



Close the Gap briefing for Scottish Government debate on eradicating child poverty June 2024

Close the Gap is Scotland’s policy advocacy organisation working on women’s labour market participation. We have been working with policymakers, employers and employees for over 20 years to influence and enable action that will address the causes of women’s labour market inequality.

1. Introduction

Poverty in Scotland is gendered. 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 Women’s low earnings are a crucial driver of child poverty, with evidence showing that where women’s disposable income is reduced, spending on children decreases. Consequently, tackling gender inequality is key to tackling child poverty and meeting the Scottish Government’s child poverty targets. The child poverty delivery plan 2018-2022 recognised the gendered nature of poverty which highlighted **“conclusive evidence that poverty and gender are inextricably linked”**.² A gender analysis is less evident in the current child poverty delivery plan, *Best Start, Bright Futures* in which little attention is paid to gender.³ The gender-blind focus on ‘parents’ in child poverty policy obscures the gendered experiences women with childcare responsibilities face in accessing employment, education and training, and in progressing at work. Without action to tackle women’s low pay, and other women’s wider labour market inequalities, it is not possible to eradicate child poverty in Scotland.

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>

² Scottish Government (2018) *Every Child, Every Chance: tackling child poverty delivery plan 2018-2022*, available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/child-chance-tackling-child-poverty-delivery-plan-2018-22/>

³ Scottish Government (2022) *Best Start: Strategic early learning and school age childcare plan for Scotland 2022-26*, available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/best-start-strategic-early-learning-school-age-childcare-plan-scotland-2022-26/>

2. Tackling women's low pay is key to eradicating child poverty

The gender pay gap is a key factor in women's higher levels of poverty, and tackling women's inequality in the labour market is therefore critical to overcoming women's poverty. In line with the compounding, intersecting inequalities experienced by different groups of women, **there is a particularly high risk of poverty among racially minoritised women, disabled women, single parents, and refugee and asylum-seeking women.**

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. This results in the low pay associated with those jobs and sectors. Undervaluation has lifelong impacts for women including debt, stress and less access to assets and resources. This contributes to **higher rates of female pensioner poverty, with women accounting for two-thirds of pensioners living in poverty across the UK.**⁴

Women are also more likely than men to have caring responsibilities and therefore must find work that allows them to balance earning with caring. This sees women concentrated in part-time work which contributes to their higher rates of in-work poverty as most part-time work is found in the lowest paid jobs and sectors. Women account for 75% of the part-time workforce, and 42% of employed women work part-time compared to 13% of men.⁵ This is significant as **part-time jobs are more than three times as likely to pay below the Living Wage than full-time roles** and research from Living Wage Scotland found that **women in part-time work stand to benefit the most from Living Wage accreditation.**⁶

3. Women and their children are facing a rising tide of poverty as a result of the cost of living crisis

The cost of living crisis has had a disproportionate impact on women, pushing many more women and their families into poverty, and for those already living in poverty their experiences have intensified. Women who were already struggling are now under enormous financial pressure. This is particularly true for groups of women who were already more likely to be living in poverty including single mothers, disabled

⁴ Close the Gap (2023) *What is the gender pensions gap?*, available at: <https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/news/blog/what-is-the-gender-pension-gap/>

⁵ Boyle, Ruth (2019) 'Tackling the Gender Pay Gap: Key to tackling poverty in Scotland', *Anti-Poverty Review Issue 30*, pp.11-13 available at <https://www.povertyalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/SAPR-30-.pdf>

⁶ Jones, Gareth (2019) 'Women benefit from living wage expansion', *Third Force News*, available at <https://tfn.scot/news/women-benefit-from-living-wage-expansion>

women, older women, racially minoritised women, and migrant women. This underscores the importance of a gendered response to both the cost of living crisis and child poverty. Despite this disproportionate impact, the First Minister’s National Advisory Council on Women and Girls found in its scrutiny of Scottish Government’s response to the cost of living crisis that **“there was very little evidence of women’s experiences being considered”**.⁷ Without action to protect women’s financial security, women and children will be pushed into further and deeper poverty, and gender inequality will worsen.

4. Fair work for women is necessary to tackling child poverty

It is vital that action to increase women’s employment consider the types of jobs they are entering. Within the current focus on parental employment, there is little attention given to gender or the specific barriers women face such as insecure, low-paid work, inflexible working practices and occupational segregation. **Women represent 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.**⁸

Women’s concentration into low-paid part-time work is largely caused by their caring roles, as there is a significant lack of quality, flexible and well-paid working opportunities.⁹ **Research from Flexibility Works has found women earning under £20,000, are the least likely to have access to flexible work, but almost half (47%) want to work more flexibly to balance their caring responsibility with work.**¹⁰ Improving access to flexible working options is therefore critical to addressing women’s low pay, and tackling women and children’s poverty. Action is therefore to create more flexible working in Scotland’s workplaces, so women can access the hours they need.

Addressing the undervaluation of what is seen as ‘women’s work’, such as cleaning, care and retail, is critical for realising fair work for women. **Undervaluation of female-dominated occupations underpins gendered experiences of low pay, the gender pay gap and poverty, exacerbating child poverty.** Scottish Government had committed to improve the minimum terms and conditions social care workers, 85% of whom are women. This was intended to enable enhanced maternity, paternity and sick pay as

⁷ National Advisory Council on Women and Girls (2024) *Phase Two report*, available at:

<https://www.generationequal.scot/second-focus-of-scrutiny/>

⁸ 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>

⁹ Close the Gap (2023) *Submission to the Social Justice and Social Security Committee inquiry into child poverty and parental employment*, available at: <https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/CtG-submission-SJSS-Committee-inquiry-into-child-poverty-and-parental-employment.pdf>

¹⁰ Flexibility Works (2022) *Flex for Life 2022*, available at: <https://www.flexibilityworks.org/flexible-working-research/flex-for-life-report-2022/>

many women in the sector only have access to the statutory minimum. However, **work by trade unions has identified that £38m allocated for improving social care workers terms and conditions has been reallocated elsewhere.**¹¹ The social care sector is characterised by acute and chronic occupational segregation, with many women workers on poverty wages and poor terms and conditions. Ensuring social care workers are appropriately valued and paid fairly is a necessary step in reducing occupational segregation. If more men are to be enabled into the sector, there needs to be an economic imperative for them to do so. The lack of prioritisation to revalue social care and other ‘women’s work, significantly undermines ambitions to end child poverty.

5. There needs to be an intersectional focus on priority families

Women are not a homogenous group, and their experiences of poverty are shaped by the intersecting inequalities they face. Whilst there are commonalities in women’s experiences generally, disabled women, racially minoritised women, LGBTI women, refugee women, young women and older women experience different, multiple barriers to accessing the labour market. Action to address women’s labour market inequalities need to **adopt an intersectional gender lens to ensure the divergent experiences of different groups of women are accounted for.**

The child poverty delivery plan identifies six priority groups at the greatest risk of poverty, including lone parents, families with a disabled adult or child, young mothers, minority ethnic families, families with children under one, and larger families. 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. As yet there is no targeted action to address the poverty experienced by women most marginalised, which will only hinder any progress to meet the child poverty targets.

¹¹ ‘Social care workers “betrayed” by cut funding’, healthandsocialcare.scot, 26 April 2024, available at: <https://healthandcare.scot/stories/3800/missing-millions-campaign-trade-unions-scotland-social-care-workers>