

Pension scandal: 'I've lost 14 years of payments'

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🕒 2 June



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Tens of thousands of elderly female pensioners are set to miss out on life changing payments, the BBC has learned.

Angela Carr, 77, from Brampton, near Carlisle, believes she is owed up to 14 years of lost state pension.

But a law change in 2008 means she will only be able to recoup one year's worth of the money owed.

"It just doesn't seem right when so much time and money has been lost," the farmer's wife, from Cumbria, told the BBC.

The money "would make all the difference in the world," she said.

An estimated 200,000 female pensioners are collectively owed up to £2.7bn after the under-payment of state pensions due to an error at the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).

The problem relates to the "old" state pension system where married women who had a poor pension in their own right could claim a 60% basic state pension based on their husband's record of contributions.

'Simply unacceptable'

A review is taking place to trace those affected by systemic failures to automatically award these pension rises, stretching back to 1992.

But only some women are being fully repaid. Others, like Mrs Carr, will only be able to claim for 12 months of missed payments.

She's set to miss out because her husband retired before a rule change in March 2008. The government said it wrote to these pre-2008 women at the time asking them to apply for an increase to their pensions. Those the BBC has spoken to said they received no such letter.



"I should be getting 60% of my husband's basic pension. I am receiving just over £38 a week, but I should have been getting £82 a week," Mrs Carr told the BBC. "14 years of lost pension, to only be able to claim back one year's worth, in the region of £2,000, it seems very unfair," she added.

Mrs Carr contacted the DWP twelve weeks ago about her case but is yet to receive a response.

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A former pensions minister, Sir Steve Webb, a partner at consultants Lane Clark and Peacock, first highlighted the problem and estimates more than 50,000 women will not be fully repaid.

He said: "It is simply unacceptable that so many married women have been unnecessarily getting by on a reduced pension simply because the system is so complex that they were unaware of the need for a further claim."

Sir Steve described the DWP's efforts to contact women, including sending forms to their husbands, as "bordering on the laughable".

He said: "Women who have lost out on twelve years or more of pension through no fault of their own should not be limited to twelve months of backdating."

Women have told the BBC they called the DWP suspecting they weren't being paid the right amount. Some were paid as little as £1 a week. But they were repeatedly told it was correct. It wasn't. For others, who are now entitled to reclaim the full amount, it has come too late.



ROSEMARY CHATTELL AND HER SON JOHN

Rosemary Chattell and her son John

For two decades Rosemary Chattell, 97, from Tarporley, in Cheshire, was underpaid.

Widowed in 1999, she should have automatically got a proportion of her husband's pension when he died. It was her son, John Chattell, 67, who first suspected something was wrong. On the fourth time of asking, the DWP agreed to investigate. The scale of the error came as shock.

'My mother was owed £107,000'

"The lady from the DWP rang me back and said 'are you sitting down? Your mother is owed a substantial amount of money.' She came back with a figure - £107,852. It's an amazing amount of money," said Mr Chattell.

"It does make me feel sad, all the other things she should could have done in her life if she had that extra pension. But also other people out there, in the same position, but don't know they are owed all of this money."

Mrs Chattell has dementia and is in a care home. The money is now helping to pay for her full time care.

"It would have made a big difference, but she'll never know about it, she is too far gone to appreciate it. You shouldn't have to fight for what's rightfully yours. Everybody pays in to the system during their lives, through their income and tax, you should get that back," said Mr Chattell.

A DWP spokesperson said: "The action we are taking now will correct the historical underpayments that have been made by successive governments and anyone impacted will be contacted by us to ensure they receive all that they are owed.

"Married women whose husbands reached State Pension age after them, but before 17 March 2008, are required by law to make a separate claim, and application forms were provided four months before they reached State Pension age."

'Female underclass'

The law limits the backdating for this group to a period of 12 months. This is a long standing element of social security law and the BBC understands there are no plans to change this position.

Former pensions minister Baroness Ros Altmann said many women are struggling to make ends meet in retirement.

"Somehow we have this underclass of often elderly female pensioners who and are living on far less than they should be," she said. "The astonishing thing is, this has been going on for many years, and no one knew. We still haven't had an explanation about what went wrong."