



Submission to the Social Justice and Social Security Committee inquiry into child poverty and parental employment

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.

1.0 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. This was reflected in the child poverty delivery plan 2018-2022 which highlighted "conclusive evidence that poverty and gender are inextricably linked"¹. A gendered analysis is, however, less evident in the current child poverty delivery plan, *Best Start, Bright Futures*². While the plan highlights Scottish Government's prior commitment to developing a strategy to better mainstream equality in policy and delivery, gender is not mainstreamed in the plan itself.

The plan's gender-blind use of 'parents' throughout obscures the gendered experiences women with childcare responsibilities face in employment, education and training, and in progression. For example, the section on childcare does not mention women or mothers specifically, despite clear evidence that childcare provision is the most immediate barrier to women being able to work, train and study. Scottish Government's gender equality index shows that 85% of those who are 'economically inactive' due to caring are women³.

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*

³ Scottish Government (2020) *Scotland's Gender Equality Index*, available at: <https://data.gov.scot/genderindex/gender-equality-index-2020.html>

Women's poverty is interlinked with child poverty. Women's propensity to be primary caregivers strongly shapes how they engage with the labour market. Women comprise the majority of low paid workers in Scotland and the gender pay gap is a key factor in women's higher levels of poverty. 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 and has lifelong impacts for women including debt, poor mental health, and less access to assets and resources.

Having a childcare role makes it more difficult for women to find flexible work that allows them to balance earning with caring. As a result, women are further concentrated into low paid and insecure work, as most part-time work is found in the lowest paid jobs and sectors, often leading to women working below their skill level. Research from Living Wage Scotland found that women in part-time work will benefit the most from Living Wage accreditation.⁴

Women with childcare responsibilities, and single parents particularly, 91% of whom are women, are trapped in poverty by a range of factors including the prohibitive cost of childcare; a lack of quality flexible working and part-time jobs; difficulties in accessing training and development opportunities; and generic employability and skills programmes and a social security system that do not meet their needs. 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 economic and labour market inequality is therefore drives child poverty. As a result of women's greater provision of unpaid childcare and gendered norms surrounding unpaid work including household management, women's incomes remain a critical factor in child poverty. Evidence shows that where women's disposable income is reduced, spending on children decreases.⁵ Women also tend to be 'poverty managers' and will routinely shield their families from poverty by going without food, clothing or warmth themselves. Consequently women can feel the effects of poverty more keenly, impacting their physical and mental health.⁶ In managing poverty women carry the main strain of budgeting inadequate material resources and may face additional barriers to accessing community support is made

⁴ Jones, Gareth (2019) 'Women benefit from living wage expansion', *Third Force News*, available at <https://tfn.scot/news/women-benefit-from-living-wage-expansion>

⁵ CPAG (2012) *Ending child poverty by 2020*, available at: <https://cpag.org.uk/policy-and-campaigns/report/ending-child-poverty-2020-progress-made-and-lessons-learned>

⁶ Women's Budget Group (2005) *Women's and Children's Poverty: Making the links*

more difficult by inaccessible services and inadequate public transport.⁷ Action on women's labour market inequality, such as improving access to affordable childcare, tackling the undervaluation of women's work, enabling women to enter good quality employment, increasing the availability of flexible working, and increasing women's incomes should therefore be a key priority in tackling child poverty.

Children's access to resources, safety and wellbeing cannot be viewed in isolation from their mother's experiences. Achieving Scotland's child poverty targets requires urgent and focused action to eradicate poverty and inequality experienced by women. A gender-blind focus on household income masks women's specific experiences of poverty and insecurity. While the child poverty delivery plan 2018-2022 recognises this explicitly, action on the gender pay gap, social security and providing sufficient accessible childcare has not been adequately prioritised. Unless interventions to advance women's equality and secure women's incomes, Scotland will fail to meet child poverty targets.

Close the Gap welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to the Committee's inquiry into child poverty and parental employment. We would urge that the Committee applies a gendered lens to its work and consider women's specific experiences of engaging with the labour market as this is a key driver of child poverty. Much of the evidence and expertise on childcare in this submission draws on a joint position paper on childcare policy which Close the Gap has developed with One Parent Families Scotland. A pre-publication copy of the paper, *A Childcare System for All: Putting gender equality at the centre of Scotland's childcare policy*, has also been submitted to the Committee.

2.0 Answers to inquiry questions

Q1. What changes to childcare provision in Scotland could have the greatest impact on child poverty?

Q2. Who should any extension of free or subsidised childcare be offered to?

Q3. What age groups should be prioritised for further expansion of childcare?

Close the Gap and One Parent Families Scotland's joint position paper on childcare, *A Childcare System for All: Putting gender equality at the centre of Scotland's childcare policy*⁸ sets out the importance of childcare to women's lives, especially women who are single parents. The lack of affordable and flexible childcare reinforces women's social, economic and labour market inequality because it is women who are more likely to do the bulk of unpaid childcare. This significantly constrains women's

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Close the Gap and One Parent Families Scotland (forthcoming) *A Childcare System for All: Putting gender equality at the centre of Scotland's childcare policy*

engagement with the labour market, and whether they are able to study or do training. 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. Close the Gap has welcomed the introduction of the 1140 funded hours. This expansion has been a positive step towards improving access to affordable and flexible childcare in Scotland. However, current commitments must be the starting point, rather than the end point of reform.

The vision articulated by Close the Gap and One Parent Families Scotland propose a childcare system which works for everyone. It contains a set of principles which should drive the next stages in the development of Scotland's childcare offer. The principles describe a system of childcare that promotes women's socio-economic and labour market equality, advances children's rights, and addresses child poverty. The principles are:

- A system of childcare that puts choice for all families at the heart of provision.
- A universal funded entitlement of 50 hours per week for children aged 6 months and above that is free at the point of use for all families.
- A high quality service which delivers positive outcomes for children and realises children's rights.
- A diverse and skilled childcare workforce that is valued, paid fairly, and gender balanced.
- Flexible delivery that enables families to access childcare when they need and want it.
- Investment in childcare should be considered as necessary infrastructure for a sustainable wellbeing economy and a good society.
- Work towards a childcare system that is not based on profit-making.

The evidence and analysis underpinning each of the principles is set out in more detail in the forthcoming joint report which has been shared with the Committee which we would urge the Committee to consider in its evidence review. In this submission, Close the Gap highlights key areas which are particularly relevant to the Committee's inquiry.

50 hours of flexible, funded childcare for all children 6 months and above

The introduction of 1140 funded entitlement was welcomed by Close the Gap, as were Scottish Government commitments around wraparound childcare and the expansion of free early learning and childcare to 1 and 2 year-olds. These commitments should be early priorities for Scottish Government in implementing the

child poverty delivery plan, in recognition of the importance of affordable and accessible childcare in meeting child poverty targets.

However, there remain critical system challenges which manifest in a lack of affordable, flexible childcare for women, especially those on low incomes. In particular, the current system fails to meet the needs of children under three years, and disabled children⁹. This has a disproportionate impact on women who are single parents, especially young single mothers, who are already more likely to experience deeper and more persistent poverty. Close the Gap and One Parent Families Scotland's joint vision on childcare sets out in more detail how the prohibitive cost of childcare traps women and their families in poverty, reduces women's financial independence, and drives the gender pay gap.

The 1140 entitlement still only equates to the duration of the school day, and therefore does not provide enable women to work full-time. This is compounded by delivery challenges around the funded entitlement at the local level which is very often insufficiently flexible for women and their families.¹⁰ Research by Scottish Government¹¹ found that of those parents who do not use all of their funded entitlement, almost a quarter of those with children aged 3 to 5 years (23%) and a fifth with children aged 2 years (20%) said they were unable to get the days and hours at their preferred setting. A recent survey by the Scottish Women's Budget Group found that, of women with children who were entitled to the 1140 hours, two-thirds reported that the delivery of these hours do not cover their childcare requirements due to a lack of flexibility in delivery.¹²

To meet the needs of all women and their families, including those on low incomes, there should be a funded entitlement of 50 hours for children aged 6 months and above to enable women to work full-time if they need to or want to. Equalising access should be central to childcare provision as the restrictions in the current system mean that women on low incomes do not have the same access to childcare provision that those on higher incomes do. 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.

⁹ Close the Gap and One Parent Families Scotland (forthcoming) *A Childcare System for All: Putting gender equality at the centre of Scotland's childcare policy*

¹⁰ Audit Scotland (2018) *Early Learning and Childcare*

¹¹ Scottish Government (2022) *Early Learning and Childcare – Parents' Views and Use: Survey findings 2022*, available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/parents-views-use-early-learning-childcare-scotland-2022/>

¹² 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/>

The call for 50 hours per week has also been supported by the First Minister's National Advisory Council on Women and Girls¹³; the Poverty and Inequality Commission¹⁴; the Social Renewal Advisory Board¹⁵; Poverty Alliance¹⁶; and the Child Poverty Action Group¹⁷.

Tackling the undervaluation of the childcare workforce is necessary to expand provision, and ensure good quality services.

The Commission for Childcare Reform concluded the primary factor that determines the quality of childcare is the staff who work with children in childcare settings.¹⁸ Highly qualified staff in early learning and childcare settings is also a well-evidenced indicator of quality which leads to positive developmental outcomes for children.¹⁹ International evidence also shows that valuing the workforce produces better outcomes for children; highly qualified childcare staff, with sufficient staff to child ratios, results in positive developmental outcomes for children²⁰. Scottish Government's strategic plan notes that the quality of service is determined by a range of factors including staffing levels and aspects of their working conditions, staff qualifications and staff development.²¹ Despite this, the female-dominated workforce is undervalued and underpaid. This not only has an impact on service delivery but also on the women workers, many of whom are experiencing in-work poverty. Improving the status and pay of the workforce is therefore critical to

¹³ National Advisory Council on Women and Girls (2018) *2018 Report and Recommendations* available at <https://onescotland.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/2018report.pdf>

¹⁴ Poverty and Inequality Commission (2021) *Child Poverty Delivery Plan progress 2020-2021 Scrutiny by the Poverty and Inequality Commission* <https://povertyinequality.scot/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Child-poverty-scrutiny-report-2020-21-Report-to-Scottish-Government-22-June-2021-003.pdf>

¹⁵ Social Renewal Advisory Board (2021) *If Not Now, When? The Social Renewal Advisory Board Report* available at <https://www.gov.scot/publications/not-now-social-renewal-advisory-board-report-january-2021/>

¹⁶ Poverty Alliance (2021) *A Scotland for All of Us: Poverty Alliance 2021 Scottish Parliament Election Manifesto* available at: <https://www.povertyalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/A-Scotland-for-all-of-us-Poverty-Alliance-2021-Scottish-Parliament-election-manifesto.pdf>

¹⁷ Child Poverty Action Group Scotland (2021) *Early Years and Childcare: 1140 hours and beyond – MSP briefing*, available at: <https://cpag.org.uk/policy-and-campaigns/briefing/early-learning-and-childcare-%E2%80%93-1140-hours-and-beyond-msps-briefing>

¹⁸ The Commission for Childcare Reform (2015) *Meeting Scotland's Childcare Challenge: The report of the Commission for Childcare Reform*

¹⁹ See Scottish Government (2022) *Early Learning and Childcare Expansion Programme: Evaluation Strategy* Fawcett (2022) *Childcare and early education systems: A comparative literature review of liberal welfare states* available at <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=88773740-12ac-40d8-9921-217f3228363d> and Siraj, Prof Iram and Denise Kingston (2015) *An independent review of the Scottish early learning and childcare workforce and out of school care workforce*

²⁰ Fawcett (2022) *Childcare and early education systems: A comparative literature review of liberal welfare states*, available at: <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/childcare-and-early-education-systems>

²¹ Scottish Government (2022) *Best Start: Strategic early learning and school age childcare plan for Scotland 2022-26*

tackling women's and children's poverty, meeting demand for labour in the sector, and improving children's outcomes.

Women account for 96% of the early learning and childcare workforce in Scotland.²² The low pay associated with childcare is driven by the sector-wide undervaluation of the predominantly female workforce, and is central cause of the sector's recruitment and retention problem. In economics, the undervaluation of "women's work" means that there is evidence of lower returns to women's productive characteristics, which means that will get less pay for investing in new skills²³. The undervaluation of the childcare workforce is sustained by stereotypes around gender roles and assumptions and women's and men's capabilities and interests. 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 the idea that women are intrinsically more caring used to justify the low pay attached to care work in the labour market. Women's perceived job satisfaction is often viewed as a substitute for fair pay.²⁴ Despite evidence that the earliest years see the most rapid development in the human brain than at any other period in the life course, those who work with children at this critical stage generally have the lowest level of qualification and the worst pay and conditions in the children and young people's workforce.²⁵ The undervaluation of professional childcare work sustains women's and children's poverty. The undervaluation of women's work in the wider economy is discussed more in our answer to question 12.

Q4. What type of childcare could work best to serve the needs of parents in employment or seeking employment?

As highlighted in Close the Gap and One Parent Families Scotland's joint vision on childcare policy, a lack of flexibility in childcare services is a key challenge in Scotland's childcare system. Current delivery is inconsistent, geographically variable, and insufficiently flexible to meet the needs of women, especially those who work atypical hours or irregular shift patterns. While the current provision of 1140 hours is welcome, it only equates to the duration of the school day. Women consistently report that they need childcare that is available at the times that they need it, and is

²² 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*

²³ Grimshaw, Damien and Jill Rubery (2007) *Undervaluing Women's Work*, Equal Opportunities Commission

²⁴ See Education, Children and Young People Committee papers – 15th meeting 2022, Wednesday 25th of May 2022 and Folbre, N (2012) *Should Women Care Less? Intrinsic Motivation and Gender Inequality*

²⁵ Siraj, Prof Iram and Denise Kingston (2015) *An independent review of the Scottish early learning and childcare workforce and out of school care workforce*

responsive to their work patterns. The model of flexible daycare that was developed and tested by One Parent Families Scotland and now delivered by and now delivered by Flexible Childcare Services Scotland service shows how vital it is for parents to be able to study, secure work, increase their hours and progress in work.²⁶ The adoption of this approach in delivering 50 hours of childcare in each local authority, tailored to local demographics, would provide a lifeline for families on low incomes.

Q5. What improvements to public transport could support parents?

Women are the majority of public transport users, and are less likely to drive²⁷ and cycle²⁸ than men. Women on low incomes are particularly likely to rely on public transport to travel around and commute to work. Because women are more likely to have a childcare role or multiple caring responsibilities, 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 are more expensive, are unavailable, or are too infrequent to meet women's needs. This significantly restricts women's options when seeking employment, and accessing employability services.

The cost of public transport is a critical barrier for women, given their concentration in low-paid jobs and among low income households. There is wide variation in transport costs depending on mode and delivery models. Close the Gap welcomes the implementation of free bus travel in Scotland for young people under 22 years, however, this does not go far enough. We supported Poverty Alliance's campaign to introduce free bus travel for young people under 25 years and people receiving Universal Credit²⁹. This would provide more opportunities to women on low incomes in accessing employment.

Safety when travelling to and from work is a further concern for women working in sectors such as retail, care and hospitality, who may finish work late at night. This

²⁶ One Parent Families Scotland (2017) *Families House: Flexible daycare – the social impact of a family-friendly approach to childcare* available at <https://opfs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Families-House-flexible-daycare-2016-17.pdf>, and One Parent Families Scotland (2018) *Flexible Childcare Service Scotland: Our social impact 2017/18*, available at: https://opfs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/OPFS_Social_Impact_Report_2017-18.pdf

²⁷ Transport Scotland (2019) *Scottish Transport Statistics: 2018 edition*

²⁸ 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>

²⁹ Poverty Alliance (2021) "One the road to recovery: we can make sure everyone has a seat", available at: <https://www.povertyalliance.org/blog-on-the-road-to-recovery-we-can-make-sure-everyone-has-a-seat/>

influences women's decisions around travel, and further constraining women's choices, limiting employment opportunities. Women report public transport as a locus of 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. Close the Gap would direct the Committee to work done by Engender³⁰ into planning which found that gender equality concerns are not integrated into the public planning system in Scotland, and support Engender's submission to this inquiry.

Q6. What can the Scottish Government do to increase the supply of well-paid, secure employment that works for parents?

Address the undervaluation of women's work

As set out in our answer to questions 1, 2, and 3, 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, poverty, occupational segregation and the gender pay gap.³¹ Tackling undervaluation is also necessary to reduce occupational segregation. If more men are to be encouraged into stereotypically female roles such as care and childcare, there needs to be an economic imperative to do so.

Covid-19 illuminated the critical role 'women's work' in sectors such as care, childcare, nursing, and retail play in Scotland's economy. Although these workers were essential to a successful pandemic response, they remain undervalued, underpaid, and under-protected.³² For example, the designation of care as low-skilled contributes to the economy-wide undervaluation of care work more broadly. The undervaluation of the social care workforce is sustained by stereotypes around gender roles and assumptions relating to women's and men's capabilities and interests.³³ The idea that women are intrinsically more caring is used to justify the

³⁰ 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>

³¹ Grimshaw, Damien and Jill Rubery (2007) *Undervaluing Women's Work*, Equal Opportunities Commission

³² 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>

³³ 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>

low pay attached to care work in the labour market, with perceived job satisfaction a substitute for fair pay.

Close the Gap welcomes the prioritisation of paying the living wage in Scottish Government's fair work policy. The extension of living wage coverage in undervalued female-dominated jobs and sectors is an important starting point for 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 this work is undervalued because it is predominantly women who do the work. Increasing the pay of undervalued work alone will be insufficient to better recognise the status and skills of the women working in female-dominated jobs.

The 2019 gender pay gap action plan, *A Fairer Scotland for Women*, acknowledged that the undervaluation of women's work was a key driver of Scotland pay gap. However it did not include any actions to tackle this. In 2021, Scottish Government published research³⁴ it commissioned on international mechanisms to revalue women's low-paid work in sectors such as social care, early learning and childcare, retail, and cleaning. The research makes a number of recommendations on job evaluation, collective bargaining, public procurement and gender pay gap reporting. In the recently refreshed fair work action plan Scottish Government again stopped short of committing to action on undervaluation, instead setting out it would "draw lessons from other comparable economies on what is achievable and what has worked in different contexts". The lack of action to realise pay justice for low income women is a critical failure of Scottish Government's flagship fair work policy. It undermines not only efforts to narrow the gender pay gap, but it sustains women's and children's poverty. There is no fair work without fair work for women.

Q8. What steps would be helpful at ensuring those not currently employed, and are looking for work, are supported?

Gender-competent employability support

Scottish Government's employability strategy, No One Left Behind (NOLB) is described as "placing people at the centre of the design and delivery of employability services"³⁵. The NOLB delivery plan acknowledges that women were

³⁴ 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/>

³⁵ <https://www.employabilityinscotland.com/policy/no-one-left-behind/>

disproportionately affected by Covid-19, and it notes that “investment in employability will continue to focus on helping those who struggle most in the labour market, with equalities and inclusivity at the centre of all we do.” However the delivery plan does not set out how women’s specific needs will be met. There are no actions or outcomes to deliver gender competent employability support, no actions to centre tackling occupational segregation and women’s concentration in low paid work in employability activity, and no recognition that capacity needs to be built in employability services to deliver change for women.

Generic employability programmes replicate gendered patterns of skills acquisition and employment, entrenching occupational segregation and widening the gender pay gap. Mainstream employability programmes routinely do not take account of women’s caring roles and fail to acknowledge that women’s readiness to work will be impacted by these caring roles.³⁶ The job-matching approaches adopted by these programmes are often inappropriate as women are funnelled into low-paid, inflexible jobs such as retail and care, which they inevitably leave as a result of these roles being incompatible with their caring responsibilities and other complexities of their lives. Occupational segregation is a cause and a consequence of women’s inequality in employment, acting as a barrier to women’s progression in the workplace, and entrenching women’s in-work poverty and child poverty. To be effective for women, employability services must take account of occupational segregation, stereotyping and norms around paid and unpaid work, racism and ableism, disabled women’s access needs, women’s childcare roles, and women’s experiences of men’s violence.

In particular, mainstream employability programmes do not meet the needs of low-income single parents, which places additional pressure on specialist programmes such as the Parental Employability Fund to deliver for this particular group. The Social Renewal Advisory Board noted that current programme funding for the Parental Employment Support Fund is “insufficient to make progress needed to meet Scotland’s statutory targets on child poverty”. It also subsequently recommended significant increases in funding for the Parental Employment Support Fund and called for an offer of employment support for those in receipt of the Scottish Child Payment. In addition to better funding for specialist support, mainstream programmes need to be tailored for women with caring responsibilities, especially single mothers. This should include promoting quality flexible working opportunities, providing better access to childcare support, and covering travel costs in order to

³⁶ Engender (2016) *Unblocking the pipeline: Gender and Employability in Scotland*

allow more women to access these services.³⁷ This support is critical to meet the needs of women living in poverty.

Scottish Government announced in the current child poverty delivery plan that it would introduce a Parental Transition Fund³⁸ to tackle financial barriers parents face in entering the labour market. There is still a lack of detail on how this will be operationalised including whether it is a one-off offer; whether it can be used to engage with employability support or only when starting a new job; and whether engagement with employability support will be a prerequisite to access fundings. It is essential that gendered barriers should be considered in the design and delivery of the Parental Transition Fund including:

- Support for childcare costs including childcare for disabled children which has a higher cost attached;
- Ensuring that childcare support through the programme does not negatively interact with funded childcare hours;
- Recognition that women are more reliant on public transport, and that disabled women have higher transport costs;
- Recognition of the specific needs of domestic abuse survivors such enabling participants to leave and re-engage, rather than it being a one-time offer; and
- Building intersectional gender competence in employability staff.

An intersectional focus on priority families

The child poverty delivery plan's focus on family groups at greatest risk of poverty, including lone parents, families with a disabled adult or child, young mothers, minority ethnic families, families with a child under one, and larger families, enables the targeting of resources. However, for this to be impactful, an intersectional approach is required. While there will be variations in these family groups around needs and priorities, it is important to note that each priority family is not a homogenous group. Women's experiences of inequality are not universal, but rather shaped by the intersecting inequalities they face. While there are commonalities experienced by all women at work, disabled women³⁹, racially minoritised women⁴⁰,

³⁷ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2021) *Freeing Low-Income Single Parents from In-work Poverty's Grip*

³⁸ Scottish Government (2022) *Best Start: Strategic early learning and school age childcare plan for Scotland 2022-26*

³⁹ Close the Gap (2018) *Response to the Scottish Government Consultation on Increasing the Employment of Disabled People in the Public Sector*

⁴⁰ Close the Gap (2019) *Still Not Visible: Black and Minority Ethnic Women's Experiences of Employment in Scotland*

lesbian, bisexual and trans women⁴¹, refugee women⁴², young women⁴³, and older women⁴⁴ experience different, multiple barriers to participation in the labour market, and to progression within their occupation. An intersectional approach is therefore crucial to so that policy design and delivery takes account of the needs of marginalised women, who are most likely to be living in poverty. Although language around intersectionality is becoming more prominent, this is not reflected in policy development, or in employer practice, with little meaningful focus on the needs of different groups of women.

Victim-survivors of men's violence against women

Victim-survivors of men's violence, and their children, will especially benefit from action on the causes of women's poverty. Violence against women (VAW) is a cause and consequence of gender inequality, and poverty makes women more vulnerable to forms of VAW. Perpetrators of domestic abuse use a range of tactics, including financial and economic abuse, to assert or maintain control over victim-survivors and restrict access to money and resources. The vast majority of women (89%) affected by domestic abuse report that financial abuse was central to their experience. The extent of women's poverty, and therefore child poverty, is masked by household statistics, which wrongly assume an equal distribution of household income and ignore the impacts of financial abuse. Financial dependence and poverty are both primary risk factors that diminish women's resilience and can prevent women from leaving an abusive partner. This is a particular issue for women who have No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) as a result of their migration status.

VAW affects all aspects of women's lives, and the workplace is no exception. However, employer practice on supporting victim-survivors is generally poor. Where women are not supported at work, their ability to do their job, their options to progress, and their wider labour market outcomes are negatively affected. Many women who have been sexually harassed are prevented from moving into better paid jobs or pushed out of work altogether. Women in low-paid precarious work, who are reliant on shift allocation, are more likely to be exploited by perpetrators and less likely to report sexual harassment.⁴⁵ Women affected by other forms of VAW such as stalking, and rape and sexual assault routinely face a lack of support at

⁴¹ Stonewall (2014) *The Double-Glazed Glass Ceiling: Lesbians in the workplace* and House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee (December 2015) *Transgender equality*

⁴² Scottish Refugee Council (2014) *One Step Closer*

⁴³ YWCA Scotland (2016) *Status of Young Women in Scotland*

⁴⁴ Scottish Commission on Older Women (2015) *Older Women and Work: Looking to the future*

⁴⁵ TUC (2016) *Still Just a Bit of Banter?*, available at: <https://www.tuc.org.uk/research-analysis/reports/still-just-bit-banter>

work, which affects their performance, forces them to take time off work, often with minimal or no sick pay, and in some cases are also forced to leave their job. Issues with Universal Credit not meeting women's needs, including the five-week wait, exacerbate victim-survivors' risk of poverty if they are forced to leave their job. The lack of support for victim-survivors at work also contributes to women's higher levels of poverty and child poverty.

Q9. Do you feel that parents who want to improve their employment options have sufficient access to education and training in your area? If not, what could be improved?

Gender-sensitive upskilling and reskilling support

In order to support women to improve their employment options whether that is entering the labour market for the first time, re-entering after time out, or progressing, there is a need to develop gender-sensitive upskilling and reskilling support. Evidence shows that women are less likely to have access to training, particularly women working in low-paid part-time jobs⁴⁶; 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 cost⁴⁷. Mainstreaming gender in the development of skills and training interventions would give prominence to factors which influence women's access to skills including women's propensity to have a caring role; the need to provide support with childcare and travel costs for women living in poverty; gender norms and stereotyping; occupational segregation; women's experiences of male violence; the timing and location of skills and training opportunities; and whether any course costs present a gendered financial barrier.

Scottish Government's Adult Learning Strategy for Scotland includes only a marginal reference to the gendered barriers women experience in accessing skills, and there are no actions which specifically engage with gendered patterns of skills acquisition and utilisation. Scottish Government has committed to develop a lifetime skills offer, with targeted upskilling and reskilling for the six priority groups for child poverty. Detail of this offer is yet to be made public but unless it specifically addresses the gender barriers that women on low incomes face in accessing training, it is unlikely to lift women and their families out of poverty.

⁴⁶ House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee (2016) *Inquiry into the gender pay gap*

⁴⁷ 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

Individual Training Accounts (ITAs) and the Flexible Workforce Development Fund (FWDF) are key Scottish Government skills interventions, however, they are not gendered and there is little evidence that they are addressing women's poverty or supporting women's progression. Despite this, there is a heavy reliance on ITAs and FWDF as drivers of change in specific sector such as retail⁴⁸. For example, the ITA offer is £200 towards the cost of a training course, which is entirely insufficient to pay for training which enables a woman working in a customer facing role to transition into male-dominated retail jobs that are expected to grow as a result of sectoral shifts. The interventions are also 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. Continued reliance on poorly gendered skills interventions will sustain women's and children's poverty, entrench the occupational segregation that characterises Scotland's education and skills pipeline, funnelling women into low-paid, undervalued jobs and sectors.

Skills and training interventions need to integrate a gender analysis, and be designed to take account of women's greater propensity to have caring roles, gender norms stereotyping, and should challenge occupational segregation as a central aim. It is critical that Scottish Government gather intersectional gender-sensitive sex-disaggregated data for all skills programmes and interventions to measure the extent to which policy is alleviating or sustaining women's and children's poverty.

Q10. What can employers do to offer more family friendly and flexible working conditions?

The lack of quality flexible working opportunities in Scotland's labour market sustains women's concentration in low-paid, low-skilled work and results in women's under-representation at management level and in senior grades. The shortage of flexible working drives the gender pay gap, and improving access is therefore critical to addressing women's low pay, tackling women's poverty and child poverty, and closing the gender pay gap.⁴⁹

The move to homeworking during Covid-19 demonstrated that many more jobs could be done flexibly than was previously believed. While there is a popular narrative that flexible working became normalised during the pandemic, in reality there remain numerous barriers to flexibility. Despite an increase in access to

⁴⁸ Scottish Government (2022) *Getting the Right Change: Retail strategy for Scotland*, available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/getting-right-change-retail-strategy-scotland/>

⁴⁹ Close the Gap (2016) *Gender Equality Pays: The economic case for addressing women's labour market inequality* available at <https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/Gender-Equality-Pays.pdf>

homeworking for some workers during the pandemic, evidence shows that all other forms of flexible working declined during the crisis. It is therefore easy to overstate the impact of the pandemic in changing working practices and it cannot be presumed that employers have radically changed their approach to flexible working. Evidence from the TUC found that only around one-third of the UK workforce were working from home during the pandemic, and over half continued to work outside of the home. This reflects the fact that women are the majority of key workers, working in 79% of these roles in Scotland⁵⁰.

Covid-19 also exposed who has access to different types of flexibility such as homeworking and hybrid working, with analysis showing a clear disparity in the ability of higher skilled and lower skilled workers to work from home. Less than one in ten of those in the bottom half of earners in the UK say they can work from home, compared with 50% of workers in the top half of earners.⁵¹ This pattern is also gendered because the majority of low-paid workers are women.

Women's disproportionate responsibility for childcare and care means that the lack of quality flexible working makes it difficult for them to balance work with family life.⁵² Research shows that flexible working is particularly important for single parents, 91% of whom are women, with single parents reporting a lack of understanding from their employers around their experience of being the only carer.⁵³ The lack of flexibility offered in full-time employment across the labour market, but particularly in low-paid full-time work, is a barrier to women increasing both their hours and earnings. There are particular challenges for mothers of school-age children, especially single mothers, in covering school holidays when in full-time work. More flexible options that are compatible with longer working hours, for example term-time only and compressed hours, are less common in many types of low-paid work, and term time working in particular has diminished across Scotland's labour market.⁵⁴ These options would provide women with greater opportunities to increase their hours, while also being able to take care of children. Research by Resolution Foundation found that mothers in low to middle income groups, and those who are reliant on social security, were more likely to say that greater job flexibility and more suitable childcare would encourage them to extend their hours.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Close the Gap (2021) *One Year On: How Covid-19 is impacting women's employment in Scotland*, available at: <https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/One-Year-On---How-COVID-19-is-impacting-womens-employment-in-Scotland.pdf>

⁵¹ Resolution Foundation (2020) *Doing what it takes: Protecting firms and families from the economic impact of coronavirus*

⁵² Close the Gap (2020) *Flexible Working for All? The impact of the right to request regulations in Scotland*

⁵³ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2021) *Freeing Low-Income Single Parents from In-work Poverty's Grip*

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Resolution Foundation (2012) *The Price of Motherhood: Women and part-time work*

Currently, low-paid roles are more likely to be offered on part-time basis and are also more likely to have fixed working hours and locations which create barriers to progression for those who require flexibility.⁵⁶

Women on low incomes face particular barriers in accessing flexible working. Research by Flexibility Works⁵⁷ found that women earning under £20,000 were the least likely group to have access to flexible working. Almost half among this group (47%) said they wanted to work more flexibility was because they were caring for children. Parents with a household income of less than £30,000, and single parents, were also less likely to work flexibly.

There are a range of actions that employers can take to provide more family friendly and flexible working.

Advertise jobs as flexible, by default

The most recent Flexible Jobs Index for Scotland shows that only just over a quarter (27%) of jobs in the labour market were advertised with flexible working as an option.⁵⁸ This is in spite of evidence showing that there is a high demand for flexible working: survey data from the TUC during Covid highlights that the vast majority of women (87%) want to work more flexibly in the future.⁵⁹ Furthermore, a recent study found that jobs advertised on a flexible basis attract 30% more applicants than those advertised without flexibility.⁶⁰ Improving the availability of flexible working therefore makes good business sense, as employers are able to recruit from a wider pool of talent and tap into women's under-utilised skills.⁶¹

Build capacity in line managers on flexible working

Line managers play a critical role in providing access to flexible working. Evidence shows that even where an organisation has a strong policy on flexible working, there is routinely an implementation gap with differentiated treatment and access,

⁵⁶ Timewise (2020) *The Timewise Scottish Flexible Jobs Index 2020*

⁵⁷ Flexibility Works (2022) *Flex for Life 2022*, available at: <https://www.flexibilityworks.org/flexible-working-research/flex-for-life-report-2022/>

⁵⁸ Timewise (2022) *The Timewise Scottish Flexible Jobs Index 2021* available at <https://timewise.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Timewise-Scotland-Flexible-Jobs-Index-2021.pdf>

⁵⁹ TUC (2021) *The Future of Flexible Work*

⁶⁰ Government Equalities Office (2019) *Encouraging employers to advertise jobs as flexible*, available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/966407/Encouraging_employers_to_advertise_jobs_as_flexible.pdf

⁶¹ Close the Gap (2016) *Gender Equality Pays: The economic case for addressing women's labour market inequality*

depending on how supportive a line manager is of workplace flexibility⁶². Consistency in implementation, and a strong understanding of how flexibility benefits different groups of women helps to create a more supportive organisational culture of flexible working.

Line managers need to have the knowledge and capability to support staff to work flexibly, and to ensure that women workers are not adversely affected. In Close the Gap's experience, line managers need training, guidance and tools, which explicitly set out how to create flexible practice in their teams. Close the Gap has developed a range of resources to support employers to build capacity in line managers, and develop improved practice on flexible working including our online tools Think Business, Think Equality⁶³ and Close Your Pay Gap⁶⁴, and our accreditation programme, Equally Safe at Work⁶⁵.

Ensure that flexible working policies and practice are VAW-sensitive

VAW affects all aspects of women's lives, including the workplace. Despite this, it is unusual for employers to consider the needs of victim-survivors, or for VAW to be recognised as a workplace issue. This is the challenge that Close the Gap's employer accreditation programme, Equally Safe at Work, is designed to address. Providing flexible working for victim-survivors is key to improving support in the workplace, and also increasing access to employment for victim-survivors. Flexible working can be an important safety planning measure for victim-survivors of domestic abuse, stalking and so-called "honour-based" violence. Enabling victim-survivors to work in a location that meets their needs can also support those who are affected trauma, anxiety and depression as a result of their experience. In the wider employment context, enabling women to work flexibly in a way that meets their needs is necessary to tackle the gender pay gap, and therefore prevent VAW⁶⁶.

Three-quarters of women experiencing domestic abuse are targeted at work⁶⁷. Abusers often use workplace resources such as email and phones to threaten and harass current or former partners, acquaintances, colleagues or strangers. They rely on knowing a victim-survivor's regular work patterns. Different forms of VAW,

⁶² Close the Gap (2019) *Flexible Working for All? The impact of the right to request flexible working regulations in Scotland*, available at: <https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/Flexible-Working-for-All.pdf>

⁶³ <https://www.thinkbusinessstinkequality.org.uk/#>

⁶⁴ <https://www.closeyourpaygap.org.uk/>

⁶⁵ <https://www.equallysafeatwork.scot/>

⁶⁶ Close the Gap (2017) *Response to the consultation on the draft Equally Safe delivery plan*, available at: https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/1498750312_Response-to-the-consultation-on-the-Equally-Safe-draft-delivery-plan.pdf

⁶⁷ Equality and Human Rights Commission (2013) *Managing and Supporting Employees Experiencing Domestic Abuse*

including domestic abuse, stalking, rape or sexual assault can impact women's experiences and performance in the workplace resulting in absenteeism, unexplained absences, difficulty in carrying out work, or avoiding certain work situations.

Flexible working can help support victim-survivors of domestic abuse, stalking, and rape or sexual assault because it enables them to temporarily change their work pattern or location during certain periods. It can also be used by women to change their work hours for safety reasons, as the perpetrator might target them during work hours. A victim-survivor of domestic abuse may also need more flexibility in her work schedule for several weeks to access housing services, counselling appointments, or advocacy support. These services are often only available during work hours, therefore rather than taking time off, it may be easier to vary start or finish times.

Supporting women to return from maternity leave and/or time out for childcare

After having children, many women need to reduce their hours or work flexibly in another way. A lack of flexible working across Scotland's labour market, and often inaccessible childcare services in local areas make it difficult for women to return to work in a job commensurate with their skill level. Research⁶⁸ from the Equality and Human Rights Commission on pregnancy and maternity discrimination in Scotland found that half of the women who had their flexible working request granted said they experienced unfavourable treatment as a result. Creating a flexible workplace culture and encouraging men to more unpaid children is necessary to retain women in the workplace and ensure that their skills are being effectively utilised.

Gather data on flexible working

Employers should gather data on flexible working to monitor uptake by different groups of employees, and whether flexible working requests were granted. This should involve gathering intersectional data on flexible working requests, by grade, team and department to identify any patterns around demand for flexible working, and the decision-making process. It is important to gather intersectional data to ensure that there is equal access to flexible working, and there is no intentional or unintentional discrimination towards, for example, disabled women, victim-survivors of men's violence or single parents, who may be more likely to need flexibility at work. Having good quality data will help employers to identify where there is a policy

⁶⁸ Equality and Human Rights Commission (2015) *Pregnancy and Maternity Related Discrimination and Disadvantage: Summary of key findings*, available at: <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/managing-pregnancy-and-maternity-workplace/pregnancy-and-maternity-discrimination-research-findings>

implementation gap, a training need within a specific area, or where microcultures within teams are undermining wider organisational ambitions on flexible working.

Q13. If the Scottish Government wants to help parents into work and better paid jobs, which changes should be its priority?

In this submission, we have set out the policy changes that are needed to support women into employment and better paid jobs, a necessary step in tackling child poverty. Women's labour market outcomes cannot be viewed in isolation from children's outcomes. Addressing the gendered barriers that women face in accessing employment, skills and training must be central to any strategy to eradicate poverty. Close the Gap highlights the following policy changes for prioritisation which are expanded on elsewhere in this response, and in our joint paper with One Parent Families Scotland on childcare policy.

- Design a childcare system which works for everyone, by equalising access to a funded entitlement of 50 flexible hours per week for every child ages 6 months and above.
- Developing gender-sensitive employability and skills programmes to enable women to access upskilling, reskilling, and good quality employment.
- Address the economy-wide undervaluation of women's work so that women's skills are valued and appropriately remunerated, lifting women and their children out of poverty.