

Gender equality at work

Explore the CIPD's point of view on gender equality at work, including actions for Government and recommendations for employers

The gender pay gap remains stubbornly high, and too many women continuing to face sexual harassment and discrimination in the workplace. The introduction of gender pay gap reporting has helped ensure more organisations are taking steps to tackle inequality at work, but more action is needed.

Sex discrimination in the workplace has been unlawful for more than four decades. However, it continues to be an issue, and sexual harassment and pregnancy and maternity discrimination remain serious problems, with some recent high-profile claims.

Women are much more likely than men to be subject to sexual harassment at work. 2017 research suggests that four in ten women had experienced some form of unwanted sexual behaviour in the workplace. Around one in nine mothers (11%) reported that they were either dismissed, made compulsorily redundant (where others in their workplace were not), or treated so poorly they felt they had to leave their job.

The gender pay gap in the UK stands at 17.3%, the reasons for the gap being complex and interrelated, including economic, cultural, societal and educational factors:

- A lack of flexible working options
- Women being the main providers of unpaid caring responsibilities
- Occupational segregation
- The undervaluing of women's work
- Pay discrimination.

If not addressed, this gap not only disadvantages individuals, but means employers miss out on a wealth of talent as they risk their reputation as a fair and inclusive employer. Gender pay gap reporting has brought transparency to workplace gender equality issues that need addressing, but it's the action that follows that makes the real difference.

Research has found that there currently exists a 'motherhood penalty', where working mothers face disadvantages in the workplace with regards to perceptions of their competence, dedication and aspiration. Furthermore, our gender pay gap reporting guide states that, 'If a woman either leaves the labour market altogether for even a short period of time, or continues to work, but on a reduced hours' basis, she's more likely to be in a low-paid and low-skilled job, and to remain there throughout her working life.'

In addition, although there has been progress in female representation at the top of

organisations, there's still a long way to go until we can claim equality of opportunity in career progression on the basis of gender. Despite notable progress spurred on by the [Hampton-Alexander Review](#) and its forerunner, the Davies Review, there's still a lack of female representation in executive positions compared to non-executive roles, meaning that women are still underrepresented in operational roles, so they don't have the day-to-day influence of decision-making roles in UK business. In addition, not all women are benefitting equally from the progress, with just 11% of female directors in the FTSE 100 being from BAME backgrounds.

Any form of discrimination or harassment is totally unacceptable from a moral and legal standpoint – in society and at work. Also, many employers are likely to lose valuable female talent by default if they fail to treat complaints of harassment seriously, and/or if the culture is one in which issues are pushed under the carpet.

People who experience bullying or harassment are more likely to be depressed and anxious, less satisfied with their work, have a low opinion of their managers and senior managers, and want to leave their organisation. Everyone should feel safe at work, and confident that their organisation will act on a zero-tolerance policy towards harassment of any form.

Leaders and line managers play a pivotal role in stamping out gender inequalities at work. However, they need to receive the appropriate guidance and training, lead by example, treat people fairly (regardless of their sex), and not tolerate inappropriate behaviour.

We fully support the introduction of gender pay gap reporting. Public declaration of an organisation's figures provides transparency and focuses attention on important gender equality issues that need addressing (for example, a lack of flexible working, occupational segregation and pay discrimination). Publishing gender pay gap data provides an ideal opportunity for organisations to examine the impact their people management and development practices have on equality of opportunity at work.

However, publishing the data is not enough, as the figures only tell us if there's a problem. The real value of the exercise lies in the *interpretation* of the data, the identification of the causes of the gap, and the action taken to address those (see *Recommendations for employers* for more detail).

Tackling the underrepresentation of women at the top of organisations is imperative. We very much welcomed the extension of the director target to also include their direct reports.

A holistic approach to building a strong and sustainable female talent pipeline is essential. This requires the development of several supportive and inclusive strategies which reach out to female employees across the workforce (flexible working, making career paths transparent, reviewing recruitment and selection processes, analysing your people data).

Ultimately, we need to be identifying and tackling the organisation culture, systems and processes that are preventing change on gender equality happening at the pace it's required.

- Set a voluntary target for 20% of FTSE 350 board-level executive directors to be women by 2025 as a stepping stone towards achieving equal gender representation on boards by 2030.
- Make the provision of an action plan a mandatory element of gender pay gap reporting if the quality of organisations' narrative reporting has not improved by April 2020.
- Ensure that the Equality and Human Rights Commission has the necessary resources to prevent sexual harassment and discrimination at work by investigating – and taking action against – employers flouting the law.
- Improve the quality of locally delivered HR/people management support services for small firms, delivered through key stakeholders such as Local Enterprise Partnerships, Growth Hubs and chambers of commerce. The [CIPD's People Skills pilots](#) suggest how this could be done.
- Update parental leave policies to better reflect the changing nature of modern families, and progress gender equality at work. Pinpoint and address the sticking points (for example, pay as a limiting factor), and provide guidance for employers on how to encourage take-up.
- Help increase the uptake and range of flexible working opportunities across the economy by supporting innovative campaigns by professional and sector bodies and social enterprises. Government action is needed to catalyse employer action, particularly in promoting more innovative working approaches which cater for specific individual circumstances.
- All employers should be taking positive steps to ensure that women are paid and treated equally in the workplace, and demonstrate a zero-tolerance approach to all forms of discrimination and harassment.
- Senior leaders need to role-model – and champion – flexible working.
- Ensure there is a clearly-communicated policy on dignity and respect at work, highlighting that there is zero tolerance of any form of discrimination and harassment.
- Train all managers to manage people effectively, including on the importance of

leading by example, proactively tackling conflict or inappropriate behaviour, and taking formal disciplinary action (where necessary).

- Interrogate your people data: employers need to look at every stage of the employee lifecycle to ensure that people management practices are fair and inclusive. For example, ascertain the number of men and women applying for each role and who gets the job, and look for any 'cliff-edge' points in careers when women tend to leave the organisation.
- Provide a narrative and action plan to explain their figures and set realistic goals for improvement, reporting on the plan's progress in subsequent reports.
- Wherever possible, advertise jobs as flexible using the tagline *Happy to talk flexible working*.
- Improve workplace flexibility for men and women by designing more flexible jobs and training line managers to manage flexible workers.
- Publish policies on flexible working and parental and carers leave on the organisation's website to highlight how the organisation supports parents and other people with caring responsibilities.
- Encourage greater take-up of paternity leave and shared parental leave; create a culture where people feel comfortable and confident to request paternity leave and shared parental leave.

Guidance and factsheets

- [Sex discrimination and employment](#)
- [Sexual harassment in the workplace](#)
- [Gender pay gap reporting](#)
- [Flexible working](#)