



Starting the conversation having an impact and making a difference - Women's careers: Beyond organizational boundaries.

Have you ever wondered how society, organisations and workplaces can better harness the skills, needs and ambitions (work & life) of women? How to fully embrace, value and benefit from all that being a woman encompasses, contributes, and impacts? And how to enable women themselves to value all that they are, all that they do and all that they offer? If you believe that understanding these processes can better shape the working norms of the future then we think you will find this a fascinating read

Professor Penny Dick from the University of Sheffield has been working with Jenny Pollock and Emma Shute from "Women to Work", a business with social aims, researching women's understandings of their careers and work related experiences. The aim of the research has been to shed light on the processes which women themselves see as influencing their career choices and progression.

What we hope for:

- Society to value and embrace women's roles and women's own definitions of work and life success
- Women to value themselves and their own choices for their work and life
- Women of the future to feel empowered to shape their own definition of success
- Organisations to create workplace environments that value and enable women to have career choices and options for progression that meet their own definitions of work and life success

Our aim for this document is to encourage you to

- ask yourself, others and your organisation soul searching questions that could lead to change
- challenge your own and others' thinking by asking, sharing and acting on these questions
- consider what your perception really is of the roles women predominantly work in
- scrutinize leadership roles within your organisation and how these are enacted and how they can be made appealing to women
- discover what you and the women in your organisation want for and value in the women in your workplace

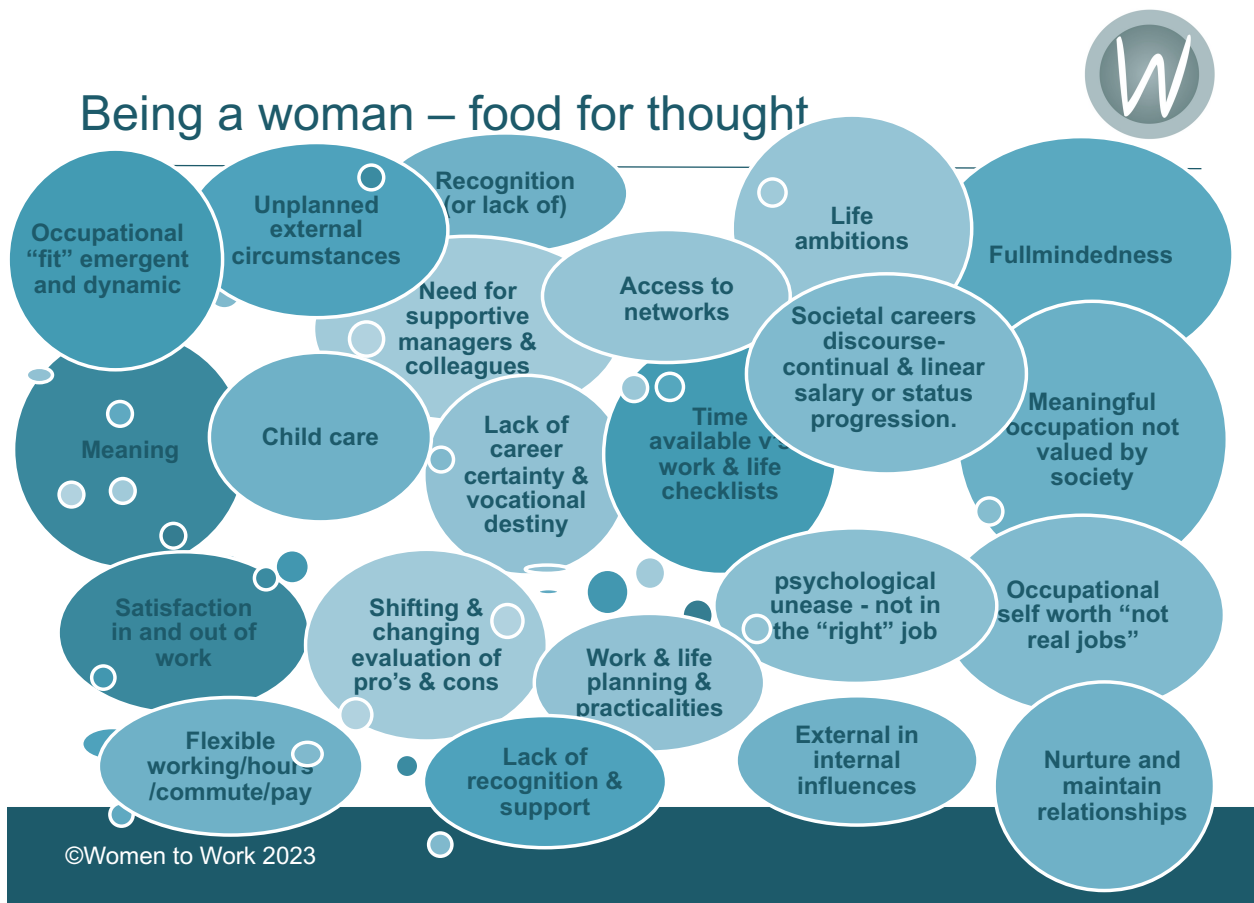


- enable the women in your workplace to be positively empowered to define their own measures of work and life success that fit with what they value and with what is important to them
- focus on the practicalities that can make your workplace a place for women to thrive

We don't have all the answers but we have the thought provoking questions

This document has been created to disseminate the findings from our research project, to pose questions to various stakeholders for consideration, to create a conversation leading to action that can impact the workplace and enable an environment for women to thrive.

Being a woman – food for thought





Summary

The project, which involved in depth interviews with 28 women who had all attended a "Women to Work" Work Life Discovery Coaching Workshop aimed at helping them evaluate their work-life experiences and choices, ran for three years and one of its aims was to generate the practical implications of the study's findings.

Following completion of the project, a stakeholder workshop was held with those participating working together to think through what these findings might mean for policy on women's career development, advancement, and workplace inclusion. The workshop aimed to develop ideas for how the project findings might inform workplace policy aimed at improving gender inequalities.

High level findings from the study

Four themes that emerged from the interviews and observations

1. What do women want from their careers?
 - Satisfaction with life in **and** out of work is primary and the two cannot be disentangled. Dissatisfaction in one domain infects the other.
 - Not career success in the traditional sense of upward mobility, status and pay. Rather a sense of fulfilment and feeling appreciated.
 - What enables this - supportive managers and colleagues; flexible working hours policies; recognition.
2. Influences on why women change jobs
 - Lack of recognition, support or even worse, bullying.
 - Lack of certainty about what to do occupationally – many women feel even after many years of work that they lack certainty about their vocational preferences.
 - External serendipitous events can generate epiphanies and reflexive spaces. Life is full of unexpected events which lead women to rethink what they are currently doing and to evaluate the costs and benefits of their existing situation.
3. What influences particular career decisions?
 - Practical concerns, such as commuting, child-care, salary, and critically time and energy requirements at work places- these practical concerns acted as pushes and pulls.
 - Kairos – the sense of needing to do something at the “right time”. This was experienced as women engage in an ongoing assessment of the pros and cons of making a particular move.



4. What influences women's satisfaction at work?

- Invisible work - the capacity for “being in the moment” and devoting one's total attention to the task in hand (whether at work or home) is continually disrupted by thoughts of what needs to be done at home.
- Sense of meaning in the job and this is cultural as well as personal – jobs that lack social status impact on sense of self-worth.
- Gaps between what is culturally prescribed vs personally experienced. Feeling left behind in the career game because of the path a woman's life has taken, particularly after having children.

Starting the conversations

Questions for women and coaches to consider

- What achievements in your life are you proud of?
- What do you value in your life?
- How does your work life reflect your values and the things that make you proud?
- What can you add into your work and life, elements that meet your values and make you feel proud?
- What work and home choices could you make that would make your life better for you? And what support do you need to make that happen?
- When evaluating plans and goals how will you recognise and embrace the role of chance in what happens?
- How can you create opportunities to enable chance to play its part?
- How can a definite pause in the flow of your life invoke a more considered and evaluative approach to what you are doing and what you want to do?
- When you look at your complete work and life picture how do you define success?

Questions for leaders, managers and organisations to consider:

- How are senior positions in your organisations enacted? That is, which behaviours and ways of acting are most visible and most valued?
- How could senior managers ways of working inspire women to aspire to senior roles?
- Do the management styles in your organisations prioritize pressuring people rather than supporting them?
- How do you show support and recognition to full and part time workers in your team?
- How can flexible working better support the individuals in your team?



- How much emphasis is put on career as one element of a worthwhile and satisfying life?
- How is the following statement practically reflected in your organisation?
“there’s that understanding that we have family lives and we have constraints of our own, and there are enough of us that we balance that out between us within work and across different offices.”
- How do you demonstrate value for part time and lower paid employees?
- How do you support women in your organisation to manage the practical considerations that influence the career trajectories and decisions of women?
- How do you know that the way you give reward and recognition is of value to all individuals?
- Which professions, occupations and roles within your organisation struggle to attract females?
- How do you work with schools to encourage girls to recognise your industry as having career options for them?
- How do you assess the reasons for women leaving your workplace?
- What conversations take place to consider what women actually want in terms of recognition, reward and support within the workplace?

Suggestions:

For organisations

- Facilitated workshops for leaders, managers and women in the organisation to shape change based on this document
- Survey responses to quantifiable questions related to desired organisational objectives derived from the facilitated workshops
- Coaching workshops for women to define, validate and meet their visions of success
- One to one coaching



Further detailed reading

Women's careers: Beyond organizational boundaries.

Outcomes from dissemination workshop held on February 2nd 2022

In this document, I have provided some narrative about each of the key issues relevant to each theme and have pulled together the feedback on the questions posed for each theme which you discussed in your small groups.

Four themes

1. What do women want from careers

- Satisfaction with life in and out of work is primary and the two cannot be disentangled

Yeah, I think I would always rather work part-time, I really don't have any desire to work full-time. Which might sound very lazy [laughter] but that's just how I feel. Because I think I've got a lot of personal interests that take time, like doing art and walking, they take time, and I think if I don't do them, then I don't feel very good.

This theme concerns women's reflections on what they want from their careers and how these desires and needs cannot be disentangled from their lives outside of work. The idea that women are held back from upward mobility is based largely on the notion of constraint caused by the demands of family or other domestic considerations. But in fact many of the women I spoke to felt the problem lay in how senior positions in organizations are enacted – too much emphasis on the bottom line (management styles which prioritize pressuring people rather than supporting them); too much emphasis on work centrality and long hours; and too much emphasis on career as the be all and end all rather than as one element of a worthwhile and satisfying life.

- Not career success in the traditional sense of upward mobility, status and pay

And my bottom line is, I need to do this, I need to try to do it, and I need to give it my best. If it doesn't work, it doesn't work, and at least I'll have tried it. If I don't try, and I just carry on working for other people and never give it a go then I will regret that, because I'll never know what could have been or what it would have felt like. So that makes me feel much more comfortable. Because ultimately, all I'm going to lose is money, and I've got some savings, I just think, well, it's not the end of the world, and at least I'll have given it a go.



Women in the cohort had life ambitions – some of these related to work, others not. The exercise in the work life experience workshop asking women to reflect on what made them feel proud about themselves often invoked reflection on this – because frequently it was not a work or career related achievement. Women in the cohort value the networks of relationships which configure their lives and work has to enable these relationships to be nurtured and maintained. Status matters only in as much as it seems to be used as a marker of where you are in your career as opposed to where you should be, with some women expressing discomfort at not being “as far on as I should be at this stage”. Money matters but was not mentioned as a primary motivator by any of the women in this cohort though all expressed the view that more pay would be nice.

- What enables this - supportive managers and colleagues; flexible working hours policies; recognition

.....there have been occasions where I've not been able to go to client meetings because I've not been able to go quite so far away and back in one day, and my work have been OK about that. And there's that understanding that we have family lives and we have constraints of our own, and there are enough of us that we balance that out between us within work and across different offices.

Because work does occupy a big space in the lives of people, the women in this study felt that what was critical was receiving support and recognition from colleagues and managers. Too often, women felt they worked very hard and yet received little recognition or thanks for this, with a feeling that their contributions were sometimes taken for granted. When they received support and recognition, it made a huge difference to their feelings about their job and was considered a major pull factor for staying in a particular organization. Flexible working hours were mentioned as very important by many of the participants who bemoaned the tendency for jobs to be rigidly characterized as requiring a full time commitment.

Discussion questions and group input

What do these findings imply for how we understand the gender pay gap?

We discussed how these findings indicate that women's work continues to lack value; a lot of the work women perform in the economy is seen to be informal, not “real” and not deserving of higher pay. Lower pay, which typifies women's work does however free the individual from the otherwise onerous expectations that can accompany higher status, higher paid roles. It was observed that this process creates a vicious circle whereby women hold themselves back because they do not want to expose themselves to too many requirements but this then keeps them stuck in lower paid jobs. The lack of value and even stigma attaching to part-time work was discussed and the question of how this could be changed was raised.

Also discussed in relation to this question is that what women want from work is highly individual. Relatedly, given that women do seem to take on board a lot of responsibilities with respect to managing the balance between work and home, who is creating the pressure for them to do these things? Women need to be able to speak out more about situations they find oppressive and unsatisfactory at work and home.

Participants asked, how can we break out of the full-time work norm? This work norm was discussed in relation to gendered occupational choices and there was also some discussion about how full-time work was conflated with greater productivity, and questions were raised



as regards the meaning of productivity – this does not have a universal or uncontested meaning.

What do these findings imply for how we understand the place of work in our lives?

A further discussion raised the question of what is meant when we say “how do we understand this or that with respect to women’s careers?”- Who is the “we”? Are we talking about policy makers, academics, women themselves? This multiplicity of interests is one marker of the complexity of this issue.

We talked about the importance of educating and empowering women to accept who they are and to have confidence in the work-life choices they make. The impact of COVID on working from home was also raised as an indicator that things in work places were changing, improving the career possibilities for women. A point was made that employers need to think about who they are recruiting and why.

Practical considerations influence the career trajectories and decisions of women. They need the financial and emotional security to enable them to make particular job choices, security which they may not have. The choices women make are therefore inevitably gendered in as much as they cannot make choices to do particular things without having to think of what that will mean for all the various pulls and pushes on their resources that such choices will bring.

What do these findings imply for current policy on careers in schools and workplaces?

Schools have a massive influence on what children learn about themselves and others and we need to think about the messages schools are giving children about the place of men and women in society. We need to enable them to imagine themselves in a range of careers and try to move away from gendered career stereotypes.

2. Influences on why women change jobs

- Lack of recognition, support or even worse, bullying

.....to have this new boss who was not good at communicating, who didn't show any appreciation for what you did...so in the end, for me, that lack of appreciation of what I was doing and that I was pretty much running the company for her, and the fact that she was making decisions which weren't what I would have decided even if it was my business...I just decided I would leave myself on my own

Many women in the cohort reported having experienced negative experiences at work ranging from an overall lack of appreciation and recognition through to outright bullying and intimidation. Although many of the women who experienced bullying had suffered mental health issues as a consequence, this also had positive outcomes in as much as it often opened up a reflexive space within which women evaluated and calibrated their current investment and interest in their work and whether it was worth the pain. This could be extremely liberating as it prompted women to take different directions in their lives or to follow a dream/idea that had seemed out of reach prior to the experience.



- Lack of certainty about what to do occupationally

I've always been really jealous of people who used to be able to say, "I'm going to be a doctor". I mean, I don't know whether they then went on to be doctors, but people who had an idea of what they were going to do because I was always kind of like...I liked doing stuff, like, I liked, you know, doing Spanish or learning Spanish or speaking Spanish, but I had no idea what I was then going to do with it. Even when I came out of university."

The vast majority of women in the cohort reported not knowing what they wanted to do in their careers from a young age and oriented to this almost as a personal failing. A lot of the women discovered their interests and ambitions through jobs that they felt they definitely were not good at or fit for rather than through jobs that they did find satisfying and meaningful. Occupational "fit" was therefore emergent and dynamic, shifting and changing as women learned about themselves, their capabilities and sometimes discovered talents or particular occupational strengths that they did not know they had and would not have discovered had they not found themselves in particular roles and jobs. The lack of certainty about their vocational destiny stayed with some of the women over the whole of their career to date and was experienced as uncomfortable.

- External serendipitous events can generate epiphanies and reflexive spaces

I think the resignation [from current job] sort of in my head came first. I'd sort of already decided, because my daughter was poorly in the summer, you know, that I wanted out. Because I'd given myself that distance as well, and that space, and I thought, I can't go back, I've got to go forwards.

A number of external and internal serendipitous events were often implicated in decisions to change careers or career direction. Bullying, the mental health repercussions of this experience, illness in the family, own illness or chance encounters with people who mentioned possible career directions or opportunities almost in passing were examples of the types of events prompting reflection on a career change. Some of these events were epiphanial in nature in as much as women reported almost "light bulb" moments where they suddenly thought such things as "I don't have to put up with this" or "I'm better than this.", or "I've always wanted to do this". Serendipitous events can be random and unconnected to particular demographic or biographical circumstances but equally, it was obvious that class and occupational status were important too. Middle class professionals are generally able to access networks where opportunities to change career direction become available.

Discussion questions and group input

What do these findings imply for current approaches to career planning in schools and workplaces?

There is a lack of careers advice in schools. Teachers and staff are expected to encourage career reflections in children but seldom are there formal programmes and practices in place to facilitate such reflections. By 8 years of age, children may have made up their minds about what they think they are and are not capable of and we therefore need professions and occupations which struggle to attract females to get into schools earlier and harder, pushing messages about the opportunities that exist for girls. It is also important to ensure that the people influencing children are not themselves trapped into particular mindsets about the types of person or people who are most likely to occupy particular roles and professions.



The culture in particular organizations was also discussed and whether this facilitates reflection on career ambitions, needs and desires. Also mentioned was the lack of flexibility many organizations showed with respect to changing to a part-time from a full-time role.

There is in general a lack of funding available within organizations to enable staff to engage in relevant and motivating educational opportunities and this means that the funding that might be available is at risk of being used by particular managers in ways that feather their own nests.

What do these findings imply for management training?

Discussions around careers in organizations often take the form of tick box exercises which are not useful in as much as they do not help individuals think about taking career plans or ideas meaningfully forwards.

Management training needs to utilise research about women's experiences at workplaces so that managers are made more aware of some of the issues they face with respect to recognition and so forth. Management training also has to inspire women so that they want to take up senior roles. Onboarding is therefore critical and therefore so is the language used for management positions or roles that women often do not occupy in any significant numbers.

Do we give enough training to managers to manage people's careers? For example could we look to managers to encourage them to generate Kairos? (see below).

What do these findings imply for current approaches to reward and recognition in workplaces?

There was a discussion about how what people value in terms of rewards and recognition is highly individual and how do we tap into this to produce systems that work for everyone. Is there a danger that if we give women what they want (e.g. more flexibility) we simultaneously trap them into lower paid roles? Are we not effectively exploiting women's pull into lower status roles? Women can be victims of type-casting whereby because they are so good at their jobs, they remain stuck in them as they have so much invested in them.

3. What influences particular career decisions?

- Practical concerns

So I stopped...(working in multiple free lance roles] so I pared everything back, so basically I could do...and the work that I do now at the counselling training organisation, I stayed doing that because it was part-time, it was flexible, and some of it could be done from home as well, so it enabled me to be able to support my parents and still work.

When making concrete career decisions, the major influences were generally of a practical nature – for example – how much commuting/travelling will be involved? How does this impact on childcare? Is the pay for this job adequate? Are the hours flexible? Will there be an opportunity to change my hours if I need to? These practical concerns acted as pushes



and pulls. Being in a job which enabled child care to be handled well could encourage a woman to stay put, even a job she experienced as mundane and boring; whereas the lack of flexibility in a given job could push a woman into looking more actively for something that would provide that flexibility, including free-lancing or self-employment.

- Kairos

But because I was leaving to go on maternity leave, and mentally I was not in work mode, I was kind of like, that's it now. And then it was suddenly this...oh, my path then might look quite different, but I've got to apply for this job, I haven't got the energy, I don't feel...you know, I do want that job, but this doesn't feel necessarily the right time.

Kairos – this is a Greek word which refers to a sense of the “right time” to do something. Many of the women referred to this sense of the “right time” when talking about their career decisions. Dissatisfaction with various elements of a job for example were often buried because the woman felt it was not the right time to move; whereas taking new opportunities or risks were often precipitated by Kairos. What generates a sense of Kairos is difficult to pin down as it appears to be influenced by a range of issues including evaluation of one's current career position; or a sudden fortuitous event that precipitates action e.g. a contract ending. Kairos is experienced as women engage in an ongoing calibration of the pros and cons of making a particular move and how their evaluations of these pros and cons shift and change as the various situations to which they apply evolve

- Serendipity and happenstance

No, well, I went into...so, and this is what I've found, actually, throughout my career, people that will give you an opportunity. So I was interviewed by a lady in the compensation and benefits department at that point, didn't have any experience, they just needed somebody as a sort of admin coordinator. I didn't have any experience, but she obviously just saw me for what I was and gave me that opportunity.

Closely related to Kairos is serendipity and happenstance which, as already mentioned above, refers to external or internal circumstances which happen without planning and have a huge influence on career and life plans. Opportunities are of course arising all of the time, but Kairos plays a role in explaining why some opportunities are taken up and others not. A key element of happenstance and its relationship to Kairos is the reflexive space that such events open up - these circumstances create a definite pause in the flow of an individual's life which invokes a more considered and evaluative approach to what the individual is doing than at more settled times.

Discussion questions and group input

What do these findings imply for the support that women need at work and are we providing it?

The main support that women need is flexibility in workplaces and workplace structures, especially when life circumstances change. Support is not just about what is provided in workplaces; support is needed in all the arenas of unpaid work which women are responsible for.

The fact that we are discussing the question of what support women need is a signal that this is currently not happening or not happening well enough. Conversations such as those generated by this workshop are needed in workplaces.



Also critical to this question is to consider what women actually want in terms of support. Employers need to do more to develop an understanding of this issue.

Employers need to develop more trust in flexible working. There is sometimes a disconnect between Human Resource Management (focusing on people) and operational management which is often more focused on the technicalities of the role. The two are not independent of each other though do require different management skills.

We also need to remember that women may be at different life and career stages which means they need different things with respect to support.

Reward and recognition needs to be rethought - women may prefer a reward in the form of shorter working hours rather than more pay. We also need to think about the lack of support available to self-employed women – if they have to take leave for any reason, their businesses fail.

We also need to support each other as women in the workplace. We need to ask for support and give support. Such practice is clearly very variable across workplaces.

How can we use these findings to help women think about their future plans and options?

Do we need to encourage women to develop plans and goals or do we accept that chance does play a role in what happens and encourage individuals to recognise and embrace that?

We also need to be aware that individuals vary in the boundaries they place around life and work and recognise that a one size fits all approach to support and career planning will therefore not work.

We need to encourage professional development to incorporate growth in self-confidence and this includes the belief that it is ok to speak out and voice discontent and needs.

4. What influences women's satisfaction at work

- Full mindedness

When I was working in London, I lived and breathed that job. So I was at work, I was living just with a flatmate, I used to...I'd be on the tube thinking about work, I'd go home and think about it, I'd think about it on the way into work, and I would get into work, and in my head, I'd already done four hours. So I'd go into work and start actioning what I'd worked out. And at the point of having children, I can distinctly remember with a babe in arms thinking, oh, shit. I'm going to have to think about every meal we're going to have for the rest of my life, because...in amongst being happy...but because it feels to me like it comes down to who worries the most.

This theme refers to women's sense of temporality and how their capacity for "being in the moment" and devoting ones total attention to the task in hand (whether at work or home) is continually disrupted by thoughts of what needs to be done and how it is going to be done as



well as reviewing checklists of things that should have been thought about and dealt with. Women found they were preoccupied by such concerns a lot of the time. This could be rendered considerably worse by ongoing situations such as health worries connected to relatives or children; financial worries; or simply the amount of stuff that needed doing versus the time available to do it.

- Sense of meaning in the job and this is cultural as well as personal – legitimacy is a massive thing here.

Yeah, well, not that, but just this idea...actually, there was a strong idea emerging that what I valued and what was important to me was perceived as, like, ridiculous, or fickle, or...like, unimportant. And so I really wanted to get away from home, I was finding it quite difficult to be at home by then, you know, it was really like, undermining.

Many women oriented to the idea that they wanted to do something occupationally which they found personally meaningful but often worried that what they found meaningful was not valued by society and hence made it difficult for them to be taken seriously and to take themselves seriously. Some of the women felt that their jobs were perceived to be “not real jobs” and this nettled and troubled them as they struggled to gain a sense of occupational self-worth. This feeling was also precipitated by jobs which an individual perceived to somehow lack a definite socially legitimate output, for example, working in a consultancy role.

- Gaps between what is culturally prescribed vs personally experienced

Yeah, because I suppose by this time I was approaching 29, and you feel like, geezers, you know, like, I really should have got somewhere a bit further on in my career by now. And I'd had such a lovely time travelling, you start to think, why have I bothered coming back, really? I might as well have just carried on.

A source of psychological unease for some of the women in the cohort was the sense that they were not in the “right” job either due to it being out of kilter with their qualifications (or lack of qualifications); personal expectations; or life stage. This particular feeling appears to be closely related to careers discourses at play in society which place emphasis on continual and linear salary or status progression.

Discussion questions and group input

How can we use these findings to help women develop a greater sense of self-worth?

Networking discussions can be very stimulating and can crystallize women’s thoughts and ideas about what they want to do and what would suit them practically, intellectually and emotionally. We also need to be careful not to imply that women do lack self-worth as this plays into the stereotype about women and is not helpful. Work is not everything in a person’s life and making work satisfying may not be a priority for every woman.

Mentoring or other forms of one -to-one interaction can be very useful for surfacing and discussing issues around self-worth. However, mentoring and similar schemes need to do more than tick boxes. For such interactions to be useful, they need to enable individuals to engage in active reflection and help them develop in directions they find meaningful.



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What do these findings imply for what is valued in workplaces? Can this be changed or influenced?

We need to consider all the elements of work which people value which include the teams we are in in; the people we work with and the working spaces which we find rewarding and facilitative.

Penny Dick February 2022