Close the Gap briefing for Scottish Government Debate:

Supporting Young People to Participate in the Labour Market

November 2026

Close the Gap is Scotland's policy advocacy organisation working on women's labour market participation. We have been working with policymakers, employers and trade unions for 25 years to influence and enable action that will address the causes of the gender pay gap. Our vision is for a Scotland where all women have a good working life.

1. Summary and key asks

Young mothers in Scotland are ambitious, capable, and determined: they are raising children, building futures, seeking paid work and learning, while navigating systems that limit their potential, choices, and opportunities by failing to recognise or support them. New research, Strengths not Stigma: Research on fair work for young mothers, undertaken by Close the Gap and Save the Children has highlighted the wide-ranging systemic barriers young mothers (under the age of 25) face to entering and progressing in the labour market, and accessing fair work.

The findings show that young mothers' labour market outcomes are fundamentally shaped by structural barriers that restrict their choices. Across the research, young mothers consistently described paid work and learning as routes to income, independence, confidence, wellbeing, and better futures for their children. Yet their ability to realise these aspirations was constrained by the interaction between caring responsibilities and wider structural inequalities, including poverty, low pay, occupational segregation, inflexible jobs, discrimination, stigma, unaffordable or unsuitable childcare, and aspects of the social security system.

Around **42% of all young mothers experience in-work poverty.** This shows that employment can reduce poverty *only* where work is secure, adequately paid, and flexible enough to balance with caring responsibilities.

You must urge the Scottish Government to take the following action to better support young mothers to access fair work:

- Prioritise **fair work for young mothers** and ensure that the inequalities they face in employment are **core to future fair work policy**.
- Require that **work on addressing economic inactivity is gender competent** and **recognises young mothers' experiences** of unpaid caring, and **design targeted action** to tackle the barriers they face in entering and sustaining employment.
- **Ensure the planned review of employability support is informed by young mothers' lived experience** and delivers support that is accessible, flexible, appropriate to skill level, and that proactively challenges occupational segregation and provides good quality employment opportunities.
- Establish a **universal, funded system of childcare that is high-quality, flexible, affordable, and accessible** to all young mothers, including those working shifts, atypical hours, or non-standard work patterns, so they can choose to work full time or part time if they need to or want to.
- **Fund specialist childcare for disabled children and children with additional support needs** to ensure that young mothers can engage in employment, training or education.
- **Design and deliver sustainable further education and higher education pathways for young mothers** that are accessible, flexible, appropriate to skill level, and that proactively challenge occupational segregation, using key learning from projects such as One Parent Families Scotland's pilot project with Public Health Scotland on single parents' employment.
- Centre young mothers in the **implementation of the child poverty delivery plan** by **designing and implementing targeted interventions** which are informed by a young mothers' lived experience advisory group.

2. **Key points referenced in briefing**

- Around **42% of all young mothers experience in-work poverty.** This shows that employment can reduce poverty only where work is secure, adequately paid, and flexible enough to balance with caring responsibilities.

- Children in households with a mother aged under 25 experience the **highest poverty rates of all Scottish Government priority family groups, at 55%.**
- Young mothers are also **more likely to experience overlapping forms of inequality** and disadvantage e.g. 54% of young mothers are also lone parents and 35% live with a disabled household member.
- Labour market data shows that the roots of gendered inequality are visible before motherhood, with **young women heavily concentrated in lower-paid, undervalued female-dominated occupations**.
- **Economic inactivity is starkly gendered** due to the disproportionate responsibility for **providing unpaid care** to family members that women undertake. Young motherhood intensifies these gender patterns. Census data shows that **73.8% of economically inactive 16-24-year-olds are women.**
- Due to structural barriers **only 21% of mothers who gave birth before the age of 20 are in employment** when their child reaches 10 months old, compared with 55% of mothers aged 20-24, and 83% of mothers aged 25 or above.

Young mothers themselves say:

"Too often, young mothers are judged before we get the chance to prove ourselves. There can be an assumption that we don't want to work, that we are unreliable, or that having a child when we're young means we've made the wrong choices or are less ambitious about our futures. Those assumptions don't reflect our lives ... When work can't fit around childcare or other responsibilities, young mothers can end up having to take whatever job is possible rather than the job they actually want, or the one that makes best use of their skills. Some can't access work at all – but that doesn't mean they've just chosen not to work. ***The choice has been taken away from them or made impossible. We should not have to choose between being a good mother and having a future****."*

(Ana, Angie, Isatou, Khadiza, Martha, Natalie, Natasha, and Tia, Research and Campaign Advisers for the Strengths not Stigma project)

3. What the data tells us about young mothers' employment

Young motherhood is strongly patterned by socioeconomic inequality. Although births to women under 25 have declined as the average age of motherhood has increased, women living in Scotland's most deprived areas remain substantially more likely to become mothers at a younger age. In the most deprived areas, 34.3% of first births are to women aged 16-24, compared with just 6.7% in the least deprived areas.[1] This does not mean that young motherhood causes poverty; rather, it reflects the wider structural inequalities that shape both the likelihood and experience of becoming a mother at a younger age. Households with a mother aged under 25 have the highest poverty rate of all six priority family groups identified in the Scottish Government's child poverty strategy, at 55%.[2] Young mothers also frequently experience overlapping disadvantage, for example, 54% are lone parents, and 35% live with a disabled household member.[3] Around 42% of young mothers also experience in-work poverty.[4] They are also more likely to experience income volatility, whereby earnings fluctuate unpredictably making it more difficult to budget, plan ahead, and absorb financial shocks.

Together, this evidence shows that young mothers often find themselves at the intersection of age-based, gendered socioeconomic disadvantage, increasing their risk of poverty and labour market exclusion. Labour market data shows that the roots of gendered inequality are visible before motherhood, with young women heavily concentrated in lower-paid, undervalued female-dominated occupations. Women also make up 79.8% of young workers in caring and service occupations, 63.7% of young workers in administrative and secretarial occupations, and 59.5% of those in sales and customer service.[5]

There are similarly stark gendered patterns in economic inactivity[6] due to looking after the family or home, which is synonymous with providing unpaid care. Census data shows that among economically inactive 16-24-year-olds in this category, almost three quarters are women, at 73.8%, compared with 26.2% who are men.[7] Motherhood intensifies these existing gendered patterns. Younger mothers, particularly those aged under 20 at childbirth, experience particularly low employment rates. Growing Up in Scotland data shows that 21% of mothers who gave birth before the age of 20 are in employment when their child reaches 10 months old, compared with 55% of mothers aged 20-24, and 83% of mothers aged 25 or above.[8]

The evidence also points to a part-time pay penalty as young women in their twenties take on disproportionate responsibility for childcare and become heavily penalised by the lower hourly pay rates characteristic of female dominated, part-time roles.

4. How young mothers experience work

As the research report by Close the Gap and Save the Children Scotland explains, interviews conducted with young mothers show how these patterns translate into labour market choices and constraints. Before becoming mothers, over two thirds of participants were in paid work, mainly full time. Following motherhood, this fell to just over a third, with most working part time. A lack of appropriate childcare was the central mechanism through which this shift occurred. **Participants described difficulties relating to affordability, availability, flexibility, and suitability of childcare provision, particularly for children aged under two, disabled children, and children with additional support needs**. These childcare barriers interacted with low pay and social security conditionality, leaving many feeling trapped between unaffordable childcare, low-paid jobs, and concerns about losing benefit entitlement if they increased their earnings.

Decisions about paid work were therefore rarely experienced as a straightforward choice between employment and childcare responsibilities. Instead, **participants described navigating trade-offs** involving childcare costs eating into wages, paid work offering necessary income and thus being prioritised over study, lack of flexibility reducing opportunities for progression, or higher income from additional working hours potentially resulting in reduced financial support.

These trade-offs were further complicated by other barriers to paid work, including inflexible working hours, difficulties taking time off when children were ill or had medical appointments, inadequate transport options, poor physical and mental health, wider unpaid caring responsibilities, limited opportunities to develop skills and qualifications, and experiences of stigma and discrimination. Several participants reported experiences that could constitute pregnancy or maternity discrimination, including having their hours cut, and being dismissed while on probation after telling their employer they were pregnant. In this context, participants' feelings of anxiety, exhaustion, and being overwhelmed were not individual responses, but reflected systems that were difficult to navigate and poorly aligned with the realities of being a young mother.

Importantly, the impact of these barriers was not evenly distributed. Young mothers are not a homogeneous group, and the research shows that **barriers to fair work were often intensified for lone mothers, disabled young mothers, young mothers affected by domestic abuse, care experienced young mothers, racially minoritised and migrant young mothers, and mothers of disabled children or children with additional support needs**. For these groups, labour market inequalities intersected with housing insecurity, trauma, poor health and disability, racism, limited support networks, and additional unpaid caring responsibilities for family members. This reinforces the need for an explicitly intersectional approach to fair work and anti-poverty policies, as structural inequalities are experienced differently depending on wider circumstances.

5. Conclusion

Young mothers who participated in our research consistently described paid work and learning as routes to income, independence, confidence, routine, wellbeing, and better futures for their children. Ultimately, the report concludes that young mothers' access to fair work is central to tackling child poverty, advancing gender equality, and achieving economic justice in Scotland.

The findings demonstrate that young mothers' labour market inequality is not caused by a single barrier, but by the cumulative effect of systems that remain poorly aligned with the realities of young motherhood. Young mothers are already seeking routes into paid work that offer an income, independence, confidence, improved wellbeing, and better futures for their children. The task now is to ensure that Scotland's labour market, childcare system, social security system, and wider support structures enable young mothers to access, sustain, and progress in fair work.

Contact details:

Dr Charlotte Sanderson, Policy and Parliamentary Lead, Close the Gap
csanderson@closethegap.org.uk | 07912 203 626

[1] Public Health Scotland (2025) Births in Scotland – Year ending 31 March 2025. Table 1: maternities [Dataset]. Available: https://publichealthscotland.scot/ publications/births-in-scotland/births-in-scotland-year-ending-31-march-2025/

[2] Scottish Government (2022) Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan Fourth Year Progress Report 2021-22. Focus report on households with mothers aged 25 or under. Available: Tackling child poverty delivery plan: fourth year progress report 2021-2022 - focus report on households with mothers aged 25 or under - gov.scot

[3] Ibid

[4] Ibid

[5] National Records of Scotland (2022) [Occupational group, aged 16-24, sex] Scotland's Census Flexible Table Builder. Available at: https://www. scotlandscensus.gov.uk/webapi/jsf/dataCatalogueExplorer.xhtml (Accessed 26 May 2026)

[6] NB: Close the Gap do not endorse the framing implied by the term 'inactive'. This category includes people who are not in paid employment and are not seeking a job, including those doing unpaid work caring for children, disabled people, and older people. Labelling this group 'inactive' implies that only paid work counts as productive economic activity. Feminist economists have long challenged this: care is not the absence of work, but its precondition, reproducing the paid workforce and sustaining the population on which paid work depends.

[7] National Records of Scotland (2022) [Economic activity, aged 16-24, sex] Scotland's Census Flexible Table Builder. Available at: https://www. scotlandscensus.gov.uk/webapi/jsf/dataCatalogueExplorer.xhtml (Accessed 26 May 2026)

[8] Scottish Government (2017) Growing Up in Scotland: Patterns of maternal employment and barriers to paid work. Available: https://www.gov.scot/ publications/growing-up-scotland-patterns-maternal-employment-barriers-paid work/documents/