

The Lifecycle of a Working Woman

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Today is International Women's Day, and this year's theme is #BreakTheBias.

Research shows that, despite this awareness day being celebrated for over a century, almost [60%](#) of women experience bias at work. Whilst many believe gender inequality is a thing of the past, this is sadly not our experience as employment advisors to many women.

In order to stop the cycle of bias, whether conscious or not, it is important to understand the life-stages in a woman's career where they may face obstacles. In this article, BDBF Associate Blair Wassman explores the lifecycle of a woman at work, the various barriers they may face during that time, and what employers can do to ensure women flourish.

Finding a job

I recall going to many job interviews whilst looking for a training contract, where I was frequently asked: "are you in a serious relationship?", "do you want to get married?" "do you want to have children?". As a young woman of 22, I had no idea what I was going to eat for lunch let alone what the next ten to fifteen years of my life looked like. But, if I answered 'yes' or 'maybe' to any of these questions, the usual response was "are you sure law is for you?".

Colleagues have had similar experiences and recall not wearing their wedding bands or engagement rings to avoid these questions to secure the job. This reflects the bias that women face, or perceive that they will face, when seeking work.

Assumptions about women's life choices mean that women fear they will be seen as a burden on the business as opposed to vital and necessary contributors. The inappropriate questions employers ask women during interviews, as well as the outdated notion that all women want to have a family have no place in a

modern society.

Additionally, we encounter women who are unable to secure a flexible role which enables them to balance their work with personal life. A positive outcome of the pandemic is that many companies are moving to a more hybrid/flexible working regime which helps those who are trying to achieve work-life balance. However, this is not without consequences with many reporting a lack of 'face time' contributing to preference of male counterparts. More on that below.

Progression, Promotions and Pay

Women are frequently overlooked for promotion, suspicious that the decision may have been motivated by a concern of impending or likely maternity leave. The same is true of women with other caring responsibilities, for example caring for elderly relatives or older children with additional needs.

Despite the progress made over the years, the reality is that the majority of primary caregivers are women. But why? Is it because men overall still get paid more than women, they are not given the opportunity to take extended periods of leave as is the case with maternity leave or perhaps because of historical habits, women are the "natural selection" to stay at home?

Whatever the explanation, it follows that women are more likely to want to work flexibly meaning they may not have a physical presence in the office as often as male colleagues. This presents 'out of sight, out of mind' concerns. This is becoming even more common following the pandemic. UN Women have analysed the impact of the pandemic, and in its [brief](#) it states that:

"[a]vailable data from 38 countries overwhelmingly confirm that both women and men have increased their unpaid workloads, but women are still doing the lion's share. Women are also taking on a greater intensity of care-related tasks than men.

Meanwhile, parents are getting more help from daughters than sons. Worryingly, more women than men are leaving the workforce, perhaps as a result of these increased workloads. The economic fallout, including loss of jobs and livelihoods, is expected to push millions of additional people into extreme poverty – and women and girls stand to be the hardest-hit.”

Another difficulty women face is that employers pay them less than their male counterparts. Recent research shows that unequal pay remains prevalent because employers ask women at interviews how much they earn, and employers are less inclined to offer women more than they earned previously. This perpetuates historical pay discrepancies. Statistics have also revealed that women are far less likely to negotiate for higher salaries when moving jobs as men in the same position. You can read more about the gender pay gap and equal pay [here](#).

Starting a family

For those who wish to have a family, they may need to take time away from work. Whether it be because of antenatal appointments, pregnancy-related illness, maternity leave, adoption leave, shared parental, parental leave, or flexible working arrangements, many women are concerned about balancing having children with a career. Sadly, we find that concern can be well placed.

Positively, women have enhanced rights, including whilst pregnant and during maternity leave. One such rights is additional protection during a redundancy process during maternity leave. However, it is not uncommon for employers to simply postpone redundancies to avoid this additional protection. As part of the Good Work Plan, we hope to see reform to extend this protected period. You can read more about women’s rights whilst pregnant or on maternity leave [here](#).

As a result of the impact of starting a family on a woman’s

career, many women delay starting families to focus on their careers first. This gives rise to less obvious obstacles which are becoming more common in the workplace. Most employers are familiar with their maternity leave obligations, but less is known about the challenges faced by women who want to start a family. Issues such as pregnancy-related illness or miscarriage are forgotten, taboo or employers are not equipped to deal with them. Another area which deserves attention is fertility challenges, and the impact that has on a woman's career due to the time needed to attend fertility appointments, and the emotional and physical effects of fertility treatment.

Menopause

There has been a significant push over the past 20 years to get women into senior positions. However, women reaching those senior positions are doing so around the time they enter their menopausal journey, which on average lasts for a period of 10 years.

Women can suffer a variety of debilitating symptoms during menopause, which naturally impacts their working life. In our experience, this can lead to women losing their jobs, not being adequately supported at work or being subjected to harassment.

There have been significant developments over the past year or so in raising awareness about this important stage in a woman's life, including a case of discrimination being brought and won in the employment tribunal by a woman experiencing the menopause. We welcome this movement and hope that going forward the stigma around this topic will be no more. You can read more about the menopause and these developments [here](#).

How do we break the bias?

Whilst a woman's journey may differ depending on the lifepath

they choose, the reality is that every woman is likely to encounter at least one of the events described above during their career. As employment and discrimination solicitors we are acutely aware of the impact that unfair and outdated practices can have on a woman's career. Whilst many businesses are tackling these issues head-on, others are turning a blind eye. Perceptions need to change in order to level the playing field. Equality will not be achieved by allowing women to take enhanced maternity leave. Rather, employers need to educate their workforces, encourage men to take paternity leave, provide enhanced paternity leave and better options for shared parental leave.

A few simple steps can make a positive difference to a career woman, including:

- Keep an open mind and avoiding assumptions;
- Ensure there are no unequal pay practices in your business;
- Offer enhanced maternity, paternity, shared parental and adoption leave;
- Encourage men to take paternity leave / shared parental leave;
- Offer enhanced parental bereavement leave;
- Offer flexible working;
- Implement effective policies to address discrimination, bullying and harassment;
- Implement effective policies to address menopause, fertility treatment, and pregnancy related events and illnesses;
- Educate managers about menopause and the impact it can have on women's health to ensure that adequate support is in place if and as needed; and
- Nominate workplace champions and inviting open discussions in the workplace about gender equality.

This International Women's Day, we pay homage to those who have fought for equality through the years and we celebrate

the strides that have already been taken to empower and support women in business. However, there is further to go, and we hope that by raising awareness about the journey of the working woman employers will be inspired to look at their business and workforce, and take proactive steps to #BreakTheBias.

You can read more about the movement and the various events on the [IWD website](#).

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