



Manifesto for the 2026 Scottish Parliament Election



Introduction

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 more than 20 years to influence and enable action that will address the causes of women's labour market inequality. Our vision is for a Scotland where all women have a good working life.

This manifesto sets out our key priority measures that should be taken over the next parliamentary term to address the gender pay gap in Scotland. The 2026 Scottish Parliament election presents an opportunity for political parties to show leadership on gender equality and take the necessary action to realise fair work for women.

While employment law is reserved, Scotland can still address the causes of the gender pay gap that women in Scotland face. This is because most of the causes of the gender pay gap are not unlawful, and can be challenged through better policymaking in key policy areas such as economy, skills, early learning and childcare, and the public sector equality duty (PSED).

Globally we are seeing a backlash against equality, diversity, and inclusion. Scotland is not immune to this, with rising misogyny, racism and right-wing activism putting women's equality and rights under threat. In this challenging context, it is especially important that gender equality is centred in policymaking so that the poverty and inequality experienced by women, especially racially minoritised women, migrant women, disabled women, and young mothers, is addressed. There is an onus on political parties to show leadership and proactively challenge the pushback on women's equality and rights. An essential element is building a labour market and economy that works for women.

The calls we make are high-impact interventions, which will enable Scotland to move towards an economy that works for everyone and promotes the effective utilisation of women's skills. These policies therefore have a strong return on investment.¹ Prioritising action on gender equality makes economic sense as equality is good for growth, while the converse is not necessarily true.²

¹ Close the Gap (2016) *Gender Equality Pays*, available at: <https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/Gender-Equality-Pays.pdf>

² Close the Gap and Engender (2020) *Gender and Inclusive Growth: Making inclusive growth work for women in Scotland*, available at: https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/covid-19/1621254968_Gender-and-Inclusive-Growth—Making-inclusive-growth-work-for-women-in-Scotland.pdf



Close the Gap's calls for the 2026 Scottish Parliament election

Priority 1: Build an economy that works for all women, including those who are most marginalised such as racially minoritised women, disabled women, young mothers, and single parents.

1. Prioritise targeted action to tackle women's low pay in undervalued jobs and sectors, including care, retail, and cleaning.
2. Designate social care and childcare as growth sectors in Scotland's economy to prioritise policy focus and investment, and support the transition to net zero.
3. Commit to use sectoral bargaining to improve and set pay, terms, and conditions in the social care sector from 2026.
4. Design and deliver targeted employability support for disabled women that is accessible, flexible, appropriate to skill level, and proactively challenges occupational segregation.

Priority 2: Reform the Scottish-specific duties of the public sector equality duty to ensure that the public sector leads the way on advancing women's equality at work.

5. Commit to reform of PSED in co-production with equality organisations, delivering new regulations in place within the next parliamentary term.

6. Require public bodies to develop and report on gender pay gap action plans.
7. Extend the requirement for public bodies to produce equal pay statements to include evidence of job evaluation and pay and grading reviews.

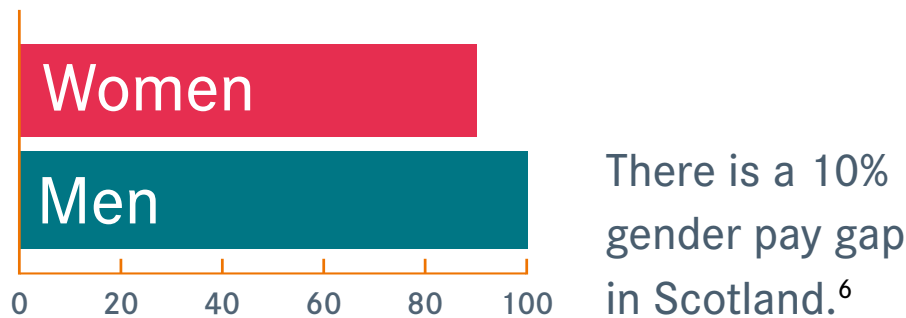
Priority 3: Deliver a childcare system that centres gender equality and puts choice for all at the heart of provision.

8. Design a pathway, with a clear timeline, to deliver a universal funded entitlement of 50 hours per week of high-quality childcare for children aged 6 months and over to enable women to work full time if need to or want to.
9. Prioritise work on making childcare more flexible, using key learning from sector leaders on flexible services including Flexible Childcare Services Scotland.
10. 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.
11. Reform the school-age childcare regulatory framework to support the expansion of access to services such as after-school clubs, sports clubs and hobby clubs, and strengthen the sustainability of the sector.



The gender pay gap in Scotland

The gender pay gap is the key indicator of women's labour market inequality as it represents the divergent experiences that women and men have not only in employment but also in education, training, care and other unpaid domestic labour, and men's violence against women and girls. It is a persistent feature of the labour market and within Scotland's gift to change. Recent data has shown a reversal of progress, with an increased gender pay gap for women of 10% when comparing average hourly pay, and this increases to 23% when comparing men's full-time pay to women's part-time pay.³ Pay gaps are also higher for disabled women⁴ and racially minoritised women⁵ who face overlapping and compounding inequalities in the workplace.



³ Office for National Statistics (2025) Gender pay gap dataset, available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/datasets/annualsurveyofhoursandearningsashegenderpaygaptables>

⁴ Close the Gap (2025) *Excluded by Design: Research on disabled women's experiences of employment*, available at: <https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/Excluded-by-Design—research-report.pdf>

⁵ Close the Gap (2019) *Still Not Visible: Research on Black and minority ethnic women's experiences of employment*, available at: https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/1557499847_Still-Not-Visible.pdf

⁶ Office for National Statistics (2025) Gender pay gap dataset, available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/datasets/annualsurveyofhoursandearningsashegenderpaygaptables>

Scotland's gender pay gap is caused by a range of factors including:

- Occupational segregation, which is the clustering of women and men into different types of work (horizontal segregation), and different levels of work (vertical segregation, often known as 'the glass ceiling');
- A lack of quality part-time and flexible working;
- The economic undervaluation of stereotypically 'female' work such as care, retail, admin, and cleaning;
- Women's disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care for children and adults;
- Biased and untransparent recruitment, development, and progression practices;
- Male-oriented workplace cultures;
- Discrimination in pay and grading systems; and
- Experiences of Violence Against Women (VAW) such as sexual harassment and domestic abuse.

Women comprise the majority of low paid workers in Scotland which drives their higher levels of poverty. Women are more likely to be in poverty than men, are more likely to experience in-work poverty, find it harder to escape poverty, and are more likely to experience persistent poverty than men. Of those in persistent low pay 7 in 10 are women.⁷ This illustrates the systemic undervaluation of 'women's work' which, although concentrated in essential jobs, continues to be underpaid.⁸

Disabled women, racially minoritised women, LGBTQ+ women, women who are single parents, and migrant women experience different, multiple, and intersecting barriers to participation in the labour market, and to progression within their occupation, resulting in overlapping and compounding inequalities for these groups. This is why it is necessary to take an intersectional approach to work on the gender pay gap. For example, across the

⁷ JRF (2025) *Meeting the Moment: Scottish Elections 2026*, available at: <https://www.jrf.org.uk/child-poverty/meeting-the-moment-scottish-election-2026>

⁸ Close the Gap (2023) *Gender Pay Gap Statistics*, available at: <https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/Gender-pay-gap-statistics-paper-2023.pdf>

labour market, disabled women and some groups of racially minoritised women are more likely to be underemployed in terms of skills, to report higher levels of discrimination, bullying and harassment,⁹ and face persistent barriers to progression.

Policymaking must not treat women as a homogenous group, and instead intersectional analysis must be centred if equality is to be realised for the most marginalised women in Scotland.

⁹ Close the Gap (2018) *The Gender Penalty: Exploring the Causes and Solutions to Scotland's Gender Pay Gap*



Priority 1: Build an economy that works for all women, including those who are most marginalised such as racially minoritised women, disabled women, young mothers, and single parents.

Mainstream economic policies fail to value ‘women’s work’, do not recognise women’s unpaid work, and do not meaningfully engage with gendered injustices in the labour market such as occupational segregation. For example, despite being increasingly skilled and demanding work, care work is underpaid and undervalued because it is seen as low skilled and something women are naturally more suited to.¹⁰ Additionally, national policy such as the Climate Emergency Skills Action Plan defines green jobs in narrow terms, failing to recognise care jobs as green jobs. This is despite evidence that care jobs are low carbon jobs, and that equivalent investment in care is 30% less polluting and produces 2.7 times more jobs than an equivalent investment in construction.¹¹



Investment in social care
is good for growth.

Women are concentrated in low-paid work, with racially minoritised women, disabled women, young mothers, and single parents being even more likely to hold these jobs.

¹⁰ Close the Gap and Engender (2020) *Gender and Economic Recovery*, available at: <https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/Gender-Economic-Recovery-Engender-and-Close-the-Gap.pdf>

¹¹ Women’s Budget Group (2020) *A Care-led Recovery from Coronavirus: The case for investment in care as a better post-pandemic economic stimulus than investment in construction*, available at: <https://wbg.org.uk/wpcontent/uploads/2020/06/Care-led-recovery-final.pdf>

This is due to the economy-wide undervaluation of ‘women’s work’ in the labour market. Improving women’s pay, terms, and conditions across the labour market, including in the care sector, is essential not only to tackle women’s low pay, and women’s and children’s poverty, but also to address recruitment and retention challenges and deliver high-quality services for Scotland. This will only become more pressing as our population continues to age and require care. Scotland currently has over a million people aged 65 and over.¹²



Care work is vital social infrastructure.

Our calls:

1. Prioritise targeted action to tackle women’s low pay in undervalued jobs and sectors, including care, retail, and cleaning.
2. Designate social care and childcare as growth sectors in Scotland’s economy to prioritise policy focus and investment, and support the transition to net zero.
3. Commit to use sectoral bargaining to improve and set pay, terms, and conditions in the social care sector from 2026.
4. Design and deliver targeted employability support for disabled women that is accessible, flexible, appropriate to skill level, and that proactively challenges occupational segregation.

¹² Scottish Government (2024) *Impact of Scotland’s Aging Population*, available at: <https://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/news-and-events/impact-of-scotland-s-ageing-population/>



Priority 2: Reform the Scottish-specific duties of the public sector equality duty to ensure that the public sector leads the way on advancing women's equality at work.

Despite being in place for more than a decade, PSED has not resulted in the transformational change that was intended. Despite there being specific duties on public sector employers on the gender pay gap, equal pay, and occupational segregation, evidence shows that this is not resulting in change, and instead the lack of targeted employer action is entrenching women's workplace inequality in the public sector.¹³ In 2023, only 38% of public bodies had published their occupational segregation information as required by the duties, while a further 29% of public bodies had published this data in part, and one third of public bodies failed to publish any data at all.¹⁴



Only 38% of public bodies met their legal obligation to publish data on occupational segregation.

Women are disproportionately reliant on public services and make up the majority of the public sector workforce. How the public sector functions has a significant impact on

¹³ Close the Gap (2021) *The Gender Pay Gap Manifesto: Realising fair work for women in Scotland*, available at: <https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/The-Gender-Pay-Gap-Manifesto—2021-Scottish-Parliament-elections.pdf>

¹⁴ Close the Gap (2025) *Close the Gap submission to the Equality, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee call for views on the operation of the Public Sector Equality Duty in Scotland*, available at: <https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/Submission-to-the-EHRCJ-Committee-call-for-views-on-the-operation-of-the-PSED-in-Scotland.pdf>

their lives. Scotland's PSED regulations urgently need reform to deliver gender-sensitive policy and improve women's lives. Current regulations lack robust accountability and enforcement mechanisms, and there are significant gaps in leadership on equality within public bodies. In a time of constrained budgets, we cannot afford policies that do not deliver results. Reformed PSED regulations with stronger accountability and leadership would ensure every pound spent on public services works harder for women's equality, driving excellence in service provision that better meets women's needs.

Our calls:

5. Commit to reform of PSED in co-production with equality organisations, delivering new regulations in place within the next parliamentary term.
6. Require public bodies to develop and report on gender pay gap action plans.
7. Extend the requirement for public bodies to produce equal pay statements to include evidence of job evaluation and pay and grading reviews.



Priority 3: Deliver a childcare system that centres gender equality and puts choice for all at the heart of provision.

Gendered patterns of childcare are deeply entrenched and have been slow to disrupt, with the unequal distribution of childcare remaining a key cause of the gender pay gap.¹⁵ It is difficult to overstate the importance of childcare to women's labour market participation; childcare provision routinely determines whether women have a job, they type of job they have, the hours they work, and the amount of pay they receive. A Scottish Women's Budget Group survey¹⁶ found that more than half (55%) of women respondents said that managing childcare has impacted the paid work they could do, with a third (33%) reporting they had reduced their working hours to be able to manage childcare costs, while only 8% said their partner had to reduce their hours. In particular, the system is failing to meet the needs of women who work shiftwork or irregular hours, single mothers, racially minoritised women, and mothers of disabled children.¹⁷



Women are 96% of the childcare workforce.

¹⁵ 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: <https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/CtG-and-OPFS—A-childcare-system-for-all-FINAL.pdf>

¹⁶ 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/>

¹⁷ 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: <https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/CtG-and-OPFS—A-childcare-system-for-all-FINAL.pdf>

Childcare is vital social infrastructure which is essential to Scotland's economy but, despite this, paid childcare work remains undervalued and low paid which drives the sector's recruitment and retention challenges.¹⁸ The sector is characterised by acute and chronic occupational segregation, with 96% of the workforce being women, and disabled people and racially minoritised people vastly underrepresented. Improving the status and pay of the workforce is critical to closing the gender pay gap, meeting demand for labour in the sector, and improving children's outcomes. If more men are to be attracted into the sector, there needs to be an economic imperative for them to do so. Furthermore, it is not possible to deliver high-quality services unless the workforce is diverse and appropriately valued and remunerated.

Our calls:

8. Design a pathway, with a clear timeline, to deliver a universal funded entitlement of 50 hours per week of high-quality childcare for children aged 6 months and over to enable women to work full time if need to or want to.
9. Prioritise work on making childcare more flexible, using key learning from sector leaders on flexible services including Flexible Childcare Services Scotland.
10. Use state wage-setting powers to increase the pay of all childcare workers the real Living Wage, with a more ambitious target set thereafter.
11. Reform the school age childcare regulatory framework to support the expansion of access to services such as after-school clubs, sports clubs, and hobby clubs, and strengthen the sustainability of the sector.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Close the Gap works in Scotland on women's labour market participation. We work with policymakers, employers and unions to influence and enable action that will address the causes of women's inequality at work.

Close the Gap
166 Buchanan Street
Glasgow
G1 2LW

+44 (0)141 572 4730
email: info@closethegap.org.uk
www.closethegap.org.uk



[closethegap.org.uk](https://twitter.com/closethegap.org.uk)



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