



The Scottish Women's Convention

PENSION REVIEW

REPORT

August 2023



Introduction

Within the UK, residents are entitled to a State Pension, which is the culmination of years of National Insurance (NI) contributions. This State Pension is provided for by the UK Government and is in place to ensure that retired citizens have a basic level of living post-retirement.

When you can receive State Pension is dependent on your State Pension age. The current age sits at 66 years old, however this is to rise to 67 between 2026 and 2028. This revision is the result of a State Pension Age Review, with reviews to be completed periodically. These reviews were believed to be necessary due to the continued increases seen in life expectancy across the UK - 79 years for men and 82.9 for women¹. A further factor in determining revised ages, is the belief that a minimum of a third of an individual's life should be in retirement. Therefore, when combined with increasing life expectancies, the retirement age will be continually pushed back.

Within the UK Government's review of the previous increase of the State Pension age from 65 to 66, it is stated that there was a reduction to average household income and an increase of the absolute income poverty rate of approximately 13 percentage points compared to if the State Pension had remained at age 65². This review also revealed that certain groups were more impacted than others, particularly renters, those with low or no qualifications and single individuals. Whether these impacts continue are uncertain and made increasingly complicated by the recent crises facing the UK such as the Covid-19 pandemic. It is therefore vital to speak to women who have direct experience with the UK pension system, to evaluate whether the figures quoted above are being felt by those on the ground, and whether a different pension scheme is needed.

To understand how women felt about the changes to pension ages, we organised an online roundtable in August 2023. This event was attended by a range of women with a wealth of experience surrounding the UK social security system. Multiple key topics were highlighted, as shown below, alongside potential solutions.

Women's Views

An Unfair System

Discrimination and Misogyny

Multiple Disadvantage

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Basic State Pension:

If you are a woman born before the 6th of April 1953 you will be eligible for a Basic State Pension. You also need to have made 10 years of NI contributions if born before 1950 or 1 year if you were born between 1950 and 1953.

New State Pension:

If you were a woman born on or after the 6th of April 1953 you will be eligible for a New State Pension. You will also need to have made at least 10 years of NI contributions.

¹ Office for National Statistics. (2021). National Life Tables – Life Expectancy in the UK: 2018 to 2020. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/lifeexpectancies/bulletins/nationallifetablesunitedkingdom/2018to2020>

² Department of Work and Pensions. (2020). Annex: Evaluation of the Increase in State Pension Age to Age 66. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/state-pension-age-review-2023-government-report/state-pension-age-review-2023#fnref:40>

Women's Views

An Unfair System

Women regularly discussed a feeling of being “let down” by the current pension system in the UK. They explained that changes to the pension age had resulted in thousands of women feeling victimised, resulting in the establishment of the WASPI women campaign, which advocates for the reimbursement of affected women. Women stated that despite repeated calls to create a fairer pension system, which properly considered the employment differences experienced by women throughout the 20th century, they were not listened to, and ultimately, pushed aside. This has had an impact on women’s mental health, with pension changes contributing to stress and anxiety over their financial futures. Overall, there was considerable feeling of disappointment and dejection towards the Conservative Government, with women’s lives being seen as less important than the money saved from pension age changes.

- “I know a lot of women, myself included, feel quite despondent, you know?”
- “I speak to so many women, and they’re so discouraged...they sometimes can’t face it.”
- “it’s so difficult to get any parliament to wavelenght on this...And it’s been recognised as a time limited thing, with 220,000 WASPI women dead”

They also stated that there was a sense of reluctance from government bodies to pay them their pensions. This has resulted in financial hardship for many pensioners in Scotland, worsened by the recent cost of living crisis. Some felt that this reluctance was directly linked to classism and a continued stigma which is associated with claiming benefits. However, women during our discussions resented this concept, explaining that State Pensions are a result of continual payments of NI contributions made throughout their lives and so should be guaranteed. Women would like to see a more robust pension system, which is person-centred and, most importantly, secure.

- “...I’ve never claimed benefits my entire life, but when you want it [State Pension], they make it really difficult.”
- “It’s undignified – there is the stereotypical view that you’re scrounging or begging.”
- “The State Pension isn’t a benefit, I contributed to it!”

Women went on to explain that a further systemic barrier that they faced, was the media narrative which has been highly influential in stigmatising older people. They explained that media outlets have been focusing on an agenda which promotes the characterisation of the elderly as ‘scroungers’ and ‘needy’. This has been further aggravated by a lack of interest from media companies to focus on WASPI women activities, as well as potential negatives of recent pension reforms. It was felt that this poor media scrutiny, has prevented proper democratic process to take place, and instead women called for a review of media outlets and their representation of protected groups.

- “...trying to get the media to concentrate on it is really difficult...we recently did a play on Barbie at an event, and so we got an article in the Mail, but they didn’t speak to us about what we were about.”
- “I know that Age Concern have raised it with the media, the way older people are being misrepresented”

Discrimination and Misogyny

Women believed that the system itself is built around structural discrimination, creating barriers and blockages to funds. This is linked to the historic devaluation of women's domestic work, alongside misogynistic stereotypes which view women as supporting characters in heterosexual relationships. The invaluable care work women have performed for generations has often facilitated a household's monetary income, with many working class women simultaneously providing a secondary revenue stream through informal or part-time work. However, as a result working class women have been left behind by the current pension system, and therefore are more likely to experience deprivation in their retirement years. Women believed that there was growing evidence of this, with pensioner poverty remaining a consistent issue, with little political will to tackle it. Some felt that reducing poverty experienced by the elderly was sidelined, despite generational resource scarcity breeding further disadvantage³. Those we spoke with felt that the differences between men and women's lives had to be fully considered, alongside further work to reduce poverty across society.

- "I would say that straight forward structural discrimination is to blame...it's one of the rawest and most obvious areas where women are discriminated against"
- "I think that we have this structural inequality, and the way this system is shaped itself around it. It's riding rough shot over women, partly through ignorance or what women's lives are actually like, and partly through 'well it won't matter anyway'.
- "...we did some work on the socioeconomic effects of the delayed State Pension and child poverty, and child poverty is directly linked to your granny no being able to make you a pot of soup, you know?"

Multiple Disadvantage

A further issue faced by women when attempting to access their State Pension, is intersectional disadvantage. Women who possess multiple protected characteristics, such as disability, can find it more difficult to navigate a complicated system. Those with life-long mental and physical disabilities have a lowered life expectancy. When one considers data collected in England, it was found that on average disabled women live 20 years less than their non-disabled counterparts, and as such may never receive their State Pension⁴. However unfortunately, premature mortality statistics are not currently broken down in relation to disability in Scotland.

Some attendees were also concerned that as the pension age was pushed back, the likelihood of long-term health conditions and disability was increased, worsening women's retirement lives. It was explained that despite lives lengthening, good quality life expectancy is not guaranteed, and due to the continued deterioration of public services in the UK, this situation is expected to worsen. Within Scotland the Healthy Life Expectancy (an estimate of the number of years we live in good or very good general health) for women is 72.3 years, however in the most disadvantaged 10% of Scotland, this figure is only 47.4 – a difference of 24.9 years⁵. Due to the likelihood of individuals residing within the most disadvantaged areas in

³ Nuffield Foundation. (2019). The Generation of Poverty. Available at: <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/200759576.pdf>

⁴ Scottish Government. (2019). Scotland's Wellbeing: National Outcomes for Disabled People. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-wellbeing-measuring-national-outcomes-disabled-people/pages/10/>

⁵ People's Health Trust. (2022). The National Picture: Scotland. Available at: <https://www.peopleshealthtrust.org.uk/health-inequalities/the-national-picture/scotland>

Scotland being reliant purely on a State Pension in comparison to a private pension, it is clear that the current State Pension age is insufficient, letting down the most vulnerable in our society.

- “...in their mid-60s, a significant percentage of women are disabled in some way, which means they’re working with a long-term health condition, yet they keep increasing the State Pension age.”
- “Those extra six years...my back is completely shattered, and that’s something else that’s ludicrous, they’re expecting young people to work till their seventies in onerous tasks”
- “...it’s not a retirement, all they’re hoping for is survival. If we can survive. And we’re in the middle of a cost of living crisis, so these women are having to cope with that on a tiny pension.”



Women’s Solutions

An Intergenerational Approach

Those who attended our roundtable believed that the most effective way in which to alter the pension system in the UK, is through an intergenerational approach. They believed it was vital to recruit younger women in pension reform debates, asking young women to consider how they are impacted by potential changes. Attendees underlined that the systemic powers at play have actively placed young and old against each other, which has prevented the two groups from engaging positively. They instead would like to see further collaboration, which focuses on how change can be implemented to assist everyone in society, ensuring that all generations have a good quality State Pension.

- “Pitting young against old, it’s wrong on so many levels”
- “...we’ve made all these strides, and what we’ve got to do is to stop going back the way. And that’s the message we have to get over to the young ones, to not be discouraged, we’re handing over the torch to them, and it’s their rights and they have to keep fighting.”

Education

Women believed that in order to encourage younger people to become more active in the fight for improved State Pensions, education is needed. They proposed that schools should incorporate pension and tax considerations into lessons, giving young women these invaluable life skills.

By including these elements into secondary school education, women would be further enabled to self-advocate within the workplace for good quality pension schemes.

Women also believed that it was vital that improved education should be provided through employers, in order to empower staff to alter their pension plans accordingly. Attendees stated that the Fair Work agenda provided a good backdrop for improved pension knowledge, with this focusing on a change in workplace cultures rather than work policy. Therefore, through increased knowledge women would more generally have the resources to promote improved pension conditions, preventing further erosion of their financial situation.

- “...it’s about education, we need to educate, and educate properly across schools.”
- “...as a nurse midwife, I was subject to being contracted out, so there was a reduction in my pension. I didn’t have a clue what that was until my pension came through”
- “...although employment law isn’t devolved...it hasn’t stopped the Scottish Government from having the Fair Work agenda...So, if it’s about drawing more employers to be more explicit about pensions”

Scottish Government Intervention

It was believed by many of the women at our roundtable that despite pensions remaining a reserved power with Westminster, there were potential solutions that could be provided by the Scottish Government. This was felt to be of particular value as life expectancies across the UK vary, with Scotland holding the title for the lowest: 79 years for men and 82.9 for women. However, this figure varies by local authority, directly linked to levels of deprivation. For example, women living in Glasgow City have the lowest at 78.3 years⁶. Therefore, having a universal age regardless of region actively discriminates against the women of Scotland, particularly those who reside in economically deprived areas. They explained that in order to work around the UK Government policies, the Scottish Government could incorporate increased education surrounding pensions, as well as assist older people with their personal financial worries. Women, therefore, believe that it is of vital importance that the Scottish Government continue to push for improved pension justice.

- “...there are all these different channels that we could be working with, we can’t just say that it’s a reserved matter”
- “...I agree that there is more that the Scottish Government could be doing...I think that there’s definitely a role for them to promote encouraging and supporting workers to save for retirement early on in life”

⁶ National Records of Scotland. (2021). Life Expectancy in Scotland, 2018-2020. Available at: <https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/statistics-and-data/statistics/statistics-by-theme/life-expectancy/life-expectancy-in-scotland/2018-2020>

Conclusion

To conclude, recent pension age reviews have not been supported by the women we spoke with. They believed that the continued push for money saving techniques by the UK Government has waylaid women's financial security, lowering standards of living. Women did hold some sympathy with regards to the changes needed to accommodate an aging population, however, did not feel that the pension age review had properly considered women's economic contributions. This was believed to be the result of structural misogyny, encouraged by state and media actors to further discount women.

Despite remaining a reserved matter attendees highlighted multiple alternative approaches that the Scottish Government could take to alleviate the hardship experienced by women. For example, by incorporating pensions within the Fair Work planning, workers could be encouraged to make pension contributions from an earlier point in their career. They also believed that education across age groups was vital in improving the pension situation in Scotland. Overall, women hoped that significant change occurred with regards to pensions and hoped that through continued campaigning women in Scotland can be better protected in their old age.

6 Recommendations

1. **Reconsider further 'Pension Age Reviews' due to the significant financial harm caused.**
2. **Work with service-users to create a more empathetic, person-centred pension system.**
3. **Incorporate information around pensions into secondary education to provide invaluable life skills.**
4. **Embed pensions into the Fair Work agenda, to encourage the alteration of employer/employee views on pensions.**
5. **Encourage the collaboration of all generations to work against structural disadvantage.**
6. **Hold media outlets more accountable for encouraging damaging messaging surrounding minority groups.**

THANK YOU!

Thank you to all the women who gave their time to discuss their experiences and views on pension reform in the UK. Without your contributions we would be unable to carry out our work to keep women's lived experience centred within the policy-making landscape.

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