

## MINUTES Career Progression

Women and Work APPG Meeting, Wednesday 23 September 2020  
3-4pm via Zoom

**Chair:** Laura Farris MP, Co-Chair of the Women and Work APPG

### Parliamentarians in attendance:

- Seema Malhotra MP
- Feryal Clark MP

### Minutes

**Co-Chair of the Women and Work APPG, Laura Farris MP** convened the meeting, welcoming attendees and panellists. She explained that the focus of the meeting would be on career progression in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, exploring how the workplace is changing and the impact this is likely to have. She explained that many women experienced a need to step back from work due to caring responsibilities and felt they had lost visibility in their organisation as a result. However, at the same time, Laura stipulated the pandemic had also brought a decline in stigma around flexible working, which provides an opportunity to embed its practice in company culture in the long-term. Laura also explained that she has had discussions with the Chancellor of the Exchequer about how to support women's employment. She then introduced the first speaker, **Izzy Obeng, the Managing Partner of Foundervine.**

**Izzy** explained that Foundervine is a UK-based social enterprise that helps people from underrepresented communities learn how to start businesses and scale up their ideas. It also seeks to help people who would be put off mainstream acceleration programmes and provides support from other people with similar lived experiences to them.

Izzy spoke about how difficult it is to start a business and how many young people have great ideas but often lack the network, knowledge and advice to take this further. She explained that women are far less likely than men to start technology companies or receive venture capital funding as out of every £1 in venture capital spending, just 1p goes to all-women founding teams, 10p to mixed gender teams, and 89p goes to all-men teams. Foundervine therefore introduces people to networks and helps them access the funding they need to grow their businesses. It works locally and nationally to bring entrepreneurship into local communities, especially BAME communities, and offers advice to the Government on where it needs to play a greater role.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on businesses, and while Government loans have been helpful, Izzy stated that they have not been without challenges. Foundervine also helps funders to become more inclusive and has been working on this through the pandemic.

Izzy said the pandemic has also provided an opportunity to expand the reach of Foundervine beyond its work in London and support entrepreneurs in other locations. She

also added that there has been an increase in interest from people who would not typically access its support, such as mothers with young children, or people who experience accessibility issues, and are more able to access a remote, digital service. Izzy concluded by stating that increasing digitalisation is a significant opportunity to engage more people and to look within and devise ways to reach further.

**Laura** thanked Izzy, noting the data she quoted on disparities in venture capital investment. She then introduced **Emma Stewart, CEO and Co-Founder of Timewise and Women Like Us.**

**Emma** introduced her organisation, explaining that it advocates for flexible working through campaigning, consultancy and by running a job site for people seeking flexible roles. She explained that women who work flexibly are more likely to be stuck in low-paying roles and that the gender pay gap is really a progression gap. She argued that the challenges for women in advancing their careers while working flexibly are not related to their skills and capabilities and are in fact structural. The vast majority of the population would like to work flexibly, but only 15% of jobs reference the opportunity to at the point of hire. As jobs become more senior, there is typically less flexibility, and in most businesses, this is something that is provided in response to a request, rather than a proactive offer.

Emma argued that to embed flexibility and address progression gaps, serious intent, vision, and role modelling are needed. Managers also need to understand how to design jobs flexibly and businesses need to embed this into their framework. Currently, only one in five managers will have a conversation at performance review about how employees can work.

Emma argued that there is a significant difference between remote and flexible working. The marked shift to working from home as a result of the pandemic has not brought any great shifts in other forms of flexibility, and women with children were much more likely than men with children to quit their jobs during lockdown as a result of needing to balance work and care. Emma added that incorporating flexible working into frontline sectors where women are overrepresented must also be explored.

To conclude her speech, Emma gave some tips for encouraging flexible working. She said that employees should always ask if there is flexibility in a role when interviewing and employers should invest in job design to embed flexibility and share best practice. She argued that businesses should include flexibility from day one in job adverts and the Government should provide more support and investment for women who cannot access the childcare they need. Emma stated that the Government should model flexible working in the civil service and ensure work coaches are trained to encourage people to ask for flexibility. She said the Government should also review the right to request flexibility. Finally, Emma argued that the Government should provide sectoral wage subsidies to promote part time working during the oncoming recession and prevent job losses.

**Laura** thanked Emma, stating that she agreed with many of her arguments and hopes the Government will introduce flexibility from day one in the upcoming Employment Bill. Laura then introduced **Mary Agbesanwa, Management Consultant at PwC and Careers Blogger.**

Mary explained that she is passionate about supporting women millennials to achieve their full potential. Working in FinTech, a male-dominated sector, she has sought to address this gender imbalance and also co-leads PwC's Multicultural Business Network, which celebrates multiculturalism at the firm.

Mary stated that she is also a careers blogger, focusing on young people, and her blog is called "*A Millennial's Diary*." She has noticed that young people entering the labour market are usually highly motivated but may not be able to find the right opportunities for themselves and are often creating their own opportunities or finding scarce ones. She therefore co-founded the "*Now You're Talking*" network, which is a career development network for female millennials that provides a space to share ideas and resources and provide peer mentorship. The network now comprises more than 700 women, 60% of whom are BAME, and who often do not have networks in the corporate world. It also provides a space to have conversations that are often stigmatised in the workplace, for example about promotions and pay. The network is now looking at how to support people who are working remotely, for example how to promote what they are doing to senior figures when people are no longer working in the same room as them.

Mary argued that technology can play a significant role in addressing workplace disparities, by enabling people to share their ideas or providing a safe space to ask questions online. She argued that young people face particular challenges in accessing individuals and networks. Mary stated that corporations and the Government need to work harder to share opportunities and demystify different sectors. They should also encourage peer-to-peer networks and support.

Mary finished by adding that she is interested in the role the Government can play in supporting young people with entrepreneurship. She held a "*side hustle*" conference, where women with "*side hustles*" shared the businesses they had started, which, Mary explained, is a growing part of the economy.

**Laura** agreed that small, side businesses could be a big opportunity. She then introduced **Julia Waltham, Head of Policy and Influencing at Working Families**. Julia stated that she is concerned that women will be disproportionately impacted by job losses as a result of caring responsibilities. She explained that this affects career progression, as 21% of part-time working parents feel they have a chance of a promotion in the next three years, compared to 40% of their full-time counterparts. Julia argued that caring should be made a protected characteristic, as it is in Australia, to prevent discrimination. She added that currently, women can appeal on the ground of sex discrimination, but this would strengthen fathers' and men's ability to take on a greater caring role and prevent discrimination against them for this too.

Julia argued that a better approach to job design and more embedded flexible working is needed, and employers should be helped to create more inclusive roles. She stated there is a danger that without innovation on job design, there will be fewer jobs overall and women's employment will fall. Julia stated that the Government should prompt employers to advertise jobs flexibly as default, and men should also be encouraged to take more leave in the first year of their babies' lives.

Julia said Working Families is calling for an infrastructure support fund for childcare, as the sector is unravelling, particularly in lower income areas where children would benefit the most from it. 52% of non-working mothers say that if they could arrange and afford good-quality childcare, they would want to go out to work.

Julia concluded by explaining that many women do not consider themselves to have a career and have to resort to more low-paid, insecure work. She argued that predictability is also vital in all jobs and workers themselves must be able to enjoy the benefits of flexibility, ensuring this is not insecure work in disguise. She explained that Working Families is calling on the Government to support flexibility and inclusion as part of the levelling up agenda.

### Q&A

**Laura** then invited questions from the audience. The discussion focused on the following key themes:

- Encouraging men to be more involved in caring responsibilities, which, the panel argued, must involve better shared parental leave policies that make financial sense for families.
- Incentivising employers to retain women employees, for example by embedding flexible practices and using employee networks to promote work and avoid digital presenteeism.
- The key barriers to career progression that persist, which Izzy explained are often structural and require investment in building more diverse pipelines and unconscious bias training.
- How to support young people entering the workforce for the first time. Mary argued that providing networks and spaces for women to connect is key, as is facilitating upskilling. Izzy added that remote working is exacerbating problems facing new workers, as people are less connected with their colleagues and will struggle to work outside their roles too.
- Career progression in the context of remote working. Panellists cited visibility challenges and encouraged employers to embed practices that keep those working remotely on a level playing field with those who may choose to return to offices.