

Unite the union response to consultation- Treasury Select Committee – Sexism in the City

August 2023

This submission is made by Unite, the UK's largest trade union with over one million members across all sectors of the economy, including manufacturing, financial services, transport, food and agriculture, construction, energy and utilities, information technology, service industries, health, local government and the not-for-profit sector. Unite also organises in the community, enabling those who are not in employment to be part of our union.

Unite represents thousands of members working in the financial services sector. Unite members in this sector work in banking, insurance, and for outsourcers.

During August 2023 Unite conducted a poll of nearly 700 female members working across financial services. The union received hundreds of statements from staff in a range of functions from bank branches, processing centres and contact centres. Employees from the finance sector reported alarming rates of sexism, prejudice, poor treatment, misogyny, and discrimination related to gender.

In this consultation Unite will cite the responses received which reflect the treatment they reported. The participants have requested that they be kept anonymous. Unite is clear that these examples show the broad experiences of women in banking and insurance.

1. Have you ever been deterred from applying for a new role because of the lack of flexible working options? What put you off?

Of those women spoken to nearly 60 per cent told Unite that they were deterred from progressing in the sector due to the lack of flexible working, part time opportunities and childcare challenges. The examples set out below were widely echoed and reflect the comments repeatedly made by staff in the financial services sector:

- “When my children were starting school, I tried to change my hours from 3 full days a week to the same hours worked over 5 days (i.e. working school hours). My formal request was not approved (back in 2000) so I ended up taking voluntary redundancy. I returned to the same business 2 years later - working part time hours I needed to drop off and pick up children but to a money purchase pension (I previously has final salary pension) and non-continuous service. This still annoys me now as I have suffered.”
- “Sidelined as a part time worker”
- “Being able to work successfully part time is a key requirement when I look for a new role.”
- “Seeing long hours of more senior staff.”
- “There was an instance where I was required to work weekends when I had no childcare.”
- “Some positions require evening and weekend working, and while there can be some flexibility it isn't really sufficient.”
- “I was told I had to be full-time to apply for a senior role.”
- “Mandatory start or finish times and office days.”

Unite clear that these are challenges that employers can and must address in order to ensure female staff are able to progress in the workplace.

2. Do you think your employer could do more to make female staff want to progress upwards in your firm? What actions or policies would help?

In our poll nearly 500 respondents said that they believe that employers could do more to ensure their organisations promote female progression. The most common comments focused on: more job share opportunities, mentoring, shadowing opportunities and better training.

Some of the specific experiences reported to Unite are:

- “We lose good people at the stage where they have young children and then again at menopause, when you have qualified capable women choose to leave their roles due to the lack of understanding and willingness to work through the issues and keep that good person in role.
- “I was very specifically told in my previous role that due to my part time status I would not be able to participate in a "future leaders" program. I was on this program prior to having children and dropping to part time. I could have picked up more hours at work and even done full time, but the lack of flexibility in shifts made it impossible (6 week rolling rota, 1 Saturday every 6 weeks, shift times to finish at 6:30pm some weeks, start at 8 other weeks). This made it impossible to find childcare, especially with the expectation to work in the office for at least 50% of the time. It's a literal roadblock to helping women progress in their careers.”
- “Training/Mentoring/Job Share/Networking- or even short term secondment opportunities to get the chance to try a role out and gain exposure/experience.”
- “Proper experienced/external coaching for women at all levels not just the most senior - although this sends a message that its the women who need the help not the company culture that needs to change so not answer on its own. Hands on inclusion training for senior and exec leadership (not just some modules on workday).Flexible working options for all that don't come with a long list of exclusions and conditions so that marginalised groups don't feel even more othered by having to ask to be accommodated.”
- “More senior female role models builds confidence in more junior female staff to be able to see themselves being able to achieve the same positions. Also, moving away from more female traditional roles I.e. HR or processing roles.”
- “More job share job adverts need to be published. Job share is hardly ever advertised.”

3. Do you think there are issues of sex discrimination or harassment within your organisation?

Whilst not all respondents through that there were issues of sex discrimination or harassment in their organisations a substantial number did share their views and experiences. Most of the issues shared centred around assumptions of a lack of desire to progress or be promoted because of caring responsibilities. The female respondents told Unite:

- “Because I am a working mum I don't get opportunities for secondments or first aid training or security training, they always prioritise full time non working staff.”

- “Less opportunity for women particularly those with other commitments such as family to progress. Being in the North with HO in the South means lack of access/opportunity whether that being networking or simply contact with senior colleagues.”
- “Women discounted automatically for leader positions due to caring responsibilities. A few cases where male leaders have pressured female staff into working harder and playing harder than their male counter parts.”
- “overlooked when you have child caring responsibilities, as you cant be flexible on working hours. Then overlooked when you no longer have child caring responsibilities, as you are expected to want to slide into retirement, like men do.”
- “Favouring male team members when allocating the varied best work. Excluding me from updates and communications.”
- “Sex discrimination in respect of job roles offered as full time and not part time. When you go part time your career is over”
- “Promotions of men over women in middle levels, new hires at senior levels are usually men, junior hires are usually women. There's a lot of condescending and lack of understanding between "us and them".
- Harassment here has been mostly indirect, ongoing lack of inclusion, respect and support rather than direct actions.”
- “Despite progress, across senior leaders there is still a shortage of women. Men are allowed to bring their whole selves to work, but women are preferred if they hide any additional personal responsibility they have.”
- “I opted to take shared parental leave, over maternity leave. This was extremely difficult, as my workplace didn't understand the policy, so it was a long process. Particularly for my husband, as it's a much less common for males to opt into this policy and share parental leave. Whilst on shared parental leave, I've reason to believe my colleagues have received performance based pay increases. I left for parental leave with an exceeding expectation rating and attended KIT days to keep in touch. However, I was overlooked for those pay increases despite my pay already being below market reference, this is delaying my opportunity to have a market reference salary. I've had male colleagues during my KIT days talk inappropriately to me about my baby in front of others, and asking strange, hypothetical and uninvited questions about 'what if' I didn't like my baby, when I was just trying to do my job. Everyone was laughing.”
- “Ignorant and selfish treatment of pregnant colleague still saddens me.”

4. Is there anything else you would like to tell us about the barriers to female progression in the financial services sector?

Unite was amazed by the large number of examples female members from the financial services sector shared with the union about the barriers to progression in this sector. The examples below demonstrate a range of appalling experiences.

- “I needed a lot of time off work with gynaecological problems. I had a full hysterectomy. It was 3 surgeries in one day and a long hard recovery, in fact I am still in recovery. It wasn't till this stage I felt I had the support of my employer and the department I worked in. In the years running up to the I had managers dismiss what I was saying, I was embarrassed and had to over explain myself in situations I felt were very private, especially to men. I had 2 disciplinaries in this time, one for my sickness and another for my bathroom usage. I felt I was never believed in what I said and that I was making excuses for being lazy. It made me depressed and anxious and I didn't enjoy my job. The stress they put me under effected my health and made me feel worse. My bonus was effected when they marked me down from not being a 'role member' of staff. I have evidence of this on my end of year when

even in 2021 I was noted as lying as to why I needed to be off, even when I had mentioned to the manager I was on the waiting list for a Hysterectomy. This operation was delayed due to covid. I have since moved departments as I felt so ostracized in the department / team I was in. I had even started to look elsewhere for work.”

- “The barriers start from before women have children. It took me several years to conceive and during that time I felt I couldn’t look for a new job.”
- “Direct and indirect discrimination is rife in all companies I have worked in in Financial Services. In my twenties, a lower performing male colleague was promoted above me. The colleague who interviewed me alongside the hiring manager later told me that this was because the male colleague was a new Dad and had a need to look after his family financially. I have never heard of a new mum being promoted for the same reasons. There is still such a 'boys club' attitude. Men all of out to play golf, build relationships and talk business. Women not even invited. It is sickening how much harder a woman must work to achieve the same as a man.”

Many female members reported a lack of support or understanding around their health issues linked to the menopause.

There were many complaints around “agism” in their organisations. Respondents felt as well as gender their progression was impacted by views on age. “The organisation in my opinion is also ageist. Anyone over a certain age is treated differently to younger staff. There is no understanding of the skills older staff bring to the workplace. Technology isn't everything.” Another respondent mirrored this sentiment, “Ageism. I have interviewed over 20 times in 6 years and benchmarked many, many times. Every time the job went to a much younger colleague. They don't have longevity like I do.”

Unite members also reported race and ethnicity as reasons for their lack of progression within the financial services sector. One member said: “I think race is major barrier for women who are ethnic minorities. Firms would rather hire a white male with zero experience on their CV than hire an ethnic minority women which often leads to them being overlooked and not promoted. Once ethnic minorities see these behaviours/culture this is a barrier to applying for the role.”

To conclude one member ended her response by stating: “The biggest barrier to female progression is men.”

Unite would welcome the opportunity to give in person evidence to the Treasury Select Committee on the issues around progression, sexism and promotion of female workers in the financial services sector.

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