

# Older women in the workplace


Balancing work with care

## Introduction

The last 25 years has seen a dramatic rise in the number of older women in employment. Women are living longer and healthier lives but the increase in the retirement age means they are also expected to work for longer. As the majority of families rely heavily on women to fill the care gap, this presents a significant challenge to working women.

This briefing covers some of the issues affecting older working women with caring responsibilities. It also suggests ways union reps can help support these women in the workplace.

## The law

The Equality Act 2010 protects employees from discrimination on a number of grounds, including sex and age; however it does not include provision for combined claims, for example sex and age discrimination which many older women may encounter in workplace. The right to request flexible working was extended to all employees from June 2014. This right has a number of limitations which are explained later on in this briefing.

## The value of unpaid care

There are clear social benefits for dependents receiving care from a family member, but the wider economic value of unpaid care is often not acknowledged. Throughout their lives

women are systematically undervalued both in paid work and in unpaid work, however there is growing recognition of the value of unpaid caring work.

There are an estimated 650,000 unpaid carers in Scotland, of whom around 62% are women. The unpaid labour of caring for disabled and older people alone represents a £10.3bn saving to the public purse, which is the equivalent to the cost of all NHS services in Scotland<sup>1</sup>. Age UK estimates the value of grandparents' unpaid caring for grandchildren in the UK is £7.3 billion a year<sup>2</sup>.

## The impact on older women

Having primary responsibility for caring limits women's choices and opportunities in the workplace, impacts their earnings and places pressure on both their careers and their health. Women who experience multiple disadvantage in the labour market due to race, class or age are at increased risk of under-employment or unemployment as a result of caring responsibilities.

Cuts in public services resulting from shrinking budgets mean increasing pressure is being placed on those caring for ill and disabled relatives. Older women in particular are impacted as they often balance work whilst being 'sandwiched' between caring for older people as well as for children and grandchildren.

<sup>1</sup> [www.carersuk.org/scotland/news/unpaid-carers-save-10-billion-a-year](http://www.carersuk.org/scotland/news/unpaid-carers-save-10-billion-a-year)

<sup>2</sup> Understanding Society Survey by Age UK and Grandparents' Plus 2013

Women face a number of barriers to find flexible work which can accommodate their many caring responsibilities. Part-time work is concentrated in low skill, low paid jobs with less opportunities for development and progression. Part-time work has a scarring effect on wages, and even working part-time for a short period increases the likelihood of being low-paid over the longer term<sup>3</sup>. This affects women's long-term incomes, their ability to pay into a pension scheme and therefore also their income in retirement.

## Flexible working

Whilst flexible working legislation encourages employers to go some way to supporting carers who work by placing a legal obligation on them to consider requests for flexible working, there are still too many older women struggling to balance their caring responsibilities with work.

The right to request flexible working only applies to employees who have at least 26 weeks service. As many carers need flexible working from the outset of employment this limitation functions as a barrier to many jobs, and can make it extremely difficult for employees with caring responsibilities to move to a job with another employer.

An employee can also only make a request once a year and the process can take up to three months to conclude. For people with caring responsibilities circumstances can change quickly and often and more flexibility is often required to address this.

A further limitation is that the right to request flexible working is simply a right to request, not a right to have that request granted. An employer may legitimately refuse a request for a range of reasons, including burdensome costs, inability to reorganise work among existing staff, or the impact on meeting customer demand.

Carers may be also be reluctant to request flexible working because they are worried about possible repercussions from their employer.

## Health issues

Many employers are supportive in allowing women to work around their caring responsibilities by reducing their hours or changing their work pattern, particularly in the public sector. However this combination of paid and unpaid work often has a negative impact on their own mental and physical health.

Trade union bodies have been involved in recent efforts to introduce statutory 'adjustment leave' and 'bereavement leave'. Employees faced with the death of a family member or a sudden change in their caring responsibilities, for example a relative diagnosed with an illness or disability, need time to adjust. A period of leave or a flexible working arrangement can help them to do this and can often stop them dropping out of the labour market completely.

## What reps can do

- Work with your employer to encourage and support older women members to make flexible working requests if they have caring responsibilities and want to work flexibly.
- Work with your employer to encourage the implementation of a flexible working policy that goes beyond the statutory entitlement.
- Contact your union office find out if your union has developed any resources on supporting carers or is holding any events to raise awareness of the issue among members.
- Set up Women Care Days in the workplace or in your branch to raise awareness about the specific issues that affect older women with caring responsibilities in the workplace.



## Resources

[www.stuc.org.uk](http://www.stuc.org.uk)

[www.closesthegap.org.uk](http://www.closesthegap.org.uk)

[www.oneworkplace.org.uk](http://www.oneworkplace.org.uk)

[www.tuc.org.uk](http://www.tuc.org.uk)

[www.acas.org.uk](http://www.acas.org.uk)

[www.carersuk.org/scotland](http://www.carersuk.org/scotland)

## Contact details

For further information on issues affecting older women in the workplace please contact your union office.



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