

Improving progression opportunities for women in low-paid and low-skill jobs in France

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The Behavioural Insights Team

The Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) is a global social purpose company that generates and applies behavioural insights to inform policy, improve public services and deliver results for citizens and society.

About this report

This project is supported by JPMorgan Chase as part of their \$350 million, five-year global commitment to prepare people around the world for the future of work. This commitment will focus on creating economic mobility and career pathways for underserved populations and the firm's employees, by collaborating with educational and research institutions to forecast emerging skillsets in the financial services industry and enable new training programs to prepare the firm's workforce for changes in technology and business. While this report has been supported by JPMorgan Chase, the contents and opinions in this paper are those of the authors alone and do not reflect the views of the JPMorgan Chase Foundation, JPMorgan Chase & Co. or any of its affiliates.

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Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of a research programme on the barriers faced by women in low-paid and low-skill work in France, alongside potential solutions. The research, conducted by the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT), was part of a global research programme focused on France, Spain, the UK, and South Africa. Our work included a review of existing literature, a survey of 2,022 low-paid workers, 6 in-depth interviews with low-paid women, and a co-design workshop that brought together employers, job centres and charitable organisations.

Below is a summary of the barriers we uncovered alongside interventions with the greatest potential.

Job-related barriers to progression

Commutes: Long and/or expensive commutes were the top-selected barrier by low-paid women we surveyed. Women may favour roles with a smaller commute over higher-paying roles in order to be closer to home to carry out domestic responsibilities. They are also more likely to encounter safety issues when commuting.

Flexibility and predictability: Flexible working arrangements are particularly important for women, as they are disproportionately responsible for unpaid work such as childcare and household work. This burden can be especially challenging for low-paid women, who may be less able to afford formal childcare. Predictability is often overlooked; low-paid women we surveyed were much more likely than men to say that unpredictable hours would prevent them taking a new role even if it paid more.

- **Default jobs to be advertised with flexible working options:** Set a default that all jobs must be advertised with flexible working options available.
- **Shift swapping & scheduling:** Advance scheduling to improve predictability and technologically-enabled shift swapping to allow workers to swap shifts with other workers without requiring manager approval.

Safety: Harassment and stereotyping in some male-dominated environments can isolate women and act as a barrier to progression. Low-paid women we surveyed were more likely than men to say that an unsafe working environment would prevent them taking on a new role, even if it paid more.

- **Safety checks or reviews of an organisation by an external reviewer:** External reviews of an organisation can help women to know in advance whether a location is safe and may encourage the organisation to improve if it scores poorly.

Job security: In France, 1 in 4 employees (26.6%) experience “precarious” career paths characterised by frequent job changes, periods of inactivity and unemployment. Agency work can mean workers are disconnected from the company they work for and therefore have fewer progression routes available.

Organisational processes: Recruitment and progression practices can unintentionally provide greater opportunities for men than for women.

- **Increasing transparency in recruitment decision-making:** Reducing bias in the selection process
- **Default employees into applying for promotions:** Where employees have demonstrated that they are ready for promotion against set criteria, they are automatically put forward in the next promotion cycle, without having to apply or be nominated.
- **Listing experience on CVs in terms of years, not dates:** presenting previous roles on a CV in terms of years of experience rather than chronological dates

Personal barriers to progression

Financial stress: Women in low-paid roles often have to manage financial stress, which gets in the way of progression opportunities. Low-paid work is often associated with irregular hours which equates to irregular pay. For low-paid women we surveyed, reduced stress about current finances was the top selected factor that women thought would help them prepare for progression at work, significantly more so than men.

- **Increasing pay frequency:** Splitting pay into smaller and more frequent payments, for example paying fortnightly rather than monthly.
- **Take-home pay transparency:** Providing greater clarity to employees about the amount they would expect to earn if they were to work all their allotted shifts in the upcoming pay period.

Skills: The evidence on the effectiveness of training is mixed, however the low-paid women we surveyed expressed a desire for more technical training.

- **Improve workplace training:** Improving both the training itself and access to training.
- **Use signalling devices to legitimise and endorse candidate skills:** certification of skills may lead to more successful job applications and increased earnings.

Domestic responsibilities: Women in France spend an extra 1.5 hours on unpaid work every day compared to their male counterparts. Childbirth extends the pay gap between women and men.

- **Increase men's uptake of parental leave:** Encouraging men to take longer parental leave by tackling the perception that other male colleagues would disapprove, by providing information to men.
- **Improve access to child-related financial support:** Providing further information to people on how to access child-related financial support.

We welcome the opportunity to collaborate with employers and research organisations to:

1. Implement solutions that have already demonstrated proven impact

2. Trial solutions that have high potential
3. Develop new ideas and subsequently test them

Introduction

Background

Globally, women are more likely to work in low-paid and low-skill work than men.¹ In France, 24% of employed women are in a low-skill job, compared to 14% of men in 2020.² This contributes to the national gender gap, reducing women's economic power and putting women at greater financial precarity and risk.

A major factor driving this inequality is that women are disproportionately responsible for childcare and housework than men, stretching their income and limiting their access to the labour market and opportunities to progress.³ Supporting women's progression is imperative to gender equality and the economy.⁴

The Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) is carrying out a global research programme to identify and design solutions for women in low-paid and low-skill work in France, Spain, the UK and South Africa, supported by JPMorgan Chase. This programme is the first of its kind to examine and build solutions for the particular barriers faced by low-paid women.

Throughout this programme of work, our focus is on understanding the barriers that low-paid women in low-skill work face and design solutions that employers, charities or public services are in a position to implement. We acknowledge the role of legislation and policy change, but these levers are outside of this programme's control. Similarly, we do not focus on what women can do, since these other partners and channels are typically in a stronger position to create change.

In this report, we present our research findings related to the key barriers that women face in France, alongside promising solutions. Our findings are in separate reports for [Spain](#), [the UK](#) and [South Africa](#).

Our insights are based on the following sources (the full methodology can be found in Appendix i):

1. [Literature review](#), summarising existing evidence on the barriers women face to progression and possible interventions to address these barriers, including research highlighted by the experts we interviewed.
2. **Survey** of 2,022 low-paid workers in France (78% women, 22% men) to better understand how women prioritise the barriers identified in the literature review and whether this differs to men.

¹ Ortiz-Ospina, E., & Roser, M. (2018). Economic inequality by gender. Our World in Data.

² INSEE (2022) [Femmes et hommes. l'égalité en question](#).

³ ONS. (2016). [Women shoulder the responsibility of 'unpaid work'](#).

⁴ Morais Maceira, H. (2017). Economic Benefits of Gender Equality in the EU. *Intereconomics*, 52(3), 178–183

3. **In-depth interviews** with 6 low-paid women in France, to better understand how the most highly prioritised barriers are experienced.

Following this exploratory phase, we then generated realistic solutions through a:

4. **Co-design workshop**,⁵ attended by employers, job centres and charitable organisations, to present our findings and to co-create ideas for possible solutions.

Definitions

Low-paid

Throughout this research programme we have used the OECD definition of “low-pay” work, defined as **workers earning less than two-thirds of median income**.⁶ In France, this equates to earning less than €14,500 per year, based on 2019 data.⁷

Low-skill

The French definition of low-skill employment differs from the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISOC)⁸ in that it includes both “*ouvriers non qualifiés*” (and “*employés non qualifiés*”. Most (80%) unskilled workers are men who work as craftsmen, industry workers, drivers, etc. in relatively secure positions since 78% of these workers hold a permanent contract.⁹ This is in contrast with “non-skilled” employees who are mainly women.¹⁰ In France, unskilled jobs are defined by the fact that these jobs do not require a degree corresponding to their occupation, but this does not mean that the job holders are “unskilled”.

It is worth noting, the definition of skill can itself be subject to gender bias, where those associated with female-dominated occupations are perceived as lower skilled.¹¹ Some skills may also not be widely recognised and therefore considered as low-skill when in fact they are skilled.¹²

Progression

After an ‘increase in pay’, the low-paid women we surveyed identified ‘a more secure contract’ as the most important defining factor for progression. Rather than focusing on

⁵ Co-design is a collaborative approach to design involving a range of perspectives in the design process

⁶ OECD. (2021). [Wage Levels](#)

⁷ INSEE (n.d.). [France, portrait social](#)

⁸ Policy brief. (2021) [Labour market polarisation: are there more low-skilled jobs in France?](#)

⁹ Virginie Forment, Joëlle Vidalenc (2020) INSEE [Les ouvriers : des professions toujours largement masculine](#)

¹⁰ Gadrey, N., Jany-Catrice, F., & Pernod-Lemattre, M. (2004). Genre et emplois non qualifiés. D. Meda, F. Vennat, *Le travail non qualifié, permanences et paradoxes*, Paris, La Découverte.

¹¹ Green, F. (2011). What is Skill?: An Inter-Disciplinary Synthesis. London: Centre for Learning and Life Chances in Knowledge Economies and Societies. Chicago

¹² Green, F. (2011). What is Skill?: An Inter-Disciplinary Synthesis. London: Centre for Learning and Life Chances in Knowledge Economies and Societies. Chicago

progression as exclusively about increasing pay, we use the term progression to include attaining higher quality work. This acknowledges that increasing pay does not necessarily lead to higher quality work.¹³ Increases in pay alone can come at the cost of other factors that contribute to higher quality work, such as job security and job safety.

Current context in France

In France 30 years ago, the majority of low-skill¹⁴ workers were “male industry workers”. Today, with the shift to a service economy, the number of low-skill workers has decreased whilst the population of low-skill employees has grown significantly.¹⁵ The majority of people occupying low-skill positions are women: 24% of employed women are in a low-skill position, compared to 14% of men in 2020.¹⁶ These jobs are mainly concentrated in three sectors: sales, hospitality and care and domestic services.¹⁷

In France, 79,5% of part-time workers are women.¹⁸ Women are three times as likely as men to be working part-time and the fact that they work fewer hours than men affects their earnings. In the private sector, it is estimated that 40% of the difference between men and women’s earnings can be explained by the number of hours they work.¹⁹

¹³ Rubery, J., & Grimshaw, D. (2011). Gender and the Minimum Wage. In S. Lee & D. McCann (Eds.), *Regulating for Decent Work: New Directions in Labour Market Regulation* (pp. 226–254). Palgrave Macmillan UK.

¹⁴ For the purposes of this review, we will refer to 'low-skill' where in France the used term is 'unskilled', and includes unskilled workers (blue-collar workers of industry) and unskilled employees (services).

¹⁵ INSEE (2020) [Les ouvriers: Des professions toujours largement masculines—Insee Focus—199. \(n.d.\)](#).

¹⁶ INSEE (2022) [Femmes et hommes, l'égalité en question](#).

¹⁷ INSEE (2020) [Tableaux de l'économie française](#)

¹⁸ <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/4501614?sommaire=4504425>

¹⁹ <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/4514861>

Barriers & interventions

In this section we discuss the barriers faced by women and possible solutions to address these barriers. We have categorised these barriers into job-related barriers, which relate to the job itself, and personal barriers, which relate to the individual. We are primarily interested in what wider actors like employers, charities or public services can do, rather than central government or individual action.

The solutions presented include those already evaluated, alongside new solutions which have not been tested. Therefore, while we provide high-level thoughts on impact and feasibility for each solution, in most cases further research should be conducted. The full list of solutions considered can be found at Appendix ii.

Job-related barriers to progression

Job-related factors are those that relate to the job itself: the commute, flexibility and predictability, safety, job security and organisational processes.

Improving commutes

Women may favour roles with a smaller commute over higher-paying roles in order to be closer to home to carry out domestic responsibilities.²⁰ Men, conversely, have fewer domestic responsibilities and are more likely to own a car.²¹ They are therefore able to commute further, allowing them to access higher earnings.²² Low-paid women we surveyed identified a long and/or expensive commute as the highest ranked factor that would prevent them from applying to a new role, even if it paid more. Women were also more likely to say this was a barrier (45%) than men (37%).

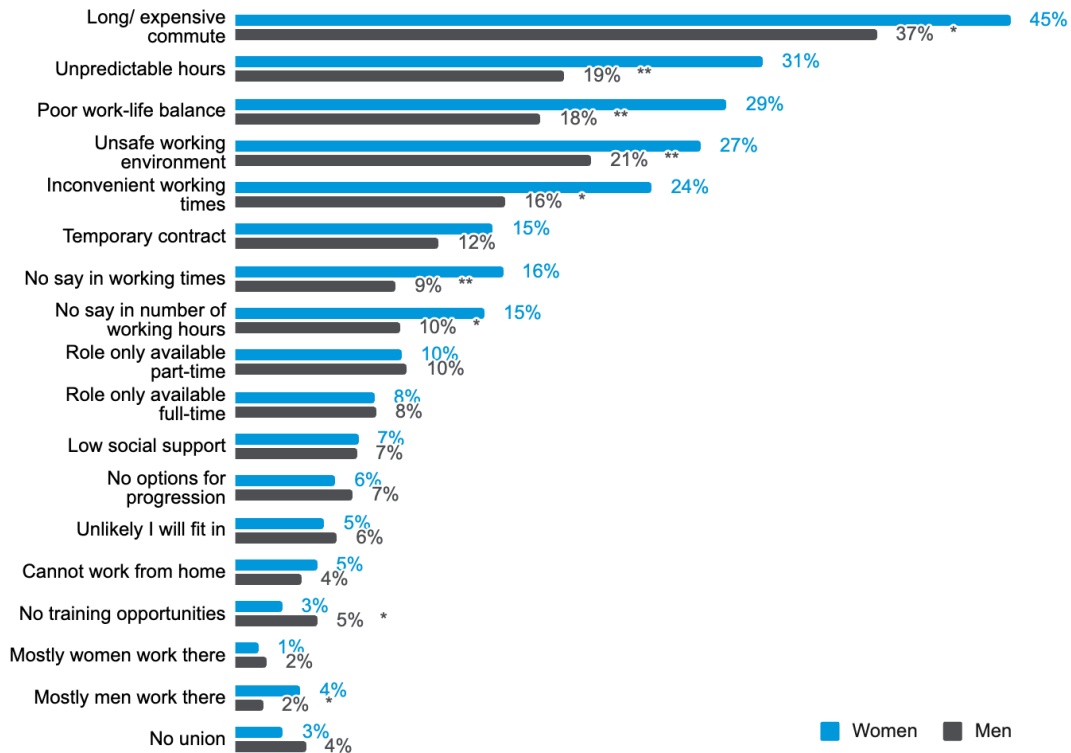
²⁰ Bertrand, M., Goldin, C., & Katz, L. F. (2010). Dynamics of the gender gap for young professionals in the financial and corporate sectors. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 2(3), 228–255.

²¹ CEIC Data. (2017). [France Motor Vehicle Ownership per Household](#).

²² ONS (2019). [Gender differences in commute time and pay](#).

Imagine you find a new job that you would enjoy and that you are qualified for. The job pays more than your current job.

Would any of the following prevent you from applying?



N = 2,022

** p < 0.01, * p < 0.05, + p < 0.10

Figure 1. Proportion of women and men saying that a given barrier means they could not work in the role regardless of pay

Commutes also have issues of safety. Women fear using public transport due to experiences of harassment, particularly at night, and low-paid and low-skill jobs are more likely to involve night-time work.²³ This limits the progression routes available for women, who, for example, may not take an opportunity if it is accompanied by late night travel.²⁴ In Île-de-France region, 9 out of 10 victims of sexual and sexist harassment on public transport were women in 2021.

²⁵

While long or expensive commutes are a key barrier for women, many solutions require non-behavioural or more structural solutions, such as in town and city planning, public

²³ Crisp, R., Gore, T., & McCarthy, L. (2017). *Addressing transport barriers to work in low income neighbourhoods: A review of evidence and practice*. Sheffield Hallam University.

²⁴ For example, 55% of women in London report experiencing unwanted sexual harassment in a YouGov survey Prescott-Smith, S. [Most women have been sexually harassed on London public transport](#).

²⁵ Ministère Chargé des Transports. (2021). [Bilan des atteintes à caractère sexiste dans les transports de l'année 2021](#)

transport infrastructure and business incentives to operate in different geographic locations. Therefore, we did not focus on this in the workshops.

Increasing flexibility and predictability

Why is lack of flexibility and predictability a barrier?

Flexibility

Women are disproportionately responsible for unpaid care work compared to men, spending on average twice the amount of time on domestic tasks such as cleaning and childcare.²⁶ Thus, flexible working arrangements are critical for women and men to participate in the labour market to manage both paid work and unpaid care work.

Flexible working arrangements are typically less well paid per hour than non-flexible arrangements for similar roles, as workers pay a “penalty” to work flexibly.²⁷ Additionally, low-paid flexible roles are more likely to be on more insecure contracts, whereas high-paid and high-skill jobs are typically offered on a permanent contract.²⁸

While commutes and predictability emerged as the most important factors for low-paid women we surveyed, **time** flexibility was also identified as important: poor work-life balance (29%), inconvenient working times (24%), and no say in working times (16%) or number of hours (15%). These factors also had the largest differences between women and men.

Both women and men ranked choosing **when** they work their hours as more important than choosing how many hours they work or being able to change the location they work. Being able to change the location they work was ranked lower by women than men.

Asking for flexibility can be perceived negatively by employers. One woman we interviewed, working as a teaching assistant to pupils with disabilities stated:

“Asking for flexibility could be perceived badly by some of my colleagues. There is a lot of jealousy in this environment. It could be seen as making waves. I felt this... on Thursday/Friday, when I asked for one thing and the supervisor came down on us and said that ‘everyone has their little requests and personal things’”.

Interviewees were worried that requesting flexible work would impact their reputation at work. They were more willing to request flexible working once they had worked in the same job for a few years or when they had a good relationship with their manager. Asking for flexibility could also be unnecessarily difficult. One woman described how she had to make a written request every time she wanted to amend her hours. For example, she had to make a request to take her daughter to a medical exam and persist in order for the request to be approved.

²⁶ INSEE. (2012). [Femmes et hommes - Regards sur la parité](#)

²⁷ Jones, L. (2019). [Women's Progression in the Workplace](#). King's College London.

²⁸ Adams-Prassl, A., Balgova, M., & Qian, M. (2020). Flexible Work Arrangements in Low Wage Jobs: Evidence from Job Vacancy Data. *SSRN Electronic Journal*.

Predictability

An often overlooked challenge for low-paid workers is predictability. Low-paid women we surveyed (31%) were much more likely than low-paid men (19%) to say that unpredictable hours would prevent them from taking on a new role, even if it paid more, and this was the second most selected barrier in the surveys by women. The reasons given by women in the interviews for wanting predictability centred on how it would enable them to organise their home life around work. One interviewee, when asked whether they need predictability, stated:

“Yes, because I need to make schedules for the nanny, for school, for after-school care.”

Intervention 1: Default jobs to be advertised with flexible working options

What is it?

Set a default that all jobs must be advertised with flexible working options available. Making it the default means that instead of managers having to remember to include flexible working, it is advertised without individuals needing to take action. If managers feel a role cannot be performed flexibly, this has to be explained to HR. For this to be especially effective, the flexible working options should be specific, e.g. part-time, job share, compressed hours.

What does the evidence say?

Evidence it increases applications from women. BIT has tested this intervention in trials with the British retailer John Lewis Partnership (JLP) and Zurich Insurance UK, specifically focused on including job share and part-time work options by default.^{29,30} The proportion of store management jobs advertising job share and part-time roles increased to 100% at JLP and across all roles to 78% at Zurich. The proportion of women applying to store management positions at JLP increased by 35%. The proportion of women applying increased by 16% at Zurich, and 19% to senior roles.

Specific flexible arrangements are more effective. Employers should avoid generic statements such as ‘flexible working available’ and instead provide specific examples of the flexibility on offer.³¹ An online experiment by BIT found that both men and women are more interested in applying to jobs with specific statements on flexibility rather than generic statements.³² Women were most interested in jobs specifying flexible working options if that included part-time work.

Behavioural insights

- Introduces **defaults** to make it easier to include flexible working options on job

²⁹ Government Equalities Office. 2020. [Changing the default: a field trial with Zurich Insurance to advertise all jobs as part time](#).

³⁰ Government Equalities Office. 2021. [Flexibility by default: Increasing the advertisement of part-time or job-share options](#).

³¹ Timewise (2021). [The Timewise Flexible Jobs Index 2021](#).

³² Behavioural Insights Team (2021). [Who is more likely to apply for flexible jobs – men or women?](#)

advertises and to signal that flexible working is normative

- **Removes friction** for hiring managers in the process of setting up job adverts.
- Improves **transparency** and reduces **ambiguity aversion** for candidates about the different types of flexibility that are available

Channels and key partners: Employers and job sites

Intervention 2: Shift swapping & scheduling

What is it?

This intervention is two-tiered. Firstly, advance scheduling provides women with greater certainty over their working patterns. For example, one woman we interviewed in the UK wanted to work somewhere where she would be given her schedule a month in advance in order to see her friends and family.

Secondly, technology-enabled shift swapping allows workers to swap their shifts with other workers without requiring manager approval. Thus, last-minute emergencies, such as illness of a child, can be managed.

What does the evidence say?

Evidence it increases predictability. A US study specific to the retail industry implemented a randomised controlled trial (RCT) to evaluate increasing schedule stability and shift swapping.³³ The study found that tech-enabled shift swapping increased the consistency of shifts, both in terms of start and end times and in terms of the time of day, with 71% of respondents stating they could easily anticipate their working hours compared to 63% in the control group.

A similar study found that increasing schedule predictability resulted in employees with children working fewer days per week but more hours per day.³⁴ This may be beneficial to women who may find childcare arrangements easier and cheaper if they are required for fewer days. Additionally, the study found that the parents had less difficulty sleeping.

Evidence it can be positive for the employer. The effects of stable scheduling also appear positive for the employer. The US retail study found that worker input increased, store sales rose and labour productivity increased by 5%.³⁵ One review finds that "when blue-collar employees describe their schedules as predictable, they are less likely to quit.

³³ Williams, J et al. (n.d.). [Stable Scheduling Increases Productivity and Sales: The Stable Scheduling Study](#). *WorkLife Law*.

³⁴ Ananat, E., Gassman-Pines, A., & Fitz-Henley, J. (2022). The Effects of the Emeryville Fair Workweek Ordinance on the Daily Lives of Low-Wage Workers and their Families (Working Paper No. 29792; Working Paper Series). National Bureau of Economic Research.

³⁵ Williams, J et al. (n.d.). [Stable Scheduling Increases Productivity and Sales: The Stable Scheduling Study](#). *WorkLife Law*.

Having a predictable schedule is six times more powerful in predicting front-line employee retention than having a flexible schedule."³⁶

Behavioural insights

- Reduces **friction** by enabling decision-making directly between peers rather than via a manager
- Draws on feelings of **reciprocity**, for example if an employee asks for a shift swap on one occasion, they may be more likely to accept a shift swap request from a colleague on another occasion

Channels and key partners: Employers, organisations offering shift swapping technology

Increasing safety in the workplace

Why is lack of safety in the workplace a barrier?

Studies have shown that harassment and stereotyping in some male-dominated environments can isolate women and act as a barrier to progression.³⁷ Increased sexual harassment is associated with fewer women in managerial positions.³⁸

In the surveys, women (27%) were more likely than men (21%) to say that an unsafe working environment would prevent them from taking a new role, even if it paid more. The low-paid women we interviewed primarily expressed concern with physical safety. One woman, working as a cleaner in people's homes, recounted many experiences working with men who were sexually inappropriate with her, which resulted in her having to resign from the job. She requested a walk-through of a home before accepting a role and turned down an opportunity as it posed a risk to her personal safety. She did not trust the cleaning agency's health and safety approvals and preferred to do her own checks.

Intervention 1: Safety checks or reviews of an organisation by an external reviewer.

What is it?

External review of an organisation can help women to know in advance whether a location is safe and may encourage the organisation to improve if they score poorly.

This could work in a number of different ways. For example, an employer could commission reviews of people's homes for a cleaning or caring role. Alternatively, an agency could commission a review of an organisation before an agent starts work there. The agency could notify organisations that any inappropriate behaviour will be reported via the review platform which may lead to the organisation being banned.

³⁶ Sull, D., Sull, C., & Zweig, B. (2022). [Toxic Culture Is Driving the Great Resignation](#). *MIT Sloan Management Review*.

³⁷ Jones, L. (2019). [Women's Progression in the Workplace](#). King's College London.

³⁸ Dobbin, F., & Kalev, A. (2019). The promise and peril of sexual harassment programs. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 116(25), 12255-12260.

What does the evidence say?

This was a new solution that came from an interview with a low-paid woman based in the UK, who primarily does casual work such as temporary customer service work, and who stated they always read reviews on Google about a workplace or an agency. As such, this is not a tested solution.

Having said this, evidence from other areas suggests that measures to introduce transparency could be promising. For example, voluntary certification standards can help reduce information barriers for consumers and help people make purchasing decisions in line with their preferences and values.³⁹ Also, there is evidence that sustainability certification programmes can have a positive impact on quality.⁴⁰

Behavioural Insights

- Improves **transparency** for prospective employees
- Reduces **frictions** for people trying to find out how safe an organisation is and for reporting inappropriate behaviour

Channels and key partners: External reviewer, employers, job sites

Increasing job security

Why is lack of job security a barrier?

Temporary contracts and seasonal labour

Over the last 15 years, the number of workers with fixed-term and part-time contracts has increased considerably.⁴¹ Labour market insecurity may act as a barrier to progression for women in low-paid and low-skill work. Short-term work, temporary contracts and seasonal labour increase precarity. Even where workers return to the same employer following fixed-term work, they do not gain the same employment rights as permanent staff and, thus, have less job security.⁴² In the surveys, 15% of low-paid women said that having a temporary contract would mean they would not take a new role, even if it paid more.

In France, 1 in 4 employees (26.6% of employees) experience “precarious” career paths characterised by frequent job changes, periods of inactivity and unemployment.⁴³ Women are overrepresented in this group (68% of women compared to 32% of men).⁴⁴ Employees who

³⁹ Roberts, T. M. (2013). The Rise of Rule Four Institutions: Voluntary Standards, Certification and Labeling Systems. *Ecology LQ*, 40, 107.

⁴⁰ Aidenvironment, WWF and ISEAL. (2018). The Systemic Impacts of Voluntary Sustainability Standards

⁴¹ https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-8-2017-0224_FR.html#_part1_ref24

⁴² Ray, Kathryn; Hoggart, Lesley; Vegeris, Sandra and Taylor, Rebecca (2010). *Better Off Working? Work, Poverty And Benefit Cycling*. Joseph Rowntree Foundation, York.

⁴³ This study considers employees who have completed their initial training or studies at least 10 years ago. Enquête Conditions de travail 2013, in Dares Analyses (2018) [En quoi les conditions de travail sont-elles liées au parcours professionnel antérieurs?](#)

⁴⁴ Dares Analyses (2018) [En quoi les conditions de travail sont-elles liées au parcours professionnel antérieur?](#)

have this type of career path often express a lack of symbolic and financial recognition for their work. They are also less likely to think that their job matches their educational background.

Agency services

One report into low-paid women further identifies how company structures create divides between different types of work. Agency services, such as cleaning, are those that are outsourced to agencies.⁴⁵ This means that those services, and, therefore, the individuals working within those services, become disconnected from the company and viewed as outside the company's development and progression structure.

Migrant women

Insecurity is exacerbated for migrant women (excluding second generation immigrants). While migrant women represent 5% of total employment, they represent 37% of domestic workers, 15% of domestic care workers, 13% of maternal assistants, and 11% of maintenance workers and hotel and catering supervisors. Thus, they disproportionately occupy low-skill and low-paid positions.^{46,47} Alongside a lack of job security that low-paid women face, migrant workers may also face a higher risk of exploitation and abuse in the workplace.⁴⁸

In our research, we did not identify any high potential interventions relating to job security that were either employer or public services focused and sufficiently developed.

Improving organisational processes

Why are organisational processes a barrier?

Low-paid and low-skill jobs are characterised by issues with career mobility and promotion practices with limited opportunities for development, making it difficult for individuals to progress once they enter these roles.^{49,50} Progression by changing job roles may be difficult when recruitment practices create barriers for women. The UK's Equality and Human Rights Commission found that informal recruitment methods are used more in low-paid industries than high-paid industries, such as using 'word of mouth' and informal networks to find

⁴⁵ Rubery, J. (2017). *Why is Women's Work Low-Paid? Establishing a framework for understanding the causes of low pay among professions traditionally dominated by women*. Oxfam GB.

⁴⁶ Direction de l'Animation de la Recherche, des Etudes et des Statistiques (DARES) is the department of the Ministry of Labour which produces analyses, studies and statistics on the themes of work, employment, vocational training and social dialogue.

⁴⁷ Aurore Desjonquères et Moustapha Niang, « Les métiers des immigrés », s. d., 71.

⁴⁸ Meyer, A and Dumortier, T. (2014). *Severe forms of Labour Exploitation - France, 2014*. Social Fieldwork Research FRANET

⁴⁹ OECD (2019), [Getting Skills Right: Engaging low-skilled adults in learning](#).

⁵⁰ OECD (2019), [Getting Skills Right: Engaging low-skilled adults in learning](#).

applicants.⁵¹ They suggest that these practices may entrench existing demographics within the workforce, making it difficult for women to enter male-dominated industries.

One field study found that over three quarters (76%) of the promotion gap between men and women is explained by women being less likely to put themselves forward for promotion.⁵² Other research finds that with a standard opt-in system women are less likely to participate in leadership selection than men, even when told they are the group's top performer.

One review found evidence of discriminatory practices stemming from a requirement by recruiters to have a continuous employment history with no gaps.⁵³ Where individuals, from varying organisations and sectors, did not have a consistent work history they were immediately screened out from the application. The majority of individuals that have left the workforce for caring responsibilities (and wish to return) are women, and, in particular, women with dependent children.⁵⁴

Intervention 1: Increasing transparency in recruitment decision-making

What is it?

Increasing transparency in recruitment decision-making involves reducing bias in the selection process, considering the sifting, interview and assessment, evaluation, and post-offer processes. The UK's Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development's (CIPD) guide to inclusive recruitment, written by BIT, suggests the following.⁵⁵

- **Sifting:** reduce bias in automated sifting and include more marginalised candidates in the shortlist
- **Interviews and assessments:** use structured interviews and use skill-based assessment tasks
- **Evaluation:** make decisions in batches and use calibrations for hiring decisions
- **Post-offer:** share and collect feedback from all candidates, and encourage candidates to reapply

What does the evidence say?

Evidence it improves recruitment decision-making. Studies have shown that there are no gendered differences in scores between candidates when structured interviews and

⁵¹ Equality and Human Rights Commission. (2020). [Recruitment of workers into low-paid occupations and industries: an evidence review](#). National Institute of Economic and Social Research.

⁵² Bosquet, C., Combes, P., & García-Peñalosa, C. (2018). Gender and promotions: Evidence from academic economists in France. *The Scandinavian Journal of Economics*, 121(3), 1020-1053.

⁵³ Hudson, N and Runge, J. (2020). [Recruitment of workers into low-paid occupations and industries: an evidence review](#). NIESR

⁵⁴ Paull, G. (2018). Analysis of those returning to the labour market following a break to care for others. Government Equalities Office

⁵⁵ CIPD (2022). [A guide to inclusive recruitment for employees](#).

skills-based assessments are used.^{56,57,58} Studies also show that making decisions about candidates in batches can reduce stereotyping.⁵⁹

Behavioural Insights

- **Reduces bias** by involving multiple perspectives in recruitment decisions rather than relying on one individual
- Makes it **easy** for hiring managers to compare performance on objective measures

Channels and key partners: Employers

Intervention 2: Default employees into applying for promotions

What is it?

Where employees have demonstrated that they are ready for promotion against set criteria, they are automatically put forward in the next promotion cycle, without having to apply or be nominated. This measure does not result in automatically getting promoted. Rather, it seeks to redress the imbalance in promotion applications between women and men.

What does the evidence say?

Evidence it increases promotions for women. One study found that when all participants were considered for leadership roles, women were significantly more likely to be selected.^{60, 61}

Behavioural Insights

- Introduces **defaults**, making application for promotion easier
- Reduces **similarity bias**, where managers may encourage those that are similar to them to apply for promotion
- Overcomes **risk and ambiguity aversion**, where employees may not apply for a job as they feel that it is a risk or they are unsure if they are suitable

Channels and key partners: Employers

⁵⁶ Levashina, J., Hartwell, C. J., Morgeson, F. P., & Campion, M. A. (2014). The structured employment interview: Narrative and quantitative review of the research literature. *Personnel Psychology*, 67(1), 241-293.

⁵⁷ McCarthy, J. M., Van Iddekinge, C. H., & Campion, M. A. (2010). Are highly structured job interviews resistant to demographic similarity effects?. *Personnel Psychology*, 63(2), 325-359.

⁵⁸ Ployhart, R. E., & Holtz, B. C. (2008). The diversity–validity dilemma: Strategies for reducing racioethnic and sex subgroup differences and adverse impact in selection. *Personnel Psychology*, 61(1), 153-172.

⁵⁹ Bohnet, I., Van Geen, A.V. and Bazerman, M.H. (2012) When performance trumps gender bias: joint versus separate evaluation. *Management Science*. Vol 62, No 5. pp1225–34.

⁶⁰ Erkal, N., Gangadharan, L., & Xiao, E. (2021). Leadership selection: Can changing the default break the glass ceiling? *The Leadership Quarterly*.

⁶¹ He, J. C., Kang, S. K., & Lacetera, N. (2021). Opt-out choice framing attenuates gender differences in the decision to compete in the laboratory and in the field. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 118(42).

Intervention 3: Listing experience on CVs in terms of years, not dates

What is it?

This means presenting previous roles on a CV in terms of years of experience (e.g. ‘four years’) rather than chronological dates (e.g. ‘2016–2020’).

What does the evidence say?

Evidence it increases gender equity in recruitment. Evidence suggests that listing experience in terms of years rather than dates can reduce bias against women returning to work. For example, one RCT found that positioning experience in terms of years rather than dates on a CV increased callback rates from employers by 15% for women returning to work after a break to care for children.⁶²

Behavioural Insights

- Makes the applicant’s job experience **salient**⁶³
- Makes it **easy** for the hiring manager to calculate total experience

Channels and key partners: Employers, job sites

⁶² The Behavioural Insights Team (2021). [Facilitating return to the labour market with a novel CV format intervention.](#)

⁶³ Kristal, A. S., Nicks, L., Gloor, J. L., & Hauser, O. P. (2022). Reducing discrimination against job seekers with and without employment gaps. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 1-8.

Personal barriers to progression

Personal factors are those relating to the individual: financial stress, skills and training, and domestic responsibilities.

Reducing financial stress

Why is financial stress a barrier?

Coupled with care commitments, women in low-paid work often have to manage financial stress as they are seen as “primarily responsible for seeing to it that the everyday needs of the home and the children are met”.⁶⁴ Evidence suggests that financial stress can inhibit job performance, thereby acting as a further barrier to progression.⁶⁵

Low-paid roles are more likely to be associated with irregular hours, and, thus, irregular pay.⁶⁶ Scarcity research suggests that instability in pay increases uncertainty, meaning individuals have reduced capacity to think about progression opportunities as their focus is on managing their financial commitments.⁶⁷

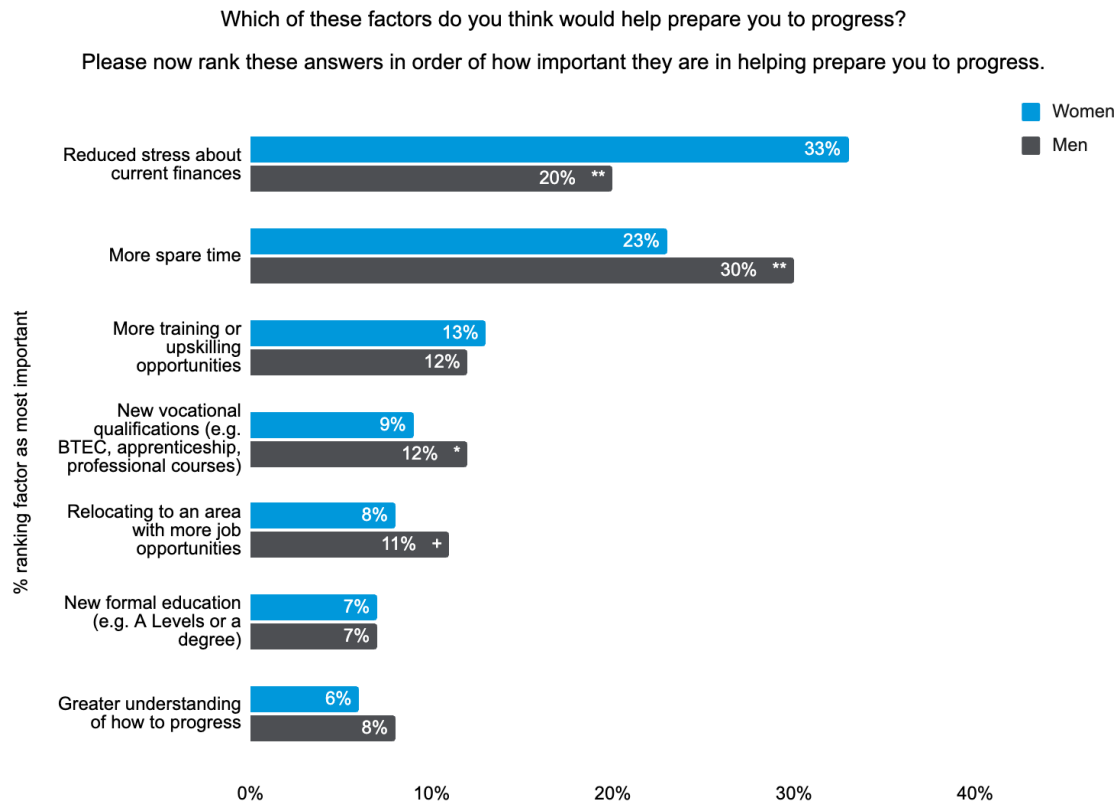
For the low-paid women we surveyed, reduced stress about current finances was the top selected factor that they thought would help them prepare to progress at work, and women felt this to a greater extent than men:

⁶⁴ [Average number of trips by age, gender and main mode: England](#). Department for Transport.

⁶⁵ Ratnawat, R. G., & Jha, D. P. C. (2014). Impact of Job Related Stress on Employee Performance: A Review and Research Agenda. *IOSR Journal of Business and Management*, 16(11), 01–06.

⁶⁶ [Irregular Work Scheduling and Its Consequences](#). (2015). Economic Policy Institute.

⁶⁷ Mani, A., Mullainathan, S., Shafir, E., & Zhao, J. (2020). Scarcity and Cognitive Function around Payday: A Conceptual and Empirical Analysis. *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research*, 5(4), 365–376.



N = 2,022

** p < 0.01, * p < 0.05, + p < 0.10

Results presented are the percentage of women and men who ranked the factor as most important.

Figure 2: The percentage of women and men who ranked the factor as most important.

In the interviews, women were concerned about how progression could impact the benefits they receive. One woman, who until recently was unemployed, stated:

“Now that I’m working, we no longer have CMU [free universal healthcare]. We don’t get the “prime d’activité” [a French subsidy] any more, the more I work, the less we get the employment allowance.”

Another woman interviewed expressed a preference for working 80% rather than 100% so that they still have access to government childcare support. As such, a new job may only be worth taking on if the increase in pay is sufficiently high to offset the reduction in benefits.

Intervention 1: Increasing pay frequency

What is it?

Splitting pay into smaller and more frequent payments, for example, paying fortnightly rather than monthly.

This intervention aims to give individuals greater financial security, thereby reducing the cognitive load and financial stress associated with infrequent pay.

Of those we surveyed (both women and men), 40% wanted to be paid more frequently, suggesting there is sufficient appetite for this solution. One woman we interviewed in the UK also suggested that receiving pay more frequently would help her as she tends to struggle towards the end of the month before payday and that more frequent pay may give her more space to focus on work and progression.

What does the evidence say?

Evidence it reduces stress. Research into tax credits found that spreading them into four smaller payments during a year, rather than as a lump sum, increased economic security, reduced reliance on credit, increased ability to pay for childcare and education and reduced stress about finances.⁶⁸

Evidence it may improve employee retention. Offering advanced pay (providing wages to employees prior to payday) has been associated with a reduction in turnover of 19%.⁶⁹ The study estimated that for each employee paid \$10 per hour, the cost of turnover was \$3,328, thereby, representing a large potential saving for businesses. This may assuage concerns for employers and provide a strong rationale for implementation.

Behavioural Insights

- Reduces **cognitive load**, which is the total amount of mental effort being used in the working memory, through reducing financial stress
- Makes it **easier** for people to manage finances by smoothing out the flow of income

Channels and key partners: Employers, payroll providers

Intervention 2: Take-home pay transparency

What is it?

Providing greater clarity to employees about the amount they would expect to earn if they were to work all their allotted shifts in the upcoming pay period. This could extend to greater clarity on income after tax and any work-related costs, such as for travel to work.

The aim is to enable predictability which better allows women to manage their finances and therefore reduce financial stress.

What does the evidence say?

⁶⁸ Bellisle, D, & Marzahl, D. (2015). Restructuring the EITC: A Credit for the Modern Worker. *Center for Economic Progress Report*.

⁶⁹ Baker, T. H., & Kumar, S. (2018). The Power of the Salary Link: Assessing the Benefits of Employer-Sponsored FinTech Liquidity and Credit Solutions for Low-Wage Working Americans and their Employers. SSRN Electronic Journal.

The technology for this solution already exists, but it has not been evaluated. We believe that this solution may have a modest impact on reducing stress, through giving low-paid women greater information which they can use to plan their finances or to work out whether they should take on additional shifts.

Behavioural Insights

- Introduces **transparency** for employees
- Improves **mental accounting**, which is the tendency for people to treat money differently depending on its origin and intended use, allowing people to better manage their finances⁷⁰

Channels and key partners: Employers

Developing new skills

Why is lack of skills a barrier?

Education

Education is often lauded as a panacea for addressing gender equality, poverty and economic growth, particularly in developing countries.⁷¹ However, in France, women are more likely to have higher education than men, suggesting a lack of education may not be the issue.⁷²

Higher educational attainment does not necessarily translate to better outcomes in the labour market. Evidence suggests that even where men and women study the same subject, men earn more. Women thus need to be more highly educated to achieve similar pay.⁷³

Type of training

A large-scale quantitative study across 14 European countries, including France, found that, overall, training contributed more to increasing wages for women than men for those earning the lowest 10% of income.⁷⁴ Thus, the absence of training or formal certification may act as a barrier for women. However, In the surveys, only 13% of women and 12% of men felt that more training or upskilling opportunities would help them prepare to progress at work.

⁷⁰ Mental accounting is the tendency for people to treat money differently depending on its origin and intended use.

⁷¹ Omoniyi, M. B. I., & Omoniyi, A. O. (2014). Unlocking Potentials in Developing Country through Education: A Panacea for Economic Growth and Poverty Alleviation. *Literacy Information and Computer Education Journal*, 5(2), 6.

⁷² OECD (2021). [Education at a Glance 2021: OECD indicators - France.](#)

⁷³ Carnevale, A. P., Smith, N., & Gulish, A. (2018). *Women Can't Win: Despite Making Educational Gains and Pursuing High-Wage Majors, Women Still Earn Less than Men* [Report]. Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.

⁷⁴ Icardi, R. (2021). Returns to workplace training for male and female employees and implications for the gender wage gap: A quantile regression analysis. *International Journal for Research in Vocational Education and Training*, 8(1), 21–45.

One woman we interviewed mentioned taking an online course during the pandemic but that training was not helpful to her nor valued by employers since she could not practise her skills and apply her knowledge through an internship or a work experience.

The type of training offered is also important. If free training were provided, most people we surveyed (72% of women and 71% of men) felt that technical training related to their job would help them progress at work rather than soft skills training or training on how to progress.

Access to training

Despite the ongoing debate on whether training is effective, there are some disparities in access to training between women and men. In France, state funding is available for training, known as the *Compte Professionnel de Formation* (CPF). Unemployed or economically inactive women are slightly more likely than men to access training through CPF. However, employed women are less likely than employed men to benefit from the scheme, especially when it comes to low-skill workers. In particular, women with children under 6 and women working in precarious contracts are less likely to access training than other groups. This may be due to other commitments that these women have compared to men, such as childcare.

Our surveys did not find any difference between women and men in the proportion stating that their 'work does not offer any training courses'.

Training may need to be offered flexibly to accommodate a wide range of working patterns. Women are more likely to work part-time and those working part-time are less likely to have access to employer-provided training than those working full-time.⁷⁵

Age and bias emerged in the interviews as a key consideration. One 45-year-old woman felt that she was too old to undergo additional external training. As a hotel receptionist, she wanted to undergo additional Spanish language training, but she felt that she would be too old by the time she completed the course and that her age would prevent her from getting a job at that point.

Intervention 1: Improve workplace training

What is it?

Improving both the training itself and access to training. A previous BIT report on workplace training for the UK Department for Education made the following recommendations:⁷⁶

- Identify training as a need: employers should focus on making skill gaps visible to managers and provide benchmarks so employers can compare training levels between themselves
- Encourage employees to take part: reduce difficulties for employees accessing training

⁷⁵ Fawcett Society. (2017). Fawcett comments on lack of workplace training offered to women by employers.

⁷⁶ Booth, S. (2017). [Annex B: Basic skills in workplaces – a behavioural insights perspective](#). Department for Education.

One way in which to encourage greater participation from women in low-paid and low-skill work may be to encourage employers to cater for those working flexibly. Using online methods of delivery may overcome the barriers women face with transport and childcare constraints.

What does the evidence say?

While there are some studies, as set out above, that demonstrate the positive impact training can have on progression, other studies report that individuals in France are actually overqualified for their current role and therefore may not benefit from additional training.⁷⁷ Alongside this, there have been no studies that we are aware of that have identified specific targeted training that would help low-paid women. As such, the above recommendations for improving training are not tested.

Behavioural Insights

- Reduces **frictions** for employees in accessing training
- Improves **transparency** of skills in the organisation

Channels and key partners: Employers, training providers

Intervention 2: Use signalling devices to legitimise and endorse candidate skills

What is it?

Signalling devices may be used to improve the job opportunities available to women in low-paid and low-skill work. They work by acting as a signal to potential employers that they are a suitable candidate. For example, a tailored cover letter to an employer signals the individual's interest, skills and qualifications.

A skills passport could be created to certify existing skills, particularly, soft skills that may be more relevant for unskilled jobs. By adding a logo or brand to the passport, this adds credibility to the certification.

What does the evidence say?

Evidence it may increase employment and earnings. In one study, individuals with limited work experience completed standardised skills assessments and were subsequently provided with certificates that showed their results and were branded by well-known agencies to lend legitimacy.⁷⁸ The study found that those individuals who were provided with their results and certification were more likely to target jobs that they felt would value their skills. Compared to a control group, the treatment group were more likely to have found employment and increased their earnings.

⁷⁷ International Labour Organisation. (2021). [Only half of workers worldwide hold jobs corresponding to their level of education](#).

⁷⁸ Orkin, K., Carranza, E., Garlick, R., & Rankin, N. (2020). *Job search and hiring with two-sided limited information about workseekers' skills*. CSAE Working Paper

Behavioural Insights

- Makes it **easy** for employers to evaluate skills
- Reduces **choice overload** for people, as they are able to search for jobs which match their skills

Channels and key partners: Public service organisations

Increasing support with domestic responsibilities

Why are domestic responsibilities a barrier?

Share of domestic responsibilities

Domestic responsibilities are closely tied to issues of flexibility and predictability. Women are more likely to require predictable and flexible roles than men due to the disproportionate responsibility they have for housework and childcare. Women in France spend an extra 1.5 hours on unpaid work every day compared to their male counterparts.⁷⁹ Low-paid women we surveyed (15%) were much more likely than men (3%) to say that their partner doing more housework and childcare would help them progress, corroborating evidence regarding the disproportionate imbalance in domestic responsibilities between women and men.

One low-paid woman we interviewed stated that the waiting list for nurseries can be very long and that you have to put your name down years in advance. This can make arranging childcare difficult and time-consuming. She also mentioned that nurseries often call women by default rather than men if a child is ill.

The effects of childbirth

Childbirth increases the pay gap between men and women. The return to employment after birth depends on several factors, including whether it is their first, second, third (or more) child, the type of job held and the level of education.⁸⁰ Women who don't have the *baccalauréat* generally return to work less quickly than women with a higher level of education, and this gap widens for subsequent children. Maternity pay is based on an employee's salary but it is capped, so it is possible that more highly educated women return to work more quickly if their maternity pay is much lower than their normal salary.

Women in France are more likely to work part-time and the gap widens as they have children.⁸¹ A greater proportion of women without children (25%) in employment work part-time than men (9%). After the arrival of the first child, the gap increases to 28% vs. 6%. With the second child, it increases again to 33% vs. 5%. After the third child, 42% of women in employment work part-time compared to 6% of men.

⁷⁹ OECD. (2018). [Balancing paid work, unpaid work and leisure](#).

⁸⁰ Pailhé, A. & Solaz, A. (2012). Durée et conditions de retour à l'emploi des mères après une naissance. *Retraite et société*, 63, 51-77.

⁸¹ Pailhé, A. & Solaz, A. (2012). Durée et conditions de retour à l'emploi des mères après une naissance. *Retraite et société*, 63, 51-77.

Parental leave

In the surveys, women (31%) were much more likely than men (4%) to say that their partner taking more time off work when their children were born would have made their return to work easier.

In France, 30% of eligible fathers do not take parental leave.⁸² In particular, men who are on fixed-term contracts or are self-employed are much less likely to take parental leave than those in permanent roles. Similarly, fathers with less than a year's service in their company are three times less likely to take paternity leave than their counterparts with two or more years' service in their organisation.

Access to support

Low-paid women we surveyed (98%) were much more likely than men (79%) to say that less paperwork would help them to access child-related financial support.

In interviews, one woman stated that she is unclear whether she is eligible to claim for subsidies from the CAF (the government body that offers benefits to eligible citizens). She stated that sometimes when she sends her income details to CAF she receives assistance whereas other times she does not. Another spoke of the long processing times for applications (between 1 and 3 months).

Intervention 1: Increase men's uptake of parental leave

What is it?

Encourage men to take longer parental leave by tackling the false perception that other male colleagues would disapprove with evidence of true high approval rates among male colleagues and/or managers in their organisation.

Encourage first-time parents to have conversations about how they will divide household responsibilities after having a child. New parents often do not discuss in advance how they will share parental leave, childcare and housework before they have their first child, which makes it more likely they will fall into traditional gendered patterns.⁸³

What does the evidence say?

Evidence it increases men's intention to take longer parental leave. Across two RCTs, BIT showed that providing men with the information that their male colleagues strongly support men taking longer parental leave increased intentions to take longer parental leave compared with men who did not see this information.⁸⁴ Importantly, this was in a context where longer parental leave was financially supported by the organisation.

⁸² Sponton, A. (2022). Quels freins limitent encore le recours au congé de paternité chez les jeunes pères? *Céreq BREF*.

⁸³ Hacothen, R., Likki, T., Londakova, K., & Rossiter, J. (2018). [Return to work: parental decision making](#)

⁸⁴ Davidson et al. (2021) [Supporting men to take longer parental leave and work flexibly](#)

Evidence it increases men's uptake of parental leave. In another RCT, BIT targeted first-time mothers reading a parental newsletter and aimed to influence their male partner's (if they had one) uptake of parental leave. The intervention primarily reframed decision-making around domestic care as a shared responsibility and was supported with worksheets that outlined key domestic tasks for couples to assign between themselves. For mothers receiving the intervention, their male partner's intended days of parental leave increased by 10%.⁸⁵

Behavioural Insights

- Reduces **stigma** around men taking parental leave
- Reduces **frictions** in the process of applying for leave
- Creates **implementation intentions** for fairly sharing household work

Channels and key partners: Employers, charities or public services

Intervention 2: Improve access to child-related financial support

What is it?

Providing further information to people on how to access child-related financial support. MDRC, a US-based social policy consultancy, suggests the following behavioural interventions to address access to childcare:⁸⁶

- Automate or remove steps where possible to access support.
- Amend messages to parents to make clearer what they need to do to access support, why they need to do it, and when they need to do it by.
- Break down actions for parents into smaller steps by using checklists.
- Send actionable reminders, emphasising what needs to be done before the deadline.

What does the evidence say?

Evidence it improves take-up of support: BIT conducted an RCT designed to increase uptake of free childcare.⁸⁷ An updated letter was sent to parents in the treatment group, including a clear call to action, highlighting the exclusivity of the offer and adding a social norms message that emphasised that parents would be joining thousands of others if they took-up the offer. The letter also included a next steps checklist giving parents clear information on what they need to do to apply. The updated letter saw an increase in the application rate by 3 percentage points, but this was not statistically significant.

Behavioural Insights

- Reduces **frictions** in accessing support
- Creates **implementation intentions**, increasing likelihood of following through with

⁸⁵ Nicks et al. (2021) [Increasing men's involvement in parental care](#)

⁸⁶ Kruglaya, I. (2020). [Behavioral Science Strategies to Increase Access to Child Care](#). MDRC.

⁸⁷ Nesta. (2021). [Early Years Toolkit](#)

the steps required to apply for support

- Makes it **easy** for by breaking down tasks into smaller steps

Channels and key partners: Public service organisations

Solutions summary

In this section, we recap the solutions offered so far. Below, in table 1, we provide an overall rating for each solution presented, considering the strength of the evidence, the potential for impact and an initial assessment on feasibility. This rating is based on our assessment of what is most promising for this programme to take forward, rather than of the idea itself.

Notably, the solutions presented in this report primarily represent those where employers or public services can enact change, rather than legislation or central government policy-level interventions. In Appendix ii, we have listed all solutions considered as part of this programme of work.

Solution	Overall rating	Evidence strength	How this could help women in low-paid and low-skill roles	Feasibility
Default jobs to be advertised with flexible working options		Proven impact	Potential to greatly increase the availability of flexible jobs in the labour market beyond low-paid roles, resulting in feasible progression opportunities for women.	May require supporting managers to structure work in a way that enables flexibility. Some organisations, particularly SMEs, may perceive that they are less able to offer flexible work.
Shift swapping & scheduling		Proven impact	Potential to increase predictability of working hours and flexibility, while also improving employee output.	In most cases, it requires technology adoption, alongside safeguards to ensure workers aren't exploited.
Take-home pay transparency		New idea	Potential to reduce financial stress by providing low-paid women with greater clarity on their earnings.	Tools already exist to enable this solution, however, it requires adoption from employers and advanced understanding of hours.

Solution	Overall rating	Evidence strength	How this could help women in low-paid and low-skill roles	Feasibility
Listing experience on CVs in terms of years, not dates		Proven impact	May increase the number of callbacks women receive for jobs.	Easy and low-cost to implement.
Increasing transparency in recruitment decision-making		Proven impact	Would reduce ambiguity aversion and reduce bias in the selection process.	Requires commitment from employers to being transparent with employees and understanding what kind of transparency makes a difference.
Use signalling devices to legitimise and endorse candidate skills		High potential	Greater opportunities for new employment and increased earnings.	Requires an independent organisation to certify skills and for employers to recognise them.
Improve workplace training		High potential	By improving both the access to and content of training, low-paid women have more readily available progression pathways.	Many employers already offer workplace training, therefore, there may be scope for amendments.
Increasing pay frequency		High potential	Ability to reduce financial stress through reducing time between pay periods, allowing women greater	There may be some administrative costs in setting up increased pay frequency.

Solution	Overall rating	Evidence strength	How this could help women in low-paid and low-skill roles	Feasibility
			financial security.	
Default employees into applying for promotions		High potential	<p>Defaulting people into promotions may be a very effective way of overcoming organisational biases.</p> <p>However, the promotion role needs to be associated with higher quality work in order for this solution to be effective.</p>	<p>The effectiveness of this solution depends on specific employers being able to offer this solution.</p> <p>For some employers, their financial position and workforce plan may restrict opportunities to use this solution.</p>
Improve access to child-related financial support		New idea	Improving access to support, for example, through increasing information available on how to access, can improve the support women receive.	Providing more information on how to access support would be a low-cost solution, however would require either government or a non-governmental organisation to take ownership of this and raise awareness.
Increase men's uptake of parental leave		Proven impact	Potential to increase men's uptake of parental leave which in turn may help women return to work and to manage domestic responsibilities.	May be more beneficial in male-dominated environments.
Safety checks or reviews of an organisation by an external		New idea	<p>This solution may help low-paid women to seek new work as they can readily identify safe working environments.</p> <p>Reviews may also encourage</p>	<p>Feasibility is constrained by identifying a credible external party to provide the review.</p> <p>It may also be difficult to review working locations in some roles, e.g.</p>

Solution	Overall rating	Evidence strength	How this could help women in low-paid and low-skill roles	Feasibility
reviewer			organisations to improve their safety, if they are shown to be scoring poorly.	people's homes for those working in caring roles.

Table 1: New solutions, in order of combined applicability and feasibility⁸⁸

⁸⁸ The colour coding is our assessment of the combination of research available, impact and feasibility, with green being highest rated and red being lowest rated.

Conclusion

Overarching findings

This programme of work has sought not only to understand the issues faced by low-paid women, but also to identify promising opportunities. A particularly novel finding of this research is the prioritisation of importance of different barriers for women, showing that long and/or expensive commutes were the most important barrier, followed by unpredictable hours and a poor work-life balance.

A persistent finding throughout our research, spanning across the literature, surveys and interviews, is the disproportionate impact of domestic responsibilities on women. Domestic responsibilities explain women's need for flexibility and predictability, job security and local place of work. They also impact personal finances and limit the time available to develop new skills.

Predictability is crucial for low-paid women as it provides them with autonomy. Despite other factors being important, they are all secondary to the need for predictability. Without a base level of autonomy, low-paid women are unable to explore other needs in their work. In this part of the labour market, predictability should be prioritised.

Implications

The summary of solutions, presented above, represents a starting point for next steps. The solutions presented can broadly be categorised into three areas:

1. **Proven impact.** These are solutions which are already well evidenced and should be more widely adopted. E.g. Default jobs to be advertised with flexible working options.

We welcome the opportunity to work with employers to implement these solutions.

2. **High potential.** These are solutions where we have some evidence of impact, but need further evaluation. E.g. Increasing pay frequency.

We welcome the opportunity to trial these solutions with employers.

3. **New ideas.** These are the sparks of initial ideas where we think there could be potential, but we need to build the evidence-base. E.g. Take-home pay transparency.

We welcome the opportunity to collaborate with research organisations to further develop these ideas, and with employers to subsequently test them.

Appendix i: Methodology

Literature review & expert interviews

We conducted a literature review, where we identified the barriers and enablers women face to progression, as well as possible interventions. In this review, we drew from the existing academic literature where possible. However, as the literature specific to women in low-paid and low-skill work has gaps, we also drew on grey literature such as think-tank reports.

When reviewing the literature, we critically assessed the robustness of the evidence offered, looking at: the size and representativeness of samples; the experimental design of studies; the appropriateness of outcome measures; statistical significance; and generalisability of results.

To further inform our findings, we also spoke to a range of experts (from academia and policy).

Surveys

We surveyed 2,022 participants in June to July 2022 using Predictiv, BIT's policy testing lab. All participants were remunerated for completing the survey.

The screening criteria for the survey was as follows:

- **Low-paid:** must be paid two-thirds of the median income for the country or lower.⁸⁹
- **Gender:** we surveyed 78% women and 22% men. While the study is focussed on low-paid women, surveying men allows us to draw comparisons.
- **Employment status:** must be either employed, self-employed or unemployed and seeking work. If unemployed and seeking work, they must have been employed less than 2 years ago. This was to ensure we could capture those who are in work, or have recently been in work and are looking for work.
- **Education:** those with a university degree or professional qualification under the age of 25 were excluded from the survey, as were those under the age of 25 who were currently studying for a university degree. This is because this group is more likely to move out of low pay without requiring intervention.

The questions were categorised as follows:

1. Demographic questions: such as gender, age, region and ethnicity
2. Definition of progression: how respondents define progression
3. Job-related barriers and enablers respondents face to progression
4. Personal-related barriers and enablers respondents face to progression
5. Domestic work: to understand caring and domestic responsibilities for the low-paid

⁸⁹ Within this paper, we use the OECD definition of "low-pay" work, defined as workers earning less than two-thirds of median earnings: OECD. (2021). [Wage Levels](#)

The surveys were completed online. As such, the sample doesn't capture the digitally excluded, or people not inclined to complete online surveys. It is also important to consider that people's reported responses in a survey may not reflect how they will act in real life.

Where we state that results are different between women and men, we refer to statistically significant differences at a level of $p < 0.05$ and $p < 0.10$. If not statistically significant, we state 'no difference'. In figures, we use the following annotations: ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, + $p < 0.10$

Interviews

To address our research questions we drew on qualitative data gathered during interviews with low-paid women. We conducted six in-depth semi-structured interviews in September 2022 with low-paid women lasting between 45 minutes and 1 hour.

Participants were recruited through the surveys conducted in June to July 2022, where survey participants had the option to leave their email address if they wanted to participate in an interview. We sampled women using the following criteria:

- **Income** (6 participants earning less than €14,500 a year)
- **Employment status** (5 employed/self-employed, and 1 unemployed)
- **Age** (5 participants over 35, and 1 participant under 35)
- **Dependents** (3 participants with dependents, and 3 participants with no dependents)
- **Industry** (2x domestic services, 1x education, 1x healthcare)

We conducted light-touch analysis of summary data. During the analytical process, a balance was maintained between deduction (using existing knowledge to guide the analysis) and induction (allowing concepts and ways of interpreting experience to emerge from the data).

These findings represent the views of the 6 people we spoke with and are not necessarily representative of the population of low-paid women in France.

Co-design workshop

We conducted a co-design workshop attended by 12 people from a range of employers, job centres and charitable organisations. Co-design is a collaborative approach to design involving a range of perspectives in the design process. In the workshop we covered the following:

1. Presenting our findings from the literature review, surveys & interviews
2. We divided attendees into groups and presented them with personas, which were developed based on the women we interviewed and findings from the survey. Attendees initially gave their thoughts on the personas.
3. Attendees subsequently reviewed intervention cards we had created, commenting on the applicability of the interventions to the given persona. They also devised their own interventions.
4. Finally, attendees discussed the impact and feasibility of the interventions, before voting on the idea they felt was best.

Appendix ii: Solutions longlist

Barrier	Solution	Description
Job-related		
Flexibility & predictability	Default jobs to be advertised with flexible working options	A default that all jobs must be advertised with flexible working options available
Flexibility & predictability	Shift swapping & scheduling	Providing technologically-enabled shift swapping to allow workers to swap shifts
Safety	Safety checks or reviews of an organisation by an external reviewer	External review of a working location to help women know whether it is safe before they take on a job
Organisational processes	Default employees into applying for promotions	Where employees have demonstrated they are ready for promotion, they are automatically put forward without having to apply or be nominated.
Organisational processes	Increasing transparency in recruitment decision-making	Reducing bias in the selection process.
Organisational processes	Listing experience on CVs in terms of years, not dates	This means presenting previous roles on a CV in terms of years of experience (e.g. 'four years') rather than chronological dates (e.g. '2016–2020').

Barrier	Solution	Description
Organisational processes	Redesign applications	Rethink the traditional CV and cover letter for jobs that are considered to be unqualified and transform CVs so that soft skills are given more weight (such as Linkedout)
Organisational processes	Job tasters	Create quick free job tasters to enable potential job candidates to try out the job for a few hours (e.g. Testmonjob , Jobs en box) ⁹⁰ and simplify the recruitment process if the trial went well, removing the need for a formal application with CV and cover letter
Commutes	Include commuting time as working time	Change the way we count time spent 'at' work and include commute time as counting towards working time
Personal		
Financial stress	Increasing pay frequency	Splitting pay into smaller and more frequent payments, for example paying fortnightly rather than monthly
Financial stress	Take-home pay transparency	Providing greater clarity to employees about the amount they would expect to earn if they were to work all their allotted shifts in the upcoming pay period to reduce uncertainty
Financial stress	Financial education	Use the payslip as a platform for financial education and advice
New skills	Improve workplace training	Improving both the training itself and access to training
New skills	Use signalling devices to legitimise and endorse	A signal to potential employers that the worker is a

⁹⁰ The equivalent of a ["Période de mise en situation professionnelle"](#) but for people who are currently in work

Barrier	Solution	Description
	candidate skills	suitable candidate
New skills	Improve access to CPF	Provide greater information about how to access the Compte Personnel de Formation
Domestic responsibilities	Improve access to child-related financial support	Public services or employers providing further information on how to access child-related financial support.
Domestic responsibilities	Increase men's uptake of father leave	Encouraging men to take longer parental leave through removing gendered perceptions of men taking leave.