



What people think,  
feel and do

[www.opinium.co.uk](http://www.opinium.co.uk)  
[research@opinium.co.uk](mailto:research@opinium.co.uk)  
[@opiniumresearch](https://twitter.com/opiniumresearch)

Women in Public Affairs

Public Affairs Census 2023



An introduction to the key findings of the  
2023 Women in Public Affairs Census

December 2023



# About Opinium

**OPINIUM** is an award-winning strategic insight agency built on the belief that in a world of uncertainty and complexity, success depends on the ability to stay on the pulse of what people **think**, **feel** and **do**. Creative and inquisitive, we are passionate about empowering our clients to make the decisions that matter. We work with organisations to define and overcome strategic challenges – helping them to get to grips with the world in which their brands operate. We use the right approach and methodology to deliver robust insights, strategic counsel and targeted recommendations that generate change and positive outcomes.

www.opinium.com | @OpiniumResearch | 0207 566 3190

# About Women in Public Affairs

**Women in Public Affairs** was launched in 2012 by Ella Fallows and Laura Gilmore as an opportunity for women from across the industry to come together in an informal setting to share experiences, offer advice and support, and explore how we can work together to build a more diverse and representative public affairs industry.

Now in its eleventh year, Women in Public Affairs is a well-established forum for women at all stages of their careers in public affairs.

We continue to focus on providing useful and interesting events with outstanding speakers which inform, inspire and support public affairs practitioners throughout their careers.

www.womeninpa.co.uk | @WomeninPA

# About the Research

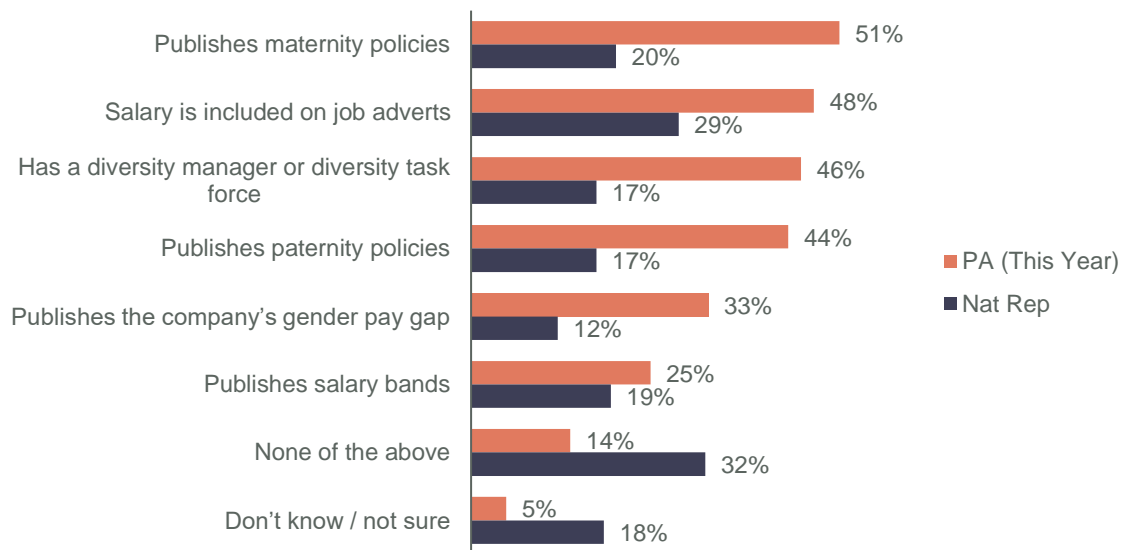
This research was conducted between 1 November to 7 December 2023 via an online survey with a sample of 225 people who identify as women who work in the public affairs industry. The survey was also completed by 25 people who identify as men, three who have identified as 'other' and one that preferred not to say, but their data is not included in the report due to the number being too small to be statistically viable. The survey was publicised online via WiPA's website and promoted via WiPA and Opinium's social media accounts. A survey was also run among 1,242 nationally representative UK workers using online panels between 1-5 December 2023 as a point of comparison.

# Company policies in the industry

Transparency in the industry over pay and policies has stayed mostly in line with the previous year. 25% this year say their company publishes salary bands compared to 27% in 2022. Half (48%) say that their company includes the salary in job adverts, unchanged from last year.

However, when compared to a nationally representative sample of workers across industries, Public Affairs fares far better. Only one in ten UK workers said that their company publishes its gender pay gap (12%) versus a third of those in Public Affairs (33%), and over twice as many said their company publishes maternity and paternity policies. The only area where there are similar figures between the public affairs industry and nationally representative sample is in publishing salary bands, with 25% in public affairs saying their company does this compared to 19% nationally.

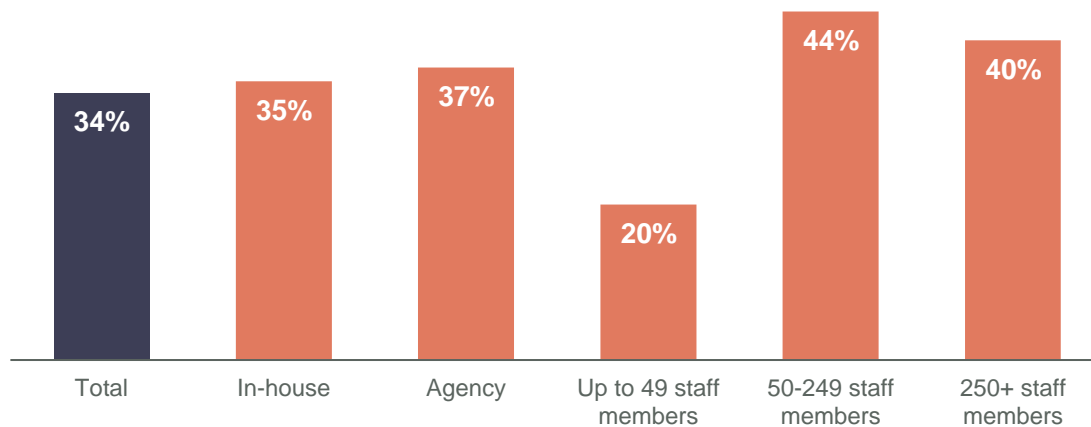
## Transparency in policies and pay



# Pay differences

Currently, a third (34%) of women working in Public Affairs believe that there is a pay difference between men and women, which is in line with last year (32%). This belief scales with business size as a fifth (20%) of those at micro / small companies (those with under 50 staff) see this discrepancy, compared to 44% of those at medium sized companies (50-249 staff members) and 40% of those working for companies with 250+ staff members (16%, 37% and 42% respectively in 2022).

## % of women in public affairs who think that pay differs for men and women at their level in the company



However, this differs greatly when compared to the national average as the perceptions of a gender pay gap are worse in public affairs compared to female workers across the UK. A third of women in public affairs think pay differs between genders (34%), versus a fifth of women in the nationally representative sample (21%). It seems that this difference is relatively small though, as 11% of women in public affairs say that the difference is 'a lot,' compared to 10% of female workers across the UK. The bigger difference is that almost a quarter (23%) say that their pay differs a little in public affairs, compared to 11% nationally.

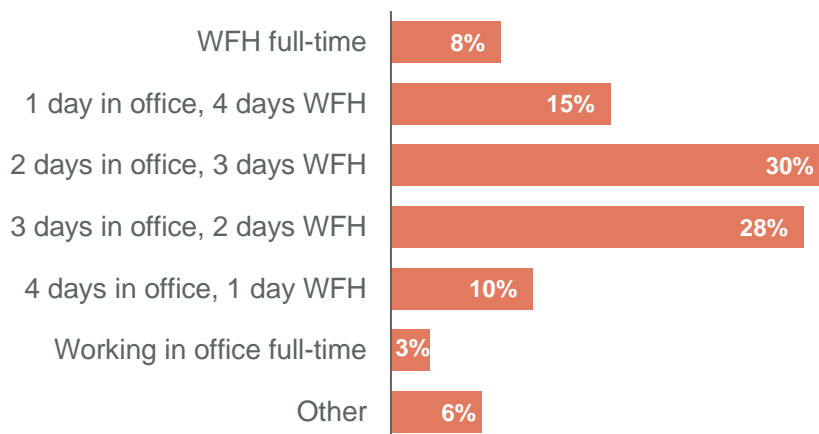
Of those women in public affairs who think pay differs, 89% think that the difference is because of men being paid more. These women estimate that men are paid on average around £5k more than women.

# The current state of play & the cost-of-living crisis

## There are signs of some shifts in hybrid working in the public affairs industry

There have been some rumblings in the news about people returning to the office. While overall hybrid working levels remain consistent in the public affairs industry (84% this year vs 82% in 20223), we do see some truth to change in the public affairs industry. The number of women in the census telling us they work 2 days in the office and 3 from home has fallen from 36% in 2022 to 30% this year, while the number of women who are in the office 3 days and 2 days at home has increased from 19% last year to 28% this year. This year, that has fallen to 84%. Those older, outside of London and working in-house are more likely to spend more time working at home. On top of this, senior managers are less likely to work hybrid (74%) than junior / middle managers (90%) and executives (84%).

### Days spent working from home vs in the office



## Concerns over cost-of-living crisis remain high

Nearly all women in public affairs are concerned about the cost-of-living crisis (93%), and overall concern remains unchanged (96% were concerned last year). However, we see a drop in the number of women saying they are very concerned (33% this year compared to 42% last year), with more women moving into being somewhat concerned (60% this year vs 54% last year). Concern is higher among more junior members and those on lower salaries (46% of those on salaries between £30,001 - £40,000 a year are very concerned, as are 46% of those at an executive level (46%).

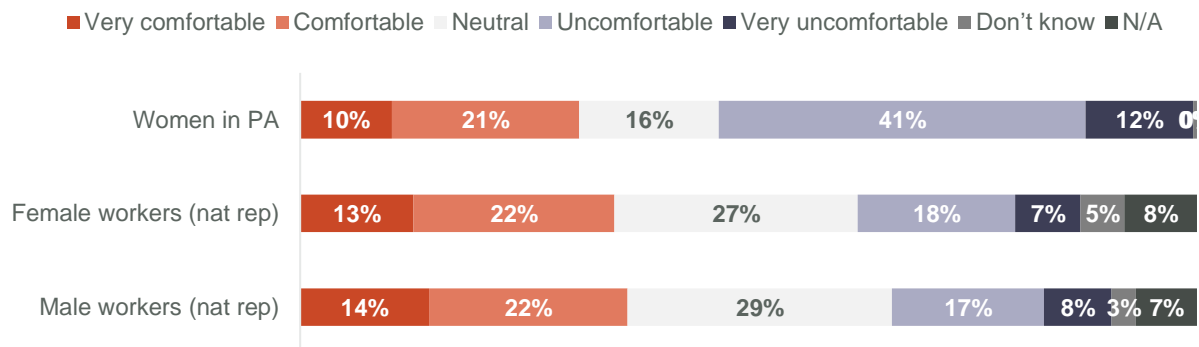
# Discussing salary

## Comfort levels around talking about money are low

Almost a third (31%) of women feel comfortable or very comfortable discussing their salary with colleagues. This sentiment is more prevalent among younger respondents (35% of 18-34 vs 22% of 35+) and those whose annual income is below £40,000 (42%).

Meanwhile, half (53%) of women in public affairs feel uncomfortable or very uncomfortable with discussing their salary with their colleagues. This discomfort is particularly strong among older women (63% of 35+ years vs 49% of those aged 18-34) at 63% and those earning over £60,000 per year, where it rises to 65%.

### Comfort levels discussing salary with colleagues



Women in public affairs feel more uncomfortable talking to their colleagues about salary compared to female workers generally (53% vs 25% respectively).

Three in ten (30%) women in public affairs feel comfortable negotiating their salary with their line manager, while almost half (48%) feel uncomfortable.

Comfort levels are again lower in the public affairs industry compared to general workers. A third of female workers (34%) across the UK say they feel uncomfortable. This is notably higher than male workers (24%).

When asked why they feel comfortable or uncomfortable to discuss their salary with colleagues, many reference their workplace's existing salary transparency and culture promoted at work. At a personal level many feel it is imperative in order to ensure there is fair pay. In contrast, those that said they felt uncomfortable referenced a company culture that discourages salary discussions and that doing so could cause embarrassment or lead to resentment if disparities were exposed.

Reasons why women working in public affairs feel comfortable discussing pay with colleagues

- **Published salary bands encourage a culture of openness**

*“We all know what pay band each other is on anyway so the transparency makes it easy.”*

- **Personal belief that transparency around salary is important**

*“I think it is important for colleagues to share with each other so that people can feel empowered to ask for fairer compensation.”*

Reasons why women working in public affairs feel uncomfortable discussing pay with colleagues

- **Company actively discourages discussions of salary**

*“Our employee handbook specifically bans colleagues from discussing salary. Additionally, it is widely known that there are massive disparities in pay within teams for colleagues doing the same functions, making it difficult to discuss pay.”*

- **It could be embarrassing, awkward, or lead to conflict**

*“It’s embarrassing if I’m getting paid less, and I don’t want to advertise it”*

*“In case it creates awkwardness and/or embarrassment. And what may happen if discrepancies are exposed.”*

*“Fear that it will create animosity between colleagues who maybe don’t earn the same but should.”*

- **Feel like salary is a personal topic**

*“I generally dislike talking about wealth/money/finances”*

In regard to salary negotiations, the line manager, company structure and personal experience all were common reasons for feeling comfortable discussing this so. Many have line managers that encourage self-advocacy and an open dialogues around pay. Similarly, clear company structures such as defined roles and review sessions can also open an occasion to discuss pay. Personal experience is also a factor, both in terms of knowing how to approach discussions of salary and best using opportunities like a review, and knowing self-advocacy is important and should not be awkward.

- **A good line manager**

*“I have a very positive relationship with my line manager and she has been a big advocate of me in my current pursuit to get promoted”*

*“My line manager is a female and she is super encouraging. I also think asking a female is easier.”*

- **Personal experience**

*“My first agency boss told me that there is no penalty for asking the question and it stuck with me”*

*“I have experience negotiating on salary and understand how to best approach these conversations”*

Women that felt uncomfortable discussing their salary cited varied reasons. A common reason is fearing ‘asking for too much’ and potential repercussions. And while some cite stiff structures such as pay bands as a barrier to negotiating, lack of transparency around pay or objectives can make it hard to feel confident asking for a raise. For some, working in the third sector or a poorer financial period for the company can also be discouraging.

- **Can feel awkward, discouraged by risk of 'asking for too much'**

*“It just feels greedy. I am from a lower-socioeconomic background and really the only person in my family with a professional job and so it also feels ungrateful”*

*“It is just very awkward. You have to justify your existence and I have found it hard to actually get given the salary I want.”*

*“I have long felt as both a woman and a parent that I am being somehow cheeky asking for a higher salary - aware that is an imposter syndrome issue on my part and not the fault of anyone else”*

*“I know my boss would be open to me negotiating my salary but it is still awkward and difficult to know when you are crossing the line/asking for too much.”*

- **Lack of structure and clear benchmarks**

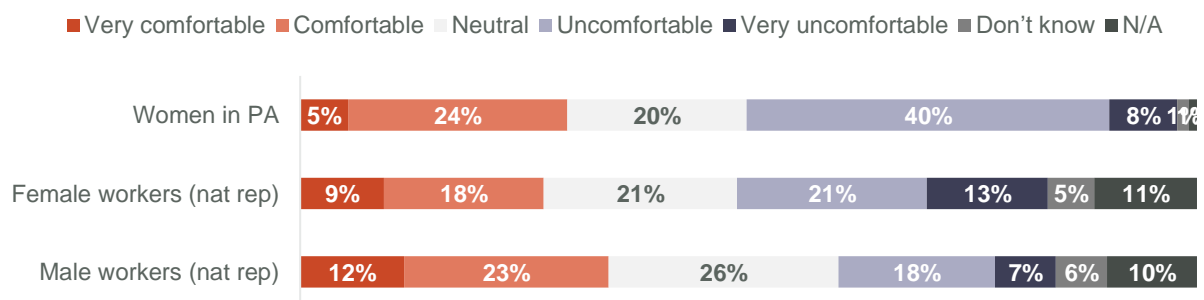
*“Concern it would go against you, no benchmark or guidance for negotiation”*

*“I feel like I don't have the knowledge of how to properly negotiate and I have no comparison salary to know what I'm worth.”*

- **Financial constraints of the business**

*“I understand the pressures companies are facing right now and am seeing people being made redundant in their roles”*

## Comfort levels negotiating salary with line managers/ boss?

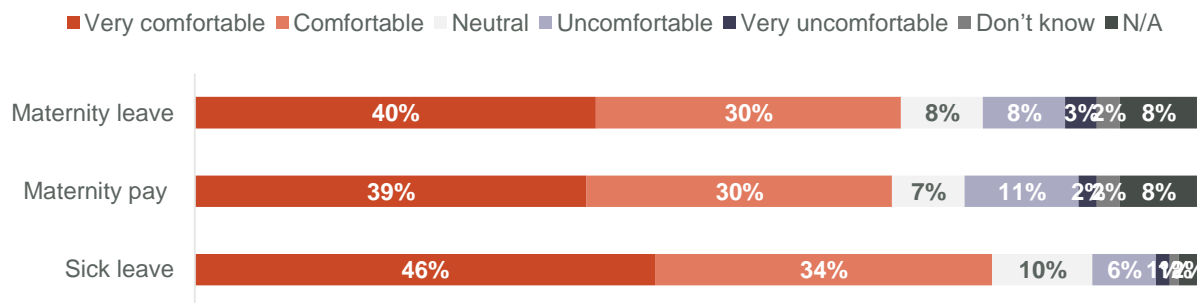




## Most are comfortable talking about sick leave, maternity leave or maternity pay with line managers

Comfort levels when it comes to talking about other types of pay for policy. Seven in ten (70%) feel comfortable or very comfortable discussing maternity leave and pay, indicating an openness towards these topics in the workplace. The comfort level is even higher for sick leave, with 80% feeling at ease discussing it.

### Comfort levels asking line managers about the following types of workplace policies



When we asked respondents why they felt comfortable discussing maternity leave with their line manager, the most common themes that emerged were: clear and well-communicated maternity policies in their workplace, a supportive workplace culture where discussing maternity leave is normalised and which values work-life balance, leadership being able to relate through their own personal experiences, previous positive experiences and observations of colleagues utilising maternity leave policies, and having a good personal relationship with their manager.

*“I have had three kids and all my managers have been extremely supportive and helpful. With no negative experiences behind me, I have every reason to feel comfortable.”*

*“There is a working parents internal group and the company is clearly accommodating to the working parents.”*

For those that say they would feel uncomfortable speaking to their boss about maternity leave, the keys reasons for this were:

- Concerns that discussing this could lead to assumptions about immediate family planning which could potentially impact career opportunities

- A lack of confidence in the manager's understanding of women's issues or fear of negative reactions, particularly from male managers
- A reluctance to open up about personal decisions and concerns about how extended time off is perceived by others

---

*“Because I am 33 years old and I would worry my employer would immediately think I was considering having a baby now and that there may be consequences for the opportunities I would be given as a result of this.”*

*“I feel women of a certain age - who are likely to have a child in the near future - are discriminated against, i.e. reluctance to hire based on this fact or considered a burden in the workplace..”*

---

Similar key themes emerge when looking at comfort levels speaking to managers about maternity pay. Common reasons for feeling comfortable were:

- Having a good relationship with their manager meant respondent felt more comfortable discussing maternity pay
- Clear and transparent company policy on maternity pay gives a sense of security and provides a structured framework
- Having a supportive work environment and a workplace culture that values open communication

---

*“The company communicates clearly its policy so the pay structure is agreed and fixed. Excellent HR Team to go to for advice.”*

*“Again maternity is in area where clear policies are in place and my boss, as a woman who has taken maternity leave, has indicated she is supportive of progressive policies in this area.”*

---

## Three quarters consider publishing pay bands ‘very important’ for addressing gender-based pay disparities

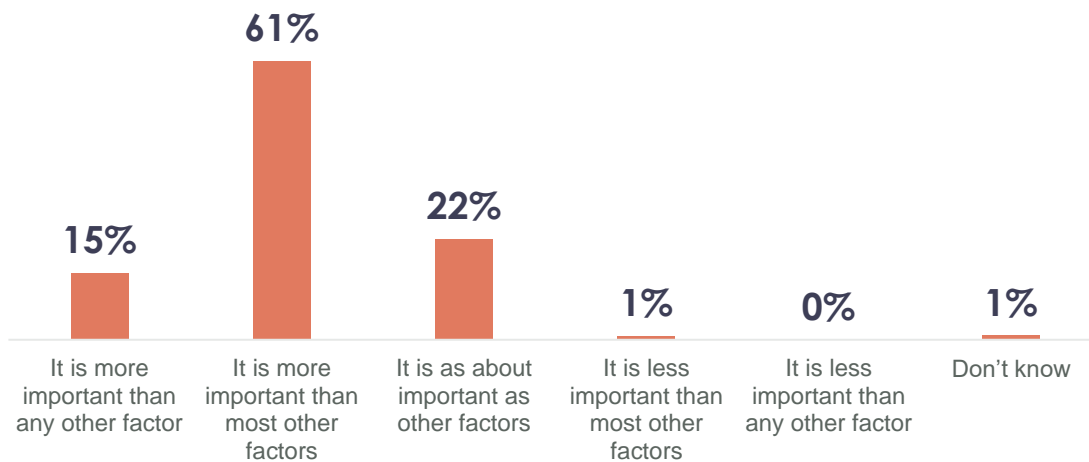
There is a strong consensus on the importance of publishing pay bands to address gender-based pay disparities, with 96% of women in public affairs considering it very or somewhat important.

- Notably, younger respondents show the highest level of support (82% of 18-34 year olds say it is very important vs. 69% of 35+), as do those from a minority or disadvantaged background (82%).
- Those in medium or large businesses are also more likely than those in micro/small businesses to say that this is very important (81% vs 83% vs 66% respectively).

When considering the start of a job application, three quarters (76%) of women in public affairs, consider it important to have a clear understanding of the salary range or pay band, stating it is more important than any other factor (15%) or most other factors (61%). This sentiment is particularly strong among younger women aged 18-34, with 78% emphasizing its importance, compared to 69% of those aged 35+.

The fact that only 1% consider it less important than most other factors further underscores the universal value placed on salary transparency in job applications, highlighting its pivotal role in candidates' decision-making processes.

### Importance of having a clear understanding of the salary range or pay band associated with the position when considering a job application at the start



### Three quarters have applied for a job where the salary range was not specified

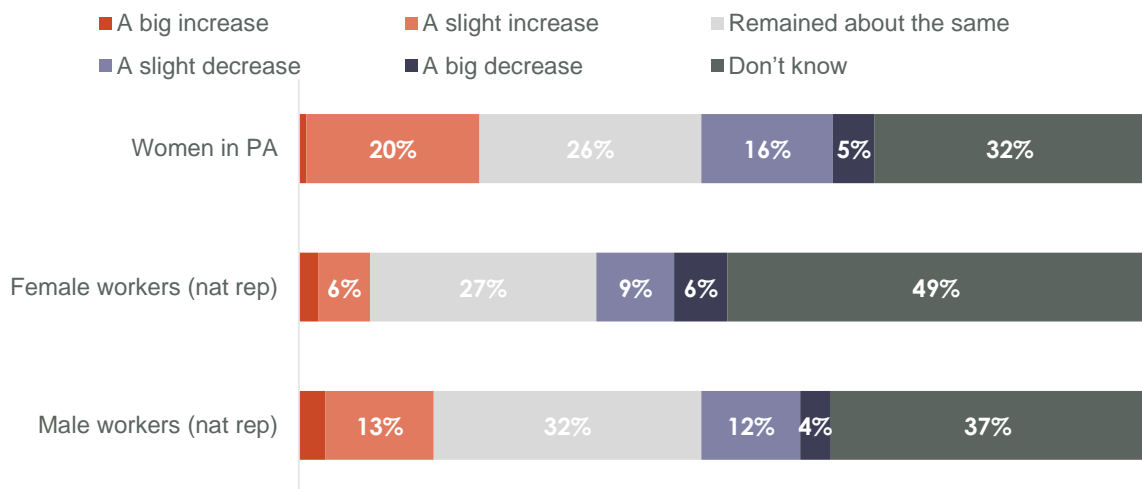
Despite the importance placed on salary transparency, three in four (75%) women in public affairs have applied for a job where the salary range or band was not disclosed in the job listing. This includes 28% for whom this was the case for most of their job applications, and a further 5% who say this has been the case for every job they have applied for. This is in spite of the fact that 83% say that a lack in transparency about pay would make them less likely to apply for a job, with this sentiment being particularly high amongst 18-34 year olds (88%).

## There are divided opinions on whether there has been an increase or decrease in companies publishing salary ranges

A modest fifth (21%) of women in public affairs think there has been an increase (either big or slight) in companies publishing salary ranges in the last 12 months. However, a similar proportion (20%) think there has been a decrease, a quarter (26%) think it has remained about the same and a third (32%) are unsure, showing that opinions vary widely.

Among female workers across the UK, only 8% think there has been an increase in salary transparency on job adverts in the last 12 months, while 15% think there has been a decrease, a quarter (27%) think it has remained about the same and half (49%) are unsure.

### Do you think there has been an increase or decrease in companies publishing the salary range in job adverts over the past 12 months?



## Half feel that their pay has been influenced by gender and other intersecting identities

Almost half (48%) of women in public affairs feel that their pay has definitely or probably been influenced by their gender and other intersecting identities such as race, age, etc. This indicates a significant portion of the workforce perceiving a bias in pay related to identity factors. This increases to 57% of those with a minority or disadvantaged background, suggesting a heightened perception of pay bias among this group.

In contrast, female workers in the UK are less likely to feel this, with just over a fifth (23%) saying they feel their pay has been influenced by their gender and other intersecting identities. However, male

workers are more likely to say that they do not think this has been an influence than female workers (58% vs. 49% respectively).

Respondents cited several of instances where they felt a disparity in pay was influenced by factors such as gender, race and another identities. Common experiences include:

- **Learning of pay disparities within the same role**

*"A male colleague left the agency I was working at. I was moved into his role. I received a nominal pay rise. Before leaving, the colleague told me what he earned which was circa £10k more than me."*

- **Where jobs are advertised with a salary range, or salaries are banded feeling like the distribution is based on personal characteristics.**

*"I feel that women and other minorities are more likely to be offered the minimum pay on the band advertised, whereas men are more likely to be offered the maximum pay."*

- **Experiencing discrimination either for being a parent, or at an age where managers/bosses expect women to have children**

*"People don't want to offer you too much salary if they think you'll go on maternity leave and they have to pick up the tab for any enhanced maternity pay while you're "off"."*

*"The idea that I might not stick around due to pregnancy, marriage, home life arrangements etc"*

- **Being less likely than others to self-advocate, negotiate pay and promotions**

*"I know I negotiate my salary less than the men in my life. And I am sure that unconscious bias in hiring and promotion means I earn less than I would if I were a man of the same age, background and race as myself."*

- **An age pay premium, regardless of experience or qualifications for the role**

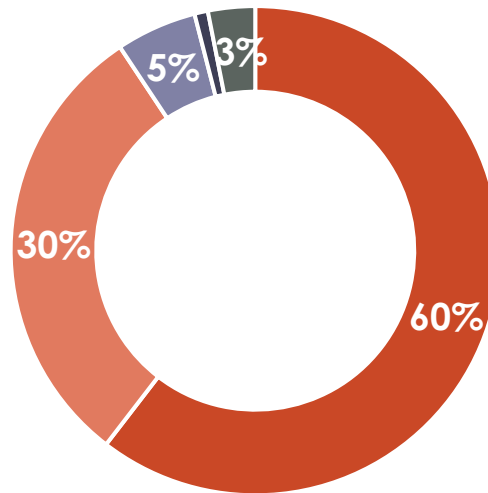
*"I think both my age and my gender have impacted my pay, as well as the level of responsibility I am given in my role, rather than it being determined by the role which I am deemed qualified for"*

## Nine in ten are likely to continue their career in public affairs over the next three years.

Nine in ten (91%, same as last year) say they are likely to continue working in public affairs over the next three years. This accounts for 60% who say this is very likely and 30% who say it is somewhat likely. Only 6% say it is not likely. In spite of this, a slim majority (53%) will outrightly say they are optimistic about future progression opportunities in Public Affairs, while 20% are pessimistic and 24% feel neutral.

## Likelihood of continuing career in public affairs in the next 3 years?

■ Very likely ■ Somewhat likely ■ Not very likely ■ Not likely at all ■ Not sure



## Ways WiPA can support women

When asked what networks like WiPA can do to support women right now, there were three common areas:

- Continuing to offer networking opportunities, including sector-specific events and mentoring
- Further training opportunities, workshops and coaching, on topics such as salary negotiation, assertiveness, interview training and business skills for freelancers
- Engaging in advocacy and pushing issues women are facing, particularly around pay transparency, fair pay and disclosure of pay bands in job adverts

---

*“It would be nice to have a monthly networking evening, something super informal in a space in a pub for example, just to be able to meet other women in the industry that we can drop in and out of over the course of an evening.”*

*“Advocate for publication of salary bands, advocate for better maternity policies, advocate for fertility benefits (IVF, freezing eggs etc)”*

---



# Demographic makeup of the Census

## Who took part in the survey?

We spoke to **225** women working in public affairs

**80%** work in London

**62%** work in-house

**32%** work in an agency

**84%** are from a White background

**77%** have no dependants

**5.9** years average tenure

White bar

Orange bar

Grey bar

Orange bar

White bar

Orange bar

Grey bar

White bar

Orange bar

White bar