



Close the Gap briefing for Members' Business: Addressing the Postcode Lottery of Early Learning and Childcare Provision Briefing

October 2025

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.

1. Introduction

Childcare remains the most immediate barrier to women being able to work, study and train. The provision of quality, flexible childcare is inconsistent in Scotland. Variations in provision including Inverclyde Council, North Ayrshire Council and East Dunbartonshire Council, only being able to offer funded places from the start of the term after a child's third birthday, leaves many families missing out on up to four months of support. This disproportionately impacts women who are more likely to leave their job to do part-time or full-time unpaid childcare. A Scottish Women's Budget Group survey 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.¹

The introduction of 1140 hours of funded childcare has been welcome, however, this entitlement must be viewed as the starting point, rather than the end point, of reform. The delivery of the funded entitlement at the local level is very often insufficiently flexible to meet the needs of women and their families² and does not deliver sufficient funded hours to enable women to work full-time.

Close the Gap and One Parent Families Scotland have set out our vision for a childcare system that works for which is evidence based and backed by over 25 organisations across the third sector. We have advocated for a **universal funded entitlement of 50 hours per week for children aged 6 months and above that is free**

¹ 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/>

² Audit Scotland (2018) *Early Learning and Childcare*

at the point of use for all families.³ This would promote women's socio-economic and labour market equality by enabling women to work full time if they need or want to.

Women need wraparound childcare to allow them to participate in the labour market, and in education and training, on an equal basis with men. In turn, higher female labour market participation contributes to increased economic growth and reduced rates of poverty, including child poverty.⁴

2. Women's unpaid caring roles

The unequal distribution of unpaid work and care remains a key cause of the gender pay gap in Scotland, as women are disproportionately more likely to take on the majority of unpaid care responsibilities.⁵ Gendered patterns of care are long entrenched and have been slow to disrupt.⁶ This is in large part due to the need to balance earning with caring which results in more women working part-time. This sees women further concentrated into low paid and insecure work, as most part-time work is found in the lowest paid jobs and sectors. This also makes it difficult for women to combine childcare with a job that aligns with their skill level.

Evidence shows that **women spend an average of 3 hours and 37 minutes per day doing unpaid work activities including housework and caring for others; this was 54 minutes more than the average among men at 2 hours and 43 minutes**⁷.

Mothers of young children in particular face multiple disadvantages when it comes to job quality, termed this the 'motherhood penalty in job quality'. **Mothers of school aged children are 5 percentage points (primary age) and 7 percentage points (secondary age) more likely to be in these poor-quality jobs than women without children.**⁸ This is partly due to the perception they are less committed to their role, despite 70% reporting they would continue to work even if they didn't need to

³ Close the Gap and One Parent Family 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>

⁴ Olsen, Prof Wendy, Dr Vanessa Gash, Sook Kim, Dr Min Zhang (2018) *The gender pay gap in the UK: Evidence from the UKHLS*, Government Equalities Office

⁵ Close the Gap and One Parent Family 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>

⁶ Emily Thomson (2020) *Gender & Inclusive Growth: Inclusive Growth and its potential to improve gender equality*, Close the Gap and Engender available at <https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/Gender-and-Inclusive-Growth---Making-inclusive-growth-work-for-women-in-Scotland.pdf>

⁷ National Center for Social Research (2023), *Time Use in the UK: Autumn 2023*, available at <https://natcen.ac.uk/publications/time-use-uk-autumn-2023>

⁸ Kings College London (2024), *Who can 'have it all'? Job quality and parenthood in the UK*, available at: <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/assets/research/project-upload-2021/who-can-have-it-all-job-quality-and-parenthood-in-the-uk.pdf>

financially. Conversely, mothers are underrepresented in high-quality jobs – those with attributes including good work-life balance, control over working hours and control over job tasks. Compared to women without children, mothers of primary aged children are 11 percentage points less likely to have these high-quality jobs⁹.

Women are overwhelmingly concentrated in low paid and insecure work, as most part-time work is found in the lowest paid jobs and sectors, contributing to women's higher rates of in-work poverty. In addition, research consistently finds that years spent working part-time or taking time out of the labour market to care for family negatively impacts women's pay, progression opportunities and pension. The gender differences in work histories are therefore a major contributing factor to the gender pay gap.¹⁰ **Evidence from the Institute of Fiscal Studies highlights women with caring responsibilities in paid work reduced their paid working hours substantially during the COVID-19 pandemic, and by more than their male counterparts.**¹¹ It is therefore critical that improving the provision of affordable, flexible and accessible childcare is a key priority of ongoing economic recovery.

These barriers are particularly acute for women and families who are most marginalised. **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.**¹² Securing a reliable number of working hours which fit with school and available childcare provision is a particular challenge for single parents, especially as single parents are more likely to be concentrated in sectors such as retail which are characterised by precarious and insecure work. Research by Close the Gap also found that racially minoritised women face additional barriers to accessing affordable, flexible and appropriate childcare.¹³ For racially minoritised migrant women, the absence of informal networks of family or friends close by to help with childcare increased the burden of childcare, limiting their ability to enter the workforce or increase their working hours.

3. Improving the provision of affordable, flexible and accessible childcare

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Olsen, Prof Wendy, Dr Vanessa Gash, Sook Kim, Dr Min Zhang (2018) The gender pay gap in the UK: Evidence from the UKHLS, Government Equalities Office

¹¹ Institute for Fiscal Studies (2020) *How are Mothers and fathers balancing work and family life under lockdown?*

¹² UK Parliament (2014) *Report of the parliamentary inquiry into childcare for disabled children*

¹³ Close the Gap (2019) *Still Not Visible*

The provision of high quality, flexible childcare remains inconsistent in Scotland and the high cost of childcare particularly affects women because the cost of childcare in an opposite sex household is often set against the woman's pay.

There is also **clear evidence that that child poverty is women's poverty¹⁴, and poverty in Scotland is deeply gendered**. Women are more likely to be in poverty than men, more likely to experience in-work poverty, find it harder to escape poverty and being more likely to experience persistent poverty than men¹⁵. There are divergent experiences within this as women are not a homogenous group, and disabled women, racially-minoritised women, young women, single parents, and refugee and asylum-seeking women face intersecting inequalities which compound and put them at greater risk of poverty. Women's low earnings are a crucial factor, as evidence shows where women's disposable income is reduced, spending on children decreases.¹⁶ As women comprise the majority of low paid workers in Scotland, and the gender pay gap is a key driver of women's experiences of poverty, addressing women's low pay is key to eradicating child poverty.

4. Tackling the economic undervaluation of the ELC workforce

The workforce is indivisible from the services it delivers, and the challenges with availability of childcare are in part driven by the undervaluation of the workforce. **Improving rates of pay, and the terms and conditions of the ELC workforce must therefore be core to future strategies on ELC provision.** Work that is seen as "women's work", such as cleaning, care and retail, is systematically undervalued in the labour market because this work is done by women. The concept of undervaluation underpins gendered experiences of low pay, occupational segregation and the gender pay gap.¹⁷ **Women account for 95% of the ELC workforce in Scotland and, as a result, this work is undervalued with the ELC sector characterised by low rates of pay.**

Although the extension of the Real Living Wage in ELC is a welcome start to addressing women's low pay it does not equate to revaluing the skills and status of these jobs, which Close the Gap has called for and is an essential step to end

¹⁴ 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(2025) <https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/Final-CtG-Engender-SWA-joint-response---call-forevidence-on-the-Tackling-Child-Poverty-Delivery-Plan-2026-31.pdf>

¹⁵ Close the Gap (2024) Close the Gap briefing for Social Justice and Social Security Committee debate: Addressing child poverty through parental employment, available at: <https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/Close-the-Gap-debate-briefing-for-SJSS-committeedebate-on-addressing-child-poverty-through-parental-employment.pdf>

¹⁶ Close the Gap (2025), *Close the Gap briefing for the Scottish Government debate on the Programme for Government: Delivering for Scotland 2025-26*, available at <https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/Close-the-Gap-briefing-for-the-Scottish-Government-debate-on-the-Programme-for-Government-2025-2026.pdf>

¹⁷ Grimshaw, Damien and Jill Rubery (2007) *Undervaluing Women's Work*, Equal Opportunities Commission

women's labour market inequality. If more men are to work in the ELC sector, which is a prerequisite to meeting the sector's recruitment and retention challenges, reducing occupational segregation and closing the gender pay gap, there needs to be an economic imperative to do so. This requires appropriately remunerated jobs with clear progression pathways as evidence that it is a good career choice. **The Scottish Government must use state wage-setting powers to increase the pay of all childcare workers the real Living Wage, with a more ambitious target set thereafter.**

Plans to pay the Living Wage to workers delivering the funded entitlement are positive and represent an important starting point in tackling the undervaluation of the ELC workforce. However, payment of the Living Wage alone is inadequate to address the sector-wide economic undervaluation. A just and fair economy means investing in a care economy. **Care is as essential to our economy as bricks, steel, and fibre optic cable. Spending on childcare and care should be viewed as infrastructure investment as it is an enabler of paid work, but also supports the realisation of women's equality and rights, and children's rights.**¹⁸ It is of particular economic and social benefit to the poorest families, including those headed by single mothers.¹⁹ **Designating childcare and social care as key growth sectors would drive the policy focus and allocation of resources necessary to grow these sectors, and address the systemic undervaluation of "women's work" by reorientating strategic focus to women's position in the economy, as workers and as carers.**

¹⁸ See: De Henau J, Himmelweit S, Lapniewska Z, Perrons D (2016) Investing in the Care Economy: A gender analysis of employment stimulus in seven OECD countries. International Trade Union Confederation. Available at: https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/care_economy_en.pdf and Lapniewska Z (2016) Growth, Equality and Employment: Investing in Childcare in Scotland. WiSE Research Centre, Glasgow Caledonian University. Available at: <https://www.gcu.ac.uk/wise/media/gcalwebv2/theuniversity/centresprojects/wise/98178%20WiSE%20BRIEFING%20PAPER%204%20August.pdf>

¹⁹ Women's Budget Group (2020) 2020 WBG Briefing: Childcare and gender. Available at: <https://wbg.org.uk/analysis/uk-policy-briefings/2019-wbg-briefing-childcare-and-gender/>