

BE FAIR: A Qualitative Investigation of pay Inequity Experiences

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Abstract: This study explores the topic of pay inequity, with a particular focus on how it impacts on women working in the UK today. Theoretical and methodological gaps exist across the literature, which to date have focussed on quantitative approaches to hypothesis connected to (i) equity theory (Adams, 1965; Homans, 1958), (ii) the gender pay gap (Olson, 2013; Metcalf, 2009; Rubery, 2015) and (iii) equal pay law (The Equal Pay Act, 1970). This study seeks to address these gaps by taking a feminist and qualitative approach to the collection of narratives that describe the lived experience of female pay inequity victims. Semi-structured interviews are used to collect the rich narratives and unique perceptions of women who have experienced this phenomenon for themselves, and provides us with deep insights into the events, behaviours and perceptions that surround their experiences (Blaikie, 2007; Oakley, 1981). This paper provides justification for the methodological approach, and how it has been used to address the gaps in our knowledge that are preventing the theoretical advancement of the topic. As this study is currently in the data collection and analysis phase for a PhD project, no findings are presented in this paper.

Keywords: Pay Inequity; Equal Pay; Women; Qualitative; Gender; Feminist.

1. Introduction

This study aims to provide a new perspective on the topic of pay inequity and how it is experienced by women working in the UK. The paper provides a summary of the current landscape, and how we have historically approached the topic of pay inequity, before highlighting the knowledge gaps that exist and how this study has been designed to tackle them (Burke, 2022). The methodology section comprises the main content of this paper, which seeks to justify the qualitative approach (Golden-Biddle and Locke, 2006), and feminist standpoint (Blaikie, 2007; Oakley, 1981), as relevant and appropriate to the study. Due to the novel approach taken to the research, the author has provided examples of how the author will present her findings, before concluding on the paper. The discussion section will consider the impact of the research, and challenge the existing research methods community for their critiques, ahead of completing the analysis of the data for this project. The author has conducted 9 interviews so far, resulting in nearly 20 hours of audio-visual files which she is part way through transcribing. Alongside the transcription, the author has begun the analysis of the data from a qualitative perspective which is helping to shape the storylines and plots that will become part of the findings paper for her PhD thesis which is expected to complete in 2024.

The author provides a diagram or schema view of the research landscape (Figure 1) to support the readers understanding of how research currently falls into the three main perspectives (societal, organisational and individual).



Figure 1: Schema-view of pay inequity research.

1.1 Existing Pay Inequity Research

Historically pay equity research has been associated with the broader social justice theories since the emergence of Homans' distributive justice theory in 1958 (Homans, 1958). Answering Homan's call for empirical evidence, Adams et.al hypothesized and tested for cognitive behaviours driven by homogenous responses to pay inequity situations and giving rise to equity theory in the mid-1960s (Adams, 1965; Walster and Walster, 1975, Leventhal, 1980), before reaching a theoretical 'black hole' towards the end of the last decade, that had already been considered as early as the 1978 by Carrell and Dittrich. In this paper they question the assumption of an homogenised response to injustice, and call for a critical realist approach explaining how pay inequity is

experienced out in the real world (*Carrell and Dittrich, 1978*). Cropanzano et.al in 2011 shed a fresh perspective on responses to social injustice that broadens the theoretical remit of the topic. Providing an analysis of research that connects this type of injustice to an emotional affect, and thereby rejecting the phenomenon as driving cognitive responses alone (*Cropanzano et. al, 2011*). Progress within the social psychology space has since been stunted, giving way to research on the UK's gender pay gap reporting and equal pay law (*Thornburg, 2019*).

Quantitative research and analysis of the Gender Pay Gap reporting interventions has dominated the UK's journal article landscape since the Office for National Statistics (ONS) began reporting it in 1998 (*ONS, 2023*), with nearly two thirds of all articles published in the UK focussing on this data. A variety of structural causes for the gap have been established through this research (*Rubery, 2017*); but the data sources have been problematic; which has hindered our ability to generate substantive theory, as well as develop any testable hypothesis or meaningful interventions to take forwards within academia or across our organisational practices (*Sharkey, et.al., 2022*). Perhaps not surprisingly, research on the efficacy of the UK's equal pay laws were delayed for over 50 years since its enactment in 1970, this being despite hundreds of thousands of tribunal court cases flowing through the courts. However, upon closer inspection of the literature as can see that the complexity, length and expense of such cases have meant that we are only just beginning to shed some academic light on our legal practices; which are already beginning to expose the very similar barriers to equity that women experience when entering the UK's tribunal court system, as they do when entering the world of work (*Thornburg, 2019*). There has, however, been some consensus across this research community that these research efforts have been siloed and fragmented. The research thus far tells of a homogenisation of our cognitive responses to pay inequity, which can be empirically tested using hypothetical scenarios ([Adams, 1965](#); *Walster and Walster, 1975*, [Leventhal, 1980](#)). Here we see 3 gaps emerge:

- Perspective - Women
- Theoretical – The lived experience
- Methodological - Qualitative

2. Methods

As we consider the broad body of literature that surrounds organisational theory, we can see that pay inequity research shares some important characteristics with other methodological approaches within the business research community. Demonstrating a preference for empirical research, using a quantitative methodology, that focuses on the creation and testing of hypotheses in our search for universal truths. For the researcher whose aims might be in establishing the facts, or truth, of given theory; this approach is entirely relevant and appropriate; however, this same approach can be problematic when faced with the challenge of developing new theory, or gain deeper insights, into the lived experiences of a particular phenomenon, such as pay inequity (*Ritchie, et al., 2014*). We must, then, consider how to adopt a new approach to research that embraces the use of different methodologies; methodologies that may be unfamiliar to the existing research community, but relevant and appropriate to the study in question. Knowledge development here could be considered an incremental process, that strives to build on what has gone before, and yet still allows for researchers to take entirely new approaches, that seek to explore new avenues to advance theoretical development, yet still continue to drive our knowledge forwards. Different methodological approaches can alienate individual researchers, and even divide research communities, which is not the intention of this paper. Therefore the main purpose of this paper will be for reviewers to primarily consider (1) whether this approach is appropriate for the specific topic of interest – pay inequity as experienced by female victims in the UK. Although there could be a further discussion prompted by this paper regarding the need for us to create more space for how we might use similar feminist and qualitative approaches to better understand female experiences within the workplace.

2.1 Research Approach

As qualitative researchers we focus on building a bridge between the world of academic theory, and the experiences of individual agents out there in the world of business. This work involves the careful articulation of theoretically relevant insights that have been gathered directly from the lived experiences of individuals, either through observation or, as in this case, through the use of rich and descriptive narratives that serve to deepen our understanding of the business world and the agents working within it (*Bartos, 1986*). Business research has additional layers of complexity, when we consider the cultures, practices and behaviours that surround the organisation (*Sathe, 1983*; *Schein, 1983a*), and therefore a qualitative approach could help us to understand how

these factors interact to create the unique experience of individuals operating within the organisation as shown in *Figure 2*. In contrast to the ‘fact finding’ approaches found in quantitative methodologies, here we will present a qualitative approach that seeks to illuminate our understanding of the specific interactions that exist between women who experience pay inequity, and the organisations that have treated them unfairly (*Golden-Biddle and Locke, 2006*). This approach therefore rejects the positivist notion that there is an ‘objective reality’ that is experienced in the same way by everyone (*Ritchie, et al., 2014*). Instead, the author seeks to gain theoretical insights from the rich and deep narratives of those women who experienced pay inequity for themselves. Bringing into focus the narratives of individual women from across a variety of industry sectors, so that they can share their unique perspectives of the organisation, events and responses that were integral to their personal experiences of pay inequity (*Ritchie, et al., 2014*). A grounded theory approach to the analysis of this unique dataset will be used to plug the perspectives gap in our knowledge identified earlier so that we can seek to connect these insights to the existing literature and beyond (*Glaser and Strauss, 1968*).

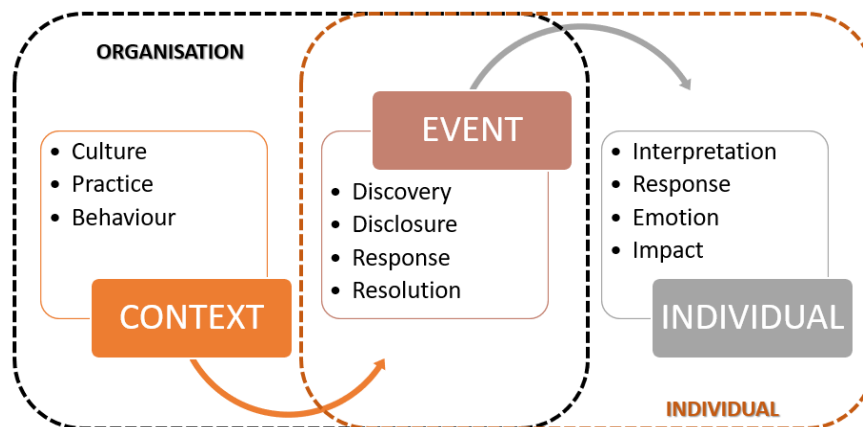


Figure 2: Pay Inequity – Organisation and Individual Interactions

Traditional research methodologies have been built upon a masculine paradigm that seeks to gather data to assimilate facts about a given phenomenon. The objective and emotionally distant male researcher has been the character most frequently displayed in business research methodology books, who will gather information and remain objective and distant to interviewees, so as to prevent accusations of biases (*Roberts, 1997*). The adoption of such masculine approaches to research, and then using these techniques to interview women about experiences that are related to their gender, is problematic. This study will only interview female participants, describing their personal experiences of a uniquely female phenomenon (pay inequity as experienced by women), as interviewed by a researcher who has also experienced pay inequity in the workplace. The author has therefore reconsidered her approach to the data collection, so that it is sensitive to the needs of the participants, and relevant to the context of the study. Traditional approaches to semi-structured interviews that create an objective and hierarchical relationship between the interviewer and interviewee is an inauthentic way for this research to be conducted. Interviewees must be in control of their own stories or narratives, and trust the interviewer to tell their story in their own words, otherwise the process could be construed as exploitative and judgemental (*Roberts, 1997*). The author’s own experiences pay inequity have shaped the research design and approach, resulting in two complementary roles; (1) the role of supportive fellow victim, and (2) the role of non-judgemental researcher. Ultimately a feminist, empathetic and supportive approach has been successfully adopted throughout the data collection process, which has aided in building the necessary rapport and trust with each female victim who have decided to share their story.

2.2 Data Collection

A 30 minute to 1 hour Introductory session is held with each potential participant to understand whether their experience meets the criteria of the study, as well as to explain the study, interview process and to build rapport. This approach focusses on retaining supportive relationships with each participant, and helps ensure that an empathetic and supportive environment can be created for the interview itself, being sensitive to the needs of the storyteller, and the environment that will put her at ease. It is essential that there are high levels of trust between the researcher and participant throughout the story-telling process, as this can be helpful to women who need to tell their stories without fear of being misrepresented or judged.

Most of the interviews conducted so far have been online due to the restrictions imposed by the Covid 19 lockdown restrictions imposed across the UK during 2020 onwards, with full video recordings for each interview resulting in the transcription of around 20 hours of data across 9 interviews so far. Although more problematic from a rapport-building perspective this has allowed for the scheduling of interviews at convenient times to the participant, and usually within the comfort of their home environments.

In-depth semi-structured interviews are used to capture the narratives of women to allow for some consistency to the flow and structure of the transcription data across the study. Open ended questions are used as prompts throughout the story telling process, with participants providing some contextual information about the company, industry and teams they worked with prior to starting their story at the beginning (discovery) and then being guided through the phases of disclosure, response and resolution as shown in *Figure 5*. Each interview will typically last around 2 hours, and are conducted informally and in a comfortable environment, reflecting a conversation rather than an interview, but with the participant in control of the narrative, and will be encouraged to tell their story using their own language. This allows for the capture of individual perceptions of the events, responses and emotions pertaining to the whole experience, as well as any relevant reflections or sense-making at the time, and afterwards.

2.2.1 Participant Selection

Due to the secrecy that continues to surround employee pay data, finding women who are aware of any pay inequities can be problematic, and will therefore be limited to those women who have discovered the injustice by accident, either by unwitting colleagues, or Human Resource (HR) errors. This means that even if women suspect that they are being undervalued, they are not able to prove this without confirmation from the organisation, and requiring a legal process for the data to be disclosed. This study will therefore need to seek out women who have discovered pay inequity, reported it to their employers, and then also started legal proceedings so that they have received confirmation of the pay inequity. These women's pay inequity experiences are kept secret at the organisational level (senior management and HR), and any associated 'pay corrections' that happen are accompanied by a non-disclosure agreement (NDA) to prevent employees alerting their fellow employees to the problem, and thereby potentially triggering a barrage of claims, such as we have seen with the hundreds of women with outstanding claims against the BBC (*Benjamin, 2018*). It is therefore only those women who decide to take their employers to a tribunal court, and hold a public hearing, that become visible to the general public, that become possible participants for the study. In addition, the author has reached out to a number of charitable women's organisations that have access to women with pay inequity issues, which has allowed for a snowballing approach to connecting with women that have had pay inequity experiences, and crucially, are also willing to share their story. This has meant that so far each potential participant meets the criteria of having experienced the whole process (from discovery to litigation) and can therefore answer the questions developed for the study as outlined in *Figure 4*. A broad cross-section of women with differing types of experience-levels, ages, ethnicities and seniority and from across a wide spectrum of industry sectors have so far come forwards to tell their story.

Current job title (or most recent)	Current (or most recent) industry sector	Age range
Managing Director	Professional Services	36 - 45
Chief Executive	Food manufacturing	46 - 55
Sales Specialist Team Leader	Telco	36 - 45
Head of Product	Broadcasting	36 - 45
Microbiology Business Support Manager	NHS	46 - 55
Co-ordinator NHS	Public	56 - 65
Senior Pricing and Proposition Manager	Telco	26 - 35

Figure 3: Participant information: Job title, sector and age

2.2.2 Ethical considerations

There are universal ethical rules and values that apply to the approach and engagement of possible participants for a study of lived experiences, which are considered alongside some additional responsibilities such as recognising that pay inequity experiences can lead to a workplace trauma that can have a lasting impact on the mental well-being of women. The author feels a responsibility towards providing a voice that will speak to the

experiences of the female victims of pay inequity in the UK, and believes that each story has a right to be heard. I have also found that I have been willing to share my own experiences with participants where appropriate in order to demonstrate empathy, and support participants through the telling of their own stories. This study design and approach has been ethically approved by the Kingston University ethics committee.

2.2.3 Interview Questions

In order to address the perspective (women) and theoretical (lived experience) gaps that have emerged from the literature review, this study has been designed to capture the narratives of women who discovered that they were being paid unfairly. A qualitative approach supports the data collection activities through the use of semi-structured interviews; which will provide a rich narrative of the lived experience of female pay inequity victims. This data capture includes narratives which describe how and when the pay inequity was initially discovered, what happened once this was disclosed to the business, and any responses they observed in themselves and others throughout their experience. Finally questions about the impact that the experience has had, and continues to have, on these women's lives and careers will help to provide insight into the female perspective on this phenomenon, and how such experiences can reshape our thoughts, attitudes, and behaviours towards society, the organisation and other individuals. A summary of the interview questions framework is included as Figure 4.



Figure 4: Interview Question Framework: Pay Inequity phases linked to interview questions.

2.3 Data Analysis

Nine interviews have been conducted so far which confirmed that the data collection and analysis phases can be conducted in parallel, as we will see from the findings section below. Deep insights and theoretical perspectives are already emerging from the rich narratives that are being collected, and therefore we can see that the grounded theory process has already begun for this project (*Glaser and Strauss, 1968*). Interviews are transcribed in full before being upload into the thematic analysis software NVivo (*NVivo - Lumivero*). Each interview is transcribed manually as soon as possible after the interview to support familiarity of the research with the data, as well as ensure the 'steady flow' of data through the NVivo system to support the emergence of themes as per the ground theory development approach (*Glaser and Strauss, 1968*). The majority of challenges associated with this approach to analysis will be surrounding in the interpretation of the data, not least because the author has her own experiences of the phenomenon and may therefore influence the findings that emerge from the analysis phase of the project. Mechanisms to preserve the specific language and descriptors used by participants will be implemented throughout the transcription and analysis process to ensure that the results remain true to participants own words and voices (*Glaser and Strauss, 1968*). The author will refrain from linking the findings back to existing theory or concepts too early in order to avoid fitting any potentially new substantive theory development into 'old theoretical boxes', and thereby enabling a phenomenologist approach (*Richie et al, 2014*).

2.3.1 Consideration of the risks associated with the research analysis

Risks to this analysis approach fall mainly into two categories; (1) risks associated with the authenticity and interpretation of the data, and (2) risks associated with the emergent nature of the findings which could lead to unforeseen gaps in the data collection process. In addressing the first risk we can see that as a woman, and as a victim of pay inequity, there exists a strong connection between the researcher, and data associated with this study. Although this could result in those parts of the data that echo the experiences of the researcher becoming more prominent in the findings presented; there is, however, a greatly reduced risk in the researcher missing the underlying meaning of what is being expressed by the participants through the description of their own experiences, and emotions. This risk is also diminished by the grounded theory approach itself, where new insights are expected to ‘emerge’ from the data, rather be forged from preconceived ideas in the researcher’s mind. In addition, appropriate presentation of the findings can also reduce this risk by linking every substantive theory statement to actual accounts provided across the data (Richie et al, 2014). With regards to the risk of unforeseen gaps, the authors are satisfied that the interview approach and questions adequately cover the range of experiences that participants face in relation to this phenomenon. The author’s own experiences and the use of a set of pilot interviews has also eradicated the need for any major rework to the research questions or approach used thus far.

3. Findings

3.1 Structure of the findings

The presentation of the findings from this study will follow qualitative approaches that will primarily consider the academic audience; however, we must also consider that these findings could contain important insights that may influence our practices around pay inequity situations within the organisation. It will therefore be necessary to ensure that the richness and complexities of the findings are readily accessible and understandable to both sets of audiences. Adopting a qualitative approach to the research leads us as authors to consider imaginative ways to present the findings in a way that can be understood by the readers, such as the theorised storyline approach (Golden-Biddle and Locke, 2006). As the grounded theory process has already begun, so too has the theorised storyline development, leading the author to begin to develop a framework for presenting the findings in the form of a story as shown in Figure 5.

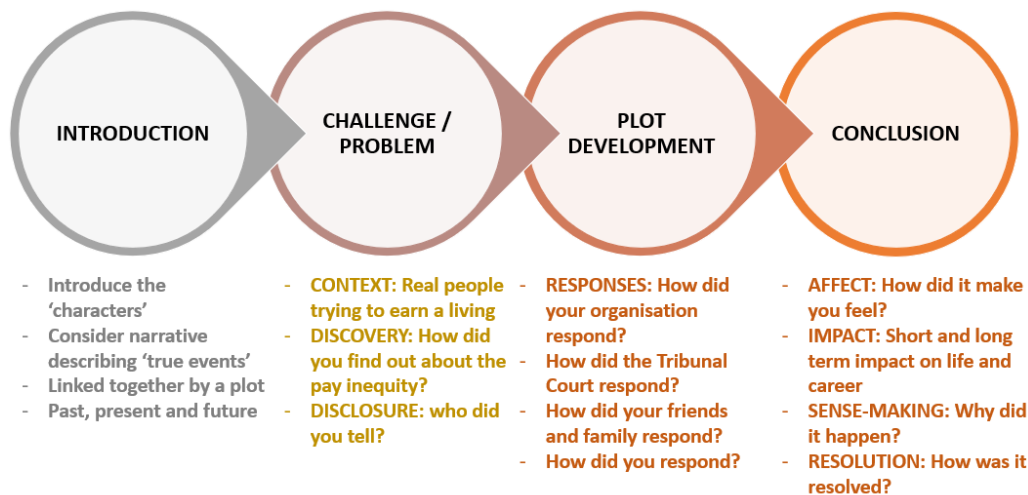


Figure 5: Theorised storyline adapted from Golden-Biddle and Locke, 2006

3.2 Presentation of the results

Rich insights emerge from the data which will illuminate our understanding of the specific events and perceptions that surround the pay inequity experience. Substantive theory will emerge from the complications and perceptions that we are guided to by our narrators, combined with the authors own personal experiences to provide readers with insights into the phenomenon (Golden-Biddle and Locke, 2006). A careful display of insights alongside the narratives will aim to take readers through the grounded theory process, whilst also connecting the narratives to any substantive theory development, knowledge claims, or existing concepts or

theories where they may already exist. Some examples have been taken from the actual transcripts part participants in this study in order to illustrate how this data will be presented within the finished article (Figure 6,7 and 8):

Recognition of power structures are implicitly understood by employees, which are not written down, but are perceived through the actions and behaviours of others:

“So there seemed to be as a kind of a unwritten set of unwritten rules which you were expected to abide by as graduates, and the managers had ultimately power over you and could determine your career there.”

Figure 6: Example of presentation style for qualitative (taken from participant transcription data).

In addition, the author will consider how metaphors have been used by participants within their narratives, or how these could be used more broadly across the data, to support and aid the understanding of readers (Golden-Biddle and Locke, 2006). An example of the participants use of metaphor is provided below:

Here we can consider organisational inaction around employee perceptions of ‘bad behaviour’ (in this case sexist and racist comments). The ‘bad apple’ metaphor has been used to explain that if an individual’s discriminatory behaviour is not dealt with, it can spread to the rest of the team; and therefore impacting on the behaviours of the whole team. This metaphor describes how one bad apple, can cause the whole apple cart to rot prematurely if not removed:

“To me that if they notice a bad behaviour and they don't deal with it. That should be the repercussion. You'll have bad apples in every place, but like they should deal with that. But they don't, you know, they just don't for the most part in my opinion.”

Figure 7: Example of use of metaphor as taken from participant transcription data.

An example of how we might link the data to existing concepts that relate to the topic area has been used below to illustrate how such findings will be presented within the final research paper.

Many employees are not aware of the prevalence of pay inequity experiences due to the success of non-disclosure agreements to silence employees from talking about it. This silence supports the ‘gas-light’ effect that can characterise the organisational response to the problem. Here we can see the impact that meeting others with a similar experience can have on validating responses experienced by victims:

“When you talk to other people and you realise, oh, I'm not crazy and you start sharing experiences, you realise like there's a pattern, you know”

Figure 8: Linking data to existing concepts across the topic area (taken from participant transcription data).

The findings will initially be constructed as per the phases that have emerged from the initial research design as outlined above (context, discovery, disclosure, response, and resolution). This will ensure that readers can follow the normal continuum present in the story-telling process, i.e. that of the past, the present and the future. The ‘resolution’ element of each narrative can help us to understand what might have changed for the individual as a result of their pay inequity experiences, these can help us to understand the ‘endings’ to story. As the story flows from the discovery of the pay inequity, through the efforts that are made to put the pay inequity right, and into how this experience has fundamentally changed the lives and careers of those women impacted (Golden-Biddle and Locke, 2006), we can discover both the short-term and long-term affect that this type of social injustice is having on women, as well as describe or potentially explain any patterns that may present themselves from the data. The author hopes to provide a framework that references the perceptions and experiences that accompany pay inequity experiences, identifying areas for substantive theory development, that can provide us with a focus for our future research efforts.

4. Discussion

Every researcher and author is driven by the desire for their research to have an impact on the real world, which can also provide an opportunity for broader communities of researchers, practitioners and even the general public to become interested in the topics that we study. Generating a deeper understanding, or simply providing an awareness of a phenomenon, can help to bring debates into focus that may otherwise remain silent or outdated. For centuries decisions on where our curiosity can wander, and how we can come to 'know' this world and each other, have been driven by the biases of the patriarchal foundations upon which our society has been built. This has limited the exploration of specific types of phenomena, as well as diminished or silenced the voice of female perspective. This paper questions the ontological assumption that our experiences of the world are the same, and presents an alternative methodological approach which embraces the idea that our experience of the world is uniquely created from the events, behaviours and perceptions that qualitative research has been designed to capture. This study therefore does not only address the gaps in the literature, but also seeks to redress the imbalance of perspectives that has emerged from society's historical biases.

This study is as ambitious in its methodological approach, as it is in its expected impact. There is a great deal of responsibility that comes with the collection and representation of personal stories, particularly those that may impact how we come to understand the phenomenon, and influence the future research and practices affecting future generations of women workers. This research approach has been specifically designed to be respectful to the time and energy that the retelling of personal stories require; and mindful that, for some, this process has involved the recall of painful memories and emotions. Every participant so far has sincerely expressed their desires for this research to produce some meaningful insights that can help the academic and practitioner world move forwards on this topic. Whether through new theory development, or through new policies or interventions, that can help to prevent other women from experiencing the type of harm they have experienced throughout their ordeals both within the workplace and through the UK courts. Change does not happen by individuals acting on their own, but as communities and experts coming together to prioritise all forms of discrimination, particularly those that cause lasting harm, and perhaps we are now capable of finding ways to protect our children from the inequity that women have suffered for generations.

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