



Women at work: plus ça change

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Sometimes, when we feel discouraged about where we are, it can be comforting to look at how far we have come.

The Me Too movement shone a spotlight on gender inequality and harassment in the workplace and made it abundantly clear how far we have to go. The gender pay gap¹ is still very real, women are less likely to be employed in key growth industries such as technology², and are still under-represented in the boardroom³ across industry as a whole.

However, the fact that we are focused on the issue of getting more women into the boardroom, or into particular industries, might have been surprising to our predecessors in the 1980s and 1990s as, despite these being the Thatcher years, the public were still wrestling with the idea that women might be in the workplace at all. The Archive of Market and Social Research contains plenty of material that helps us paint a picture of working life for women of the time and understand where progress has – and hasn't – been made.

One 1996 study⁴, *Women Setting New Priorities*, reports on the increase in women's participation in the workforce in the preceding decade, and the permanence of that change. The authors tell us that the prevailing assumption amongst the general public was that working women would rather be at home, given the choice, and that when women did work it was only for 'pin money'.

Instead, the study found that the majority of European women had opted for a role in the public domain, especially in paid employment. Overall, 69% of women said they would prefer to be working, and 43% of non-working women planned to work at some point in the near future. The research also shows that European women were the 'new earners,' with 59% of working women providing half or more of their family's income which, the authors said, was a crucial but underestimated component of household income, and of the economy at large.



Despite being the new earners, 94% of women said that family was the most important part of their lives and 56% would not give up any of their home responsibilities for work. This is borne out by a separate MORI *British Public Opinion* (BPO) study⁵ in 1995, in which 65% of women said they were doing all of the cooking at home and 64% all the housework. A more recent analysis on the ONS website⁶ shows that in 2016 women still carried out 60% more unpaid cooking, childcare and housework than men; clearly there is still some room for improvement here.

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The *Women Setting New Priorities* study also shows that less than one in five women were concerned about sexual harassment at work. We can't know whether this meant that few women were experiencing sexual harassment or merely that it was something they didn't feel concerned about. To put this in context, the BPO research shows that more than half of women had experienced some form of harassment, at work or otherwise and, of these, 28% said it had been by a work superior, and 50% by a colleague. Only 6% reported harassment to their boss and 9% to the police.

Seemingly not much had changed in this area by 2016, when a study⁷ by the TUC showed that over half of women surveyed had experienced sexual harassment at work and 80% had not reported it. More recently, the Me Too movement has led to more women coming forward⁸, but there is still a long way to go, in particular in how reported harassment and assault is dealt with. A 2019 study⁹ found that a quarter of young women would be reluctant to report workplace harassment for fear of being fired.



So, when it comes to women in the workplace, it's a case of *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. Women are still fighting for equality of treatment, of opportunity and of safety and security, but it is also possible to see signs of improvement. In the BPO research in 1995, only 39% of people thought that putting up 'girlie' calendars was a serious form of workplace harassment. We can't know what the corresponding data point would be today, but with the demise of Page 3¹⁰, it seems less likely that this would even be in the list of options to be asked. And finally, it is hard to imagine that anyone nowadays would choose a 'tarts and tramps' theme for an office party, let alone report in the MRS Newsletter¹¹ with pride on the winners of the best-dressed tart and smelliest tramp as one agency did, back in 1980. Perhaps we have made some progress after all.

References

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