



Close the Gap response to the Economy and Fair Work Committee's inquiry into town centres and retail

March 2022

1. 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 employees for over 20 years to influence and enable action that will address the causes of women's labour market inequality.

Close the Gap welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to the Economy and Fair Work Committee's timely inquiry into town centres and retail. Retail's share of employment has been declining for the past 15 years,¹ and the sector is currently experiencing a period of flux. The increasing dominance of online retail; the impact of Covid-19; and automation will have far-reaching implications for the structure of the retail sector.

The retail workforce is female dominated, with women accounting for 60.5% of the workforce in 2019. Women's employment will therefore be disproportionately impacted by structural changes in the sector and there are likely to be negative implications for women's unemployment, job quality and financial security. Work in the retail sector continues to be characterised by low pay, rising precarity and unreliable working hours. Despite being critical to a successful pandemic response, "women's work" in retail also remains systematically undervalued in the labour market. The failure to deliver fair work for retail employees in Scotland contributes to women's higher rates of in-work poverty and the increasing precarity of women's work.

Our response starts with an overview of the barriers that exist with regards to delivering fair work for women in the sector. In line with Close the Gap's expertise, our submission focuses on those questions relating to fair work and the retail workforce.

2. Fair work in the retail sector

The retail sector continues to be characterised by poor employment practice. Scottish Government's commitment to improving the quality of work in Scotland, through its flagship policy of fair work, therefore remains pivotal. We welcome the Committee's

¹ Resolution Foundation (2019) *Sorry, we're closed: Understanding the impact of retail's decline on people and places*

focus on fair work within this inquiry. However, fair work must mean fair work for women, too.

Any recommendations made by the Committee with regards to the delivery of fair work in retail must take account of the gendered barriers to fair work which remain prevalent in the sector. In Close the Gap's response to the Scottish Government's consultation on becoming a fair work nation, we highlighted that fair work policy development must be better gendered if it is to create change for women in Scotland.² This means prioritising action on women's low pay; the lack of training and development opportunities; continued insecure and precarious working practices; unequal pay; and harassment, including sexual harassment.

Low pay

The latest data from the Labour Force Survey shows that average hourly earnings for sales and customer services occupations in Scotland is £11.21. This is significantly lower than the average hourly pay in the Scottish labour market which sits at £17.49. Women's mean hourly pay (£10.91) in sales and customer service is lower than men's (£11.56).³ Research by the Fair Work Convention found that 42.5% of those aged over 18 employed in wholesale, retail and repair of motor vehicles earned less than the real living wage, compared with 16.9% of all employees in Scotland.⁴ This leads to high rates of in-work poverty in the sector. Retail workers, particularly women who are concentrated in low-paid roles in the sector, are therefore unlikely to have savings to fall back on if their employment or working hours are impacted by structural changes in the sector.⁵ As a result of the inextricable links between women's poverty and child poverty, women's concentration in low-paid sectors such as retail remains a key cause of child poverty in Scotland.

The undervaluation of "women's work" in retail

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.⁶ In economics, the undervaluation of "women's work" means there is evidence of lower returns to women's productive characteristics.⁷ Practically, this means that women will receive lower pay from investing in education or from their

² Close the Gap (2022) *Response to Scottish Government consultation on becoming a fair work nation* available at <https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/Close-the-Gap-response-to-the-Scottish-Governments-consultation-on-Becoming-a-fair-work-nation---December-2021.pdf>

³ Labour Force Survey

⁴ Fair Work Convention (2020) *Fair Work in Scotland* <https://www.fairworkconvention.scot/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Fair-Work-in-Scotland-Report.pdf>

⁵ Close the Gap (2021) *Response to the Scottish Government's consultation on the Child Poverty Delivery Plan*

⁶ Grimshaw, Damien and Jill Rubery (2007) *Undervaluing Women's Work*, Equal Opportunities Commission

⁷ Ibid.

own work experience. Covid-19 illuminated the critical role “women’s work” plays in Scotland’s economy. However, although retail workers were essential to a successful pandemic response, they remained undervalued, underpaid, and under-protected.⁸

Improving the coverage of the living wage in the retail sector is an important starting point in ensuring women are appropriately remunerated for their skills. However, the living wage is not a panacea for undervaluation as it does not address the crux of the low pay problem, which is that retail work is undervalued because it is predominantly women who do the work. Raising wages to the rate of the real Living Wage alone will therefore be insufficient to better recognise the status and skills of the women working in female-dominated jobs. Scottish Government has recently published research⁹ on international mechanisms to revalue women’s low-paid work in sectors such as retail. The research makes a number of recommendations on job evaluation, collective bargaining and gender pay gap reporting. The Committee should consider the recommendations made within this research when making suggestions as to how to embed fair work into the retail sector, ensuring that ambitions to deliver fair work do not leave women behind.

Equal Pay

High profile equal pay challenges are emerging in the retail sector as women shopfloor workers in supermarkets pursue equal pay claims comparing themselves to male warehouse staff. In the biggest-ever private sector equal pay claim in the UK, women checkout workers are currently pursuing an equal pay claim against Asda. It is reported that Asda could be facing backdated pay claims totalling £8 billion. Similar parallel claims are currently being pursued by women workers at Tesco, Next, Sainsburys, Morrisons and Co-op.¹⁰ This demonstrates the problems arising from the absence of job evaluation based on equal value principles and their consolidation into pay structures. Pay in the retail sector is determined by collective bargaining in larger retailers and the statutory National Living Wage.

In spite of the high-profile equal pay cases in retail, the UK gender pay gap reporting regulations have, however, generally had the perverse effect of making pay discrimination as a cause of the pay gap more invisible. In attempting to clarify the difference between the pay gap and equal pay, comms around pay gap reporting from UK Government and the regulator Equality and Human Rights Commission implied that

⁸ 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>

⁹ Scottish Government (2021) *International Mechanisms to Revalue Women’s Work: Research exploring and evaluating international mechanisms that aim to revalue or result in the revaluation of women’s work*, available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/international-mechanisms-revalue-womens-work-research-exploring-evaluating-international-mechanisms-aim-revalue-result-revaluation-womens-work/>

¹⁰ Ibid.

pay discrimination was not relevant to gender pay gap reporting. This is borne out in the findings of Close the Gap's assessment of employer pay gap reporting. Of 200 Scottish employers reports that Close the Gap assessed, only one mentioned an equal pay review, and one mentioned job evaluation.¹¹ Similarly, research by the UK Government Equalities Office¹² found that 62% of employers had no current, past or planned future involvement in pay reviews because they considered that they already provided equal pay.

Research commissioned by the Scottish Government on international mechanisms to revalue women's low-paid work recommended that, once these legal proceedings are finalised, Scottish Government should prepare to support the large supermarkets and unions in implementing job evaluation across the sector.¹³ The report recommends that this could be reflected in Scottish Government's Retail Strategy, and be viewed as part of an economy-wide initiative to underpin equality-proofed pay structures in future. Close the Gap supports this recommendation.

Insecure work

Research by the Living Wage Foundation found that 18% of those employed in wholesale and retail are in low paid insecure work¹⁴ with employees often employed on contracts as low as four hours a week that can then be flexed up as required by the employer.¹⁵ Those on insecure contracts report feeling unable to decline shifts for fear of not being offered work in the future, or being given the worst shifts.¹⁶ Where women's access to shifts is dependent on the goodwill of their line manager, they are also more vulnerable to bullying and sexual harassment.

In addition to the loss of employment rights such as sick pay and annual leave,¹⁷ women in insecure work may also be denied basic maternity entitlements, such as maternity leave, time off for antenatal appointments, effective health and safety protections and the right to request flexible working. Research by Maternity Action found that even where women in insecure work do have legal entitlements, they are often unwilling to

¹¹ Close the Gap (2018) *The Road to Change? An assessment of Scottish employer reporting of the UK gender pay gap regulations*, available at: <https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/The-Road-to-Change.pdf>

¹² Winterbotham et al (2014) *Company Reporting: gender pay gap data*, Government Equalities Office: London

¹³ Scottish Government (2021) *International Mechanisms to Revalue Women's Work: Research exploring and evaluating international mechanisms that aim to revalue or result in the revaluation of women's work*, available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/international-mechanisms-revalue-womens-work-research-exploring-evaluating-international-mechanisms-aim-revalue-result-revaluation-womens-work/>

¹⁴ Living Wage Foundation *Living Hours: Providing security of hours alongside a real Living Wage* available at <https://www.livingwage.org.uk/living-hours>

¹⁵ Scottish Government (2021) *International Mechanisms to Revalue Women's Work: Research exploring and evaluating international mechanisms that aim to revalue or result in the revaluation of women's work*

¹⁶ Living Wage Foundation *Living Hours: Providing security of hours alongside a real Living Wage* available at <https://www.livingwage.org.uk/living-hours>

¹⁷ Citizens Advice Bureau (2017) *Employers tricking people out of sick pay*

exercise these rights because this may disadvantage their position in the workplace or future access to shifts.¹⁸ There is also a risk for pregnant women that their employer reduces their hours of work or does not extend fixed-term contracts after they have become aware of their pregnancy.¹⁹

Research by the Living Wage Foundation²⁰ found that more than half (52%) of women in shift work are likely to receive less than a week's notice for working hours, shifts or work schedules. While equal numbers of men and women (26%) reported experiencing unexpected cancellations of shifts in the past 12 months, women were more likely than men to report receiving no payment when shifts were cancelled (29% compared to 20%).²¹ This presents particular challenges for women in planning childcare and care for adults around irregular shift patterns and also gives rise to the so-called "insecurity premium" which refers to the extra costs workers have to cover as a result of being called into work, such as last-minute childcare or transport costs. Adoption of living hours within retail would assist in driving up the quality of work in the sector and have clear benefits for women's financial security. The living hours campaign²² calls for a decent notice period for shifts of at least four weeks, with guaranteed payment if shifts are cancelled within this notice period, and the right to a contract that reflects actual hours worked. Both the living hours campaign and USDAW have called for guaranteed minimum of 16 hours a week (unless the worker requests otherwise).

Sexual harassment, violence and abuse

There are high levels of harassment within the retail sector, with evidence highlighting that Covid-19 has resulted in a further increase in experiences of abuse. Almost 9 in 10 retail workers were verbally abused in 2020; 60% reported threats of physical violence; and 9% said they had been physically assaulted.²³ In addition, a 2019 survey by USDAW found that 70% of women working in retail had experienced sexual harassment at work and one in two women had experienced unsolicited comments of a sexual nature within the previous 12 months.²⁴ Sexual harassment is a form of violence against women, a violation of women's rights, and a contributing factor in the gender pay gap. Two-thirds of USDAW's female members did not report their experiences of sexual harassment to

¹⁸ Maternity Action (2020) *Insecure Labour: The realities of insecure work for pregnant women and new mothers* available at <https://maternityaction.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/InsecureWorkReportNov2020FINAL-1.pdf>

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Living Wage Foundation (2021) *The Insecurity Complex: Low-paid workers and the growth of insecure work* Available at https://www.livingwage.org.uk/sites/default/files/The%20Insecurity%20Complex%20-%20Low%20Paid%20Workers%20and%20the%20Growth%20of%20Insecure%20work_1.pdf

²¹ Ibid.

²² Living Wage Foundation *Living Hours: Providing security of hours alongside a real Living Wage* available at <https://www.livingwage.org.uk/living-hours>

²³ USDAW (2020) *Campaign to end violence and abuse against retail workers* available at <https://www.usdaw.org.uk/CMSPages/GetFile.aspx?guid=630d6f8e-73df-4ca2-a923-7f1251381614>

²⁴ Van-de-Peer, Hannah (2021) 'The grim reality of sexual harassment for shop workers', *Vice*, 1st July 2021 available at <https://www.vice.com/en/article/qj8z5v/the-grim-reality-of-sexual-harassment-for-shop-workers>

their employer, with key reasons for not reporting including believing their report would not be taken seriously or categorised as ‘banter’.²⁵ Evidence shows that where women report sexual harassment by third parties, this is managed particularly poorly by employers. Indeed, 38% of respondents to USDAW’s survey wanted more management support on issues of harassment.

Last year, the Scottish Parliament passed the Protection of Workers (Retail and Age-restricted Goods and Services) (Scotland) Act 2021.²⁶ While this legislation will assist in protecting women employed in certain retail settings, the Scottish Government should also work with the UK Government to reinstate protection from third party sexual harassment in the Equality Act. The UK Government repealed s40 of the Equality Act 2010, which made employers liable for harassment of their employees by a third party (e.g. customers) in 2019. While the UK Government have now announced that protection from third party harassment will be re-established, the timescales for reinstatement remain unclear.²⁷

Training, development and progression

Research estimates that 40% of wholesale and retail employers provide no training for their staff.²⁸ In Scotland, less than 20% of those employed in wholesale, retail and repair of motor vehicles participated in training which related to their current or future job in 2019.²⁹ Progression opportunities in retail are limited, and differential pay rates between shop floor workers and supervisors have largely been eroded.³⁰ According to analysis from by the Resolution Foundation, just 4% of sales assistants had become sales supervisors or retail managers between 2011 and 2016.³¹ The narrow differentials in many parts of the retail sector mean that career progression is not attractive, with additional responsibilities not reflected in sufficient additional pay. In the UK, nearly one

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ USDAW (2020) *Campaign to end violence and abuse against retail workers* available at <https://www.usdaw.org.uk/CMSPages/GetFile.aspx?guid=630d6f8e-73df-4ca2-a923-7f1251381614>

²⁷ UK Government (2021) ‘Government response to the consultation on sexual harassment in the workplace’ available at https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/consultation-on-sexual-harassment-in-the-workplace?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=govuk-notifications&utm_source=d598765a-aacf-44fa-b04c-420ec1f7bf1a&utm_content=daily

²⁸ Living Wage Foundation *Good Jobs in Retail: A Toolkit* available at https://www.livingwage.org.uk/sites/default/files/Living%20Wage%20Foundation%20-%20Good%20Jobs%20Toolkit_1_0_1.pdf

²⁹ Fair Work Convention (2020) *Fair Work in Scotland* <https://www.fairworkconvention.scot/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Fair-Work-in-Scotland-Report.pdf>

³⁰ Scottish Government (2021) *International Mechanisms to Revalue Women’s Work: Research exploring and evaluating international mechanisms that aim to revalue or result in the revaluation of women’s work*, available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/international-mechanisms-revalue-womens-work-research-exploring-evaluating-international-mechanisms-aim-revalue-result-revaluation-womens-work/>

³¹ Resolution Foundation (2018) *Low Pay Britain 2018*

in five retail employees report that they are over-qualified and over-skilled for their current role.³²

As a result, there are high rates of underemployment for women in the retail sector.³³ This is further exacerbated by the lack of high-quality flexible working opportunities in the sector. While part-time work is common within low-paid jobs such as customer assistant roles, higher paid management roles have a culture of long-hours which creates a barrier to women's progression.³⁴ At present, data from September 2021 shows that women account for only 30% of managers and directors in retail and wholesale, despite making up over 60% of employees.³⁵

If the Committee are to recommend state-funded skills and training programmes to upskill and reskill retail workers, it is important that these recommendations are gender-sensitive and informed by women's experiences of training. Across the Scottish labour market, women are less likely to have access to training, particularly women working in low-paid part-time jobs³⁶, less likely to undertake training that will enable them to progress or secure a pay rise, and more likely to have to do training in their own time and to contribute towards the cost.³⁷ Generic skills interventions, which do not consider the gendered barriers to skills acquisition and employment reinforce and sustain occupational segregation and the gender pay gap. Skills interventions need to integrate gender, and be designed to take account of, for example, women's greater propensity to have caring roles, gender stereotyping, and should challenge occupational segregation as a central aim.

3. Answers to consultation questions

Keeping town centres alive

3) How can equality and diversity issues be addressed in policies that create and sustain resilient town centres?

Inadequate transport infrastructure presents particular challenges for women in retail because of their greater likelihood of working varied working patterns, including shift working. Scottish Government and local authorities should ensure that there is adequate, integrated public transport infrastructure in place so that women can travel safely to and from work.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ USDAW (2019) *Industrial Strategy for Retail*

³⁵ Annual Population Survey – regional – employment by occupation

³⁶ House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee (2016) *Inquiry into the gender pay gap*

³⁷ Aldrige, Fiona and Corin Egglestone, (2015) *Learning, Skills and Progression at Work: Analysis from the 2015 adult participation in learning survey*, UK Commission for Employment and Skills

Women are the majority of public transport users, and are less likely to drive³⁸ and cycle³⁹ than men. Women in low-paid work such as retail are particularly likely to rely on public transport to get to work. Women are more likely than their male counterparts to be primary caregivers for children, or to have multiple caring responsibilities which means they tend to make more complex, frequent and multi-purpose journeys. As a result, women are more likely to use orbital transport routes across various transport providers. This increases travel costs for women, erecting a barrier to employment, education and training. These issues are particularly pertinent for women in rural areas who face difficulties in accessing transport because services cost more, are unavailable, or are too infrequent to meet women's needs.

Safety when travelling to and from work is a further concern for women in retail who may finish work late at night. This influences women's decisions around travel, constraining women's choices, and erecting a barrier to employment. Women cite public transport as a 'hotspot' for gendered abuse, violence and sexual harassment and raise concerns about poorly staffed services and termini, as well as services that are poorly connected, especially at night. Planning therefore needs to take account of gendered experiences of transport and public spaces. A key consideration when developing policies to sustain resilient town centres should be ensuring access to appropriate, affordable and safe transport.

We also direct the Committee to work conducted by Engender into planning which found that gender equality concerns are not integrated into the public planning system in Scotland.⁴⁰ This is despite the fact that women experience and navigate public space very differently to men as a result of gender roles and inequalities that shape the dynamics of paid and to unpaid work; the use of public services and buildings; participation in public and domestic spheres; and women's lack of safety and security.

The design of urban space and infrastructure continues to overlook women's needs. For example, safety and lighting are key issues for women, and inadequate public toilets prevent disabled women, carers, and mothers of young children from accessing public spaces. There are also particular concerns and requirements for Black and minority ethnic women, older women, pregnant women, rural women and women on low incomes. We therefore echo recommendations made by Engender around the critical importance of mainstreaming gender equality considerations throughout government strategy, policy and programming, including planning policy and services. This should

³⁸ Transport Scotland (2019) *Scottish Transport Statistics: 2018 edition*

³⁹ Engender Response to the Scottish Government's consultation on the National Transport Strategy <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Engender-response-to-the-Scottish-Government-consultation-on-Scotlands-National-Transport-Strategy.pdf>

⁴⁰ See Engender *Local Government and Communities Committee Planning (Scotland) Bill* available at <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Engender-Parliamentary-Briefing---Planning-Scotland-Bill-March-2018.pdf>

include application of robust gender budget analysis of spending decisions within planning processes.⁴¹

The new realities of Scottish retail

3A) How can the retail sector deliver fair, secure and quality employment?

The low-paid and precarious nature of the sector is correlated with high levels of staff turnover and absenteeism, which has associated costs for employers in terms of recruitment and training.⁴² Employers who advance gender equality at work are able to recruit from a wider talent pool, address skills gaps, and see their businesses become more productive, more innovative, and more profitable.⁴³ The Living Wage Foundation also found that organisations that pay the real Living Wage have reported improvements in staff loyalty, engagement and quality of work, reductions in staff turnover and absenteeism.⁴⁴ It therefore makes good business sense to prioritise action that will deliver fair work and improve job quality in the sector.⁴⁵

However, despite the clear business case to advance gender equality at work, employer complacency remains a critical challenge to addressing women's labour market equality. The current fair work policy framework and supporting tools do not afford sufficient attention to women's experiences of employment and there is a lack of specific actions designed to achieve fair work for women. There is consequently a critical role for Scottish Government and the delivery agencies to better gender fair work policymaking in order to improve women's experiences of employment in the retail sector. In addition, the Scottish Government should also take forward actions mentioned earlier in this submission around supporting the large supermarkets and unions in implementing job evaluation across the sector; developing gender-sensitive upskilling and reskilling interventions; and working with the UK Government to reinstate protection from third party sexual harassment in the Equality Act. It is also vital that retail employers take a number of practical steps to deliver fair, secure and quality employment for women. In particular, we would urge the sector to:

- Undertake an equal pay review to uncover and address discrimination in pay and grading systems.
- Develop gender-sensitive upskilling and reskilling interventions to mitigate the disproportionate gendered impact of Covid-19 and automation on retail workers.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² USDAW (2019) *Industrial Strategy for Retail*

⁴³ Close the Gap (2016) *Gender Equality Pays: The economic case for addressing women's labour market inequality*

⁴⁴ Living Wage Foundation *Good Jobs in Retail: A Toolkit* available at https://www.livingwage.org.uk/sites/default/files/Living%20Wage%20Foundation%20-%20Good%20Jobs%20Toolkit_1_0_1.pdf

⁴⁵ Living Wage Foundation *Living Hours: Providing security of hours alongside a real Living Wage* available at <https://www.livingwage.org.uk/living-hours>

- Deliver decent pay and job security for workers, with a minimum of £10 per hour, an end to exploitative zero-hour and short-hour contracts; and a minimum contract of 16 hours per week for those who need and want it.
- Provide a decent notice period for shifts of at least four weeks' notice, with guaranteed payment if shifts are cancelled within this notice period.
- Provide high-quality flexible working to workers that need it, particularly women workers who need flexible hours to manage their caring roles with work.
- Ensure that the process for accessing training and development opportunities is transparent and open to all staff, regardless of working patterns.
- Develop and implement a robust sexual harassment policy that recognises the gendered experience of sexual harassment, and take steps to prevent sexual harassment in the workplace.

3B) What's the gender impact of the move away from traditional retail?

Section 2 of our submission highlights many of the barriers that exist with regards to realising fair work for women in the retail sector. Our analysis provides some insight into how the move away from traditional retail may impact women's employment and job quality in the sector. In addition, in answering this question, we provide some further information on the gender impacts of the growth of online retail and automation.

The growth of online retail

As a result of the growth in online retail, employment in customer-facing retail jobs have been declining while increasing numbers of jobs have been created in logistics, fulfilment and technical roles relating to online sales.⁴⁶ Changes in the distribution of jobs in the sector will negatively impact women's employment because women account for the majority of those employed in shop floor roles but are under-represented in these newly created roles. Indeed, women accounted for 64% of sales and retail assistants, and 73% of retail cashiers and checkout operators in September 2021.⁴⁷ Without gender-sensitive upskilling and reskilling support to enable women to enter new and emerging roles, the growth of online retail is likely to have implications for women's unemployment. Moreover, efforts to improve resilience in response to sectoral shifts often focus on reducing staff costs, including minimising investment in training and limiting the cost of employee pay and benefits.⁴⁸ The growth of online retail could thus have negative implications for job quality in the sector.

Scottish Government analysis also highlighted the "challenging outlook" for in-store

⁴⁶ <https://internetretailing.net/strategy-and-innovation/strategy-and-innovation/retail-job-numbers-stay-steady-but-the-nature-of-the-jobs-is-changing-as-stores-close-and-online-expands-23302>

⁴⁷ Annual Population Survey – regional – employment by occupation

⁴⁸ Living Wage Foundation *Good Jobs in Retail: A Toolkit* available at https://www.livingwage.org.uk/sites/default/files/Living%20Wage%20Foundation%20-%20Good%20Jobs%20Toolkit_1_0_1.pdf

retail during Covid-19.⁴⁹ While in-store retail sales declined significantly during the crisis, online retail sales as a percentage of total sales reached an all-time high of 36% in January 2021. Online sales remain significantly higher than they were pre-pandemic, accounting for 29% of retail sales in April 2021.⁵⁰ The changing nature of retail sales is further evidenced by the permanent closure of prominent high street stores, with a number of retail companies going into administration during the pandemic leading to large numbers of redundancies. For example, the collapse of Debenhams and Arcadia alone resulted in the loss of 25,00 jobs across the UK. 80% of staff working for both retailers were women, resulting in the loss of around 20,000 women's jobs.⁵¹ During the pandemic, job losses in 'bricks and mortar' retail may have been offset by the recruitment of largely male couriers; parcel sorters; and warehouse workers.⁵² The pandemic is therefore likely to have catalysed further changes in the structure of the sector, displacing a largely female workforce. In the longer-term, the shift to online shopping may represent a changed gender division of labour in retail.⁵³

Automation

The British Retail Consortium estimate up to 60% of jobs in retail are at risk of automation,⁵⁴ and over 40% of USDAW members are concerned that new technologies will impact their job security.⁵⁵ Female-dominated roles in the retail sector are at greatest risk of automation, with the ONS estimating that 65% of retail cashier and check-out working time could be automated. This presents numerous challenges around women's labour market equality and future skills demand.

There are a number of reasons to suspect that the pace of automation in the Scottish economy will increase as a result of the pandemic. Evidence from the three recessions in the past 30 years found that 88% of job losses took place in highly automatable occupations, with automation being viewed as accounting for "essentially all" of the jobs lost in the crises.⁵⁶ Research shows that automation tends to happen in bursts, often concentrated in the wake of economic shocks when labour becomes relatively more expensive as firms' revenues rapidly decline.⁵⁷ Moreover, Covid-19 may change consumer behaviour as a result of social distancing and fear of contracting the virus,

⁴⁹ Scottish Government (2020) *State of the Economy – September 2020*

⁵⁰ Business Insights and Conditions Survey Scotland (BICS) Wave 30 - 19th April to 16th May 2021.

⁵¹ USDAW (2021) *The Crisis in Retail: USDAW's case for a retail recovery plan*

⁵² Scottish Government (2021) *International Mechanisms to Revalue Women's Work: Research exploring and evaluating international mechanisms that aim to revalue or result in the revaluation of women's work*, available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/international-mechanisms-revalue-womens-work-research-exploring-evaluating-international-mechanisms-aim-revalue-result-revaluation-womens-work/>

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ British Retail Consortium (2016) *Retail 2020*

⁵⁵ USDAW (2019) *Industrial Strategy for Retail*

⁵⁶ Jaimovich, Nir and Siu, Henry (2012) *Job Polarisation and Jobless Recoveries*

⁵⁷ Muro, Mark (2020) 'Will the covid-19 pandemic accelerate automation?', *The Economist*, April 22 2020, available at <https://eiperspectives.economist.com/technology-innovation/will-covid-19-pandemic-accelerate-automation>

leading to consumers preferring automated services to face-to-face interactions in sectors such as hospitality and retail for the foreseeable future, adding further incentives to businesses to automate their services.⁵⁸

Redundancies in the retail sector as a result of the changes highlighted above could have profound consequences for women's labour market and economic equality as retail has a high outflow into unemployment.⁵⁹ Moreover, retail's decline is likely to have a particularly negative impact in places with poor alternative local employment prospects for women who have been made redundant. As the main providers of childcare and unpaid work, women face gendered barriers to travelling for employment and are more likely to seek employment in the local area.⁶⁰ Employment opportunities, especially those that are well-paid, tend to be distant from residential areas and the services and amenities that women need for caring and household management roles. This limits women's access to the labour market and creates time poverty for those juggling paid and unpaid work.⁶¹ Limited alternative employment opportunities within local town centres could therefore particularly disadvantage women's employment opportunities.

⁵⁸ Benedikt Frey, Carl (2020) 'COVID-19 will only increase automation anxiety', *Financial Times*, April 21 2020, available at <https://www.ft.com/content/817228a2-82e1-11ea-b6e9-a94cfd1d9bf>

⁵⁹ Resolution Foundation (2019) *Sorry, we're closed: Understanding the impact of retail's decline on people and places*

⁶⁰ ONS (2019) 'The commuting gap: women are more likely than men to leave their job over a long commute' available at <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/articles/thecommutinggapwomenaremorelikelythanmentoleavetheirjoboveralongcommute/2019-09-04>

⁶¹ Engender *Local Government and Communities Committee Planning (Scotland) Bill* available at <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Engender-Parliamentary-Briefing---Planning-Scotland-Bill-March-2018.pdf>