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Government promises new legislation to boost women's rights at work

3 Jul 2019 By Annie Makoff-Clark

Review will target parental leave and pay, as MP announces plans to make flexibility mandatory in job ads



The government has today announced a string of new consultations which it hopes will improve gender equality in the workplace.

Penny Mordaunt (pictured), minister for women and equalities, announced a review into the enforcement of equal pay legislation, the launch of a consultation on employment rights for carers and plans to improve information for working parents around family-friendly entitlements.

The consultation will look at ways to increase transparency around parental leave and pay policies, improving the availability of flexible working in job adverts and the possibility of bringing in specific employment rights for people with caring responsibilities.

The announcements also included a review of the metrics used to measure the gender pay gap and the promise of a campaign to help employers understand how to support flexible working.

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The package of measures are part of a [wider report and roadmap](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/gender-equality-at-every-stage-a-roadmap-for-change) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/gender-equality-at-every-stage-a-roadmap-for-change>) that aims to improve gender equality and empower women at work and beyond.

Speaking on Radio 4's *Today Programme* this morning, Mordaunt said: "We know women work very hard but they earn less and save less and this piece of work has looked at a woman throughout the whole course of her life, from the choices she makes in the classroom through to what happens when she heads into the world of work."

She added the government was finally "getting a grip" on the issues affecting women, including maternity discrimination, employment rights for carers, including leave, and ensuring pension pots were taken into account during divorce settlements.

The proposals were welcomed by Julie Dennis, head of diversity at Acas. She praised the report for revealing a "clear divide" between men and women when it came to high-paid and senior jobs, and added that having children also "adversely impacts career prospects" for women compared to men.

However, Servane Mouazan, CEO of Ogunte, an organisation which supports women in setting up social enterprises, cautioned against treating all women as a homogenous group. She told *People Management* she would have liked to see an "intersectional approach" within the measures which highlighted issues affecting minority and marginalised groups.

"We need to understand that women are not a uniform group – many women also belong to a number of marginalised or minority groups and only an intersectional approach highlighting how some groups are disproportionately affected would start to tackle their multiple disadvantages," she said.

Today's report noted that women were at a distinct financial disadvantage from the start of their career – despite generally doing better in education, with many entering the labour market with more qualifications than men, they earn less per hour from their very first job.

Women are also more than three times more likely to work part time, tend to work in lower-paid industries and typically retire with smaller private pensions. Women aged 55-64 were 20 per cent less likely to have a private pension scheme, while those that did had a 40 per cent smaller pension than their male peers on average.

The report also noted that women made up 90 per cent of people who were economically inactive due to caring responsibilities.

Separately, a coalition of campaign groups – including the Fawcett Society, Mother Pukka, the Fatherhood Institute and Pregnant Then Screwed – launched a petition calling on the government to legislate for flexible working for all from day one of employment.

Directed at business secretary Greg Clark, the [Flex for All petition](https://you.38degrees.org.uk/petitions/all-jobs-to-be-flexible-by-default) (<https://you.38degrees.org.uk/petitions/all-jobs-to-be-flexible-by-default>) calls for legislative change to force employers to provide flexible and remote working options for every advertised role.

A poll of 1,000 adults carried out by Pregnant Then Screwed found that just one in five (19 per cent) respondents said they had seen jobs advertised with any type of flexibility, while 61 per cent said they had never or could not recall ever seeing jobs advertised specifying flexible working options.

This is despite nearly three quarters of people (73 per cent) believing their job could be carried out flexibly.

Joeli Brearley, founder of Pregnant Then Screwed, said: “The world of work has changed, our labour force has changed and we need to be sure that UK businesses are adapting to these changes or our economy risks stagnation.”

Helen Whateley, MP and deputy chair of the Conservative Party, also came out in support of the petition. She said: “Too many women are reluctantly dropping out of work or forced to go part-time after having children because their employers won’t allow them flexibility.

“This means women miss out on opportunities and the country loses out on the contribution they could and would like to make.”

Whateley said she planned to bring forward legislation – the Flexible Working Bill, set to be introduced in Parliament on 16 July – that would make all jobs flexible by default unless an employer had a good business reason not to do so.

However, Claire McCartney, diversity and inclusion adviser at the CIPD, told *People Management* that although it wanted more employers to commit to talking about flexible working during recruitment, a legal duty may be difficult to enforce.

“The CIPD believes that boosting the availability and uptake of flexible working is about highlighting the business case and the benefits around flexible working and encouraging and enabling employers to make positive changes through providing practical guidance and support,” she said.



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