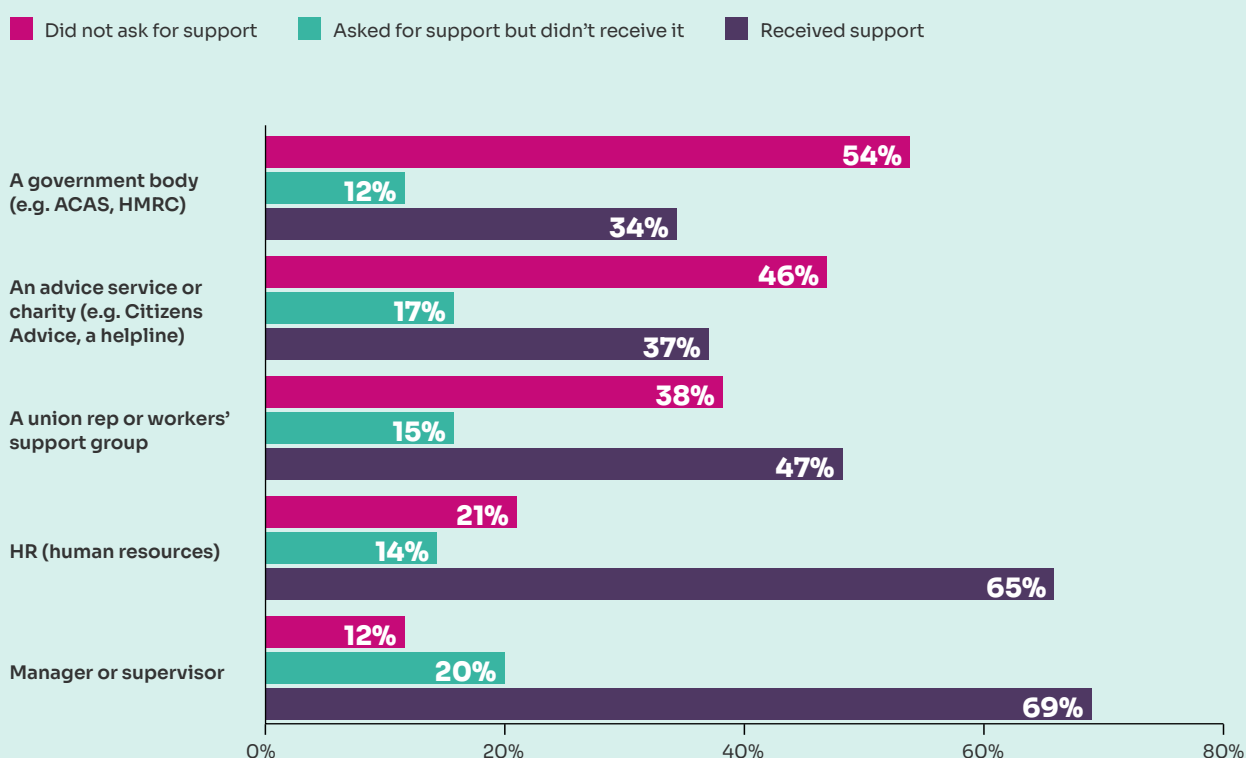
Adequate support was crucial for a successful resolution across the board, but our survey found that issues were most likely to be successfully resolved for young women who received support from a manager, supervisor, or HR department.

Organisations supporting young women told us that **safe spaces and a supportive community** are key ingredients for a positive experience. Regardless of whether the final outcome is positive or negative, **young women need to be listened to and feel heard, and their experiences need to be validated.** Providing spaces for young women to talk through their experiences can help with feelings of confidence and security, and it also creates opportunities to teach young women about their rights so that they're better equipped moving forward.

Young women who received support from within their organisation were most likely to say that reporting their complaint made them feel heard and validated – 30%, compared to 24% overall. Young women who received this type of support were also more likely to report positive outcomes across the board and less likely to experience negative repercussions after making a complaint.

Despite being less likely to say that their issue had been successfully resolved, young women working in health and social care were slightly more likely to say that reporting their unfair treatment resulted in them gaining respect at work (26% vs 21% overall) and helped to improve the working conditions for others in their organisation (23% vs 19% overall). This group were one of the most likely to have received support from a union rep or workers' support group, which may have contributed to these positive outcomes.

FIGURE 9: % of young women able to successfully resolve their issue, by support accessed.



CONCLUSIONS

Having a supportive community helps with feelings of isolation, and bolsters confidence.

This is crucial in helping young women to find the strength they need to pursue action – and the more young women are successful in their reporting journeys, the clearer the message is that unfair treatment at work is unacceptable.

It's evident that the right support can be transformational, and while it's obvious there are issues with in-house workplace support, the other avenues available to young women are being under-used.

Young women aren't accessing enough support from unions, government bodies or other organisations, and aren't clear on what these resources can do for them. Given the role they play both in informing young women of their rights and in bringing issues out into the open, as well as the practical support they're able to provide in fighting for positive outcomes, this might be a key area for further investigation.



I think just giving them that safe space to come and speak openly, honestly, and knowing that they're listened to. I know whether it's employment or any other issue, I know that makes a big difference for lots of people, because sometimes it's the first place that they feel like they've actually been listened to."

| Interviewee, Help On Your Doorstep

4

WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF REPORTING UNFAIR TREATMENT ON YOUNG WOMEN?

SUMMARY

Reporting unfair treatment at work can have a significant negative effect on young women's mental health, particularly for those who aren't able to resolve their issue. Anxiety levels rise due to concerns around hostility in the workplace and uncertainty about the progress of their complaint. The mental health burden can seriously impact young women's lives, and may leave some unable to work.

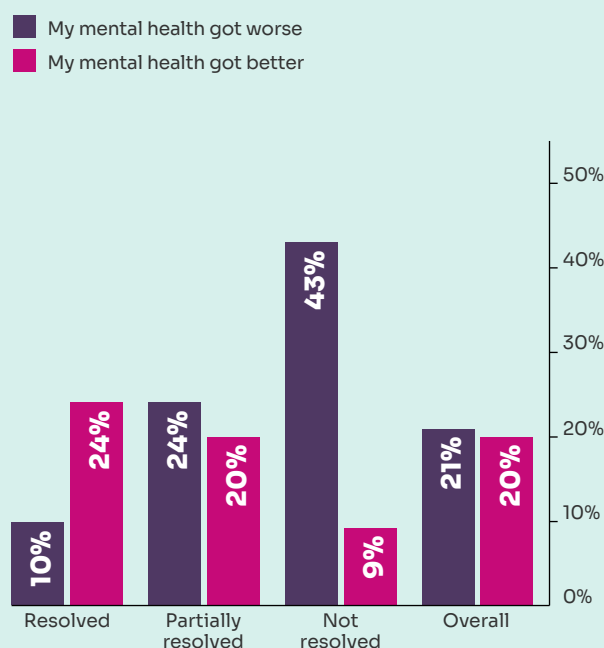
The impact on young women's careers may be negative even in the case of a positive outcome to their complaint. They may find themselves turned down for promotions and opportunities or even lose their jobs, and the work environment may become extremely hostile. This can lead to young women being forced to leave their role, their industry, or even the workforce. However, some young women are able to turn the experience they gain through reporting into a positive, by using their new knowledge to support others with their own workplace claims.

The impact of reporting isn't limited to the workplace and may infiltrate many areas of young women's lives. Support networks are negatively affected – friendship groups often overlap with the workplace and family members may struggle to deal with the constant focus on the workplace situation. There are also financial implications if young women's jobs become untenable.

THE IMPACT ON MENTAL HEALTH

The mental health impact of reporting unfair treatment at work is closely connected with the final outcome reached. While overall the young women who responded to our survey were split on whether reporting unfair treatment improved (20%) or worsened (21%) their mental health, it's not surprising that the latter figure was much higher for those who weren't able to resolve their issue – **43% of young women who couldn't reach a resolution said their mental health got worse**, compared with just 10% of those who were able to reach a full resolution. In our LinkedIn polls, 88% said that the biggest negative impact of reporting unfair treatment was on their mental health.

FIGURE 10: The impact of reporting an issue on young women's mental health, by outcome



Worsening mental health is also more likely for young women working in health and social care, retail and education, and for younger women. Just under a third (30%) of those in health and social care, over a quarter (27%) in retail and education, and over a quarter (26%) of young women aged 18–24 experienced a decline in their mental health after reporting unfair treatment.

For the young women who shared their stories with us, anxiety was the most commonly experienced symptom, whether as a new condition or exacerbated by the situation. Anxiety was often triggered by concerns about how they would be perceived after making a report; whether they'd be seen as disruptive or problematic, how their claims would be received, and how they'd be treated at work.



It was that anxiety about... kind of getting almost a reputation that I think it can be looked at as being, I think there's certain men in the industry that can kind of look at it as being dramatic or speaking up, and they don't quite believe things."

| Research participant (young woman)

Anxiety levels were also impacted by a lack of communication after reports had been made. Young women told us they were often struggling to access information and waiting for updates that never came, which left them in a limbo state that was very hard to manage. The uncertainty and stress can affect young women very severely – some told us they found themselves bed-bound or otherwise unable to participate in daily life, or experienced suicidal ideation.



It almost makes everything worse, because you know, are they going to try and frame something else that happened unrelated to this, because of the way they've interpreted the whole thing?"

| Research participant (young woman)



I think that it's the constant overthinking, and then should I ask for an update? Should I not? How is this person going to react to it?"

| Research participant (young woman)



I just feel like I've lost six months of my life. Because it was just, I just wasn't there. Like I just was not a person."

| Research participant (young woman)

The negative impact on young women's mental health can affect both their professional lives and their experiences outside the workplace. Young women shared that the loss of confidence triggered battles with imposter syndrome, which impacted not only their performance at work, but their access to future opportunities too. In some cases it also affected relationships with friends and family. They described being unable to participate in career-advancing work projects or events due to poor mental health, and struggling with job-seeking as self-doubt crept in. For some, burnout meant an inability to work at all.

Young women told us that therapy and coaching can be extremely helpful in these instances, as can support from loved ones. However, these options aren't always accessible, and what they really wanted was **better provision of wellbeing support structures within the workplace.**



Where it takes the toll is stress, mental health is a real big one...So we encourage them, do you know about this [employer counselling services]? Do you know how to access this? And if they don't, we'll talk to their employer, because their employer has a duty of care to let them know 'you're undergoing this process, so this is our counselling service'."

| Interviewee, Unison



The confidence was the main one, because I was obviously applying to other jobs at the time, and it kind of made me second guess everything, like I'm never going to get another job, because I was so low-confidence at the time."

| Research participant (young woman)



I definitely think you can feel incredibly trapped and hopeless, and it can have physical symptoms too...I had severe headaches to the point I couldn't look at the screen so I became physically incapable, really, of working."

| Research participant (young woman)



There was no help in place or support put in place by anyone in the actual company itself, you know. I kind of had to get that help myself."

| Research participant (young woman)

While we heard a lot about the negative impacts to mental health, **young women did say that there were some benefits, even in cases where the outcome of their complaint wasn't positive.** The process of actually taking action, regardless of outcome, was an empowering experience for some, and could help bring about an increase in resilience and positive thinking. For others, a negative experience led to positive changes in the long run, as it assisted the development of better mental health support strategies. Ultimately though, many improvements in mental health came through leaving the toxic workplace.



It's that validation of my needs, like I'm really glad that I have done this because my needs are valid."

| Research participant (young woman)



The experience taught me that actually therapy is great and it's something I can access and I should access...I feel like I'm matured a little bit, whereas previously I was very much like 'no I don't need to speak to anyone, I should just do this and sort it out'."

| Research participant (young woman)



THE IMPACT ON LONG-TERM CAREER OR EMPLOYMENT JOURNEYS

As with mental health, the long-term impact on young women's work lives appears to depend heavily on whether or not their issues were resolved positively. For those who managed to resolve their issue, almost a third (31%) said that they gained respect at work, 3 in 10 (30%) told us that their working conditions improved and almost 3 in 10 (29%) said that making a complaint helped to improve the working conditions for others in their organisation. Young women who were able to resolve their issue were also more likely to say that their workplace relationships improved.

Of young women whose complaint wasn't resolved

a third

(33%) left the workforce entirely as a result

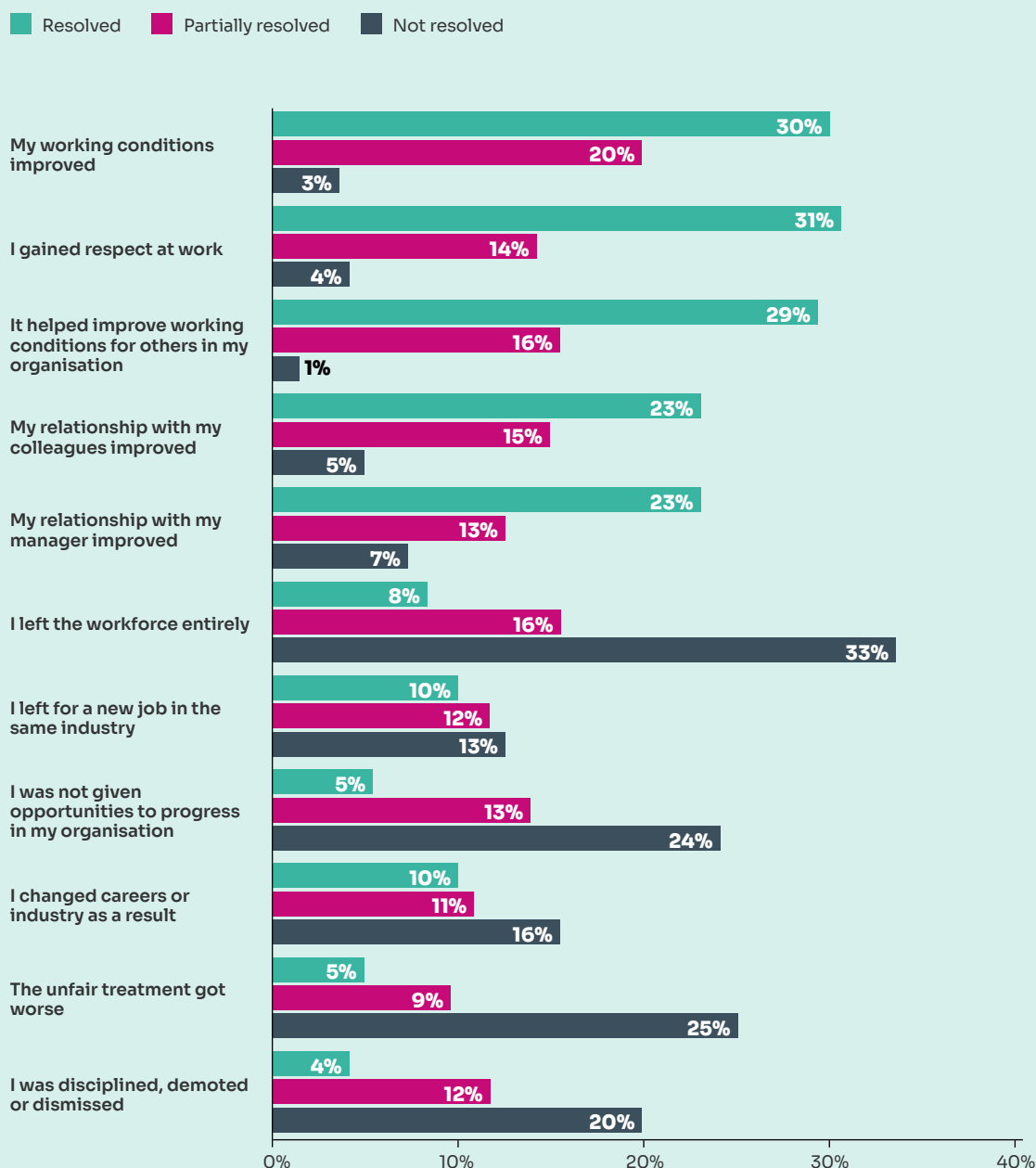
For young women whose complaint of unfair treatment isn't successfully resolved, the long-term effects can be quite drastic – a third (33%) told us that they left the workforce entirely as a result of making a complaint. 13% left and found a new job in the same industry and 16% changed careers or industries as a result. The difference here is stark – whilst the proportion of young women leaving for a new job in the same industry is similar regardless of the outcome, just 8% of those who are able to successfully resolve their issue leave the workforce entirely, and just 10% choose to make a career change.

4. THE IMPACT OF REPORTING UNFAIR TREATMENT ON YOUNG WOMEN

The process of reporting unfair treatment often sets young women back on their career paths – 72% of respondents to our LinkedIn polls felt that reporting had had a negative effect on their careers. **It damages young women's standing in the workplace, leading to job loss, demotion, or denial of promotions** – a quarter (25%) of young women whose issues weren't resolved told us that they were disciplined, demoted or dismissed after reporting their unfair treatment and around the same quantity (24%) said they weren't given opportunities to progress.

This supports the stories young women shared with us – their actions were often held against them, doors were closed to them, and for some this reputational damage could spread outside the original workplace into the wider sector or industry.

FIGURE 10: The impact of reporting an issue on young women's employment, by outcome



Aside from the specific actions taken against young women once they've reported unfair treatment, many find that **the working environment becomes so hostile that it's difficult to keep working there.**



It made me question like whilst I like you [manager], do I want to continue working under you when this is how it's been handled? Like it's just made me question whether this is the right place for me."

| Research participant (young woman)

More than two fifths (43%) of young women whose issue wasn't resolved said that their relationship with colleagues was negatively impacted, and over a third (36%) said the same of their relationship with their managers. A fifth (20%) told us that the unfair treatment they'd complained about got worse.

43%

of young women whose issue wasn't resolved said **their relationship with colleagues was negatively impacted**

Young women said they felt unwilling to stay in places where issues had been so poorly handled, afraid they'd find themselves in the same situation again. It also led them to make changes in their own behaviours and approaches at work – for some, revealing their full selves in the past had proved unsafe so they chose to withhold in new workplaces in order to protect themselves.



With these [workplaces] they're very cliquey in terms of their SLT. So if one SLT member felt like I was being difficult and I was going to create a fuss, that reputational damage would go elsewhere, to other places... making it harder for me to move somewhere else."

| Research participant (young woman)



When I started at [new workplace], I set a point that I wasn't going to mention that I was neurodiverse or queer until I felt safe, and I felt like that came from that previous role. Like I always felt so proud of that part of me."

| Research participant (young woman)

It's not surprising that many young women find themselves feeling that the only option is to leave – **almost two fifths (38%) of young women who reported unfair treatment ended up either leaving their job, leaving their sector, or leaving the workplace entirely, and this increases to over three fifths (62%) when the issue reported is not resolved.** Several of the young women we interviewed chose to look for roles in other industries, feeling that the endemic misogyny and toxic cultures in their sectors would put them at too great a risk.

38%

of young women who reported unfair treatment ended up **leaving their job, sector or the workplace entirely**

For some of these young women, the transition to a new field has been positive, setting them on paths that they find satisfying and fulfilling. For others however, it's meant giving up work that they enjoyed and would have preferred to keep doing. In either scenario, it's a choice they would have preferred not to have been forced into.



I actually really enjoyed being [in the industry]. So I think if I'd had a more positive experience, I'd have still been doing something around that probably."

| Research participant (young woman)



I mean, generally, you're just going to get people that are very unhappy, and it's kind of one of two things. It's either they stay in this situation that's not going to change, or, you know, they look for new jobs. They look for alternatives again."

| Interviewee, Help On Your Doorstep



Looking for a new job and new industry, it was more of a consideration, to be honest, to make sure that there was a big number of women in there, just so I felt like it was already kind of adjusted well and ready to take women and know how to deal with the issues that can sometimes arise."

| Research participant (young woman)



In a way, that experience, as traumatic as it was, gave me some sort of clarity, and just in the process of advocating for myself I've been able to pivot into a career in law."

| Research participant (young woman)

Young women who've been through the experience of reporting unfair treatment gain valuable knowledge about their workplace rights along the way – a better understanding of their entitlements at work was the most common impact articulated by young women who responded to our survey, with almost 3 in 10 (29%) agreeing that they had gained this knowledge as a result of the reporting process. Over a quarter (27%) felt that they were now more likely to speak up about unfair treatment in the future. For several of the young women we spoke to, this learning opportunity translated into a desire to support others, using their own negative experiences as a way to empower other young women.



I started helping other people with their HR matters, with advocacy, and going to people's disciplinaries, appeals, grievances etc. and getting good outcomes...I've got a [meeting] next week for a trade union role that I think I'd be a good fit for."

| Research participant (young woman)



Now I can see my experiences as a way to kind of become the change that I want to see, like the lives of other young women and girls who possibly are in that situation. And because I've dealt with it, and I've been through it, I can give them the support and guidance that they need to overcome such battles as well."

| Research participant (young woman)



THE IMPACT ON LIFE OUTSIDE THE WORKPLACE

The negative effects of reporting unfair treatment aren't confined to the workplace – nearly a fifth (19%) of young women who weren't able to successfully resolve their issue said that the process negatively impacted their relationships or home life. Young women told us that their **friendships were particularly affected**, as these often overlapped with the workspace. Social circles often included their colleagues, who might respond negatively to the work situation or be friends with those about whom complaints had been made. Friendship groups might even include those who had been reported, making it uncomfortable for the young women to join social activities. And in cases where the young women left the workplace due to the unfair treatment, they risked leaving their friendship group behind.

Family relationships can also be impacted negatively by the reporting process.

Research participants told us that the constant focus on their work situation could strain family relationships as family members were forced to share vicariously in the reporting experience. In response, some found themselves pulling away from family and isolating themselves, so as not to burden them with the extra stress.



So after that [leaving] it's like there was this huge gap... and everyone says 'oh we miss you', but everyone's not unemployed. You're the only one unemployed, and the dynamic of the relationship changes."

| Research participant (young woman)



I think they have to deal with you talking about it, and especially beforehand, like they have to deal with it for longer...the fact that they're having to listen to the whole process, like they are just living it as well."

| Research participant (young woman)



Going through my experience made me want to like, less interact with my family and things, because I was trying to just battle my emotions – I didn't want to come across as, you know, rude or anything like that, so I kind of just kept it to myself. So I kind of distanced myself from my family."

| Research participant (young woman)

Upheaval in the workplace as a consequence of reporting unfair treatment can have serious financial implications.

For the young women we spoke to, being unable to work meant relying on savings, or leaning on parents for support. In the worst cases, being unable to financially support themselves led to issues with housing and with affording basic supplies. Young women who weren't able to resolve their issue were most likely to suffer financially as a consequence of reporting. 16% told us that their financial situation got worse as a direct result of reporting their unfair treatment, compared to just 4% of those who were able to resolve their issue.

The knock-on effects of reporting unfair treatment create ripples that can travel through all areas of young women's lives.

Research participants told us how the worry spilled over into their home lives, with some unable to follow through on life plans they'd made due to the financial pressures or the mental health burden. Some had to navigate new locations or environments due to the changes they'd been forced to make. But the majority of the young women who shared their stories with us were able to find some positive value in the experience they gained and the consequent changes in outlook and priorities. Their battles for justice in the workplace left them on the whole more determined to stand up for themselves and others in their shoes.



You're not working, you're not going to work. You can't really live a life that you want to live, not just that but you can't even afford food, and you know, toiletries...and then you have to go seeking for help with other people, which makes you more vulnerable as well."

| Research participant (young woman)



I think it just made me angrier, and more passionate about the things I care about... to try and turn my negative story into a positive, and make change and try and help other people."

| Research participant (young woman)



CONCLUSIONS

The negative impacts of reporting unfair treatment ripple through every aspect of young women's lives, affecting their health, their career prospects, their finances and their home lives.

For young women who experience something bad at work, taking action to improve or resolve it is likely not only to make that bad thing worse, but to spread it across multiple areas. Young women are being punished for reporting unfair treatment, and the losses they face when going through with a claim make the process unacceptably risky.

Since a large part of the mental health burden is due to the way reports are handled, improvements in reporting systems could have a sizeable impact in reducing it. Simple processes, regular updates and clear communication could remove a lot of the uncertainty that drives anxiety. Likewise, processes to ensure staff are protected in the workplace, confidentiality is assured, and complainants aren't treated differently due to their reports could help lower anxiety about the negative impacts of reporting.

The bullying and vengeful tactics and hostile environments faced by many young women who report unfair treatment

are driving them out of the workplace, particularly in traditionally male-led industries. This is damaging not only for young women but for the workplaces and industries they leave. Young women need protections in place to prevent punitive actions such as denial of opportunities, job losses, and reputational damage – reporting unfair treatment needs to be a safe process.

Despite the distress caused by going through this process, young women are emerging ready to harness their traumatic experiences and use them to support others fighting injustice. They are showing us that they don't want to play the role of victim – they have the strength and knowledge to be full participants in making change. If reforms to the current system are to succeed in making it feasible, safe and effective for them to report unfair treatment at work, they'll need to be developed and implemented in collaboration with young women.

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN?

YOUNG WOMEN'S TRUST'S RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GOVERNMENT

INFORM:

- Employers should be required to inform all new employees of their new rights under the **Employment Rights Act**, and who to contact for information, support, and to whistle blow.
- The Government or the **Fair Work Agency** should fund and deliver a national marketing campaign to advertise workers' new rights – particularly to young women. This should be in collaboration with Young Women's Trust and other organisations who can reach groups of workers who are less likely to be aware of their rights.

PROTECT:

- Employers should be held to a specific standard in terms of how they process claims of unfair treatment. This should include regulations around the steps taken, the timeline and duration, communication and frequency of updates provided, and the support offered. Mechanisms should be put in place to ensure compliance.
- Workers should be entitled to whistle blow to the **Fair Work Agency**, and should be protected from recrimination under legislation if they do so.

SUPPORT:

- Government should provide support to small and medium sized businesses to provide information to workers about their rights.

The creation of the **Fair Work Agency** signals a real opportunity to enact many of these changes and make reporting unfair treatment at work safer, smoother and less damaging for young women.

To ensure that happens, our '**Rights Here, Rights Now**' campaign also asks for the following:

- The **Fair Work Agency** to be charged with a duty to protect the rights of marginalised groups, including young women.
- A requirement that the **Fair Work Agency** takes on a specific programme of work that scrutinises the enforcement of the rights of marginalised groups – including young women – and publishes an annual report on this.
- A representative for young women workers on the **Fair Work Agency Advisory Board**.
- Targeted enforcement action on industries where young women feel less able to report and worse outcomes when they do.
- Adequate provision of funding to allow the **Fair Work Agency** to meet its obligations and carry out its duties effectively.

YOUNG WOMEN'S TRUST'S RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EMPLOYERS

INFORM:

- Make sure information about how to report unfair treatment is included in inductions, easily available for reference, and available in accessible formats for all employees.

PROTECT:

- Ensure line managers are comprehensively trained in how to deal with claims of unfair treatment and have proper support in place to help them to do so fairly, transparently, and quickly.
- Make sure staff who have reported unfair treatment are kept safe by ensuring confidentiality and being vigilant against workplace bullying or intimidation.

SUPPORT:

- Make sure staff reporting unfair treatment are offered appropriate support through Employee Assistance Programmes or workplace counselling services where available, and signposted to external support where not.
- Where possible, encourage and facilitate spaces for employees to engage in peer support and education activities.

YOUNG WOMEN'S TRUST'S RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUPPORT ORGANISATIONS

INFORM:

- Schools, colleges and universities should include workplace rights on the curriculum, and make sure that this includes information on the different types and sources of support available.
- Support organisations such as unions and services such as **ACAS** and **Citizen's Advice** should consider investing in social media campaigns to make sure that accurate information is spread as widely as possible.

PROTECT:

- Support organisations could consider working with employers to help develop practices that foster a safe working environment for those who have reported unfair treatment and protect against bullying.

SUPPORT:

- Support organisations that are currently being under-utilised by young women, particularly trade unions and advice services, should investigate ways to connect with young women and other marginalised groups who are not currently engaging with them enough.

Rights Here **Rights Now**
Rights Here **Rights Now**
Rights Here **Rights Now**



Join our ***Rights Here, Rights Now*** campaign, calling for better enforcement of young women's rights. [Find out more](#)