



Close the Gap briefing for Scottish Government Debate on Eradicating Child Poverty

September 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

Child poverty in Scotland is inextricably linked to women's poverty. As such, it will not be possible to eradicate child poverty without addressing gendered inequalities in the labour market. Evidence shows that women are more likely to be in poverty, more likely to experience in-work poverty, and more likely to experience persistent poverty than men.¹ There is particularly high risk of poverty for certain groups of women including racially minoritised women, disabled women, single parents and young mothers. The Scottish Government's tackling child poverty delivery plan, *Bringing Hope, Building Futures*, acknowledges the link between women's poverty and child poverty and continues to focus on the six priority family groups at most risk of poverty. However, its approach remains too generic and does not commit to the targeted actions that are needed to address the inequalities certain groups face. **To truly eradicate child poverty, the Scottish Government must:**

- Take targeted action to address the intersecting inequalities that drive women's and children's poverty.
- Prioritise targeted action to tackle drivers of poverty amongst young mothers under 25, who have the highest rates of poverty of all priority family groups
- Centre disabled women in the design of employability support services
- Take action to address low pay and undervaluation in women dominated sectors like childcare, social care and retail
- Design and deliver high-quality childcare that is affordable, accessible and flexible, particularly for disabled children and children with additional support needs
- Use the review as an opportunity to strengthen, not weaken, ambition on child poverty.

¹ Close the Gap (2018) *Women, Work and Poverty: What you need to know*, available at <https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/1---Women-work-and-poverty-what-you-need-to-know.pdf>. Engender (2026) *Confronting Women's Poverty*, available at <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/ChallengingWomensPovertyFINAL.pdf>

2. Key statistics referenced in briefing

- Women are the majority of low-paid workers in Scotland, comprising **60% of workers earning below the real living wage**, and represent three-quarters of the part-time workforce
- Women earning under £20,000 were the **least likely to have access to flexible work**, but almost **half (47%) would like to work more flexibly** to balance their caring responsibility with earning
- **55% of women say managing childcare has restricted the paid work** they can do; **33% had to reduce their working hours** to cope with childcare costs
- **55% of children in households with a young mother aged under 25 experience poverty**, the highest rate of all the Scottish Government's priority family groups
- **33.3% of disabled women** who responded to our survey and had used an **employability service** found it was **not appropriate for their level of skill and experience**.

3. The link between women's low incomes and child poverty

Women's poverty is directly tied to child poverty, and women's economic and labour market inequality is therefore a key cause of child poverty. Women's incomes remain a critical factor in child poverty with evidence showing that where women's disposable income is reduced, spending on children decreases.² Action to address women's labour market inequality and ensure women receive adequate financial support through the social security system are therefore key priorities in tackling child poverty. Close the Gap welcomes recognition of this intrinsic link in the current Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan, which states: 'Child poverty is women's poverty. Across the family types at greatest risk of poverty, many are households led by women. This means we can only deliver meaningful progress on child poverty by tackling the inequalities women face.'³ However, there are few commitments to specific targeted action to address women's labour market equality or the gender pay gap in the plan.

Women are the majority of low-paid workers in Scotland, comprising 60% of workers earning below the Real Living Wage, and represent three-quarters of the part-time workforce.⁴ Women's low pay is driven by the systemic undervaluation of "women's work", such as cleaning, care and retail, whereby the work predominately done by women is undervalued because it is done by women. The

² CPAG (2012) *Ending Child Poverty by 2020*, available at https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/CPAG-Ending-child-poverty-by-2020-progress-made-lessons-learned-0612_0.pdf

³ Scottish Government (2026) *Bringing Hope, Building Futures: Tackling child poverty delivery plan 2026-2031*, available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/bringing-hope-building-futures-tackling-child-poverty-delivery-plan-2026-2031/documents/>

⁴ Close the Gap (2023) *Briefing for Scottish Government Debate: Fair work in a wellbeing economy*, available at <https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/Close-the-Gap-briefing-for-Scottish-Government-Debate---Fair-work-in-a-wellbeing-economy-Nov-2023.pdf>

concept of undervaluation underpins gendered experiences of low pay, poverty, occupational segregation and the gender pay gap.

Targeted action to tackle undervaluation is crucial for increasing women's incomes, and supporting them and their families out of poverty. In particular, the Government should implement sectoral bargaining to improve and set pay, terms, and conditions in the social care sector, and use state wage-setting powers to increase the pay of all childcare workers to the Real Living Wage, with a more ambitious target set thereafter.

Women's concentration into lower paid jobs is caused in part due to the significant lack of quality, flexible and well-paid working opportunities, which allows them to balance caring with earning. Research from Flexibility Works has found women earning under £20,000 were the least likely to have access to flexible work, but almost half (47%) would like to work more flexibly to balance their caring responsibility with earning. Improving women's access to flexible working is therefore critical to addressing their low pay, as well as tackling women's and children's poverty.⁵

4. The need for a childcare system that works for women and their families

It is difficult to overstate the importance of childcare to women's labour market participation. The availability of childcare remains the most immediate barrier to women being able to work, study or train. A Scottish Women's Budget Group survey found 55% of women say managing childcare has restricted the paid work they can do; 33% had to reduce their working hours to cope with childcare costs.⁶ The provision of high-quality, flexible childcare is inconsistent in Scotland, resulting in a postcode lottery for many women and their families. Social norms on who is best suited to doing childcare mean that many women reduce their hours, change their job, or leave employment altogether after having children. Women's unpaid childcare roles drive their concentration in part-time work, which in turn results in them being more likely to be in the lowest paid jobs and sectors where part-time work is prevalent.

The introduction of 1140 hours of funded childcare has created improvements in the system but the funded entitlement at the local level is very often insufficiently flexible to meet the needs of women and their families and does not deliver enough funded hours to enable women to work full-time. Close the Gap therefore welcomes the commitment in the Scottish Government's Programme for Government 2026-31 to expand the childcare offer to provide support 52 weeks a year for children from 9 months old to the end of primary school, to deliver access to breakfast clubs for all primary schools from August 2027, and a new after school and holiday childcare offer for primary school children available from August 2029.⁷ An entitlement to early learning and childcare (ELC), pre-school cover and after-school childcare is an important step towards the wraparound system that is

⁵ Flexibility Works (2022) *Flex for Life*, available at <https://www.flexibilityworks.org/flexible-working-research/flex-for-life-report-2022/>

⁶ Scottish Women's Budget Group (2024) *What's Wrong With Childcare in Scotland?*, available at: <https://www.swbg.org.uk/news/blog/whats-wrong-with-childcare-in-scotland-a-summary/>

⁷ Scottish Government (2026) *Programme for Government 2026 to 2031*, available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/programme-government-2026-2031/documents/>

needed to meet the needs of all women and their families. Many women do shift work or work atypical or unpredictable hours, and the new childcare offer must be designed to be flexible to their needs, especially as these jobs tend to be low paid. Flexible childcare is essential to help women in low-income households, particularly single parents, remain in employment after having children.

To be successful the expansion will also have to adequately address barriers to accessing childcare which can be particularly acute for women with disabled children, racially minoritised women and their families, young mothers, single mothers, and women living in rural areas. Parents and carers of disabled children pay higher than average costs, and three-quarters have reduced their hours or left their job because of difficulties accessing appropriate childcare.⁸ Racially minoritised women face additional barriers to accessing affordable, flexible childcare including a lack of culturally competent services, and for migrant women, the lack of informal networks of family or friends creates further barriers.⁹

If the expansion is to be realised, the Scottish Government must prioritise a childcare workforce strategy. Improving pay rates and the terms and conditions of the childcare workforce must be central to the expansion delivery. Women account for 96% of the ELC workforce in Scotland and, as a result, this work is undervalued in the economy with the ELC sector characterised by low rates of pay.¹⁰ The commitment in the Programme for Government to continue to enable childcare professionals delivering funded ELC to be paid at least the Real Living Wage is welcome.¹¹ However, it is insufficient to drive the level of change needed. Scottish Government must use state wage-setting powers to increase the pay of all childcare workers to the Real Living Wage, with a more ambitious target set thereafter.

5. The need for a gendered approach to targeted action for priority families

The Scottish Government's latest Child Poverty Delivery Plan continues to focus on the six priority family groups at the greatest risk of poverty, including lone parents, families with a disabled adult or child, families with a mother under 25, minority ethnic families, families with a child under one, and larger families (3 or more children). While it is important that actions are targeted to those who need it most, this framework obscures a gendered analysis of child poverty. The key commonality across these groups is that women are present in all of them, further underscoring the gendered nature of poverty, and the need for child poverty measures to include specific action to tackle women's poverty. 92% of lone parent families, for instance, are headed by women.¹² The Child Poverty Delivery Plan acknowledges that: 'Across the family types at greatest risk of poverty, many

⁸ UK Parliament (2014) *Report of the parliamentary inquiry into childcare for disabled children*.

⁹ Close the Gap (2019) *Still Not Visible: Research on Black and minority ethnic women's experiences of employment in Scotland*, available at: https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/1557499847_Still-Not-Visible.pdf.

¹⁰ Close the Gap and One Parent Families Scotland (2023) *A Childcare System For All: A Vision That Puts Gender Equality at the Centre of Scotland's Childcare Strategy*, available at: [CtG-and-OPFS---A-childcare-system-for-all-FINAL.pdf](https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/1557499847_Still-Not-Visible.pdf)

¹¹ Scottish Government (2026) *Programme for Government*.

¹² Scottish Government (2026) *Tackling child poverty priority families overview*, available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/tackling-child-poverty-priority-families-overview/pages/lone-parent-families/>

are households led by women. This means we can only deliver meaningful progress on child poverty by tackling the inequalities women face.’¹³

Despite this, there are few targeted actions in the delivery plan to address the poverty experienced by the women who are most marginalised. There is also insufficient intersectional analysis to understand the needs of those who belong to more than one of these groups. While there will be variations in these family groups around needs and priorities, it is important to recognise that each priority family is not a homogenous group. Women’s experiences of inequality are not universal, but rather shaped by the intersecting inequalities they face. For example:

- Nine in ten single parents are women, and there is a significant overlap with experiencing domestic abuse and being a single parent
- Women are more likely to be disabled, and more likely to be carers for disabled children and adults
- Disabled women experience higher levels of underemployment and unemployment, and in-work poverty
- A high proportion of young mothers are also single parents, and domestic abuse is also a common experience
- Women with large families (three or more children) often face prohibitively high childcare costs creating additional barriers to the labour market
- Minority ethnic women experience higher levels of unemployment and low pay, and some groups of minority ethnic women experience particularly high levels of ‘economic inactivity’.¹⁴

55% of children in households with a young mother aged under 25 experience poverty, the highest rate of all the Scottish Government’s priority family groups.¹⁵ Young mothers are also more likely to be in more than one priority group.¹⁶ Close the Gap and Save the Children’s upcoming research into young mothers’ experiences of the labour market has found that young mothers remain considerably less likely to be in employment when compared to other mothers, even as their children grow up.¹⁷

Many young mothers who are disabled and/or have disabled children face additional barriers. For example, women with disabled children often struggle to find childcare that is suitable for their

¹³ Scottish Government (2026) *Bringing Hope, Building Futures*.

¹⁴ Close the Gap (2025) *Joint Response from Close the Gap, Engender and Scottish Women’s Aid to the Call for evidence on the Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2026-2031*, available at: <https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/Final-CtG-Engender-SWA-joint-response---call-for-evidence-on-the-Tackling-Child-Poverty-Delivery-Plan-2026-31.pdf>

¹⁵ 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 at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/tackling-child-poverty-delivery-plan-fourth-year-progress-report-2021-22-focus-report-households-mothers-aged-25-under/documents/>

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Close the Gap (2026) *New research on young mothers reveals urgent need for systemic change*, available at <https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/news/blog/new-research-on-young-mothers-reveals-urgent-need-for-systemic-change/>

children's needs, impacting their ability to undertake paid work.¹⁸ Disabled mothers face structural barriers to fair work, such as discriminatory recruitment practice, inaccessible workplace, and lack of employer understanding of disability, yet there are no actions targeted at the specific barriers disabled women face in accessing and progressing in employment.¹⁹ Targeted action that tackles the barriers young mothers and other priority groups face is therefore crucial to eradicating child poverty.

Our research has shown that 33.3% of disabled women respondents who used an employability service found it was not appropriate for their level of skill and experience.²⁰ Therefore, targeted action should include centring disabled women in the planned review of employability services to ensure support is accessible, flexible, appropriate to skill level and proactively challenges occupational segregation.

6. The current review of child poverty targets

Close the Gap is concerned that the review of child poverty targets announced by Scottish Government could be used to obscure the lack of progress that has been made on this issue. The Government must ensure that any change to the targets does not result in less ambitious action being taken to tackle poverty in Scotland. Progress must not stall while the review is ongoing; there must be targeted action to tackle child poverty. The review of targets should instead be used as an opportunity to refocus on the bold and ambitious actions that must be taken to address both women's and child poverty in Scotland.

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¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Close the Gap (2025) *Excluded by Design: Research on disabled women's experiences of employment in Scotland*, available at: <https://www.closethegap.org.uk/content/resources/Excluded-by-Design---research-report.pdf>

²⁰ Ibid.