

Equality, Diversity AND Inclusion

How gender balanced is the funeral profession?

Historically a male-dominated profession, funeral service certainly feels like it is a far more gender equal workplace today. But if we look past the perceptions, just how equal does funeral service feel to those working within it? As part of International Women's Day in March, *Funeral Director Monthly* spoke to female funeral professionals from across the UK and across very different types of businesses, to find out if they feel there's a level playing field in the profession.



▲ Melanie Hunnaball.

Melanie Hunnaball, of Hunnaball Family Funeral Group in Suffolk, has been in the funeral profession for more than thirty years – building one of the first all-female funeral directing teams in the country during that time. She has seen a significant shift since she first joined the firm – one which has accelerated particularly since 2005.

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"In the early 1980s, the Verger of a small country church tried to show me to my seat for a service and was thunderstruck when I told him I was the funeral director. "It's a funny job for a woman," he pronounced. That became the title of many talks that I've given over the years. It makes me laugh now.

Melanie Hunnaball, Suffolk

more than thirty years – building one of the first all-female funeral directing teams in the country during that time. She has seen a significant shift since she first joined the firm – one which has accelerated particularly since 2005.

"On the whole, the industry is fairly well balanced between male and female professionals, although this has been fairly recent," Melanie says. "Women have made great strides towards equality in the last ten to fifteen years."

The arrival of more females in the profession has helped to bring about a change in wider perceptions of funeral service too. "I think there has been a definite shift in the way that the industry is perceived as more of a caring profession, rather than simply an end-of-life service," adds Melanie. "Thanks to the softer side of women, matched with their great strength and dignity, we've moved from clinical to compassionate in quite a significant way. The industry is less bound in myths and more grounded in openness now. I think this is due to the way women naturally tend to be more communicative."

Amy Hazel, a funeral director in family firm Ian Hazel Funerals in Sutton Coldfield, agrees. "When I joined our company, 15 years ago or so, women were already getting established in becoming funeral directors. There are women in most funeral businesses now and a fair few new ones being started up by women."

Barbara Scrimshaw, of Edd Frost and Daughters, in Oxfordshire, has noticed the same change – but believes there is still some way to go before women are equal in seniority as well as in numbers. She notes: "I do believe there is fair gender

"I have had customers at work not believe that I was in charge - more so when I was younger. I think [it was] a combination of my gender and perceptions about my age.

Abi Pattenden, Sussex



▲ Barbara Scrimshaw.

balance in the funeral profession, albeit not in *all* the roles available. The arranging side of funerals is weighted towards females rather than males, but the tide seems to be changing creating an equal balance throughout the profession."

The challenge of ensuring there is female representation at all levels in the sector is not lost on NAFD Past President Abi Pattenden. "I do think there is probably a lack of women in senior positions," says Abi, "but that isn't unique to the funeral industry – and, hopefully, will change as the young women entering the profession now move up the ladder."

Female leadership within the profession is certainly something that is advancing and the NAFD is leading the way in this respect. Two of the last three NAFD Presidents have been women (including Abi



▲ Abi Pattenden.



▲ Gillian Stewart.

and Alison Crake of Crake and Mallon in Stockton-on-Tees) – and the current President, David Barrington, will be succeeded next month by NAFD Tutor Kate Edwards.

Women are also filling leadership positions in some of the larger businesses in the sector – with Chief Operating Officer Gill Stewart joining MD Sam Tyrer and Regulation Director Alison Close at Co-op Funeralcare recently – and former Chief Executive of Propertyfinder and Managing Director of MSN UK, Gillian Kent, appointed as Non-Executive Director of Dignity plc.

For Co-op Funeralcare's Gill Stewart, true equality might take some time to fully achieve. She says: "I think gender equality varies by role within the profession, but overall I would probably say it is not yet a gender equal sector. A lot of people have stayed within the profession for many years, which will impact the length of time to make and see the shift."

In Scotland, gender equality is happening too, but perhaps is taking longer to achieve than in England. Michelle Cuthell, of Thomas Cuthell and Son in Falkirk, notes: "I think the profession is still primarily a male dominated profession in more rural parts of the country, however I do think it is heading in the right direction of becoming more gender balanced."

"I don't think there are as many women in the industry in small town or cities like ours," says Janet Corten, a funeral director with Tovey Brothers in Newport, Wales. "It is still rather male dominated. Whereas I think larger cities would tend to have more women."

"I don't think there is any discrimination against women in the industry these days and I am sure they would be given equal opportunities to men. Therefore, I don't think it is any harder for women to progress in the industry. It's certainly much more equal now than it was when I started."

In Northern Ireland, funeral director Amanda Murdock, of Ivan Murdock and Sons, says that while there are plenty of females in the profession and no obstacles for women, she has sought a role which plays to her strengths as a woman. "It's still a very traditional sector here," she says. "but, even so, there are no barriers for me as a woman in funeral directing. However, I prefer not to conduct funerals. I focus on caring for the family, arranging the service and providing emotional support, because it's where my strengths are – and while it's okay for a woman to give another woman a hug – it can be considered less appropriate for a man to do it."



▲ Amanda Murdock.



▲ Michelle Cuthell.



“The only barrier I would see for young women looking for a career in the profession is if businesses are still of the old school mentality and feel it is still a profession primarily for men.”

Michelle Cuthell, Falkirk

“Viewings and presentation of the deceased is very important in Northern Ireland and I also lead on this as part of my care of the family. Maybe it’s different in the larger firms, where people have more defined roles, but in our small family business this works for us.”

Has the presence of women changed how funerals are arranged, marketed and carried out?

Amy Hazel thinks funerals have changed at least in part due to the increased numbers of women in the sector. “I do feel we are in a new generation, where the older gentlemen, who have very black and white ideas, are fading out - the ones who would have asked you to just be the admin person, and who wouldn’t entertain the idea of the alternative ways of doing funerals.

“We have evolved funerals to be full of options, such as alternative vehicles, coffins and dressing with garlands - instead of just having the spray on the top. This is only the tip of the iceberg, but I do think women are more open minded on this and possibly encourage this side more.”

Will some people think this is a controversial view? “I was worried that men reading this article would think ‘we embrace that too!’ confesses Amy. “But I have a couple of male colleagues here in the office who have just said to me upon reading this: “you are right, men are traditionally more black and white!”

Abi Pattenden isn’t so sure that men are less capable of showing a softer and more caring side – but agrees there are benefits to a balanced workforce. “There are a lot of stereotypes around women being softer or more caring than men and, while I don’t think this is necessarily true, it may have helped make the industry more approachable and less something to fear,” she says. “Of course, the arrival of women in the industry in modern times has led to more women being involved - I would argue very strongly that it’s hard to be something you don’t see. I also think some firms use the presence of women as a marketing tool and, while I don’t necessarily agree with this, because I think it might play on some of the stereotypes around women, it means they are more visible, which is a good thing.”

Are there still barriers for women who would like to join the profession?

“When I took the diploma back in 1989, there were no female funeral directors in our area at all,” adds Janet Corten. “Hence, I never became involved with conducting. I concentrated on the arranging side, which in all fairness suited me as that was what I wanted to do.

“In the early days when I arrived at a home I was often greeted with ‘I thought you would be a man’. I



▲ Janet Corten.

don't think that is the case as much today, families are used to dealing with women now in all walks of life. Families are quite accepting now with dealing with a woman and dare I say it, some may prefer it. I did used to have odd responses when people realised what I did as a job, but over the years it has now become quite acceptable."

For Melanie Hunnaball, there are still barriers in place which prevent women from considering funeral directing as a career – and the challenge starts at school. "This is still a profession that people tend to move sideways into," she says. "Not many career advisers think to suggest it as a career path - for either girls or boys – but as one of the caring professions, it ought to be on their list. So much of the work is about caring for the living as well as the deceased.

"I've spent quite a lot of time going into schools and colleges to talk about the profession, to explain what we do and to outline the career opportunities. Invariably it's the girls who are the most engaged with these talks and ask a myriad of questions, especially about embalming. For girls with an interest in science, embalming is a fascinating profession and it really ought to be on the career advice radar by now."

For some people (potential female employees – and funeral firm owners), there may be a perception that the physicality of funeral service may be more suited to men. "Yes it is challenging, which may deter some (women) from trying it," says Barbara Scrimshaw. "But this can be overcome when you have an experienced, willing team behind you."

This concept of the team – with men and women bringing their different and equal strengths to the task – is important. Equality should not mean pretending there are no differences, but instead recognising them and enabling both men and women to bring these complementary strengths to the workplace. "I've seen so many female funeral directors over the years who have clearly felt that to be accepted they would have to do everything the same way as the men," says Melanie. "We're not men, we have nothing to prove about our equal competency, so we should be free to wear heels or flats, trousers or skirts and to be glamorous as well as professional – or not – if we want to.

"I learned much of this from my great role model, Muriel Grimmett, who was certainly a pioneer of women in the profession. She was such a champion of women, yet she would never have called herself a feminist – and neither would I. 'Just do it,' she told me. So, I was determined that I was going to be the best at it. Gender simply didn't come into it."

So how are funeral firms working to ensure they are creating a gender equal workplace?

"I always try to highlight gender bias wherever I see it," says Abi Pattenden. "As an employer, I think one of the main things I can do is to ensure that we treat women and men the same as one another, so our employment packages are designed before we start recruiting (which stops you basing the package on your chosen candidate) and jobs where we have several employees are rewarded across the board so that there is parity in pay rates.

"We advertise ourselves as an Equal Opportunities employer. I am a major advocate of Paternity Leave as a way to bring about a more balanced workplace so I encourage my male staff to take their paternity leave and all staff who have a baby to look into Shared Parental Leave. I would like to see the NAFD encourage its members to have more diverse boards and to ensure they understand their responsibilities as employers in terms of equality."

The same is true for Hunnaball Family Funeral Group. Notes Melanie: "We recruit on the basis of ability and aptitude. My hope is that we all continue to do this as an industry. We all need to be gender – and colour – blind with applicants, and appoint people who are filled with compassion, exceptionally able and utterly professional. Male or female."

"I think we have a responsibility to create inclusive workplace for everyone and raise awareness of gender bias," adds Gillian Stewart. "Creating more flexible ways of working will help with attraction and retention of more women. My commitment is to create an inclusive culture for everyone that enables people to be themselves and have confidence to speak up."

Equality and the Law

In the recent membership survey, the NAFD asked member firms if they had an Equality and Diversity Policy. Fifty-five per cent of respondents confirmed that they had – leaving a significant minority (30%) confirming that they do not have one and a further 15% not being sure.

The Equality Act 2010 lays out the standard which all businesses must maintain. However, there is also a responsibility on business leaders and employees to promote a culture of equality at work.

It does not matter whether you are set up as a sole trader, a partnership, a limited company or any other legal structure. The size of your business does not matter either – all NAFD members need to give active consideration as to how the Equality Act applies to all aspects of their business.

For more information, please visit the following links:

England, Scotland and Wales:

The Equality and Human Rights Commission is Great Britain's national equality body, responsible for safeguarding and enforcing the laws that protect people's rights to fairness, dignity and respect. It was established as a statutory non-departmental public body by the Equality Act 2006.

equalityhumanrights.com

Northern Ireland: The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland is a non-departmental public body established by the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Our powers and duties include providing protection against discrimination on the grounds of age, disability, race, religion and political opinion, sex and sexual orientation.

equalityni.org

Equality Policy template

There are Equality Policy templates available on the ACAS website:

www.acas.org.uk/equality-policy-template