Is the Job Quality Gender Gap Narrowing?

Findings from the Skills and Employment Survey 2024

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HEADLINES

This report examines whether the job quality gender gap is widening or narrowing along six key dimensions: Working Time Quality, Weekly Earnings, Job Security, Autonomy & Skill, the Physical Environment and Work Intensity. The gap in each of these dimensions is important for gender equality in health and wellbeing, but only the pay gap is well monitored in official statistics. The report derives indices and tracks the gender gap at intervals over the last four decades. It finds that:

- In addition to the narrowing gender gap in Weekly Earnings for employees, there has been a gender convergence in Working Time Quality, in Autonomy & Skill, and in the Physical Environment of work.
- For example, the proportion of men who report that their health or safety is at risk from their work declined from 38% in 2001 to 21% in 2024. Among women, the proportion at risk did not significantly change over the long term, remaining at 22% in 2024.
- There has been a modest gap in favour of women in job security, and this gap has not changed significantly. In 2024 the proportions who said that there was a chance of job loss in the next 12 months were 18% for men and 12% for women
- There has been no substantive gender gap in work intensity (the pace of work). For both sexes, work intensity has risen between 1992 and 2017, but it has fallen back since then. For example, the proportion of men who reported having to work at high speed at least three quarters of the time rose from 21% in 1992 to 44% in 2017, falling to 37% in 2024.
- In 2024 there was a substantive gender gap in favour of men with respect to the Social Environment of work, but the trend is unknown. This gap arose because women were far more likely than men to experience workplace abuse.

The report calls for better, regular monitoring of all objective dimensions of job quality, so as to adequately monitor ongoing gaps according to sex and other protected characteristics. This could be achieved at comparatively low cost using regular government nationally representative surveys.

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1. The Importance of Monitoring Gender Gaps in Multiple Dimensions of Job Quality

Modest progress in narrowing the gender wage gap has been observed ever since the passing of the Equal Pay and Sex Discrimination Acts in the 1970s. However, the broader gender gap in job quality – that is, in all aspects of jobs that contribute to meeting people's needs from their work – concerns much more than just pay and benefits. Jobs differ according to other extrinsic dimensions such as in their working time quality and in the prospects for job security and career progression. They also differ in their intrinsic dimensions, including the use of skills, the extent of autonomy and participation, the required pace of work, and the social environment and physical environment in which work takes place. Less is known about the gender gaps in these other dimensions and how they have been changing.

Over time, some aspects of job quality, especially wages, are associated loosely with general economic growth. However, each dimension changes independently, and is affected too by many other factors, including the regulatory environment, technological change, managerial cultures and the balance of bargaining power between employees and employers. One might expect that, as most jobs have gradually opened up over time to both sexes, though at an uneven pace, there will also have been progress towards narrowing job quality gender gaps for other dimensions besides pay. On the other hand, where jobs have remained stubbornly segmented or where new sex-differentiated jobs have emerged, the trend might be for increasing differentiation.

Modern research shows that all these dimensions of job quality have substantial effects on workers' health and wellbeing. There are therefore good reasons behind this report's objective, which is to gauge the trends, to assess whether or not there is a convergence of job quality in each dimension, and hence to inform the challenges that face employers and policymakers who aim to foster gender equality.

2. Previous Evidence on Trends in the Job Quality Gender Gap

Official statistics show that the UK gender pay gap among full-time employees fell steadily from 17% in 1997 to 10% in 2010; after marking time until 2013 it then continued its decline, dropping after the pandemic to just 7% in 2024. Yet gender earnings inequality remains greater among the self-employed, with men's earnings approximately 40% more than women's in 2020, its long-term trend unclear. Looking beyond Earnings, there is evidence for 2015 that, as with most countries in Europe, both Working Time Quality and the Physical Environment of jobs in the UK were better for women than for men. However, there was no significant UK gender gap reported in other dimensions of job quality. Across the European Union as a whole, the average gender gap for Working Time Quality, Autonomy and Skill, Work Intensity and the Physical Environment of jobs did not significantly change between 1995 and 2010. Yet by 2015 there was evidence that the gender gap had narrowed somewhat in respect of both Autonomy and Skill and the Physical Environment of jobs. Moreover, the European-level gap between men's and women's hours of work was narrowing. Nevertheless, the gender segmentation of jobs persisted at a high-level right across Europe.

This evidence of positive but limited progress towards gender equality in multi-dimensional job quality remains tentative. Updated information is needed for the UK, now that it is no longer part of the European Union and hence does not automatically take part in the European Working Conditions Survey.

3. The Skills and Employment Survey 2024

The Skills and Employment Survey 2024 (SES2024) is the eighth in a series of nationally representative sample surveys of individuals in employment aged 20-60 years old (although the 2006 and subsequent surveys additionally sampled those aged 61-65). In conjunction with the earlier surveys, SES2024 allows us to track most job quality trends over recent decades, including in the period since 2017 which spans the Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns. The complete survey consists of three parts: a face-to-face survey of working adults aged 20-65 years in Britain; an online survey of eligible respondents living in Britain who agreed to join a panel of respondents recruited from previous NatCen surveys; and an online survey of eligible workers living in Northern Ireland.

For this report, we utilise the face-to-face survey only, in conjunction with the earlier surveys. The sample was drawn using random probability principles stratified by several socio-economic indicators. Two eligible respondents per address were randomly selected for interview, 32% of those selected were interviewed and most were completed in 2024, the remainder at the end of 2023. All parts of the data collection process were directed by the research team and the fieldwork was carried out by NatCen. The numbers of face-to-face respondents living in Britain were: 4,047 in the 1986 survey; 3,855 in 1992; 2,467 in 1997; 4,470 in 2001; 7,289 in 2006; 3,200 in 2012; 3,306 in 2017; 2,824 in 2024. Weights were computed for all surveys in the series. These correct for differential probabilities of sample selection, the over-sampling of certain areas and response rate variations between groups (stratified by sex, age, occupation and qualification level). All the following analyses use these weights and, for consistency, all trend analyses apply to 20-60 year-olds.

4. Dimensions and Indicators of Job Quality

Indicators for all dimensions of job quality are available for 2024, but to see the long-term progress in each dimension we derived indices using only those indicators that are also available on a consistent basis from 2006 or before. We consider seven dimensions of job quality:

'Working Time Quality' is defined as the extent to which the disposition of time between the job and other life domains meets the needs of workers. It thus involves both working time duration, and contemporary issues of work time scheduling and flexibility. The *Working Time Quality* index we use is a composite index (having an average of zero, positive scores mean above average, negative numbers below average). It combines an indicator of employee control over the start and finish times of work, which evidence confirms is positively associated with wellbeing, with an indicator for normally working fewer than 48 hours per week, since working longer hours has

detrimental health effects. The composite index is standardised, so that positive scores mean above average working time quality, and conversely for negative numbers.

Our *Weekly Earnings* index is the median of gross weekly pay for employees and gross earnings for the self-employed, deflated to 2015 prices. Some self-employed workers will be engaged in gig work which, if this is part of a person's second job, would not be covered by the SES series.

The 'Prospects' of jobs comprise those job characteristics that affect how well, or badly, they are expected to meet workers' future work-related needs – both whether the job is likely to last (job security) and whether there are chances of advancement within the job. Over time we only have data covering job security: our *Job Security* index here combines two measures in a standardised index, namely whether the job contract is permanent (that is, not temporary or fixed-term), and the worker's scaled perception of the likelihood of job loss in the ensuing 12 months. We do not have a long-term consistent indicator for the probability of career advancement.

Turning to the intrinsic dimensions, 'Autonomy and Skill' comprises two related concepts, job autonomy and job skill. Job autonomy is the degree to which workers can influence their own labour process: its scope embraces the tasks that they are expected to perform (including the methods, pace and choice of standards for that performance), and the extent to which workers have a say over decisions about the way they work. Job skill comprises the job's skill requirements and level of complexity. It combines indicators of the education level and learning required for the job, and a composite measure of task complexity derived from 25 items that gauge the generic tasks performed. The combined *Autonomy and Skill* index is standardised with mean zero.

The 'Physical Environment of Work' is 'that collection of environmental features at work having in common that they carry a risk of harm'. These are not measured in detail in the SES series. However, workers have been asked consistently since 1992 whether or not their health and safety is at risk because of work; we use the percentage who are not at risk as a single item *Physical Environment* indicator. 'Work Intensity' is defined as the rate of physical and/or mental input to work tasks performed during the working day. It depends mainly on workload and the time available to get things done. Our *Work Intensity* index combines three indicators in one standardised index, consistent over time, covering the pace of work, the pressure of deadlines, and the perception of required hard work.

An additional dimension of job quality, the 'Social Environment of Work' comprises both positive elements (the extent of support from supervisors/managers and co-workers) and negative elements (the prevalence of workplace abuse). For 2024, we construct, for employees only, the *Social Environment* index by combining, in one standardised index, indicators of social support from supervisors or managers with indicators of the absence of workplace abuse. Unfortunately, this index is only available in SES in 2024, and so we cannot report long-term trend evidence on the Social Environment of Work.

5. Findings

The left column of graphs shown in Figure 1 present the long-term trends in the more extrinsic dimensions of job quality, those that are often specifically mentioned in job contracts.

Working Time Quality

As can be seen, Working Time Quality is higher for women than for men. This difference derives from the fact that substantially fewer women were working for more than 48 hours a week. Counterbalancing this gap, however, men are somewhat more likely to be able to control the start and finishing times of their work. Because our index weights these two items equally, the larger advantage in avoiding long hours yields a balance in favour of women. Over time, however, there has been an almost-complete gender convergence, alongside a modest long-term improvement.

Underlying this convergence, both men and women benefited from improved Working Time Quality, but men more so than women. Among men, 78% of workers were avoiding long-hours working (more than 48 hours per week) in 2006, but this had risen to 86% in 2024 – a distinct improvement in job quality. Among women, by contrast, 94% avoided long-hours working at both the beginning and the end of this period. Both men and women experienced a similar small improvement in working time schedule control, primarily either side of the pandemic: the proportion with control over when they start and finish work rose between 2017 and 2024 from 48% to 54% among men and from 41% to 45% among women.

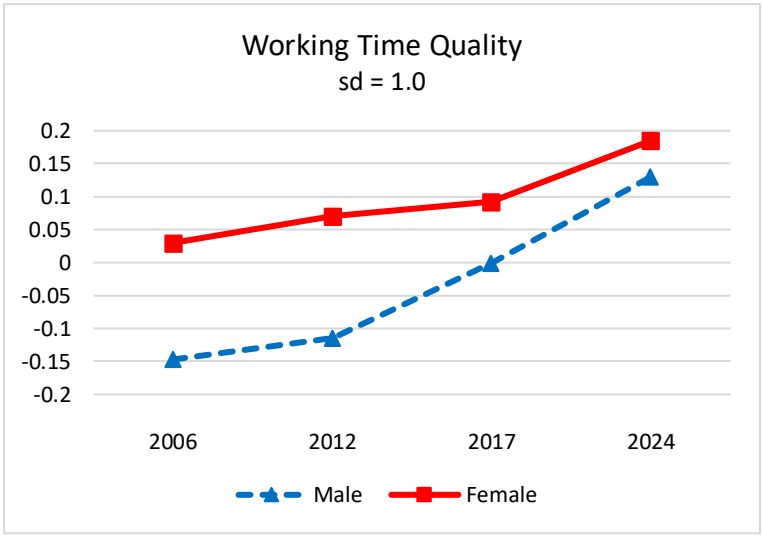
Earnings

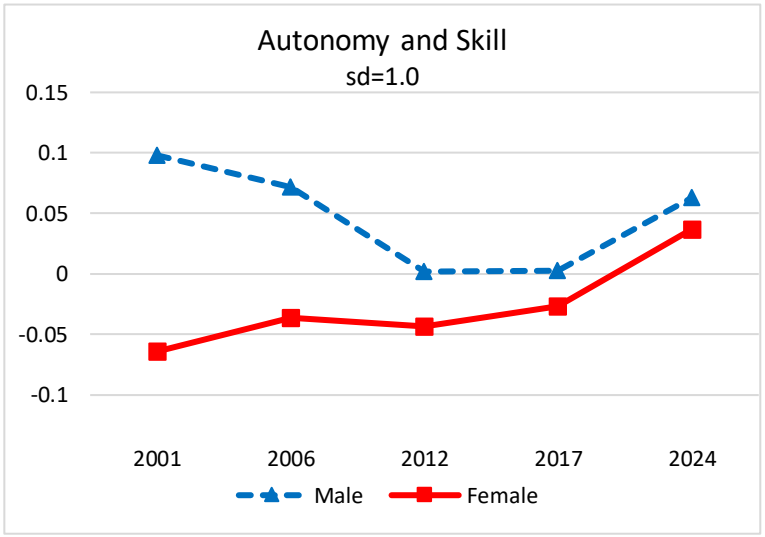
Figure 1 also shows convergence in weekly Earnings. Median earnings (for both employees and the self-employed) were rising for both men and women in the early 2000s, but subsequently they fell, especially for men between 2006 to 2012, spanning the 2008 financial crisis and the recession which ensued. The earnings of males subsequently recovered only slowly, reaching approximately the same level in 2024 as in 2006. By contrast, the earnings of females rose substantially after the 2012 survey; by 2024 they had reached 19% above their 2006 level.

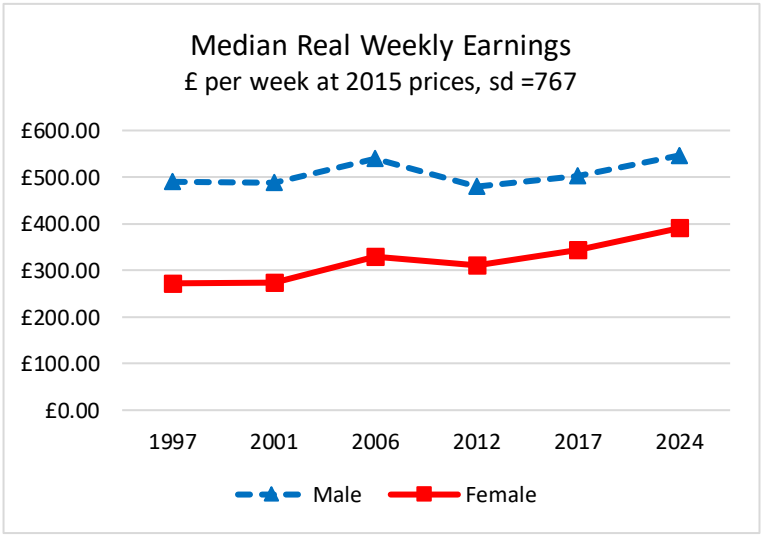
Job Security

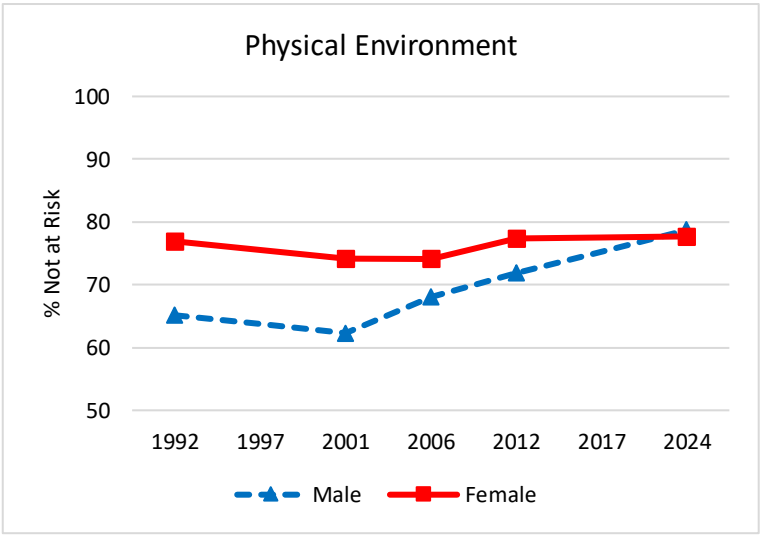
Figure 1 shows that the trend in the *Job Security* index is similar for men and women, with no process of convergence or divergence. Averaged over all years, there has been a small but statistically significant gap in favour of women. For example, while in 2024 the proportions in non-permanent jobs were similar (6% for men compared with 7% for women), the proportions who said that there was a chance of job loss in the next 12 months were 18% for men and only 12% for women. Over the long-term Job Security has improved by a small amount for both men and women. This small rise reflects trends in the aggregate labour market. Compared with the 1980s and early 1990s when unemployment in the UK was very high, unemployment in recent decades has generally been lower. Nevertheless, Job Security took a sharp fall in 2012, compared with earlier and subsequent waves, reflecting the aftermath of the great recession of 2008-2009.

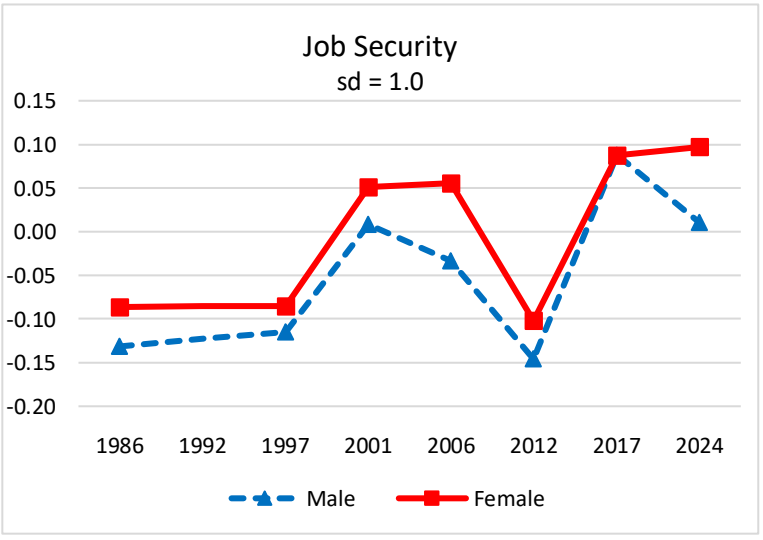
Figure 1 Trends in the Average Values of Six Dimensions of Job Quality

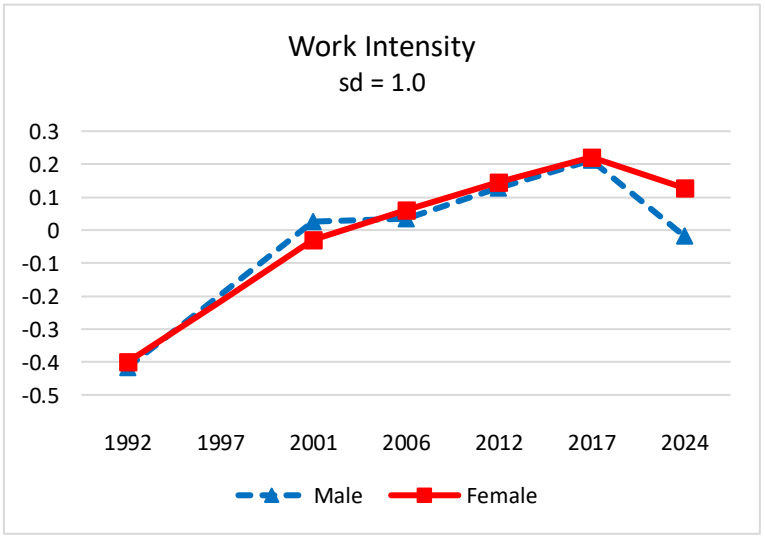












Earnings in £; Physical Environment in %; all other dimensions are standardised composite indices having an average of zero (with positive numbers above average, negative numbers below average), and standard deviation (sd) of one.

Autonomy & Skill

Figure 1 presents in the right column the trends in the intrinsic dimensions of job quality. In respect of *Autonomy & Skill*, and taking the period as a whole, men experience greater job quality in this dimension. However, between 2001 and 2012 there was rapid convergence as *Autonomy & Skill* was rising for women while falling for men. For 2012 and 2017 there was no significant gender gap, but a small gap in favour of men opened up again in 2024. To illustrate, 30% of men in 2024 report that they had quite a lot or a great deal of say in decisions about the way they work, as compared with 25% of women.

Underlying these trends there has been a decoupling between job skills and job autonomy, in the sense that the indicators, though related at the individual level in any one year, have on average been moving in opposite directions. Continuing on from the 1990s, the required level of job skill has been rising this century; to illustrate, the proportion of jobs requiring a qualification at degree level or above rose from 29% in 2001 to 46% in 2024. The indicators of job skill rose especially fast for women between 2001 and 2012, and this lies behind the gender convergence over that interval in the overall combined *Autonomy & Skill* index.

After 2017, required job skills rose significantly for both sexes. In contrast, job autonomy has been falling since 2001 for both men and women. For example, the proportion of all workers who report a great deal of influence over how to do tasks fell from 46% in 2001 to 39% in 2024. Taking together with the rising job skills, the resulting long-term trend in the *Autonomy & Skill* index for all workers is flat.

Physical Environment

The Physical Environment of work has improved substantially during this century, as indicated by a long-term decline in the perceived risk to health and safety. This decline was concentrated entirely among men, among whom the proportion reporting their health or safety were at risk from their work declined from 38% in 2001 to 21% in 2024. Additional analysis (not shown here) found that less than a quarter of this decline could be accounted for by industrial structural change, that is, by shifting proportions of industries within the economy. Rather, the largest improvements arose within industries; they are likely to be linked with improved procedures and technologies, aided by regulatory controls. Most progress occurred in the Mining and Quarrying industry. Risks were also significantly diminished in Wholesale and Retail, Real Estate/Renting, Health & Social Work, Manufacturing and Construction.

By contrast, women have in recent decades been at a lower physical risk from work. However, there has been only a small improvement this century among women, bringing them to 22% at risk, close to where they were in 1992. As a result of the above, by 2024 there had been a remarkable complete gender convergence: men now perceive themselves to be at the same level of physical health risk from work as women.

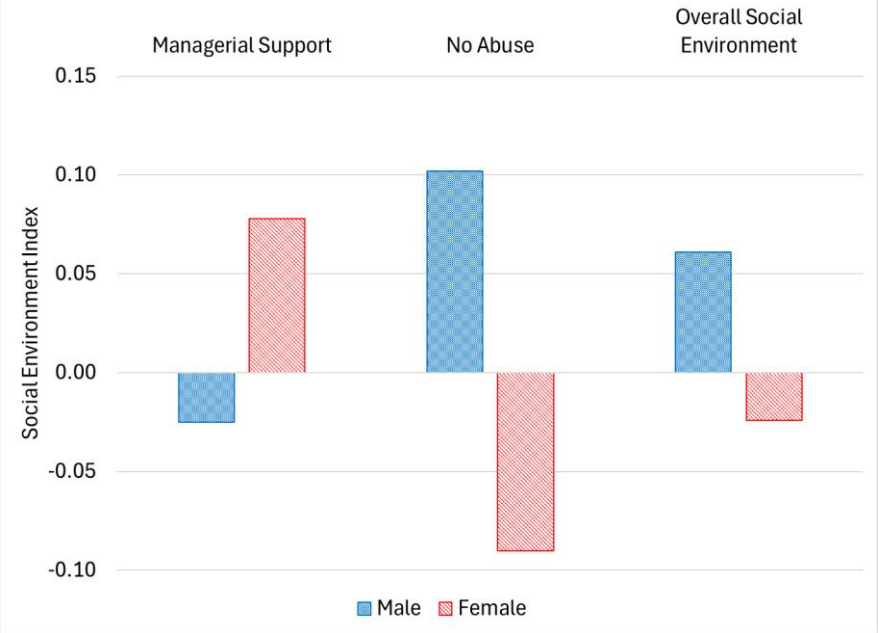
Work Intensity

The Work Intensity index was rising long-term between 1992 and 2017. It then fell back over the 2017 to 2024 period, either side of the pandemic lockdown, to the level it had been at in 2006, still substantially higher than in 1992. To illustrate, among males the proportion of workers who reported having to work at high speed at least three quarters of the time rose from 21% in 1992 to 44% in 2017, falling to 37% in 2024. In most years, the work intensity index is not significantly different between the sexes, and there is no trend in this near-zero gender gap.

Social Environment

Figure 2 shows that there is a significant gender gap in the Social Environment in favour of men. This gap is driven entirely by the very large difference in the exposures of men and women to workplace abuse. That gap is partially mitigated by the fact that women report moderately higher levels of managerial support than men. However, due to combining the two components with equal weight in the Social Environment index, the advantage lies substantially with men.

Figure 2 The Gender Gap in the Social Environment of Work for Employees, 2024



6. Policy Implications

Monitoring and understanding job quality in all dimensions is integral to an improved understanding of Britain's economy, including progress towards gender equality. Job quality matters a great deal for men's and women's wellbeing and health, and so also for their commitment to employment.

The long-term gradual narrowing of the gender pay gap for employees has been complemented by improvements with some, but not all other dimensions of job quality. There has been a convergence in Working Time Quality, in the Physical Environment of work and in Autonomy & Skill, although a small gender gap in the latter has opened up again since the pandemic, favouring men. The gender gaps in other dimensions of job quality have been small for many years. Taken altogether, these trends suggest that jobs may have become less gendered over recent decades. Nevertheless, there remains a substantive pay gap favouring men. There is also a gender gap in the Social Environment of work, and other gender gaps may yet open up.

There is, therefore, an ongoing challenge to ensure gender equality across the multiple dimensions of job quality. Employers aiming to improve job quality to retain a committed workforce should constantly review their management style and human resource policies to improve job quality for both sexes. To facilitate good policy on gender and other protected characteristics it will be important to monitor *all* dimensions of job quality, not just pay. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) has been monitoring the Social Environment of work, and some partial elements of Autonomy & Skill, of Working Time Quality and of Prospects since 2021. However, the data are not easily accessible, and the results are published intermittently; they are in any case far from adequate to keep track of multidimensional job quality.

The ONS also tracks job satisfaction and meaningful work under the rubric of job quality, but these are measures of subjective workplace wellbeing, not job quality. Rising demand for information about job quality is being addressed, inadequately, using unrepresentative and partial data from job adverts or employee reviews; these, however, are no substitute for surveys that collect data about the real lived experience of work from a representative sample of workers. We would recommend that ONS considers re-focusing resources on monitoring all objective dimensions of job quality as recognised in the scientific literature; this can be accomplished at comparatively low cost using validated short-form questions.

Further Reading

Eurofound (2016) *Sixth European Working Conditions Survey – Overview Report*, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

Eurofound (2016) *Working Time Developments in the 21st Century: Work Duration and Its Regulation in the EU*, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

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All titles are downloadable free from the survey website: wiserd.ac.uk/project/ses/ses2024. The NatCen SES2024 Technical Report which outlines in detail how the data were collected along with the questionnaires used is also available. You may also like to take the www.howgoodismyjob.com quiz which is based on some of the questions used in the survey.

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