



Close the Gap briefing for Social Justice and Social Security Committee debate: Addressing child poverty through parental employment

March 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 unions for more than two decades 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 than men, more likely to experience in-work poverty, find it harder to escape poverty, and are more likely to experience persistent poverty than men. **Women's poverty is also interlinked with child poverty, meaning action to address women's labour market inequalities is vital for tackling child poverty.** Women's propensity to be primary caregivers strongly shapes how they engage with the labour market, and a lack of flexible work that allows them to balance caring and earning results in them being concentrated in low-paid, part-time work.

The child poverty delivery plan 2018-2022 recognised the gendered nature of poverty which highlighted "conclusive evidence that poverty and gender are inextricably linked".¹ 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.² 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. Close the Gap is disappointed that the Social Justice and Social Security Committee did not take a gendered approach to its inquiry into child poverty and parental employment. 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.

2. Accessible, affordable, and flexible childcare is a critical anti-poverty measure

¹ 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/>

² 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/>

The lack of affordable, flexible, and accessible childcare reinforces women's socio-economic and labour market inequality as they provide the bulk of unpaid childcare.

Women's childcare responsibilities constrain their engagement with the labour market, and whether they are able to study or train. Consequently, childcare provision routinely determines whether women have a job, the type of job they have, the hours they work, and the amount of pay they get.³ Therefore, action to improve the affordability, accessibility and flexibility of current childcare provision is crucial to supporting parental employment.

Close the Gap welcomed the delivery of 1140 funded hours entitlement. However, **1140 hours should not be seen as the end point of reform as it still only equates to the school day, and therefore does not enable women to work full-time, should they need or want to.** In addition, the inflexibility of childcare provision, which generally follows a typical 9-5 work pattern, are inaccessible to those who work irregular hours, such as shift work. **Research has shown two-thirds of women reported delivery of these hours do not cover their childcare needs.**⁴ This limited flexibility in delivery further constrains women's ability to enter, remain, or increase their paid working hours,⁵ or to access training and study. Free part-time childcare only has a marginal effect on labour market participation of mothers, however, **by expanding free childcare to full-time hours leads to significant increases in labour market participation and employment of mothers.**⁶

The increased funded entitlement has also not negated the need for expensive top-up childcare, particularly for single parents and those who work atypical hours. **Childcare costs remain exorbitantly high, presenting a significant financial barrier for parents to enter and remain in paid work,** with the average price for 50 hours of nursery per week for an under two costing £257 in Scotland.⁷ This issue is particularly acute for single parents, 91% of whom are women in Scotland, with research showing **more than a fifth of single parents could no longer afford childcare at all.**⁸ Financial barriers are especially pertinent for other groups of women, including disabled women, racially minoritised women and migrant women who are more likely to be in lower-paid work and/or be experiencing poverty. Women with disabled children face both financial barriers and difficulties in finding specialist provision. **Three-quarters of parents and**

³ 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>

⁴ Scottish Women's Budget Group (2022) *Women's experiences of childcare shared through our survey*, available at: <https://www.swbg.org.uk/news/blog/womens-experiences-of-childcare-shared-through-our-survey/>

⁵ 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>

⁶ Brewer, M., Cattan, S., Crawford, C., and Rabe, B (2022) Does more free childcare help parents work more?, *Labour Economics*, volume 74, available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0927537121001354?via%3Dihub>

⁷ Child Poverty Action Group (2024) *The Cost of a Child in Scotland in 2023*, available at: https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-02/Cost_of_a_child_in_Scotland_2023_1.pdf

⁸ One Parent Families Scotland (2022) *Living Without a Lifeline*, available at: <https://opfs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Living-without-a-lifeline-full-report.pdf>

carers of disabled children have reduced their hours or left their job because of difficulties accessing appropriate childcare.⁹ As such, the prohibitive costs of childcare are therefore trapping women and their families in poverty.

Current childcare provision in Scotland does not yet meet the Scottish Government's aim of supporting parents into work, study or training, as the 1140 hours entitlement does not provide sufficient choice for women around managing childcare with employment. **To support parental employment, particularly of mothers, it is vital the Scottish Government take action to invest in expanding the childcare offer.**

Close the Gap and One Parent Families Scotland have published a joint vision and a set of principles¹⁰ that describe a childcare system that works for everyone. The principles are framed around the need for everyone, including those on low incomes, to be able to access the services they need. Among the principles are calls for:

- A universally funded entitlement of 50 hours per week for children aged 6 months plus, free at the point of use, and fully flexible in delivery to that women can work full-time if they need to or want to.
- Flexible delivery that that enables families to access childcare when they need it and want it.
- A diverse and skilled childcare workforce that is valued, fairly paid and gender balanced.
- A high-quality service which delivers positive outcomes for children and realised children's rights.

Expanding provision would put choice at the heart of the system, and all women would have more agency to determine how and when they engage with the labour market.¹¹ This would go some way in supporting women's employment, and in turn, reduce their experiences of poverty.

3. Skills and employability programmes need to be gender-sensitive

There is a strong need for gender-sensitive employability support, and upskilling and reskilling initiatives to support women into employment. **Current generic employability programmes replicate gendered patterns of skills acquisition and employment. Mainstream employability and training programmes routinely fail to consider women's caring roles or how women's readiness and ability to work is impacted by**

⁹ UK Parliament (2014) *Report of the parliamentary inquiry into childcare for disabled children*, available at: <https://www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/parliamentary-inquiry-childcare-disabled-children>

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

¹¹ 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>

these roles.¹² In particular, mainstream programmes fail to meet the specific needs of low-income single parents, more than 90% of whom are women, and victim-survivors of domestic abuse.¹³ Employability and training programmes often result in women being funnelled into low-paid, inflexible jobs, such as retail and care, **further entrenching occupational segregation and barriers to women’s progression in work. This contributes to women’s higher levels of poverty and therefore children’s poverty.**

It is also **vital that upskilling and reskilling initiatives are designed to be gender-sensitive**, as evidence shows women are less likely to have access to training,¹⁴ undertake training that will support career or pay progression, and are more likely to have to do training in their own time and also contribute towards costs.¹⁵ The design of employability and skills policy and programmes needs to take account of the gendered **barriers women face in accessing training, such as their caring roles, occupational segregation, gender norms and stereotypes, the need for flexibility, and men’s violence.** However, Scottish Government’s ambitions on skills development heavily rely on gender-blind programmes such as Individual Training Accounts, and the now concluded Flexible Workforce Development Fund. There is little evidence these programmes have addressed women’s poverty or supported their career progression. In particular, such small-scale interventions are extremely unlikely to enable women to move from low-paid sectors such as retail into high-growth sectors in the wider economy, including the priority green sectors identified in the Climate Emergency Skills Action Plan.

4. Fair work for women is key 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 afforded 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.**¹⁶ 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

¹² Engender (2016) *Unblocking the pipeline: Gender and Employability in Scotland*, available at:

<https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Unblocking-the-Pipeline---Gender-and-Employability-in-Scotland.pdf>

¹³ Scottish Women’s Aid (2018) *Building Equality: Highlights from the mid-term review*, available at:

<https://womensaid.scot/project/building-equality-mid-term-review/>

¹⁴ House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee (2016) *Inquiry into the gender pay gap*, available at:

<https://committees.parliament.uk/work/6038/gender-pay-gap-inquiry/>

¹⁵ Aldrige, F., and Egglestone, C. (2015) *Learning, Skills and Progression at Work: Analysis from the 2015 adult participation in learning survey*, available at: <https://learningandwork.org.uk/resources/research-and-reports/2015-adult-participation-in-learning-survey/>

¹⁶ 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>

opportunities.¹⁷ **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.**¹⁸ 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.** Close the Gap welcomed Scottish Government commitments to pay early learning and childcare (ELC) workers delivering the funded entitlement and adult social care workers £12 per hour. This is a welcome first step, however more is a need to ensure that women's skills are valued in the economy. The commitment to provide a pay uplift to ELC workers applies to only those delivering the funded entitlement and is not sufficiently engaging with the sector-wide injustice of undervaluation. The ELC sector is characterised by acute and chronic occupational segregation, with women comprising 96% of workers, many of whom are on poverty wages. Ensuring ELC 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.

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, LBT¹⁹ 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.

¹⁷ 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>

¹⁸ Flexibility Works (2022) *Flex for Life 2022*, available at: <https://www.flexibilityworks.org/flexible-working-research/flex-for-life-report-2022/>

¹⁹ Lesbian, bisexual and trans women