



Close the Gap response to the Social Justice and Social Security Committee's inquiry into the Carer's Allowance Supplement (Scotland) Bill

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

1. INTRODUCTION

Close the Gap welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Social Justice and Social Security Committee's inquiry into the Carer's Allowance Supplement Bill. Care, both paid and unpaid, is a gendered issue. There are now 1.1 million unpaid carers in Scotland, 61% of whom are women. This is an increase of 392,000 since the start of the pandemic with 78% of carers having to provide more care than they were prior to the coronavirus outbreak.¹ However, this issue also predates the pandemic, with reduced provision and tighter eligibility rules driving an increased reliance on unpaid carers. Women provide the vast majority of unpaid care, often having multiple unpaid caring roles for children and other relatives who are older or require support.² Data from the DWP shows that women in the UK are more than 2.5 times more likely to receive Carer's Allowance.³ Unpaid care is foundational to the economy and yet is missing from mainstream economic models. This sustains the undervaluing of care and of unpaid carers.

Women's disproportionate responsibility for care and other domestic labour affects their ability to enter and progress equally in the labour market. Women are four times more likely to leave their job because of multiple caring responsibilities and are more likely to be in low-paid, part-time employment as this is often the only option that will enable them to balance earning with caring.⁴ Providing unpaid care also has a significant impact on health and wellbeing, with one in four unpaid carers reporting

¹ Engender (2020) *Gender and Unpaid Work: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women's caring roles*

² Carers UK and Employers for Carers (2012) *Sandwich Caring: Combining childcare with caring for older or disabled relatives*

³ DWP Stat Xplore: Dataset: CA: Cases in Payment - Data from May 2018, Table 1 - Gender

⁴ Ibid

that they have not had a break from caring in five years.⁵ Women's disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care, along with their over-representation in paid care work, is sustained by persistent gender norms.

Close the Gap's particular interest in this consultation relates to the far-reaching impact women's unpaid caring roles have on gender inequality in the labour market, and women's poverty.

2. ANSWERS TO CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

- 1. What are your views on the increased payment of the Carer's Allowance Supplement?**
- 2. Do you agree with increasing the December payment of Carer's Allowance Supplement?**

Close the Gap welcomes the increased payment of the Carer's Allowance Supplement, as outlined in the Bill. It is positive that the Bill also provides scope for further increases to the Supplement in the future.

Carer's Allowance remains set at the lowest rate for any income replacement benefit and research by Carer's UK found that, across the UK, the cumulative total of cuts to carers incomes as a result of welfare reform reached over £1 billion.⁶ Women's access to resources, security and safety has also been disproportionately impacted by the UK Government's wider welfare reform programme with 86% of the net 'savings' raised through cuts to social security over the decade of austerity from 2010 to 2020 coming from women's incomes.⁷ Welfare reform has pushed many women into further and deeper poverty, and women with unpaid caring roles are particularly likely to have been impacted by social security changes. The Carer's Allowance Supplement is therefore a lifeline for many unpaid carers in Scotland and the increase in the payment will help to alleviate financial precarity for many women providing care for older people and disabled people. At present, caring can leave carers with a legacy of poverty which lasts beyond the end of their caring role, as well as poor physical and mental health.⁸

Research by Carers Scotland found that 53% of carers receiving Carers Allowance were struggling to make ends meet and 79% of carers regularly use their own income or savings to pay for support, equipment or products for the person they care for.⁹

⁵ Carers UK (2017) 'Carers in four unpaid carers "have not had a day off" in five years' available at <https://www.carersuk.org/news-and-campaigns/news/one-in-four-unpaid-carers-have-not-had-a-day-off-in-five-years>

⁶ Carers UK (2014) *Caring and Family Finances Inquiry: Carers Struggling with Alarming Levels of Hardship*

⁷ Engender (2016) *Securing Women's Futures: Using Scotland's New Social Security Powers to Close the Gender Equality Gap*

⁸ Carers Scotland (2021) *Response to the Adult Social Care Review*

⁹ Ibid.

This financial precarity can have long-term impacts, with 54% of unpaid carers stating they were not able to plan for their retirement. Improving financial support is therefore critical in securing women's incomes and ensuring that those caring for disabled people and older people do not face a rising tide of poverty as a result of the pandemic.

4. Do you consider the increased payment the best way to support unpaid carers with the challenges faced as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic?

Unpaid carers, 60% of whom are women, save Scotland an estimated £10.8 billion per year which amounts to a third of the national budget.¹⁰ Despite this, Carer's Allowance is currently paid at just £67.60 per week and the Carer's Allowance Supplement is paid twice yearly at a rate of £231.40. The additional payments of Carer's Allowance Supplement during the pandemic have been a welcome recognition of the additional work and stress undertaken by unpaid carers during the crisis. However, there remains a need to develop a longer-term mechanism to ensure the security of unpaid carers for disabled people and older people in the form of a payment equivalent to at least the real living wage. The payment should be flexible and capable of being combined with paid work and education or training while compensating for hours delivered.¹¹ At present, the low rate of Carer's Allowance sustains women's poverty and does not reflect the economic value of unpaid carers.

In the context of Covid-19, work by Glasgow Disability Alliance, Inclusion Scotland and the ALLIANCE has found that social care packages have been reduced during the crisis, with some Health and Social Care Partnerships increasing their eligibility criteria which has made it more difficult to access care, displacing responsibility for care onto female family members.¹² Any future gaps in social care provision are likely to lead to increased pressure on women to fulfil these roles on an unpaid basis, potentially driving them out of the workforce and into greater poverty.¹³

Evidence highlights that the pandemic has also had an impact on unpaid carers access to paid work.¹⁴ Research from Citizens Advice found that 2 in 5 people with caring responsibilities were facing redundancy, more than double that of the average working population. Evidence also highlights that 22% of carers were either

¹⁰ Engender (2016) *Securing Women's Futures: Using Scotland's new social security powers to close the gender equality gap*

¹¹ Engender (2021) *Parliamentary Briefing on Recognising the Importance of Family Caregivers*

¹² The Alliance (2020) *Response to the Equalities and Human Rights Committee inquiry on the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on equalities and human rights*

¹³ Close the Gap (2020) *Disproportionate disruption: The impact of COVID-19 on women's labour market equality*

¹⁴ Engender (2020) *Engender response to the Commission on Social Justice and Fairness consultation on Discussion Paper 2: Reform of Social Care*

furloughed or took unpaid leave in response to social distancing.¹⁵ These difficulties in balancing increased caring responsibilities and paid work will continue in the aftermath of the pandemic, particularly as many carers may need to shield in order to protect the people they care for. Additional financial support through an increased payment of the supplement is thus necessary to address any lost income as a result of difficulties in maintaining paid work and caring responsibilities over the course of the pandemic.

However, as highlighted in more detail in question six below, short-term financial support is insufficient in itself to address the issues faced by unpaid carers in Scotland. 53% of unpaid carers felt overwhelmed managing their caring responsibilities during the crisis. In addition, over two thirds of carers (69%) say that their mental health has worsened because of a lack of breaks during the pandemic, and 64% of carers said their physical health has got worse.¹⁶ There is also a need for tailored support for carers in returning to employment in the aftermath of the pandemic, as well as a continued drive for improved flexible working opportunities in the labour market to assist women in balancing care and paid work. While financial support is therefore an important starting point, the scope of this Bill is too narrow to address the wider social, economic and labour market inequalities faced by women who have unpaid caring responsibilities.

6. Do you have any other views on the Bill?

In addition to increasing the Carer's Allowance Supplement, there is a need to develop a longer-term mechanism to ensure the security of unpaid carers for disabled people and older people in the form of a payment equivalent to at least the real living wage. In addition, wider support for unpaid carers is necessary. A recent survey by Carers UK found that 74% of carers are exhausted as a result of caring, 71% are stressed and anxious and 65% feel lonely and isolated.¹⁷ Other actions that should urgently be adopted include ensuring unpaid carers have increased access to breaks and replacement care, alongside access to training to support carers in their caring role. In addition, the Scottish Government's wider commitments to social care reform must recognise the contribution of unpaid carers, while ensuring social care services are appropriately funded and accessible to those in need of support.¹⁸

The undervaluation of the social care workforce is sustained by stereotypes around gender roles and assumptions and women's and men's capabilities and interests.

¹⁵ National Carers Organisations (2020) *Discussion Paper: Moving out of lockdown*

¹⁶ Carers UK (2021) *Breaks or breakdown: Carers Week 2021 Report*

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Close the Gap (2020) *Close the Gap submission to the Independent Review of Adult Social Care* available at <https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/Close-the-Gap-submission-to-the-Independent-Review-of-Adult-Social-Care.pdf>

There is a widespread assumption that caring and other unpaid work done in the home is better suited to women because historically it has been their role. This drives the undervaluation of this work when it is done in the labour market, with jobs such as cleaning, catering, childcare and social care paid at, or close to, the minimum wage as a result. In addition, the idea that women are intrinsically more caring is used to justify the low pay attached to care work in the labour market, with perceived job satisfaction a substitute for fair pay.¹⁹ Ensuring that unpaid carers have appropriate financial support and access to wider support is thus a critical aspect of addressing the continued economic undervaluation of the social care workforce.

¹⁹ Folbre, N (2012) *Should Women Care Less? Intrinsic Motivation and Gender Inequality*