

# Middle aged and Older Women (aged 41+) and Work

## Project 28 – 40 findings

This factsheet analyses data from *Project 28-40* to highlight the perspectives of women over 41 years old, who are educated to GCSE/O Level/Scottish Highers or apprenticeship level and earning less than £30,000 per year.

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### Introduction

The increased automation of semi-skilled roles puts older, low paid women at risk. They will face many barriers to re-employment. Despite this, the wants and needs of older women – particularly those in low paid work - are under-researched and consequently excluded from discussions on gender equality and an ageing workforce, from issues such as work/life balance to agile working.

Meanwhile, the growth of the digital economy is having a wide impact on the economy, society, and employees – and disproportionately on those in low skilled work. This loss of jobs will impact both men and women, but older women are particularly concentrated in the lowest paid work which will become automated. They are also more likely to face additional barriers to re-employment, such as dual age and gender discrimination and bias, lower economic empowerment (reflected in the larger gender pay gap amongst those over 40) and a lower level of education and qualifications.

### Key facts about older women in low paid work

- 47% of women work in jobs classified as low-skilled, compared to only 18% of men.
- Female-dominated low skilled work pays less on average than male-dominated low skilled work.
- Over half of older women work in just three sectors (public administration, health, and education) and in particular, public administration is at high risk of being replaced by technology<sup>1</sup>.

- Sectors with the most minimum wage jobs are hospitality and retail – they account for just over 45% of minimum wage jobs, followed by social care, cleaning, and employment agencies which each accounted for between 6–7% of such jobs.<sup>ii</sup>
- The retail industry is at high risk of automation, and 69% of the retail workforce are women and 1.2 million workers in retail are over 50 years old<sup>iii</sup> in the UK.

**Note:** This factsheet highlights key findings from [Project 28-40](#). **The statistics only refer to women earning under £30,000 and with GCSE/O Level/Scottish Highers, Apprenticeships or no qualifications as their highest qualification.** The pay threshold is much higher than the national minimum wage, but to ensure the data is robust, we decided not to reduce it further in the analysis (see appendix). This factsheet provides grounding for more research into older women in lower or semi-skilled work.

## Project 28-40 Findings

### Ambition

Working to earn enough money to support their lifestyle is important to all age groups with the same level of education and pay. However, looking at career progression and ambition, there are some differences between the age groups.

For women over 41, progressing to the top of their career is not as important to them as it is to the younger generation - only 27% of women over 41 feel this is important compared to 68% of 16-27-year-olds. This does not mean that women over 41 do not want to progress at all. Indeed, 63% want to get as far as they can - but 85% of 16-27-year-olds want to progress.

Women over 41 are also less likely to believe they can progress to a senior level even if they wanted to - 67% feel they could compare to 82% of 16-27-year-olds. This could be driven by the fact they're less likely to be promoted: 80% of women over 41 have not received any promotions in the last three years, compared to 52% of 16-27 year-olds.

87% of women over 41 believe it is important to be intellectually fulfilled in their work, yet they are less likely than the younger generation to be seeking development opportunities or training (10% and 31% respectively). This could be due to either feeling less confident in their abilities to lead a team as the younger generation or feeling less positive about the possibility of progress. Alternatively, progressing upwards could simply be less of a priority for them.

### Societal expectations

Lower aspirations and ambition to progress is not necessarily as simple as a conscious choice; the reasons are probably more complex and relate to society's expectations of women and men.

Women over 41 don't feel quite as strongly that they're under pressure to succeed both at work *and* at home - only 6% "strongly agree" with this, compared to 12% of 16-27 year-olds. This is reflective of a traditional society in which men are expected to be the providers and women the housewives and carers.

Furthermore, women over 41 overwhelmingly feel society expects them to put family before career - 61% agree compared to 45% of 28-40 year olds. Interestingly, 60% of 16-27 year olds with the same education and pay *also* feel society expects them to put family before career.

Despite this similarity, younger women are more likely to feel supported by their partner in their career ambitions - women over 41 are half as likely to "strongly agree" that their partner supports their career. Overall, 73% of 16-27 year olds and only 65% of women over 41 feel that their partner is supportive of their career ambitions. The older generation are also far less likely to feel that their wider family supports them – 63% feel supported compared to 82% of 16-27 year olds.

It cannot be assumed that older women in lower paid work and with fewer formal qualifications do not want to develop their career or be offered training opportunities - we know that being intellectually fulfilled is important to over three-quarters of women in this group.

## Role models

There seems to be a lack of visible role models for older women. Only 52% of women over 41 see senior women in their organisation who inspire them, compared to 71% of 16-27 year olds. Many feel the media portrays senior women in business as superwomen (69% compared to 49% 16-27 year olds); being able to balance home and work without any difficulty and consequently setting an unrealistic expectation. In fact, the overarching opinion is that senior roles involve high pressure, long hours and high levels of stress and so are unappealing to aspire to (82%).

## How can employers support older women?

More women over 41 work flexibly than the younger generation and agile working opportunities are important to them. When asked how their employer could support them at work, women over 41 chose, in the following order:

1. Regular, transparent performance reviews, objective setting and appraisal processes (also most important to all women aged 28-40)
2. Flexible working opportunities (ranked 6<sup>th</sup> for all women aged 28-40)
3. Clear definition of roles to help them understand what is expected at the next level, clear career paths and defined routes for promotion (ranked 2<sup>nd</sup> for all women aged 28-40)
4. Return to work programs to support them after a career break (ranked 12<sup>th</sup> for all women aged 28-40)
5. Core competency/skills assessment to help understand strengths and areas to develop (ranked 4<sup>th</sup> for all women aged 28-40)

## Future research

Our analysis of *Project 28-40* data has highlighted some experiences and perspectives of women over 41, who earn less than £30,000 per year and are educated to GCSEs/O Levels/Scottish Highers or apprenticeship level.

Understanding more about their wants and needs at this point in their life is crucial, so that once many of their jobs become automated or digitalised, we can more effectively work with employers to prevent their early exit from the employment market. If we do not know how to attract and retain older female workers, employers risk losing out on their unique experience and skills, whilst reducing their economic empowerment.

## Appendix

Women earning less than £30,000 and with either GCSE's/O Level/Scottish Highers, apprenticeship or no qualifications:

16 - 27 years	100
28 - 40 years	284
41 years or older	437
<b>Total</b>	<b>821</b>

## Sources

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<sup>i</sup> ONS (2015) [Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings: 2015 Provisional Results](#)

<sup>ii</sup> Women and Equalities Select Committee (2016) Gender Pay Gap Inquiry  
<https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/women-and-equalities-committee/inquiries/parliament-2015/gender-pay-gap-15-16/>

<sup>iii</sup> CIPD (2015) <https://www.cipd.co.uk/binaries/avoiding-the-demographic-crunch-labour-supply-and-ageing-workforce.pdf>