

Close the Gap



**Save the
Children**



Strengths not Stigma: Research on fair work for young mothers



Contents

Foreword	4
1. Executive summary	7
2. Introduction	14
3. Methodology	18
4. Findings	25
4.1 Young mothers and poverty in Scotland	26
4.2 Mapping young mothers' labour market participation	29
4.3 Young mothers' experiences of paid work	44
4.4 Employer perceptions of young mothers	83
5. Conclusion	98
6. Recommendations	103
7. Glossary of terms	111



Foreword

Young mothers face real barriers to getting into work, staying in work, and building the future they want for themselves and their families. Too often, those barriers are accompanied by assumptions about who we are and what we're capable of. We are young mothers, but being a young mother is only one part of who we are. We have skills, ambitions, and goals for ourselves and our families. Becoming a mother at a young age doesn't mean those goals stop.

In many ways, being a mother has given us valuable skills – resilience, organisation, time management, problem solving, and the ability to manage lots of things at once. We want people reading this report to see that potential, rather than the stereotypes that are often attached to being young and being a mother.

Too often, young mothers are judged before we get the chance to prove ourselves. There can be an assumption that we don't want to work, that we are unreliable, or that having a child when we're young means we've made the wrong choices or are less ambitious about our futures. Those assumptions don't reflect our lives.

This research has put evidence behind what many of us already knew from our own lives – the barriers are real, and young mothers across Scotland are experiencing them.

The reality is that many young mothers want to work, study, build careers, and provide for their families, but face barriers that can make this

extremely difficult. Workplaces aren't always designed around the reality of family life. Childcare often doesn't fit with working hours. Flexible working might exist on paper but be difficult to access in practice. Employability support can underestimate and judge us. Small changes that could make a huge difference to a young mother can sometimes be treated as an inconvenience by an employer.

When work can't fit around childcare or other responsibilities, young mothers can end up having to take whatever job is possible rather than the job they actually want, or the one that makes best use of their skills. Some can't access work at all – but that doesn't mean they've just chosen not to work. The choice has been taken away from them, or made impossible.

We should not have to choose between being a good mother and having a future.

One of the most important things we want employers, policymakers, and others reading this report to understand is that young mothers are not the problem. Instead of asking why a young mother “can't fit” into a particular workplace, working pattern or system, ask what is creating the barrier and what could be changed.

Listen when a young mother tells you what she can do and what support or flexibility would make something possible. Something that seems like a small change to an employer can make an enormous difference to whether someone can take a job, stay in work, or progress in their career.

Young mothers all experience a lot of the same barriers, but at the same time, there isn't one solution that works for every young mother. Even within our group, our experiences of motherhood, employment, childcare, and family life are very different. People's circumstances change, children's needs change, and life is unpredictable. Policies, workplaces, and services need to recognise that.

For other young mothers reading this report, we want you to know that you are not alone. The barriers described in this research are real, and experiencing them doesn't mean that you have failed.

Your experiences matter. There are people who care about making things better, and we hope this research helps to create change for young mothers now and in the future.

Being involved in this project has reinforced for us why young mothers need to be part of work like this. Research about young mothers should not be done without young mothers. Statistics can show that something is happening, but they can't always explain what it feels like to live it, why a policy doesn't work in reality, or how different barriers come together in someone's life.

We are the people living these experiences. Our voices should be central to research about young mothers, and to the decisions, policies, services and workplace practices that affect us.

We hope the people reading this report will listen to what young mothers have said, see us for our potential, and use the evidence to create meaningful change.

Ana, Angie, Isatou, Khadiza, Martha, Natalie, Natasha, and Tia
Research and Campaign Advisers



1. Executive summary

Young mothers in Scotland are ambitious, capable, and determined: they are raising children, building futures, seeking paid work and learning, while navigating systems that limit their potential, choices, and opportunities by failing to recognise or support them. Young mothers also sit at the intersection of several of Scotland's most pressing policy challenges, from child poverty and gendered labour market inequality to insecure work, unequal caring responsibilities, and barriers to childcare. Although women and young people are recognised across existing policy frameworks, young mothers' specific experiences remain underexplored. This research aims to address this gap by bringing together a literature review, official labour market data, interviews with 32 young mothers, and a survey of 281 Scottish employers to examine how young mothers participate in paid work and what shapes their access to fair work.

Key findings

The findings show that young mothers' labour market outcomes are fundamentally shaped by structural barriers that restrict their choices. Across the research, young mothers consistently described paid work and learning as routes to income, independence, confidence, wellbeing, and better futures for their children. Yet their ability to realise these aspirations was constrained by the interaction between caring responsibilities and wider structural inequalities, including poverty, low pay, occupational segregation, inflexible jobs, discrimination, stigma, unaffordable or unsuitable childcare, and aspects of the social security system.

This matters for Scotland's ambitions to tackle child poverty because young mothers are at a disproportionate risk of poverty. Children in households with a mother aged under 25 experience the highest poverty rates of all Scottish Government priority family groups, at 55%. Young mothers also frequently experience overlapping disadvantage, for example 54% are lone parents, and 35% live with a disabled household member. Furthermore, around 42% of all young mothers experience in-work poverty. These figures illustrate an important point: employment can reduce poverty only where work is secure, adequately paid, and flexible enough to balance with caring responsibilities.

What existing evidence tells us

Young motherhood is strongly patterned by socioeconomic inequality. Although births to women under 25 have declined as the average age of motherhood has increased, women living in Scotland's most deprived areas remain substantially more likely to become mothers at a younger age. In the most deprived areas, 34.3% of first births are to women aged 16-24, compared with just 6.7% in the least deprived areas. This does not mean that young motherhood causes poverty; rather, it reflects the wider structural inequalities that shape both the likelihood and experience of becoming a mother at a younger age. Households with a mother aged under 25 have the highest poverty rate of all six priority family groups identified in the Scottish Government's child poverty strategy, at 55%. Young mothers also frequently experience overlapping disadvantage, for example, 54% are lone parents, and 35% live with a disabled household member. Around 42% of young mothers also experience in-work poverty. They are also more likely to experience income volatility, whereby earnings fluctuate unpredictably making it more difficult to budget, plan ahead, and absorb financial shocks. Together, this evidence shows that young mothers often find themselves at the intersection of age-based, gendered socioeconomic disadvantage, increasing their risk of poverty and labour market exclusion.

Labour market data shows that the roots of this inequality are visible before motherhood, with young women heavily concentrated in lower-paid, undervalued female-dominated occupations. Women also make up 79.8% of young workers in caring and service occupations, 63.7% of young workers in administrative and secretarial occupations, and 59.5% of those in sales and customer service. There are similarly stark gendered patterns in economic inactivity due to looking after the family or home, which is synonymous with providing unpaid care. Census data shows that among economically inactive 16-24-year-olds in this category, almost three quarters are women, at 73.8%, compared with 26.2% who are men. Motherhood intensifies these existing gendered patterns. Younger mothers, particularly those aged under 20 at childbirth, experience particularly low employment rates. Growing Up in Scotland data shows that 21% of mothers who gave birth before the age of 20 are in employment when their child reaches 10 months old, compared with 55% of mothers aged 20-24, and 83% of mothers aged 25 or above. The evidence also points to a part-time pay penalty as young women in their twenties take on disproportionate responsibility for childcare and become heavily penalised by the lower hourly pay rates characteristic of female-dominated, part-time roles.

How young mothers experience work

Interviews with young mothers show how these patterns translate into labour market choices and constraints. Before becoming mothers, over two thirds of participants were in paid work, mainly full time. Following motherhood, this fell to just over a third, with most working part time. A lack of appropriate childcare was the central mechanism through which this shift occurred. Participants described difficulties relating to affordability, availability, flexibility, and suitability of childcare provision, particularly for children aged under two, disabled children, and children with additional support needs. These childcare barriers interacted with low pay and social security conditionality, leaving many feeling trapped

between unaffordable childcare, low-paid jobs, and concerns about losing benefit entitlement if they increased their earnings. Decisions about paid work were therefore rarely experienced as a straightforward choice between employment and childcare responsibilities. Instead, participants described navigating trade-offs involving childcare costs eating into wages, paid work offering necessary income and thus being prioritised over study, lack of flexibility reducing opportunities for progression, or higher income from additional working hours potentially resulting in reduced financial support.

These trade-offs were further complicated by other barriers to paid work, including inflexible working hours, difficulties taking time off when children were ill or had medical appointments, inadequate transport options, poor physical and mental health, wider unpaid caring responsibilities, limited opportunities to develop skills and qualifications, and experiences of stigma and discrimination. Several participants reported experiences that could constitute pregnancy or maternity discrimination, including having their hours cut, and being dismissed while on probation after telling their employer they were pregnant. In this context, participants' feelings of anxiety, exhaustion, and being overwhelmed were not individual responses, but reflected systems that were difficult to navigate and poorly aligned with the realities of being a young mother.

Importantly, the impact of these barriers was not evenly distributed. Young mothers are not a homogeneous group, and the research shows that barriers to fair work were often intensified for lone mothers, disabled young mothers, young mothers affected by domestic abuse, care experienced young mothers, racially minoritised and migrant young mothers, and mothers of disabled children or children with additional support needs. For these groups, labour market inequalities intersected with housing insecurity, trauma, poor health and disability, racism, limited support networks, and additional unpaid caring responsibilities for family members. This reinforces the need for an explicitly intersectional

approach to fair work and anti-poverty policies, as structural inequalities are experienced differently depending on wider circumstances.

Employer attitudes and workplace practice

Employer attitudes, revealed through a survey, identified both support for and assumptions about young mothers in the workplace. Employers most commonly described young mothers as hardworking (54%), committed (50%), resilient (45%), and motivated (42%). Around two thirds of respondents agreed that young mothers are productive, committed, and reliable employees. However, employers were less likely to associate young mothers with ambition, career progression, or leadership potential: only around half agreed that young mothers are ambitious and career focused, while more than a quarter agreed that hiring a young mother is risky for employers. Attitudes also varied by organisational size and respondent age, with respondents from smaller organisations and older age groups generally more likely to express negative views of young mothers. Respondents were also far more likely to associate young mothers with administrative, caring, and service job roles than with management, technical, professional, or higher-paid occupations. This matters because seemingly positive attitudes can co-exist with occupational stereotyping, weak progression routes, and workplace cultures that quietly reproduce disadvantage.

This creates a notable tension between how employers understand the issue and how young mothers experience paid work. While many survey respondents reported that their organisation supports flexible working and career development, young mothers frequently described difficulties securing flexibility, concerns about being penalised for caring responsibilities, and limited opportunities for progression. Employer respondents widely recognised that childcare and workplace culture act as barriers, yet many also viewed flexible working requests as operationally challenging. Employer awareness of barriers, therefore, does not necessarily translate into practices that remove them.

Implications

The most persuasive finding of the report is the consistency across the evidence strands. The literature review and labour market data show how gendered inequalities are structured and patterned; young mothers' accounts show how those inequalities are lived, negotiated, and compounded; and employer responses reveal how workplace attitudes and practices can either mitigate or reinforce disadvantage. Together, the findings demonstrate that young mothers' labour market inequality is not caused by a single barrier or institution, but by the cumulative effect of systems that remain poorly aligned with the realities of young motherhood.

Recommendations

The recommendations set out coordinated action for policymakers, employers, and trade unions to address the systems that constrain young mothers' choices. They focus on centring young mothers in child poverty, fair work, childcare, employability, education, and equality policy; expanding affordable, flexible, and inclusive childcare; reducing financial risk when entering paid work or learning; and strengthening intersectional data gathering and accountability. They also call for employers to turn positive attitudes into fair workplace practices through secure hours, the Real Living Wage, genuine flexibility, inclusive recruitment and progression, protection from discrimination, support for caring responsibilities, and workplace cultures that challenge stigma and assumptions about young mothers' ambition or reliability. Trade unions also have a key role in supporting young mothers to understand and exercise their rights, and in making fair work for young mothers a bargaining priority.

Conclusion

Young mothers who participated in the research consistently described paid work and learning as routes to income, independence, confidence, routine, wellbeing, and better futures for their children. Ultimately, the

report concludes that young mothers' access to fair work is central to tackling child poverty, advancing gender equality, and achieving economic justice in Scotland. The evidence points to a need to tackle the inequalities and structural barriers that limit young mothers' employment choices. Young mothers already have clear ambitions to work, develop their skills, and build secure futures for themselves and their children. The task now is to ensure that Scotland's labour market, childcare system, social security system, and wider support structures enable young mothers to access, sustain, and progress in fair work.



2. Introduction

Young mothers in Scotland are ambitious, capable, and determined: they are raising children, building futures, seeking paid work and learning, while navigating systems that limit their potential, choices, and opportunities by failing to recognise or support them. Young mothers are also at the intersection of several of Scotland's most pressing policy challenges: gendered labour market inequality, women's and children's poverty, increasingly insecure and low-paid work, a childcare system that fails to deliver for all women and their families, and the implementation gap between fair work ambitions and young women's everyday experiences. Although the inequalities faced by women and young people in the labour market have some recognition in current policy frameworks, the experiences of young mothers specifically are almost entirely overlooked.

Increasing young mothers' access to fair work is a necessary step in tackling child poverty. 55% of children in households with a young mother aged under 25 experience poverty, the highest rate of all the priority family groups set out in Scottish Government's child poverty delivery plan.¹ It is therefore evident that a gendered approach, centring young mothers' lived experience, is needed to shift the dial on child poverty and meet the 2030 statutory targets.

¹ Scottish Government (2022) *Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan Fourth Year Progress Report 2021-22. Focus report on households with mothers aged 25 or under*. Available: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/tackling-child-poverty-delivery-plan-fourth-year-progress-report-2021-22-focus-report-households-mothers-aged-25-under/documents/>

This research addresses a critical gap; existing policy frameworks engage with gender, age, and caring responsibilities as determinants of labour market outcomes, however, young mothers' experiences of employment is an underresearched area. The aim of the research was to identify the sectors and jobs in which young mothers work, and the key characteristics of their employment in terms of occupational segregation, working patterns, pay, job security, and experiences of discrimination. It also aimed to ask young mothers about the barriers that they experience in accessing fair work, and importantly what changes to employment practice would create more fair work for them. A final element was to better understand employer perceptions of young mothers as workers.

The findings challenge any simple account of young mothers as disengaged from paid work or lacking ambition. Young mothers who participated in the research consistently described paid work and learning as routes to income, independence, confidence, routine, wellbeing, and better futures for their children. However, their decisions are constrained by systems that often make all available options laden with some type of risk. The choice was rarely simply between having a job and or not having a job; it was between low-paid work and unaffordable childcare, wanting more hours but it affecting their benefits, going back to study and this affecting the household budget, or wanting to progress but then having to forego any flexible work they did have. This is why the research is important, it shifts the focus from individual women's decision making to the conditions under which decisions are made.

A key objective of this research was to centre intersectional analysis. Young mothers do not have a uniform experience and, as the research shows, the systemic inequalities they face are intensified if they are a single parent, disabled, a survivor of domestic abuse, racially minoritised, LGBTI+, migrant, or care experienced. Understanding the way that inequalities intersect and compound for young mothers is necessary to design effective solutions to the barriers that determine their labour market outcomes. A homogenised approach will not work.

Drawing on a literature review, quantitative labour market data, semi-structured interviews with young mothers, and an online survey of Scottish employers, the research gathers wide ranging evidence on young mothers' experiences and the systemic inequalities that constrain their access to fair work and trap them and their children in poverty. Young mothers' employment outcomes are shaped by the way caring responsibilities interact with discrimination, low pay, inflexible jobs, unaffordable or unsuitable childcare, social security conditionality, stigma, and wider structural inequalities. This makes young mothers' experiences an important lens through which to understand whether Scotland's labour market is genuinely capable of delivering fair work for those with the least financial resilience and the greatest caring demands.

Critically, this research has been guided by young mothers through their participation as Research and Campaign Advisers (RACA), a group of eight young mothers with lived experience who shaped the research priorities, provided valuable insight and analysis on the findings, and contributed to the recommendation development. The project's Stakeholder Advisory Group, comprising national and local organisations and individuals with expertise on equality, anti-poverty strategies, employment rights, career advice and guidance, children's rights, and family support, also played an invaluable role in shaping this research and developing recommendations.

The report is structured as follows:

- **Chapter 3** describes the methodology used, including data sources, sampling approaches, demographic details for the semi-structured interviews with young mothers and the employer respondents to the survey, and analysis approach.
- **Chapter 4** presents the findings of each of the research elements: the literature review, the quantitative data mapping of young mothers' labour market participation, young mothers' lived experience gathered through interviews, and employer survey results.

- **Chapter 5** synthesises the findings to identify the points in the system which are constraining young mothers' access to fair work.
- Finally, **Chapter 6** presents a set of recommendations for change, emphasising that there is no one single solution – rather, structural inequality requires change at the systems level. It means policymakers, at national and local level, and employers doing things differently.



3. Methodology

Between October 2025 and May 2026, a mixed methods approach was taken to building an evidence base about young mothers' experiences in the Scottish labour market. This research aimed to identify what must change to ensure that young mothers living on a low income can access, sustain, and progress in fair work. It also explored how policy failings, poor employer practice, and the persistence of occupational segregation contribute to young mothers and their families remaining at a disproportionate risk of poverty.

The research comprised four elements which together contribute to filling widespread evidence gaps about the experiences of young mothers, a group that is often overlooked and ignored in policy and practice alike:

1. A quantitative mapping of young mothers' position in the Scottish labour market.
2. A literature review focused on young mothers' labour market experiences.
3. Semi-structured interviews with young mothers who are living on a low income, exploring their choices, experiences, and considerations around paid work.
4. An employer survey to understand perceptions and attitudes towards young mothers as employees.

Of these four elements, the interviews with young mothers were the most substantive piece of research, being key in providing a rich insight into the lived experience of young mothers around paid work. The remaining three elements supplement and contextualise the qualitative research. This mixed methods approach recognises the comparative strengths of using both quantitative and qualitative data to obtain a fuller picture of a research problem.²

Quantitative mapping

Data collection

Close the Gap conducted a quantitative data mapping exercise, drawing on available labour market data to establish what is known about the way young mothers engage in the Scottish labour market. This exercise aimed to understand where young mothers are employed and how their labour market engagement is constrained by structural inequalities, such as occupational segregation, women's disproportionate responsibility for childcare and care for adults, and low pay. Key sources of data include: Scotland's Census 2022; data from the Annual Population Survey, Labour Force Survey, and the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings; the Growing Up in Scotland study; and Family Nurse Partnership data. This provided a baseline for understanding patterns in employment, economic inactivity, and related inequalities, and helped identify where there is a lack of routinely collected data on the labour market participation of young mothers.

Literature review

Data collection

Research Scotland were commissioned to carry out a literature review to identify key themes that could inform the other research elements. The review considered available policy documents, academic papers, and grey literature relating to young mothers' experiences of the Scottish labour

² Creswell, J. (2015), *A Concise Introduction to Mixed Methods Research*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications.

market. It identified recurring barriers to paid work, which were then used to inform the discussion topics in interviews with young mothers.

Interviews

Data collection

Research Scotland were also commissioned to conduct qualitative research, which aimed to explore choices, experiences, and considerations around paid work for young mothers living on a low income. Women living in Scotland were invited to participate in the research if they considered themselves to be on a low income and met one of the following age and parenthood criteria:

- a) They were aged between 16 and 25 at the time of the research and had at least one child.
- b) They were aged 26 or over at the time of the research but had at least one child when they were between the ages of 16 and 25.

There was a particular focus on trying to recruit participants who experienced multiple and compounding inequalities. For example, disabled, racially minoritised, or care experienced young mothers, those with experience of men's violence or drug or alcohol addiction, as well as those with very young children, large families, lone parents, and who had their children at the lower end of the target age range.

The approach to participant recruitment involved identifying a range of third sector organisations across Scotland likely to work with, and be trusted by, young mothers. This included employability support organisations, poverty-focused organisations, organisations working with mothers, lone parents, or families more generally, and organisations with an explicit focus on supporting protected characteristic groups. Each organisation was asked for their support in identifying young mothers living on a low income to participate in the research. In recognition of

their time, organisations who successfully supported the recruitment of research participants were offered a small donation.

A semi-structured interview guide was created to explore the following topics:

- 1) Participants' family situation and caring responsibilities.
- 2) Their experiences of paid work before and after having children.
- 3) Thematic areas identified in the literature review that affect young mothers' options around paid work, including childcare, social security, qualifications, and stigma.
- 4) What enables young mothers to access, sustain, and progress in paid work.

Research Scotland had the flexibility to focus on the most relevant topics and questions based on each participant's lived experience and what they were willing to share. In advance of the interview, participants were also asked to complete a short demographic survey to understand the composition of the sample. This included questions about the age of participants, their age when they had their first child, disability, and ethnic origin. The interviews with young mothers lasted between 30 minutes and one hour, depending on the length of time individual participants were able to commit. To acknowledge the value of their time and expertise, each participant received a voucher. Where relevant, participants were also signposted to additional support services and any safeguarding concerns arising during interviews were escalated appropriately.

The qualitative research was guided by two advisory groups whose expertise shaped the research design and the exploration of findings. The first was our Research and Campaign Advisers (RACA). This is a group of eight women with lived experience of being a young mother who

were instrumental in ensuring the interview process and research tools would meet other young mothers' needs. This group also provided crucial expertise in sense-checking the interpretation of research findings. The research similarly benefitted from our Stakeholder Advisory Group (SAG). Members include representatives from national and local organisations, as well as individuals, who have varied expertise relevant to young mothers and employment. They influenced decision making around the ambition of the target participant sample, including how to engage participants who may experience multiple and compounding inequalities. The insights of the SAG and RACA were also vital in identifying organisations that could support participant recruitment.

The sample

A total of 32 young mothers were interviewed by Research Scotland. At the time of the research, the highest proportion of participants were aged 19-22, at 50%. This was followed by participants aged 23-25, at 38%, and participants aged 26 or over, at 12%. While there were no participants aged 16-18 at the time of the interviews, 90% of the sample had their first child by the age of 22. Participants had between one and three children. Most participants had a child aged 1-4, while 20% had a child aged under one, and 20% had a child aged five or older.

Other demographic data revealed that 10% of participants self-identified as disabled, while 50% reported having a physical or mental condition lasting 12 months or more. The research did not gather quantitative information on the specific type of disability or condition. Participants came from across Scotland, including urban, small town, rural, and remote areas. Just under a quarter of participants (23%) were from racially minoritised communities, including mixed or multiple, African, and Asian communities, and migrant women.

Through the interview process, participants disclosed a range of experiences including: care experience and adoption, male violence such as domestic abuse, homelessness, alcohol and drug addiction,

mental health issues including suicidal thoughts and attempts to end their own life, and suicide of family members. A concerted effort was made to ensure that the interview environment was safe, comfortable, and appropriate for each participant. This meant adapting the format, location, duration, and content of interviews to meet participants' needs. Safeguarding procedures were in place to ensure that each young mother was supported by trusted organisations throughout the research process.

Employer survey

Data collection

The employer poll was designed to capture employer perceptions of young mothers as employees, as well as how these compare to their perceptions of other groups of workers. This aimed to identify where bias and stereotypes may persist to the detriment of young mothers, and how attitudes differ based on employer type. Norstat was commissioned to build the poll using an online survey instrument and distribute it through their network of existing research panels. The original target sample size of 250 Scottish employers was surpassed, with the poll achieving a total of 281 valid and complete responses. An external consultant, Dr Joanna Wilson of Manchester Metropolitan University, conducted a detailed analysis of the survey data.

The literature review identified evidence of negative attitudes and poor employer practice in relation young mothers in the workplace. In order to explore this in more detail, some survey questions were designed to explore employer perceptions of young mothers as employees, including assumptions about organisational 'fit' and potential. Other key sections of the poll asked about workplace norms and attitudes towards flexible working as a means of supporting young mothers to enter, sustain and progress in paid work. The question formats included questions relating to respondents' role as an employer (for example, sector and job role), Likert scale statements, matrix and direct comparison questions, and multiple-choice questions.

The sample

There were 281 valid and complete responses from Scottish employers. Responses were sought from Scottish employers encompassing a range of sectors and industries, organisational sizes, and job roles. More than two thirds of respondents (69%) were from the private sector, with 28% from the public sector, and 3% from the third sector. Over half of all respondents were from small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Of these participants, 14% were from an organisation employing fewer than 10 employees, a further 14% employing between 10 and 49 employees, and 27% employing between 50 and 249 employees. The remaining 45% of respondents were from large employers with 250 or more employees.

Participants represented a range of sectors. While some sectors were represented by relatively small numbers, others had larger samples. The largest proportion of participants were drawn from information and communication (17%), followed by construction (13%), human health and social work activities (10%), professional, scientific and technical activities (9%), wholesale and retail (8%), manufacturing (7%), and financial and insurance activities (7%). More than two in five respondents were in senior management roles (43%), while 24% were owner-directors, a further 24% were line managers, and 8% were HR or People Leads.

Analysis

The interview responses were analysed thematically, looking at overall patterns in young mothers' experiences. This rich data reflects young mothers' lived experience of how structural inequalities impact their ability to access, sustain, and progress in paid work. However, due to the sample size (n=32), the qualitative research findings cannot reasonably be extrapolated to represent wider experiences. The mixed methods approach to this research mitigates this, complementing and contextualising the qualitative findings through statistical analysis of labour market data and responses to the employer survey. In turn, analysis of the interview data adds depth and insight into the quantitative findings.



4. Findings

This chapter presents the findings from research exploring young mothers' experiences of paid work in Scotland and the factors that shape their participation in the labour market. Drawing together analysis of UK- and Scotland-level data, interviews with young mothers, and an employer survey, the findings show that young mothers face a range of interconnected barriers to employment, including childcare, poverty, low pay, inflexible working practices, unequal caring responsibilities, and discrimination. While these barriers are often experienced across the wider population of women, the evidence suggests that they can be intensified by young motherhood and compounded by other forms of inequality, including disability, care experience, domestic abuse, racialisation, migration, and lone parenthood.

The chapter begins by examining what is known about young mothers' labour market participation and the wider structural inequalities that shape employment outcomes. It then explores young mothers' own experiences of paid work, learning, and caring, highlighting both the barriers they face and the strengths, resilience, and aspirations they bring. The chapter goes on to consider employer perceptions of young mothers, identifying areas of alignment and tension between how employers view young mothers and how young mothers themselves experience work and the workplace.

Across the findings, a consistent theme emerges: young mothers' employment experiences are shaped by the interaction between caring responsibilities and wider structural inequalities, which influence

opportunities to enter, sustain, and progress in employment. The findings therefore point to a need to address the inequalities that constrain their choices and opportunities.

Anti-racism and this research

This research is informed by an anti-racist approach that recognises racism as a structural system of inequality which shapes women's experiences of education, employment, poverty, and access to opportunities. Close the Gap and SCUK are committed to embedding anti-racist practice across all areas of their work, and the research seeks to centre intersectionality to recognise that young mothers' experiences are shaped not only by gender and age, but also by race, ethnicity, migration status, disability, poverty, and other forms of inequality.

An anti-racist approach requires attention not only to individual experiences of prejudice and discrimination, but also to the policies, practices, assumptions, and power structures that produce unequal outcomes. This means recognising that barriers identified in this research may be experienced differently by racially minoritised young mothers, even where racism is not explicitly named, and being mindful of whose experiences are reflected in the evidence.

4.1 Young mothers and poverty in Scotland

In 2024-25, the highest proportion of births in Scotland was to women aged 30-34 years old, accounting for 35.5% of all births. This proportion has increased steadily over recent years, reflecting the longer-term trend towards later motherhood. In contrast, births to women under the age of 25 have continued to decline, reaching a current low of 13.8%. This figure can be broken down further to show that of all women giving birth under

the age of 25, 2.5% were aged under 20 and 11.3% were aged between 20 and 24.³

While the average age at which women become mothers is increasing, this trend is not experienced equally across the population. Public Health Scotland data shows a clear relationship between socioeconomic deprivation and earlier motherhood. Women living in the most deprived areas of Scotland are substantially more likely to have their first child at a younger age. This pattern is illustrated in Table 1. For example, in areas with the highest levels of deprivation (as measured by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation, SIMD), 34.3% of first births were to women aged 16-24. In the least deprived areas, the comparable figure was 6.7%, while 45% of first births were to women aged between 30 and 34. This evidence suggests a clear relationship between area deprivation and earlier motherhood.

Table 1: Percentage of first births by maternal age and SIMD		
	SIMD 1 – most deprived areas	SIMD 5 – least deprived areas
16-18	5.3%	0.5%
19-21	12.9%	1.9%
22-24	16.1%	4.4%
25-29	32.4%	22.7%
30-34	22.8%	45%
35-39	8.3%	20.7%
40+	2%	4.6%

Source: Public Health Scotland (2025) Births in Scotland – year ending 31 March 2025, Table 1: Maternities

³ Public Health Scotland (2025) *Births in Scotland – Year ending 31 March 2025*. Table 1: maternities [Dataset]. Available: <https://publichealthscotland.scot/publications/births-in-scotland/births-in-scotland-year-ending-31-march-2025/>

These figures do not suggest that early motherhood causes poverty, nor that poverty is an inevitable consequence of becoming a mother at a young age. Rather, they highlight the extent to which young motherhood is patterned by wider social and economic inequalities. Young women living in deprived communities are more likely to experience a range of disadvantages, including lower household incomes, insecure housing, poorer health outcomes, and unequal access to education and employment opportunities. As a result, young motherhood is often experienced alongside other forms of structural inequality that can shape subsequent labour market participation. Evidence also suggests that certain groups of young women are disproportionately affected. For example, care experienced young women aged 14-24 are estimated to have birth rates two to three times higher than the wider population of that age, although robust measures to confirm this are limited.⁴

The Scottish Government has identified six priority family types that are at particularly high risk of poverty, and are the focus of its child poverty strategy. These comprise lone-parent families, families with a disabled adult or child, larger families, minority ethnic families, families with a child under 1, and families where the mother is aged under 25. Of these groups, households with a mother aged under 25 face the highest risk of poverty (55%). Given the inextricable link between women's poverty and child poverty, women are central to all six priority groups. Young mothers are particularly likely to experience multiple forms of disadvantage simultaneously and be in more than one priority group. The strongest overlaps are with lone parenthood (54%), having a baby under one (40%), and living with a disabled household member (35%).⁵

⁴ The Why Not? Trust (2023) *Births to care experienced teenagers and women aged 14-24 in Scotland: an estimation*. Available: https://whynottrust.org/media/dslpygvg/care_experienced_teenagers_and_mothers_v1_feb_2023.pdf

⁵ Scottish Government (2022) *Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan Fourth Year Progress Report 2021-22. Focus report on households with mothers aged 25 or under*. Available: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/tackling-child-poverty-delivery-plan-fourth-year-progress-report-2021-22-focus-report-households-mothers-aged-25-under/documents/>

Young mothers are also more likely than older mothers to experience in-work poverty and financial insecurity. Around 42% of young mothers experience in-work poverty. They are also more likely to experience income volatility, whereby earnings fluctuate unpredictably making it more difficult to budget, plan ahead, and absorb financial shocks. Households with young mothers are more likely to receive a higher proportion of their income from social security than from earnings. Households with a mother under 25 receive a third of their income from earnings and almost two thirds from social security. This is compared to all households with children in poverty, who receive more than half of their income from earnings, and two fifths from social security.⁶

This reflects broader labour market inequalities faced by young mothers. Younger mothers, particularly those aged under 20, are more likely to be out of paid work or employed in lower-paid occupations. At the same time, they are more likely to rely on parts of the social security system that provide lower rates of financial support to younger claimants, such as Universal Credit. Consequently, young mothers often find themselves at the intersection of age-based, gendered socioeconomic disadvantage, increasing their risk of poverty and labour market exclusion. Despite the absence of intersectional data on young mothers, it is reasonable to assume that the risk of poverty is heightened for racially minoritised and disabled young mothers, as well as other young mothers who experience compounding inequalities.

4.2 Mapping young mothers' labour market participation

This section maps what is known about young mothers' labour market participation and the structural inequalities that shape it, including occupational segregation, women's disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care, and low pay. A central finding is the lack of routinely collected data on young mothers specifically. Scotland's Census 2022

⁶ Ibid

provides useful evidence on employment among young women and men aged 16-24, highlighting significant gendered inequalities in participation, occupational and industry distribution, and pay, with strong evidence that these are closely linked to early motherhood and caring responsibilities. However, significant intersectional data gaps remain, including for young mothers who are disabled, racially minoritised, survivors of men's violence, migrant, or LGBTI. Despite these gaps, the available evidence shows that young mothers face similar structural inequalities to women overall, but these are intensified creating multiple and interconnecting barriers to entering, sustaining, and progressing in paid work.

A note on terminology

This report uses the terms 'economically active/inactive' when citing official statistics because this is how the data is collected and published. However, Close the Gap and SCUK do not endorse the framing implied by the term 'inactive'. This category includes people who are not in paid employment and are not seeking a job, including those doing unpaid work caring for children, disabled people, and older people. Labelling this group 'inactive' implies that only paid work counts as productive economic activity. Feminist economists have long challenged this: care is not the absence of work, but its precondition, reproducing the paid workforce and sustaining the population on which paid work depends.⁷ We therefore use the official terminology only for consistency with cited data, while distinguishing clearly between paid and unpaid work.

⁷ See for example: Waring, Marilyn (1988) *If Women Counted: A new feminist economics*, Harper & Row, and Elson, D. (2017) 'Recognise, Reduce, and Redistribute Unpaid Care Work: How to Close the Gender Gap', *New Labor Forum*, 26(2), pp. 52–61.

Economic activity

Gendered experiences of economic activity

Gendered patterns of economic activity are entrenched in Scotland and the UK and are slow to disrupt. Due to substantial routine data gaps on young mothers specifically, this section uses gender-disaggregated data for 16-24-year-olds as a proxy. This data establishes the baseline structural inequalities such as occupational segregation and early part-time penalties that young women navigate as they become parents.

Census 2022 data finds that young women are slightly more likely to be employed than young men, 54.2% compared with 52.2%. At the same time, young men are slightly more likely to be unemployed than young women, at 4.2% and 3.2% respectively. However, as people age, women overall are less likely to be employed than men as a group, 71.7% compared with 77.1% respectively.⁸

‘Economic inactivity’ is the official measure of those who are neither employed, available for employment, or actively seeking a job. The economic inactivity rate for people aged 16-64 years in Scotland, based on Labour Force Survey data, was estimated at 22.3% in September to November 2025.⁹ Women are more likely to be economically inactive than men, 25.9% compared with 19.4%.¹⁰

The clearest gendered difference is in economic inactivity due to looking after family or home, synonymous with unpaid care. Census 2022 data shows that, among economically inactive 16-24-year-olds in this category, almost three quarters are women, at 73.8%, compared with 26.2% who

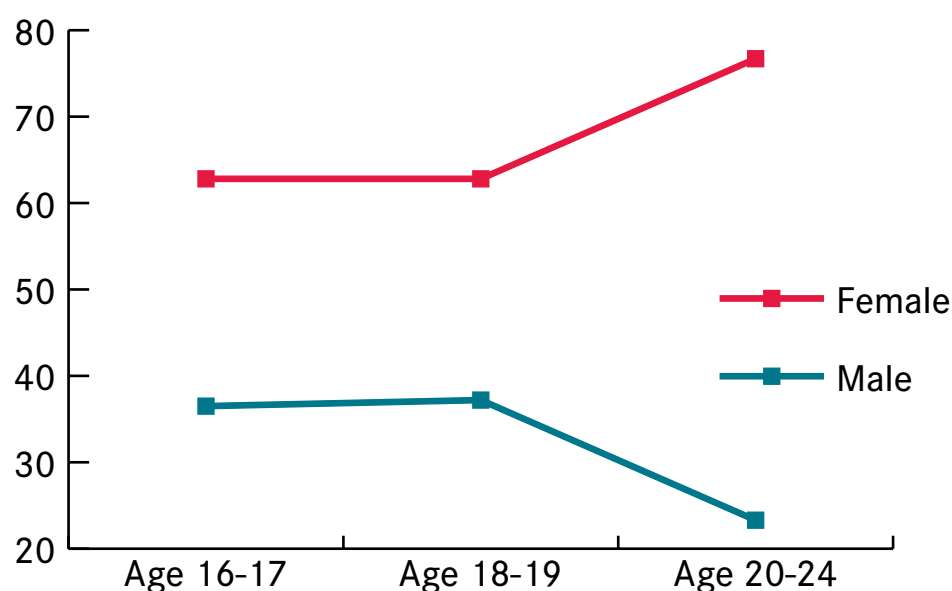
⁸ Scottish Government (2026) *Scotland's Labour Market Insights, January 2026*. Available: <https://www.gov.scot/collections/labour-market-statistics/#currentlabourmarketstatisticspublications>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

are men.¹¹ As shown in Figure 1 the gender gap widens with age: women account for 62.8% of economically inactive 18-19-year-olds looking after family or home, rising to 76.7% among those aged 20-24. This suggests that becoming a mother is a key driver of young women's withdrawal from the labour market. These gendered patterns reflect long-term trends shaped principally by unequal responsibility for unpaid care for children, disabled people, and older people.

Figure 1: Proportion of young men and women economically inactive due to looking after family/home



Source: National Records of Scotland, 2022 Census. Custom data extracted via Scotland's Census Flexible Table Builder. Licensed under OGL v3.0.

¹¹ National Records of Scotland (2022) [Economic activity, aged 16-24, sex] *Scotland's Census Flexible Table Builder*. Available at: <https://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/webapi/jsf/dataCatalogueExplorer.xhtml> (Accessed 26 May 2026)

Other reasons for being economically inactive are more evenly distributed by sex when looking at headline data. For example, there are broadly similar levels of inactivity due to being a student, 49.6% for young men and 50.4% for young women. However, when looking in more detail at participation in education, there are gendered differences in being a full-time or part-time student. Young women are much more likely to be a part-time student (61.5%) compared with young men (38.5%). The propensity to study part time mirrors the way women as a group engage with the labour market.

These long-standing patterns indicate that young mothers face structural barriers to labour market participation, with unpaid childcare responsibilities significantly reducing their ability to remain in or re-enter employment.

Working hours

Recent data¹² from the Annual Population Survey shows stark differences in who works full time and part time; men are more likely to work full time than women, comprising 59% of all full-time employees. Looking at men as a group, the vast majority (86%) work full time. Conversely women are much more likely to work part time, making up almost three quarters (72%) of part-time workers in Scotland. 38% of all women work part time while 62% work full time in Scotland. Women's disproportionate responsibility for childcare and care for adults means that they often need to find part-time work. Part-time work is predominantly found in lower-paid, female-dominated jobs and sectors. This contributes to women's higher levels of poverty.¹³ For example, women represent 90.7%

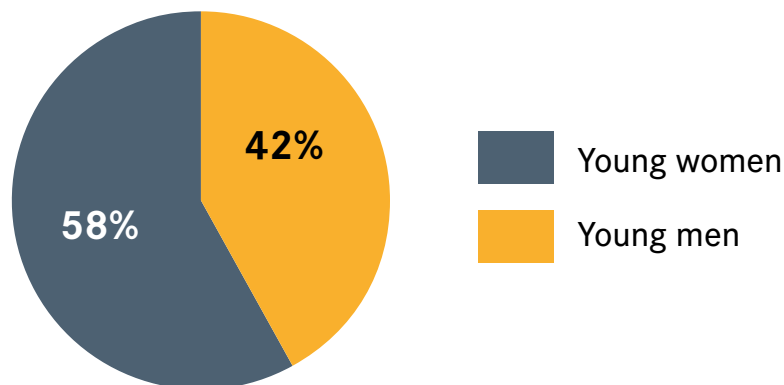
¹² Office for National Statistics (2025) *Annual Population Survey – Regional – Occupation* [Dataset]. Available: <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/datasets/aps218> (Accessed 26 May 2026)

¹³ Scottish Government (2026) *Bringing Hope, Building Futures: Tackling child poverty delivery plan 2026-2031*. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/bringing-hope-building-futures-tackling-child-poverty-delivery-plan-2026-2031/>

of all part-time workers in Administrative and Secretarial occupations, and 87.4% of Caring, Leisure and Other Service Occupations.¹⁴

The gendered differences in who works full time and part time are less pronounced for young people, although there are still disparities. Figure 2 shows that 16-24-year-old employed women are significantly more likely to work part-time (58%) than young men (42%). The smaller differences are accounted for by the greater likelihood of women having a caring role as they get older, and therefore needing to work part time to balance this with earning. This early divergence into part-time work heavily mirrors the Census economic inactivity trends mentioned above, where unpaid care triggers a massive drop in full-time participation as young women enter their twenties.

Figure 2: Percentage of 16-24-year-old men and women working part time in Scotland



Source: National Records of Scotland, 2022 Census. Custom data extracted via Scotland's Census Flexible Table Builder. Licensed under OGL v3.0.

¹⁴ Office for National Statistics (2025) *Annual Population Survey – Regional – Occupation* [Dataset]. Available: <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/datasets/aps218> (Accessed 26 May 2026)

Employment rate of parents by gender

Labour Force Survey data¹⁵ on parents reveals a stark gender gap: 92.8% of fathers with dependent children are employed compared to 77.1% of mothers. While having children correlates with an 18.7 percentage point increase in employment for men, it yields only an 8.5 point increase for women. This data is not routinely disaggregated for the 16-24 age group, but it establishes the broader structural baseline where motherhood restricts labour market participation while fatherhood accelerates it.

Employment patterns by age of youngest dependent child

The age of the youngest child heavily dictates maternal employment. In Scotland, 75% of mothers with a child aged two or under are in employment (this figure includes those on maternity leave).¹⁶ This drops to 69.6% for mothers of 3-to-4-year-olds, before rising significantly to 86.5% once children reach primary school age. This trend highlights how the acute lack of affordable, flexible early years childcare acts as a primary barrier to keeping mothers, particularly young mothers with fewer resources, in the workforce.

Single parents

The vast majority (92%) of single parents in Scotland are women.¹⁷ There is also a significant overlap between being a single parent and being a young mother; over half (54%) of children in a family with a younger mother are also in a single parent family.¹⁸ While employment rates for all

¹⁵ Office for National Statistics (2025) *Employment rates for men and women living with and without dependent children in the UK: Table Q* [Dataset].

¹⁶ Office for National Statistics (2025) *Employment rate of parents living with dependent children by family type and age of the youngest child in the UK: Table R* [Dataset].

¹⁷ Scottish Government (2025) *Tackling child poverty priority families overview*. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/tackling-child-poverty-priority-families-overview/pages/lone-parent-families/>

¹⁸ Scottish Government (2022) *Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2022-2026 – annex 7: equality impact assessment*. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/annex-7-equality-impact-assessment/documents/>

women tend to increase with the age of their children, this is especially true for women who are single parents. More than half (55.9%) of single mothers with their youngest child aged 2 or under were in employment between July and September 2025. Those whose youngest child had reached school age experienced a significant increase in employment rates, rising to 71.8% with their youngest child aged 5-10, and 80.3% with their youngest aged 11-15, bringing single mothers' employment rate closer in line with that of mothers living in a couple whose youngest child was also aged 11-15.¹⁹

This underscores the significant effect being a primary carer for children has on women's labour market participation, especially where there is inadequate childcare available²⁰, and the exacerbated inequalities that single parents face.

The considerable 15.9 percentage point employment jump once a child reaches school age (from 55.9% to 71.8%) suggests that the lack of affordable, flexible childcare is a major barrier to employment for single mothers. Before school age, the compounding costs and rigid hours of childcare options create an insurmountable structural barrier, particularly for young single parents, who are more likely to be on low incomes, and who do not have a partner to share care or costs with. It is only when their children go to primary school that many single mothers are able to re-enter the labour market. However, it should also be noted that challenges remain in finding employment that is flexible enough to accommodate school hours.

¹⁹ Office for National Statistics (2025) *Employment rate of parents living with dependent children by family type and age of the youngest child in the UK: Table R* [Dataset].

²⁰ Close the Gap and One Parent Families Scotland (2023) *A Childcare System for All: A vision that puts gender equality at the heart of Scotland's childcare strategy*. Available at: <https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/CtG-and-OPFS—A-childcare-system-for-all-FINAL.pdf>

Employment rate of mothers and fathers by age

A woman's age at childbirth is a primary determinant of her subsequent employment status. While 79.9% of mothers aged 35-49 in Scotland are in paid work, this falls to 70.1% for those aged 25-34. National statistics lack routine disaggregation for the 16-24 group, but targeted programme and longitudinal data confirms that younger mothers experience the lowest employment rates of all women with children. Data from the Family Nurse Partnership shows that at six months post-birth, employment rates sit at 8% for mothers aged 17 and under, 14% for those aged 18-19, and 18% for mothers aged 20 and over. While these rates more than double by 24 months post-birth, younger cohorts consistently lag behind older mothers.

This trajectory is reinforced by the Growing Up in Scotland study (see Table 2 below), which identifies younger maternal age and lower household income as the two strongest and most consistent predictors of being unemployed and seeking work. When their child is 10 months old, only 21% of mothers who gave birth under age 20 are in employment, compared to 55% of those aged 20-24, and 83% of mothers aged 25 and over.

Table 2: Mother's employment status when child aged 10 months				
	Mothers' age at child's birth			
	Under 20 years old	20-24 years old	25 years old and over	All
	%	%	%	%
In full-time employment	3	12	39	28
In part-time employment	18	43	44	40
Not working	78	45	17	31

Source: Scottish Government (2014) The experiences of mothers aged under 20, Table 2.3, p.55

The stark contrast in Table 2, where only 21% of mothers under 20 are employed compared to 55% of those aged 20-24, directly aligning with the Census data on economic inactivity data analysed earlier in this report. As noted previously, economic inactivity due to unpaid care jumps from 62.8% for the 18-19 cohort to 76.7% for the 20-24 cohort. Taken together, these datasets suggest a clear structural pattern; the transition into young motherhood is a primary driver of labour market withdrawal, with those under 20 years facing the most acute barriers to remaining in or entering paid work.

Growing Up in Scotland data also showed that most mothers who were not in employment were not in education or training, nor were they looking for employment. Across all age groups, most mothers reported they were looking after family/home, but mothers aged under 20 were most likely to say this. Those mothers who were looking for employment tended to be younger than those already employed and those not employed and not looking for a job. Mothers looking for employment were also considerably more likely to be in lower-income households than other mothers. When their child was aged three, only 3% of mothers seeking employment were in the highest income group compared with 21% of mothers who were not employed and not looking for a job. This evidence positions younger maternal age, particularly being under 20 at childbirth, and lower household income as the two strongest and most consistent predictors of being unemployed and looking for a job.²¹

Occupational segregation

Census data on the distribution of young people aged 16-24 in Scotland shows clear, entrenched patterns of gender segregation.²² Young women

²¹ Scottish Government (2017) *Growing Up in Scotland: Patterns of maternal employment and barriers to paid work*. Available: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/growing-up-scotland-patterns-maternal-employment-barriers-paid-work/documents/>

²² National Records of Scotland (2022) [Occupational group, aged 16-24, sex] *Scotland's Census Flexible Table Builder*. Available at: <https://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/webapi/jsf/dataCatalogueExplorer.xhtml> (Accessed 26 May 2026)

are heavily concentrated in lower-paid, service-sector roles and specific industries. The same is true of racially minoritised and migrant women²³ and disabled women.²⁴ This has direct implications for young mothers, who are highly likely to re-enter the labour market into these same occupations and sectors following periods of not being in paid work.

Occupational group

Table 3 shows that young women are significantly overrepresented in caring and service occupations, comprising 79.8% of workers, compared to just 20.2% men. Young women also make up the majority of those in administrative and secretarial occupations (63.7%) and sales and customer service roles (59.5%), indicating a strong concentration in customer-facing and typically lower-paid positions.

Importantly, young women are underrepresented in higher-paid, higher-status roles, including managers, directors, and senior officials (45.2% female). This suggests limited early access to career progression pathways, which is a defining feature of female-dominated sectors like care and retail.

By contrast, young men dominate in more technical and higher-paying manual occupations. Men comprise 87.7% of those in skilled trades and 76.9% of process, plant, and machine operative roles. These positions are typically associated with higher wages and more stable employment pathways, highlighting a structural divide in early labour market opportunities.

²³ Close the Gap (2019) *Still Not Visible: Research on Black and minority ethnic women's experiences of employment in Scotland*, available: https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/1557499847_Still-Not-Visible.pdf

²⁴ Close the Gap (2025) *Excluded by Design: Research on disabled women's employment in Scotland*, available at: <https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/Excluded-by-Design—research-report.pdf>

Table 3: Distribution of 16-24-year-olds across occupational groups in Scotland		
Occupational group	% men	% women
Managers, Directors and Senior Officials	54.8	45.2
Professional	44.4	55.7
Associate Professional and Technical Occupations	48.8	51.2
Administrative and Secretarial	36.3	63.7
Skilled Trade	87.7	12.3
Caring, Leisure and Other Service	20.2	79.8
Sales and Customer Service	40.5	59.5
Process, Plant and Machine Operatives	76.9	23.1
Elementary	51.1	48.9

Source: National Records of Scotland, 2022 Census. Custom data extracted via Scotland's Census Flexible Table Builder. Licensed under OGL v3.0.

Industry

Census data on the distribution of young men and women across industries also reveals stark segregation which mirrors the patterns in occupational groups.²⁵ Table 4 shows that women dominate in public administration, education and health (70.7%), and comprise the majority of those in distribution, hotels and restaurants (55.6%). The public administration, education and health sector being 70.7% female reflects persistent gendered assumptions, for example, about who is best suited to care work, which is typically associated with lower pay and status.

²⁵ National Records of Scotland (2022) [Occupational group, aged 16-24, sex] *Scotland's Census Flexible Table Builder*. Available at: <https://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/webapi/jsf/dataCatalogueExplorer.xhtml> (Accessed 26 May 2026)

While financial and professional services appear broadly balanced at 50.6% men and 49.4% women, this headline data masks segregation within these sectors, for example more women in admin roles and more men in trading/investment roles and senior positions.

Young men are heavily overrepresented in several key industries, including construction (92.0%), agriculture, energy, and water (75.3%), manufacturing (72.3%), and transport and communication (70.4%). The near-total male dominance in construction suggests young women face considerable structural barriers to entry, whether through apprenticeship culture, recruitment practices, or gender norms. Similarly, the acute segregation in transport and communication indicates that young women are being funnelled away from technical and logistics roles from an early age.

This occupational segregation translates directly into systemic low pay. In Scotland, women are disproportionately likely to earn less than the Real Living Wage rate of £12.60 (12% compared to 10.5% of men). This inequality is compounded by age; a stark 38.3% of workers aged 18-24 earn below the Real Living Wage, compared to less than 10% of any other working-age cohort. Because young mothers are concentrated at the intersection of these two demographics - working in highly segregated, female-dominated sectors during their lowest-earning years - they face an exceptionally high risk of in-work poverty.

Table 4: Distribution of 16-24-year-olds across industries in Scotland		
Industry	% men	% women
Agriculture, energy & water	75.3	24.7
Manufacturing	72.3	27.7
Construction	92.1	7.9
Distribution, hotels & restaurants	44.4	55.6
Transport & communication	70.4	29.5
Financial, real estate, professional and administrative activities	50.6	49.4
Public administration, education and health	29.3	70.7
Other	42.9	57.1

Source: National Records of Scotland, 2022 Census. Custom data extracted via Scotland's Census Flexible Table Builder. Licensed under OGL v3.0.

Average hourly pay and gender pay gaps

The gender pay gap is the difference between women's and men's average hourly earnings and is a key indicator of women's labour market inequality. In 2025, the combined mean gender pay gap for all employees in Scotland stood at 10.0%, with a median gap of 9.4%.²⁶ To understand how this inequality impacts young mothers specifically, it is necessary to examine the data by both age and working hours. As Table shows the gender pay gap widens as young women enter their 20s and are more likely to balance earning with unpaid care.

²⁶ Office for National Statistics (2025) *Gender pay gap: Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE) gender pay gap tables* [Dataset]. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/datasets/annualsurveyofhoursandearningsashegenderpaygaptables>

Table 5: Gender pay gaps in Scotland by age group						
Age group	Pay gap comparing all men's and women's pay	Pay gap comparing all men's and women's pay	Pay gap comparing men's and women's full-time pay	Pay gap comparing men's and women's full-time pay	Pay gap comparing men's full-time pay with women's part-time pay	Pay gap comparing men's full-time pay with women's part-time pay
	Median %	Mean %	Median %	Mean %	Median %	Mean %
All	9.4	10.0	3.5	10.1	22.9	26.5
18-21	-0.7	-0.7	-2	-2.2	0.4	1.3
22-29	-0.1	4.2	-2.9	3.3	18.3	17.7
30-39	7.0	6.0	1.4	4.8	20.4	14.7
40-49	7.9	9.8	2.3	7.4	27.1	22.1
50-59	18.8	16.1	11.7	12.7	32.4	30.3
60+	12.5	17.4	12.2	14.4	22.4	25.5

Source: Office for National Statistics, 2025 Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE)

The part-time penalty

For full-time employees in the 18-21 and 22-29 groups, headline median pay gaps slightly favour women, at -2.0% and -2.9% respectively. However, looking at the mean gap for 22-29-year-olds reveals a shift to 3.3% in favour of men, indicating that higher earners are already skewing the distribution.

The critical barrier for young mothers is exposed when comparing women's part-time hourly pay with men's full-time hourly pay. While this gap is negligible at ages 18-21 (0.4% median and 1.3 mean), it widens drastically to 18.3% median and 17.7% mean for the 22-29 age group. This stark divergence reflects the onset of a motherhood penalty. As young women take on disproportionate responsibility for childcare and

move into part-time work, they are heavily penalised by the lower hourly rates characteristic of female-dominated, part-time roles. This structural shift locks in a trajectory of lifetime earnings disadvantage right at the start of their working lives.

Conclusion

Taken together, this data mapping suggests that young mothers do not simply experience the same gendered labour market inequalities as women overall, but they experience these inequalities in an intensified way. Age and motherhood interact with gender to produce the starkest outcomes; employment among mothers under 20 sits at a fraction of that of older mothers, economic inactivity due to unpaid care rises steeply as young women move through their 20s, and the part-time pay penalty widens sharply between the 18-21 and 22-29 age groups. This is compounded by occupational segregation, which funnels young women into lower-paid and lower-status roles even before they become mothers. It is compounded further by a childcare system where costs and inflexibility make paid work hardest to sustain in the specific years and age group when young mothers have the least financial resource to absorb them.

The persistent absence of routinely collected, disaggregated data on young mothers, and the near-total absence of data on those who are disabled, racially minoritised, migrant, LGBTI, or survivors of men's violence, means this picture remains incomplete. What is available, however, points consistently in one direction: young motherhood is a critical juncture at which structural barriers to employment intensify.

4.3 Young mothers' experiences of paid work

This section explores young mothers' experiences of paid work, learning, and caring, drawing on interview evidence to examine how gendered caring responsibilities, poverty, and wider structural inequalities shape labour market participation. It begins by highlighting the strengths, resilience, and aspirations that young mothers described,

before exploring their experiences of paid work prior to and following motherhood, including returning to employment and learning. The section then examines the key barriers participants identified, before considering how these challenges intersect and are compounded for different groups of young mothers. There are a range of direct quotations and examples taken from the interviews – any names attributed to these are pseudonyms to preserve participants’ anonymity. Across the findings, a consistent theme emerges: young mothers are ambitious, motivated, and committed to paid work. However, their experiences are shaped by the interaction between young motherhood and wider structural inequalities, which influence opportunities to enter, sustain, and progress in paid work.

Young mothers’ strengths, skills, and aspirations

Participants described pride in caring well for their children and in the skills, confidence, and sense of purpose they had developed through motherhood. Single mothers emphasised the significance of being the sole person responsible for their children’s care, while others spoke about putting their children first and valuing the time they were able to spend with them. Young mothers in paid work or education also described pride in showing their children that it is possible to combine motherhood with work or learning, and in modelling independence and aspiration.

The interviews show that young mothers often understood motherhood as a source of resilience, determination, and responsibility. Participants connected caring for their children with their motivation to work, study, plan for the future, and continue pursuing their own goals:

“I think I’m a good example for my child, do you know what I mean? He’s going to be like...my mummy works hard for this.” – 23-25 years old, child aged three, disabled, care experienced, white.

“I think I’m proud of the fact that I’m still trying and that I haven’t just given up on the things that I want to do.” – 19-22 years old, child aged four, unpaid carer, racially minoritised.

“Being a mum shouldn’t define you, you’re more than just a mum... you are your own person before you fall pregnant. You can be an air hostess, you could be an actor, or whatever you like. It’s really important as a mum that you hold on to that.” – 23-25 years old, child aged three, long-term health condition, white.

The sense of agency young mothers described in relation to their own lives is important to highlight. Participants spoke about learning to rely on themselves, make decisions that were right for them and their families, and resist pressure to follow routes that did not suit their circumstances. Some reflected that they were still developing as people when they had their first child, but that motherhood had helped them become more mature and confident. A few also emphasised the distinctive challenge of growing up themselves while raising their children:

“Overall I think it’s daunting for young mums after having their whole life flipped around. But I feel again, young mums are quite resilient and you kind of grow with your wee one.” – 26-30 years old, child aged five, white.

This evidence challenges any assumptions that young mothers lack ambition or commitment. Instead, participants described motherhood as a motivating force that shaped their aspirations, strengthened their self-reliance, and sharpened their sense of what they wanted for themselves and their children.

Paid work, learning, and caring

Young mothers’ experiences of paid work, learning, and caring were often closely interconnected and shaped by a combination of personal aspirations, caring responsibilities, financial pressures, access to childcare, and the availability of supportive employers and educational institutions. While most participants had engaged in paid work prior to becoming pregnant, motherhood frequently prompted significant changes in their employment and educational trajectories. For some, pregnancy

and motherhood disrupted existing career plans through experiences of discrimination, inflexible working arrangements, or difficulties accessing suitable childcare. For others, motherhood led to a reassessment of priorities, with participants seeking employment that was more compatible with their caring responsibilities or choosing to return to education as a route to future career opportunities. Across the findings, young mothers demonstrated considerable resilience and adaptability as they navigated the competing demands of caring, employment, and learning, often making strategic decisions to balance immediate family responsibilities with longer-term aspirations.

Experiences of paid work prior to and during pregnancy

Before having a child, more than two thirds of participants were in paid work, mainly full time. After having their child, this fell to just over a third, with most of those in paid work doing so part time. Almost all participants had some experience of paid work before becoming pregnant. A small number had no prior paid work experience; these participants were typically teenagers when they had their first child and had not yet looked for or undertaken paid work. Some participants were also reaching working age during the COVID-19 pandemic. A few described moving from school, into lockdown, and then into pregnancy, which shaped their early experiences of paid work.

Most participants who were in paid work during their pregnancy did not report problems at work. However, four of 32 participants described significant issues after disclosing their pregnancy to their employer. These experiences involved being accused of stealing, having a probationary period terminated, having working hours reduced, and not being believed when they disclosed their pregnancy.

Example: Accusation of stealing after pregnancy disclosure

Isla worked in a hotel before becoming pregnant. Although it was not her ideal job, she felt it paid well. A few days after telling her manager she was pregnant, she was accused of stealing.

Isla decided to leave the job. She suspected that the accusation had been made so that her employer would not have to pay her maternity pay.

Example: Probation ended after pregnancy disclosure

Jenna had recently started a job at a building society and was on probation when she found out she was pregnant. In a performance review, she was told that she was performing well and was on track to pass probation. The following week, she disclosed her pregnancy. Her review was then changed, with documentation edited to state that she was not performing well. Jenna's employment was terminated, and she was concerned about the impact of the stress on her own health and that of her unborn baby.

These experiences echo existing evidence relating to young mothers being disproportionately impacted by discriminatory employer attitudes and practices, particularly in relation to pregnancy and maternity. Research shows that, when compared to mothers of all ages, up to six times as many mothers under the age of 25 reported being dismissed from their jobs after notifying their employer of their pregnancy. The same study found that twice as many young mothers felt pressured to resign or reported having to resign due to unresolved health and safety issues in the workplace. Furthermore, mothers under 25 were five percentage points more likely to be discouraged from attending their antenatal appointments.²⁷ This pattern suggests that employers' treatment of mothers varies by age, with young mothers specifically being subjected to a higher rate of discriminatory attitudes and practices in the workplace.

²⁷ Equality and Human Rights Commission (2016) *'#PowertotheBump unites young mothers in fight against pregnancy and maternity discrimination at work'*. Available: <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/power-to-the-bump-unites-young-mothers-fight-against-pregnancy-and-maternity-discrimination-work?return-url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.equalityhumanrights.com%2Fsearch%3Fkeys%3Dyoung%2Bmothers%2Bdiscrimination>

Taken together, young mothers' accounts indicate that pregnancy disclosure can represent a significant turning point in their employment experiences. While most participants did not report difficulties at work during pregnancy, the discrimination described by a minority was serious and had implications for income security, confidence, and continued labour market participation. Experiences such as reduced hours, the termination of probation, dismissal, and being disbelieved suggest that some employers may perceive pregnancy as a risk or operational challenge, rather than as a normal aspect of working life. For young mothers, who are already concentrated in lower-paid or less secure employment, these attitudes and practices can contribute to earlier withdrawal from paid work and compound the structural barriers they face in sustaining employment before and after childbirth.

Views and experiences of returning to paid work

Many participants had either returned to paid work or planned to do so in the near future. More than a third had already returned, mainly on a part-time basis. For some, returning to paid work was motivated by enjoyment of work itself. Participants described employment as giving them a sense of purpose, strengthening their independence, and helping them feel like young people in their own right, rather than being defined only by motherhood.

“Having a job gives me a sense of independence...it makes me feel good.” – 19-22 years old, child aged two, long-term health condition, white.

For other participants, financial pressures were a key motivation for returning to paid work. Some wanted to contribute to household income, particularly where a partner was supporting the family. Others described putting pressure on themselves to provide for themselves and their children, and to reduce reliance on social security. A few also felt external pressures to seek employment, particularly where this was connected to benefit conditions, including Universal Credit.

Over half of participants were not in paid work at the time of the research. Most said they would like to be, describing paid employment as a route to a better life, social connection, and improved wellbeing. However, several participants did not feel able to return to work at that point. A lack of suitable childcare was a recurring barrier, including limited nursery hours, inflexible childcare slots, and difficulty finding provision that could meet children's additional support needs. A small number of participants also described finding it difficult to trust others to care for their children. This was raised particularly by care experienced young mothers, some of whom linked this difficulty to experiences of abandonment and trauma.

"If the nursery didn't phone me constantly, I'd be able to go back to work right now." – 23-25 years old, children aged two and under one, children with additional support needs, white.

"I would love to go back to work, honestly it would be so good. But I just don't really have much trust in people." – 19-22 years old, child aged two, care experienced, long-term health condition, white.

Example: Childcare, trust, and trauma

Fern was adopted when she was very young into a family where there was domestic abuse and addiction. When she became a mother, she felt she did not fully understand what parenting involved and did not have the foundations she needed. After each of her children was born, Fern spent the first year feeling that someone might come and take her baby. She felt unable to leave the home and decided that she could not leave her children with anyone else until they were old enough to speak and tell her what had happened while she was away. Her experiences of adoption and care meant that she found it extremely difficult to trust anyone else to look after her children.

A small number of participants had returned to the paid roles they held prior to motherhood. These participants were typically in secure employment, working in fields they enjoyed and wanted to pursue, and who had access to strong family support networks.

Example: Returning to paid work

Erica was a trainee dental nurse before and during her pregnancy, and completed her qualification while pregnant. When her child was six months old and her maternity pay ended, she secured a private nursery place and returned to work three days a week. Erica was keen to return to paid work because she found the transition to motherhood challenging and valued having a sense of identity beyond parenting.

“For me, obviously being a single parent, it was kind of difficult, the transition from having my own life to myself, obviously being so young, I was only 20, so I just kind of needed that balance of not being a parent and that was my kind of, I know it sounds terrible, but that was my kind of escape, was kind of to get back into work and feel that I had some sort of life again.”

Erica undertook a phased return to work and felt well supported by both her employer and, and when possible, her mother. She initially worked three days a week but later reduced this to two days to better balance employment, time with her child, and caring responsibilities for her mother.

A small number of participants were unable to return to their previous roles because those roles were no longer available. This occurred where employers had made staff redundant or had failed to maintain contact during maternity leave. These experiences may indicate potentially discriminatory employment practices and highlight a lack of awareness among some young mothers of their employment rights.

Example: No contact from employer

Ellie worked as a home carer for a local authority before taking maternity leave. During her leave, her employer did not maintain contact with her. By the time of the interview, as part of this research, her baby was nine months old and Ellie had instead secured a part-time retail job, which had recently become a permanent position.

A more common experience was that participants felt their previous jobs were no longer compatible with their circumstances as parents. The main barriers related to working hours, shift patterns, and childcare availability. Several participants had previously worked in hospitality, where evening and weekend work is common, but found these schedules incompatible with their caring responsibilities. Other participants had previously worked night shifts in sectors such as social care or cleaning, but found that a lack of suitable childcare made a return to these roles impossible.

A small number of participants reported that returning to work was only possible because their partner could provide childcare when they were at work. Others had relocated to be closer to parents or grandparents to access childcare support. In some cases, these changes affected their ability to return to their previous jobs. Participants also highlighted practical challenges such as long commuting distances, which became more difficult to manage alongside increased family responsibilities. This was especially true for young mothers in remote and rural areas.

For a minority of participants, returning to their previous paid role was undesirable because of the emotional demands of the work. Examples included supporting children in hospice settings and providing end-of-life care in care homes. In these cases, motherhood had led participants to reassess their priorities and seek less emotionally demanding employment. Some participants described putting their previous career ambitions on hold to focus on caring for their children and families. In many cases, this was viewed as a temporary pause rather than a

permanent change, with participants hoping to return to their career goals once their children were older.

Example: Temporarily putting career aspirations on hold

Alicja lives with her partner and is well supported by family and friends. Before becoming a mother, she was studying at college for a career in the airline industry and completed her qualification while pregnant. After the birth of her child, Alicja chose to focus on parenting full time. She hopes to seek employment when her child is attending nursery, planning to look for work that can be balanced with childcare. Once her child reaches primary school age, she intends to pursue her longer-term ambition of working for an airline. Although she recognises that this will require careful planning and childcare arrangements, she feels confident that it will be achievable.

Experiences of returning to learning

Some young mothers who participated in this research had returned to educational courses they were undertaking before becoming pregnant, while others reported that their interests and career aspirations had changed, leading them to pursue different areas of study. A number of participants had considered returning directly to paid work but instead chose further or higher education. Their decisions were influenced by several factors, including opportunities to develop skills for future careers, childcare provision available through some colleges and universities, and the flexibility of remote learning. The latter was particularly important for young mothers living in rural and remote areas.

Example: Online learning in rural and remote areas

Jasmine lives in a very remote area and plans to study for a university degree online. Employment opportunities in her local area are limited and taking up work would require a lengthy commute using public transport. Online learning offers a more accessible and flexible route for developing her skills and qualifications.

Several participants explained that arranging childcare for study felt more manageable and affordable than arranging childcare for paid work. This was often because childcare was provided on-site at their college or university, enabling children to remain nearby. Others found that study schedules aligned more closely with available childcare options or offered greater flexibility than employment. Participants felt that educational settings were often more accommodating if they needed to arrive slightly later because of childcare arrangements or take time away to respond to caring responsibilities. As a result, some young mothers chose to invest time in education while their children were young, viewing this as an opportunity to develop skills and improve future employment prospects. In addition, a small number of participants who had left school with few or no qualifications saw further and higher education as a way to broaden their opportunities and increase access to future employment.

Example: Returning to college

Before having her child, Seema worked 12-hour shifts in a care home. During the COVID-19 pandemic, she moved into a retail role closer to home. After becoming pregnant, she was unable to return to work because she couldn't afford nursery fees. As a single parent with limited family support, she found it difficult to identify employment that offered the flexibility required to care for her child. Seema had previously completed an HNC in healthcare, but decided to return to college to pursue an HND qualification in childcare, funding her studies through a student loan. A subsidised nursery place was available through the college, which made returning to education feasible. She described this decision very positively, reporting improvements in her mental health and reassurance from knowing her child is nearby and well cared for. The college nursery was able to accommodate her preferred childcare hours, and her child's place is guaranteed until they begin school.

Challenges and barriers to paid work

Childcare

Participants described childcare as the first and most important consideration when thinking about paid work. All participants highlighted problems with childcare affordability, flexibility, or availability. A few used private nurseries, but this was widely viewed as expensive, with some participants saying nursery fees would absorb most or all of their earnings. This was particularly difficult for young mothers with more than one child. Most participants said that they could not afford private nurseries or childminders.

“I would probably say childcare is everything. You can’t do anything without childcare. You always need to make sure that everything is set in stone before you even set foot out the door.” – 19-22 years old, child aged under two, white.

Many participants highlighted the limited childcare options available for children under two and felt they would be unable to work until their child became entitled to funded nursery hours. Some used this period to consider their longer-term options. However, parents of older children also described childcare barriers. They noted that funded nursery hours were often delivered in short daily blocks, over only some weekdays, and during term time only. This left very limited time for paid work, especially for those in remote or rural areas and small towns, where commuting time could use up much of the childcare window. Only one participant had negotiated a term-time contract with her employer, while others were concerned about how they would manage paid work during school holidays.

“I would have liked to get back to work a lot sooner, but the childcare options just weren’t brilliant.” – 23-25 years old, child aged two, long-term health condition, white.

Participants with disabled children or children with additional support needs described particular difficulty finding childcare that could meet their children's needs. Some had secured childcare, but provision was frequently interrupted because settings were unable to manage their child's needs without parental intervention. As a result, a few participants felt unable to consider paid work until more appropriate and reliable childcare was available.

Example: Unsuitable childcare for children with additional support needs

Abbie left work when her first child was born. She does not feel able to return to paid work or learning because she has two children, one of whom is autistic and has ADHD. She is regularly called by the nursery to collect her child during the day. Abbie would like to return to paid work, but feels unable to do so because her child's needs are not being met in childcare.

A few participants shared childcare responsibilities with their partner, which enabled them to work on days when their partner could provide care. In some families, this involved alternating day and night shifts around childcare, or one parent taking responsibility during the week and the other at weekends.

Some participants said they did not know how to access appropriate childcare or that options in their area were very limited. A few felt guilty about using childcare while their children were young, but also wanted to build a stable career and future for their family. Overall, participants emphasised the need for more affordable, accessible, and flexible childcare to support their goals in paid work and learning.

Childcare is a central condition shaping whether young mothers can enter, sustain, or progress in paid work and learning. Affordability, availability, flexibility, and suitability all determine whether childcare is viable. Even where funded hours are available, short sessions, term-time

provision, commuting time, and limited options for children under two can make paid work difficult to organise. For mothers of disabled children or children with additional support needs, childcare must also be reliable and able to meet their child's needs. Family or partner support can make employment possible, but reliance on informal care creates inequalities between those with support networks and those without. Overall, childcare emerged as one of the most significant structural barriers to young mothers' employment, requiring provision that is affordable, accessible, flexible, and inclusive.

Time off for family illness and appointments

Almost all participants said they were worried about being able to take time off work when their child was unwell or had appointments. These concerns were particularly acute for single mothers, participants with limited or no family support, and mothers of disabled children, children with additional support needs, or children with health conditions. Migrant and racially minoritised participants described mixed experiences: some had local support networks, while others felt isolated and had little support available. Many participants said these worries made paid work feel more pressured and precarious. Some had been warned or disciplined by employers for taking time off to look after their children. One participant said she used paid annual leave when her children were unwell and felt this arrangement worked adequately for her.

“You send them to nursery and all of a sudden they come home with all these bugs – they get sick. I ended up on a stage three [warning] for absences because I had like three periods of missing work within a certain amount of time and they said like one more day off would have triggered disciplinary action...and I'm like, what do you expect me to do?” – 23-25 years old, child aged three, long-term health condition, unpaid carer, white.

These findings show that the ability to take time off for children's illness or appointments is a central condition of sustainable employment for young mothers. Participants' concerns were not simply about occasional absences, but about whether workplaces would recognise caring for children as a normal and unavoidable part of working life. Where employers responded punitively, or where young mothers lacked family support to absorb emergencies, paid work became more precarious and emotionally demanding. This was intensified for single parents and for mothers of disabled children or children with additional support needs, whose caring responsibilities could be more frequent and less predictable. The evidence therefore points to the need for workplace policies and cultures that provide flexibility without penalty, so that young mothers are not forced to choose between maintaining employment and meeting their children's health and care needs.

Unpaid caring responsibilities

Some young mothers involved in the research had additional unpaid caring responsibilities for parents, grandparents, or siblings. Balancing paid work or looking for work, childcare, and wider caring responsibilities was difficult, and some participants described this as contributing to anxiety and depression. These responsibilities were not reported by all participants, but they were particularly evident in the accounts of some racially minoritised young mothers, suggesting that wider family expectations and support structures may shape young mothers' ability to work or study in different ways.

Example: Unpaid caring responsibilities across the family

Abebi cares for her baby, who is under one, as well as her younger school-aged siblings and a parent. She does not have friends nearby who can provide support. Her daily responsibilities include getting her siblings ready for school, caring for her baby, doing school drop-offs and pick-ups, and making sure her siblings are fed. Abebi previously worked in a temporary warehouse job, but had to

stop because of her caring responsibilities. She found working too stressful because she was worried that her baby and siblings would not be well looked after while she was away. Abebi would like to be in paid work, but her caring responsibilities significantly limit the jobs and hours she can consider. She is thinking about attending a college or university that offers childcare for students.

These findings show that unpaid caring responsibilities beyond childcare can further restrict young mothers' employment and learning options. Where young mothers are caring across generations, or supporting siblings as well as their own children, the time, flexibility, and emotional capacity needed for paid work are reduced. This can make employment more difficult to sustain, particularly where there is limited informal support and few services that recognise the full extent of young mothers' caring roles.

Working hours

Participants described balancing multiple responsibilities, including caring for children and, in some cases, wider family members. As a result, they felt that their availability for paid work was restricted to certain hours of the day. All participants said that being a young mother affected the type of working hours they could undertake. Key challenges included finding jobs with working patterns that aligned with childcare, securing enough flexibility to manage childcare, illness, and appointments, and being unable to work irregular hours, long shifts, or additional hours at short notice. Many felt that these constraints significantly narrowed the range of jobs they could apply for. Participants also noted that part-time work was not necessarily flexible, and finding employment that fits around childcare responsibilities is extremely difficult.

“Now I work not too much hours, because my child [has] nursery, and I have class when she's in nursery – so sometimes I don't have too much time.” – 23-25 years old, child aged two, racially minoritised.

“There’s jobs out there that I would love to do, but I can’t do them because they don’t suit the hours that I would need. That’s what makes everything so much harder.” – 19-22 years old, child aged two, white.

Several participants identified sectors such as hospitality and retail as particularly difficult to combine with caring responsibilities because of their reliance on evening, weekend, variable, and unsocial hours. Some felt that employers, especially in lower-paid roles, expected young workers to be available at short notice and able to work long or irregular shifts. Participants suggested that young workers in these sectors are often viewed as easily replaceable, making it harder to negotiate working arrangements that accommodate caring responsibilities. A few also said that employers sometimes assume young mothers would have family support available for childcare, despite this not always being the case.

These findings suggest that working hours are a significant structural barrier to young mothers’ participation in paid work. Participants’ challenges were not simply about finding employment, but about finding jobs with hours and levels of flexibility that could be reconciled with caring responsibilities.

Health

Around half of the participants in this research had a long-term physical or mental condition that limited their day-to-day activities. For some, these conditions affected their ability to participate in paid work. Several young mothers expressed pride in maintaining employment despite significant health challenges, often highlighting their attendance and commitment to their job. A few described positive experiences of employers making reasonable adjustments to support them in the workplace.

One participant reported that her employer had been supportive in making reasonable adjustments for her dyslexia, enabling her to

remain in employment. However, she was uncertain whether other employers would be as accommodating and felt this could limit her future career opportunities. In contrast, another participant felt she had experienced disability discrimination and described employers as lacking understanding and compassion towards her health conditions. She lived with chronic health issues that made sustaining paid work difficult, and felt she had been penalised because of her health. This participant was made redundant while on maternity leave.

Participants identified several ways in which health affected their employment opportunities. Some had taken time away from paid work because of postnatal depression or other perinatal mental health difficulties. Many were caring for disabled children or children with additional support needs, which affected their ability to enter and sustain paid work. Others described how the pressures of balancing motherhood, childcare, finances, and other responsibilities had contributed to poor mental health or had exacerbated existing physical and mental health conditions.

Young mothers' accounts suggest that health can act as a significant and often overlapping barrier to employment. Participants' experiences show that their own health needs, the health and support needs of their children, and the pressures associated with poverty and caring responsibilities can interact to shape their ability to access and sustain paid work. While supportive employers and reasonable adjustments enabled some young mothers to remain in employment, others experienced a lack of understanding and flexibility, highlighting the importance of inclusive workplace practices in supporting young mothers' labour market participation.

Finances

Many participants described having to carefully balance household income and expenditure. This included managing income from paid work and social security benefits alongside the costs of childcare, food,

clothing, equipment, and housing. Participants often spoke about the financial pressures associated with raising children and the challenge of making their income stretch to meet their family's needs. For some, these pressures had a significant impact on their mental health. A few said that they had only been able to cope financially because they were living with parents or grandparents, while others described having to develop budgeting and financial management skills quickly after becoming mothers.

Several participants were in receipt of social security benefits, including Universal Credit and Scottish Child Payment. These benefits were generally viewed positively and were seen as making a meaningful contribution to household finances. However, participants also described a range of challenges. These included difficulties understanding the application process, confusion about eligibility and entitlement, lower rates of Universal Credit for claimants under the age of 25, and administrative errors that left them with little or no income while problems were being resolved. Some participants also spoke about the emotional impact of relying on benefits, describing feelings of guilt, stigma, or frustration despite recognising the importance of this support. Others felt uncertain about where to access advice when problems arose.

“I hate relying on Universal Credit. I’m thankful for it, but I hate relying on it.” – 19-22 years old, child aged one, white.

“The benefits I’ve been offered have been amazing. Like the Scottish Child Payment and all that kind of thing, that all really makes a big difference, like a really positive difference.” – 23-25 years old, child aged three, long-term health condition, white.

Example: Challenges claiming benefits

One young mother experienced difficulty when her Universal Credit payments were stopped after she began a college course, despite having informed the Department for Work and Pensions of this change several months in advance. Although the issue was

eventually recognised as an administrative error, she was left without income for a month and described the experience as highly stressful.

Some young mothers said that they had to carefully assess whether it was financially viable for them to take on paid work. This often involved making complex calculations about childcare costs and the proportion that may be covered through Universal Credit, travel expenses, the costs of starting work, and the impact of earnings on benefit entitlement. Participants described the benefits system as complicated and difficult to navigate, making financial decision-making challenging.

Several participants highlighted the difficulties created by the childcare element of Universal Credit being paid in arrears. Although support with childcare costs is available, fees are paid up front before being reimbursed. Some young mothers felt trapped in a situation where they could not access the childcare element because they were not yet in paid work, but could not start paid work because they were unable to afford childcare.

Example: Meeting childcare costs

Lucy had to pay childcare costs upfront and reclaim them through Universal Credit. At the time, with two children in nursery, the fees exceeded her salary. She relied on financial support from family to cover the costs and then repaid them once the reimbursement arrived. She described the arrangement as extremely stressful.

Some participants felt that paid work added significant pressure to their lives through childcare arrangements, time away from their children, and the practical demands of balancing paid work and family life, without substantially improving their financial situation. This led some to question whether they could be financially better off not in paid work. Despite this, most participants said they did want to be in paid work because they valued independence and did not want to rely solely on social security benefits. Others highlighted the wider benefits of employment, including

improved mental health, social interaction, routine, confidence, and sense of purpose.

For some, paid work was a financial necessity. Participants described needing employment to support their families, repay debt, or meet essential living costs. One participant felt compelled to return to work when her baby was a few months old due to financial pressures. Another described needing to support not only her own child but also young siblings and a parent.

Example: Balancing paid work and benefits

Lila described feeling trapped by the interaction between low pay and benefit entitlement. She worked 26 hours a week over five days, but said that earning even a small amount more would result in the loss of financial support with her rent, which she could not otherwise afford. She felt this limited her opportunities for progression and left her feeling frustrated and financially stuck.

“I feel like the government make it harder to be a working single mum than to not...I get three days funded childcare which isn’t enough. There’s no incentive to keep single parents in work. It’s a lot harder to maintain than to just be on benefits.”

Financial barriers extend beyond low income alone. Young mothers often had to navigate complex interactions between earnings, childcare costs, benefit entitlement, and household expenditure, making decisions about paid work financially risky and difficult to predict. While social security provided essential support and helps many young mothers and their families avoid deeper financial hardship, participants’ experiences suggest that the design of and interaction between the childcare and benefit systems can create barriers to entering and progressing in paid work. The evidence also highlights that employment is valued not only as a source of income but as a source of independence, wellbeing, and future opportunity, even where the financial gains are limited.

Skills and qualifications

The young mothers interviewed for this research held a wide range of qualifications, from no formal qualifications to university degrees. Many of those who had left school early or with few qualifications reflected that they would have made different educational choices if given the opportunity. They felt that limited qualifications had reduced their employment options and constrained their longer-term career opportunities.

“It’s a huge setback...sometimes you think to yourself, I should have just put my head down and focused on what I needed to do.” –
23-25 years old, children aged six, four, and two, racially
minoritised.

Participants who wanted to develop their skills and qualifications described a range of barriers. These included finding time to study, covering the financial costs of learning, and maintaining motivation while managing a range of responsibilities. Several participants explained that they were already balancing multiple demands and that they did not have the time, energy, or capacity to invest in learning while their children were young. This was particularly true for young mothers caring for disabled children or children with additional support needs.

Some participants said they expected opportunities for learning and development to become more realistic once their children reached school age. A few planned to delay further learning until then, viewing college or training as a route to better employment opportunities than those currently available to them.

Several participants also felt unable to reduce their working hours or leave employment to pursue qualifications because they needed a regular income. While some young mothers would have liked to undertake further study or training, they felt that financial pressures made this unrealistic. As a result, some described feeling stuck and unable to improve their employment prospects.

“I feel that I’m not able to progress at all...the only way for me to progress would be to go to college, which I’m considering, but then financially that puts a lot of stress on me...so I feel as if I’m stuck.”
– 19-22 years old, child aged two, white.

Opportunities to develop skills within employment were also limited for some young mothers. A few participants said they were unable to increase their hours, take on additional responsibilities, or pursue promotion because of childcare demands and concerns about the impact of higher earnings on benefit entitlement. This contributed to a feeling that career progression was out of reach. Some felt they would not be able to progress until their children were older, as the additional commitments associated with promotion or training would be too difficult to manage alongside their caring responsibilities. Others felt constrained by their previous work experience, which limited the range of jobs and career pathways they could realistically pursue.

These findings suggest that skills development and career progression are often shaped by the same financial and caring responsibilities that affect young mothers’ participation in paid work more broadly. While many participants were ambitious and wanted to improve their qualifications and employment prospects, limited time, financial pressures, childcare responsibilities, and concerns about income stability often prevented them from doing so. As a result, young mothers could become caught between the need to earn in the present and the need to invest in skills that would improve their long-term employment opportunities, creating a significant barrier to progression.

Stigma and assumptions

All of the young mothers involved in the research said that they had experienced some form of stigma or judgement because they became a mother at a younger age.

“I feel that being a young mum, you’re really frowned upon.” –
26-30 years old, child aged five, white.

“You get judged by the doctors, you get judged by people on public transport, by the college, by the school, just everywhere, everywhere you go.” – 19-22 years old, child aged one, disabled, racially minoritised.

Participants described experiencing stigma across multiple areas of their lives, including education, healthcare, public spaces, and employment. In relation to paid work, a few participants felt that employers assumed young mothers would be less reliable employees because of their caring responsibilities. One participant felt judged by colleagues after becoming a mother at a young age, while another described experiencing stigma in both school and college settings.

Example: Stigma in the workplace

Alana said that her manager frequently referred to her as a “young mum” in front of her colleagues, which made her feel uncomfortable and singled out. She felt that young mothers are often subject to negative assumptions and subtle judgement. After raising the issue with her manager, she found that she was unaware of the impact her comments were having and subsequently changed her behaviour. For Alana, being able to communicate openly with her manager was important in resolving the situation.

Several participants felt that young mothers are judged regardless of the choices they make. Some described feeling criticised if they were not in paid work, while also feeling judged if they were employed and used childcare. A few also spoke about feelings of guilt associated with spending time away from their children, despite recognising that employment helped them provide for their families.

“I feel like you can never win as a young mum whether you work or not, because if you don’t work then people are like, she’s just scrounging off the government...if you do go to work they’re like, that’s terrible, she’s away off to work and leaving her child with

strangers. I feel like in general, young mums can't win." – 26-30 years old, child aged one, long-term health condition, white.

Some participants reported feeling particularly scrutinised when advocating for their children in healthcare settings. This was especially common among mothers of disabled children and children with additional support needs. Several felt that healthcare professionals were less likely to take their views seriously because of their age. One participant explained that she took her own mother to appointments because she felt professionals listened more readily to an older adult. Another said that she felt judged and unsupported when a health visitor advised her not to return to work because of her children's health issues.

A small number of participants also described stigma linked to other aspects of their identity and circumstances. One care experienced young mother felt that professionals sometimes assumed young mothers with care experience would struggle to parent effectively. She described feeling pressure to demonstrate that she was succeeding as a parent by returning to paid work. Another participant felt that young mothers are often subject to unfair stereotypes about their relationships and sexual behaviour.

Some participants also encountered stigma within their families and communities. For example, one participant had not told several immediate family members that she had a child because she feared the consequences for family relationships.

"It's a difficult family situation, I would like to tell them but...a lot of problems would be caused after." – 19-22 years old, child aged four, unpaid carer, racially minoritised.

Despite these experiences, a few participants emphasised that they tried not to let negative assumptions affect them. While they were aware of the stigma surrounding young motherhood, they described focusing on their children, their goals, and the positive aspects of their lives.

Stigma remains a pervasive feature of many young mothers' lives and can shape their experiences across employment, education, healthcare, and family relationships. Participants described being subject to contradictory expectations, whereby they were criticised both for being in paid work, and for not being in paid work, and often felt that their age undermined their credibility as parents. These findings indicate that stigma and negative assumptions can create additional emotional and psychological barriers to employment, affecting confidence, wellbeing, and access to support.

Travel, transport, and housing

Travel was a significant issue for some participants, particularly for those living in rural or remote areas. Challenges included long journey times, limited or unreliable transport options, and the cost of travel. These factors restricted the employment and learning opportunities available to young mothers. For example, participants living in rural areas described concerns about the limited range of jobs they could realistically access. One young mother estimated that most hospitality jobs would require a one-hour commute each way, increasing the amount of time she would spend away from her child. Another said there were very few local employment opportunities and that she would have to depend on unreliable public transport to travel to work. Travel also created practical difficulties when combined with childcare responsibilities. Several participants highlighted the challenge of coordinating nursery or school drop-offs with work or study commitments, particularly where public transport schedules were inflexible or journeys were lengthy.

Some participants had intentionally chosen to work or study close to home, while others were studying remotely. A few noted that transport would become a major barrier if they were required to travel regularly. Several young mothers mentioned benefiting from free bus travel through the Young Scot card, but highlighted that this entitlement ends at age 22, despite many continuing to face financial pressures as young parents.

For a small number of participants, travel challenges were compounded by other factors. One young mother with experience of domestic abuse described feeling anxious about travelling alone. Others explained that changes in their living arrangements, experience of domestic abuse, or breakdowns in family relationships had affected their ability to travel safely, affordably, and reliably to access paid work or learning opportunities.

Example: Moving to a new area

Beth worked as a support worker in a school near her previous home, where she had lived with her child and her mother. Following a breakdown in family relationships, she moved with her child to a new area. This created significant difficulties in managing childcare and travelling to work. Beth's contracted hours were 9am to 3pm, but she had also taken on an escorting role within the school that required her to start work at 8am. Using public transport, she could no longer drop her child at nursery and arrive at work on time, forcing her to rely on expensive taxis. Beth proposed several adjustments to help her balance paid work and childcare, including changing her hours and removing the escorting role. However, these requests were rejected by her employer, who subsequently asked her to submit her resignation.

Young mothers' accounts suggest that travel can act as a significant barrier to employment and learning for young mothers, particularly in rural and remote areas. Travel challenges were rarely isolated issues but instead, they interacted with childcare responsibilities, financial constraints, housing circumstances, and experiences of domestic abuse. Participants' experiences demonstrate that access to employment is shaped not only by the availability of jobs, but also by whether those opportunities can be accessed affordably, safely, and within the constraints of caring responsibilities. For some young mothers, transport barriers substantially reduced the range of viable paid work and learning opportunities available to them.

Impact of challenges

Despite facing significant challenges, the young mothers interviewed for this research often demonstrated resilience, determination, and a desire to create positive futures for themselves and their children. When reflecting on their experiences, many described the emotional impact of balancing caring responsibilities with the pressures of paid work, education, finances, and family life. Participants commonly used words such as anxious, stressed, overwhelmed, hopeless, exhausted, helpless, and trapped to describe how they felt.

Many said that concerns about paid work, childcare, social security benefits, financial security, health, and meeting their children's needs weighed heavily on their mental wellbeing. For some, the cumulative effect of these pressures led to them questioning whether they would ever be able to access or sustain paid work in the future.

“It makes me feel like – oh my God – this is just an impossible situation...There's too much expected, people, society and employers forget that being a parent is a full-time job already... young mums are expected to have two full-time jobs.” –
26-30 years old, child aged one, long-term health condition, white.

At the same time, participants also highlighted positive aspects of employment and managing multiple responsibilities. Some felt that navigating these challenges had strengthened their resilience, confidence, and problem-solving skills. Several described paid work as an important source of routine, independence, and social connection. For some, paid work provided a temporary break from the pressures of parenting and caring responsibilities. A few said that being at work allowed them to feel like themselves beyond their identity as a mother, giving them opportunities to build friendships, interact with other adults, and participate in activities outside the home. Participants also noted that employment had a positive impact on their mental health and overall wellbeing.

While participants demonstrated considerable resilience, many described the cumulative impact of balancing paid work and caring responsibilities as overwhelming. Nonetheless, young mothers' accounts highlight the important role that paid work can play in supporting wellbeing, identity, and social connection.

Intersecting inequalities

The research involved interviews with 32 young mothers with a wide range of backgrounds and circumstances. While each participant's experiences were unique, applying an intersectional lens to the analysis revealed some common patterns among particular groups of young mothers.

Racially minoritised young mothers

The racially minoritised young mothers who participated in the research had diverse experiences and included Scottish-born, UK-born and migrant women. Among the two participants who moved to Scotland from outwith the UK, one was a self-employed refugee, and another was employed in the same occupational field she had worked in before migrating. Both described relatively positive experiences of combining paid work and motherhood, were highly motivated, and had access to family support. As a result, they reported comparatively few challenges in relation to employment. However, one participant noted that financial commitments to family members living in her country of origin added to the financial pressures she experienced as a young mother. The two racially minoritised participants who had moved to Scotland from elsewhere in the UK shared some similarities. Both had their children as young teenagers, had limited support networks in Scotland, and were engaged in further education at the time of the research. The experiences of the Scottish-born racially minoritised participants were more varied: one was receiving support to develop skills and move towards employment, while another felt uncertain about her future because she had never been in paid work.

None of the racially minoritised participants identified racism or racial discrimination as a significant barrier to employment. Participants were not asked directly about experiences of racism, although they were invited to discuss challenges relating to discrimination, harassment, stigma, and assumptions. This finding should therefore be interpreted with caution. In qualitative research, what participants choose to disclose is shaped by the questions asked, the perceived purpose of the research, the relationship between participant and interviewer, the perceived background of the interviewer, and whether participants feel that particular experiences will be understood as relevant. Where racism is not named explicitly, this should not be read as evidence that racism was absent or unimportant.

Wider evidence shows that racially minoritised women in Scotland face interconnected gendered and racial barriers that affect their ability to access, sustain, and progress in paid employment. For example, nearly three quarters of racially minoritised women in Scotland have experienced racism, discrimination, racial prejudice, or bias in the workplace, yet only around half reported this to their employer. The most common reasons for not reporting were expectations that they would not be supported by their manager, or that reporting would not make any difference.²⁸ This wider context is important because it shows that experiences of racism at work are often normalised, minimised, or left unreported, particularly where workers do not believe that employers or institutions will respond appropriately.

For racially minoritised young mothers, racism may also intersect with other barriers identified throughout this research, including stigma about young motherhood, poverty, childcare constraints, insecure work, migration status, limited support networks, and wider unpaid caring responsibilities. These barriers may not always be experienced or described separately. For example, a participant may describe difficulty

²⁸ Close the Gap (2019) *Still Not Visible: Research on Black and minority ethnic women's experiences of employment in Scotland*, available: https://www.closethegap.org.uk/content/resources/1557499847_Still-Not-Visible.pdf

accessing work, feeling judged, being unsupported by an employer, or lacking confidence in services without identifying these experiences as racism, even where racialised assumptions or unequal treatment may be part of the context. This is particularly relevant where participants are also navigating pressures associated with age, motherhood, caring responsibilities, and financial insecurity.

Against this wider context, the absence of explicit discussion of racism in these interviews should not be taken as evidence that racism was irrelevant to participants' employment experiences. Rather, racially minoritised young mothers may not have felt the interview to be a space in which their experiences of racism would be recognised as relevant, heard, or valued as part of their experiences of young motherhood. Some may also have prioritised more immediate or visible barriers, such as childcare, finances, housing, caring responsibilities, or education, when discussing their employment experiences. The findings therefore point to the need for future research to more directly understand the interaction between racialised labour market inequalities, gender, age, motherhood, poverty, migration, and care.

Disabled young mothers and health conditions

One in ten participants self-identified as disabled, while half reported having a physical or mental health condition lasting 12 months or more. This is higher than the two in five adults in Scotland who report having a long-term health condition that limits their day-to-day activities.²⁹

The research did not gather quantitative information on the type of participants' disabilities or health conditions, which limits the extent to which differences within this group can be analysed. Nonetheless, many participants referred to aspects of poor mental health, including stress, anxiety, and depression.

Only one participant made explicit reference to experiencing disability discrimination in the workplace. However, this should not be taken as

²⁹ Scottish Government (2025) *The Scottish Health Survey*, available at: <https://www.gov.scot/collections/scottish-health-survey/#2024>

evidence that discrimination was uncommon, as participants were not asked directly about disability discrimination and may have described related experiences through other themes, such as lack of flexibility, poor employer understanding, or difficulty accessing suitable work. Wider labour market evidence also shows the growing significance of ill health as a driver of women's economic inactivity, with ill health now surpassing caring responsibilities as the most commonly reported reason for women being economically inactive.³⁰

There was considerable overlap between disability, long-term health conditions, and other forms of disadvantage and inequality. Young mothers with physical or mental health conditions generally showed similar broad employment patterns to the wider sample, with most having experience of paid work before becoming mothers and fewer participating in paid work afterwards. However, their accounts often showed how health-related barriers were compounded by other circumstances, including homelessness, domestic abuse, unpaid caring responsibilities, care experience, poverty, and caring for disabled children or children with additional support needs. Experiencing these intersectional inequalities could reduce the time, energy, flexibility, and support available for paid work or learning, while also increasing the need for income security and responsive services. Disability and health should not be understood as separate or isolated barriers, but as factors that can intensify the wider structural challenges young mothers face in accessing, sustaining, and progressing in employment.

Young mothers with experience of domestic abuse

A small number of participants discussed the impact of domestic abuse on their employment and learning opportunities. Their accounts demonstrated that the consequences of abuse extended far beyond the abuse itself, affecting confidence, mental health, housing stability,

³⁰ Close the Gap (2025) *Excluded by Design: Research on disabled women's employment in Scotland*, available at: <https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/Excluded-by-Design—research-report.pdf>

support networks, and their ability to access work, education, and childcare. Participants described feeling anxious about leaving their children in formal childcare, travelling alone, or entering unfamiliar environments. Others explained that domestic abuse had reduced the support available to them, disrupted family relationships, or contributed to housing instability, making it more difficult to engage in paid work or learning. These experiences highlight how domestic abuse can create long-term barriers to labour market participation, even after the abuse has ended.

Example: Future ambitions after domestic abuse

Katrina had no experience of paid work when she became pregnant at the age of 17, having spent much of her time providing full-time unpaid care for her mother. During this period, she was also experiencing domestic abuse. After leaving the relationship, she and her child lived in temporary homeless accommodation. Katrina described how the trauma associated with these experiences affected her confidence and mental wellbeing, making paid work feel unmanageable. However, she felt that employment could have had a positive impact on her mental health had she been able to access it. Following the end of her relationship, Katrina trained as a nail technician with support from a charity. She found balancing college and childcare challenging, particularly because her experiences of abuse had made it difficult for her to trust others to care for her child. Despite these challenges, Katrina remained focused on building a future for herself and her family. She hopes to become a self-employed nail technician, enabling her to work flexibly around her children's nursery and school hours.

Violence against women is a critical but often overlooked factor shaping women's labour market experiences. Forms of violence against women, including domestic abuse, stalking, sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape, so-called honour-based abuse, and other forms of gender-based violence can all have profound implications for women's economic

participation. However, these experiences are rarely recognised as employment issues, despite their direct impact on women's financial security, career progression, attendance, confidence, and wellbeing.

For young mothers specifically, the effects of domestic abuse can intersect with other inequalities identified through the research, including poverty, limited childcare options, poor physical or mental health, and restricted support networks. The consequences of domestic abuse can also undermine many of the practical conditions required to access and sustain employment, such as access to reliable transport, affordable childcare, stable accommodation, supportive relationships, and control over household finances. As a result, domestic abuse should not be understood as a separate issue from employment inequality, but as one of the structural factors that can shape young mothers' opportunities to access, progress in, and sustain paid work.

This is particularly important given evidence that women who have children at younger ages are more likely to experience abuse and are more likely to experience multiple forms of abuse.³¹ Young mothers are also disproportionately affected by poverty and financial insecurity, factors which can increase vulnerability to abuse and make it more difficult to leave abusive relationships. Research also shows that domestic abuse frequently begins or escalates during pregnancy and the first year after birth.³² This period often coincides with young mothers' reduced income, increased caring responsibilities, greater dependence on partners, and significant changes to household and employment circumstances. These overlapping inequalities mean that domestic abuse

³¹ Skafida, Morrison, and Devaney (2022) *Prevalence and social inequality in experiences of domestic abuse among mothers of young children: A study using national survey data from Scotland*, available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33416002/>

³² Maternal Mental Health Alliance (2023) *Briefing: Perinatal mental health and domestic abuse*, available at: https://maternalmentalhealthalliance.org/media/filer_public/79/63/79635e45-1797-4729-a18b-2ab4c46f4cde/mmha-briefing-perinatal-mental-health-and-domestic-abuse-jan-23.pdf

can both contribute to, and be reinforced by, young mothers' labour market exclusion.

Care experienced young mothers

Care experienced participants described a distinct set of challenges that shaped their experiences of employment, learning, and motherhood. Many had limited family support and few people they could rely on for childcare, practical help, advice, or emotional support. This contrasted with participants who were able to draw on parents, grandparents, or wider networks to help balance paid work and caring responsibilities. Several care experienced young mothers also described difficulties trusting others to care for their children, often linked to earlier experiences of instability, separation, trauma, or disrupted relationships. As a result, barriers to employment were not solely about the availability of childcare, but also whether they felt confident and safe entrusting their children to others.

Some participants also felt judged by professionals due to their care experience and felt they were under greater scrutiny as mothers. A few described gaps in practical knowledge, including budgeting, financial management, and navigating services, which they felt they had fewer opportunities to develop while growing up. Care experience frequently intersected with other forms of disadvantage including poverty, disability, poor health, domestic abuse, and lone parenthood, often compounding barriers to employment and learning.

Success and enablers

The availability of support networks emerged as an important factor shaping young mothers' experiences of paid work, learning, and caring responsibilities. A small number of participants reported having no support networks at all, with few or no friends or family members they could rely on. Limited support networks were particularly common among young mothers with care experience, those affected by domestic abuse, and those who had experienced substance use issues within their families.

In contrast, participants who lived close to parents or grandparents often described family support as a key factor enabling them to access and sustain employment or education. Family members were sometimes able to provide childcare, practical help, or emotional support, making it easier for young mothers to balance paid work and caring responsibilities. However, family support was not always straightforward. Some participants who lived near or with family members had significant unpaid caring responsibilities for them, limiting the support they could receive in turn.

Several participants described receiving support from community organisations and charities, including organisations supporting parents, women, young carers, and people affected by alcohol and drug use. Others highlighted support from health services, such as Family Nurses and health visitors, and employability services, including Skills Development Scotland and Routes to Work. Third sector organisations were often described as particularly valuable in reducing isolation and providing support during difficult periods. In contrast, a few participants reported negative experiences of Job Centres, describing them as focused more on compliance and sanctions than personalised support.

Many participants also emphasised the importance of practical support with childcare. Some were only able to engage in paid work because of funded childcare places or support with costs through the benefits system. Several stated that without affordable and reliable childcare they would be unable to work at all.

A small number of participants attributed their ability to sustain employment to having supportive and flexible employers. Positive experiences included access to flexible working arrangements, understanding when children were unwell, and working patterns that aligned with school and nursery hours.

Example: Term-time contract

Laura works part time as a dental nurse. She initially returned to work two days per week after becoming a mother and later increased this to three days per week once her son started school. She is able to access after-school childcare and has a term-time contract that aligns with her childcare responsibilities. Laura works in a small team of women who are also mothers, and feels that her colleagues understand the challenges she faces.

When asked what would help them access and sustain paid work in the future, participants consistently highlighted the importance of fair work. This included job security, statutory rights being upheld, opportunities for training and career development, supportive colleagues, and meaningful work that they enjoyed.

Participants also emphasised the importance of flexible employers. Young mothers felt that employers should recognise the value they bring to the workplace and challenge assumptions that caring responsibilities reduce commitment to work. Suggestions included offering working patterns that align with childcare, flexibility for unforeseen changes, reduced or adjusted hours where needed, support when children are unwell, flexibility for appointments, and appropriate facilities for breastfeeding mothers.

“The most important thing for me would be the hours, the flexibility, and the employer to be understanding about my circumstances.” –
19-22 years old, child aged two, white.

Many participants stressed that workplace culture was as important as formal policies. They wanted managers who were approachable, understanding, and non-judgemental, particularly when childcare responsibilities affected attendance or availability.

“Just someone that’s emotionally intelligent, someone that can support you if you need it...just someone that can work around [you] having a family and not pressurise your workload.” – 23-25 years old, child aged two, long-term health condition, white.

Some participants in their mid twenties reflected that they now felt more confident discussing their caring responsibilities with employers than they had when they were younger, when they often felt reluctant to disclose personal circumstances or ask for flexibility.

Finally, participants consistently identified childcare as the foundation of their ability to consider, access, and sustain paid work. They highlighted the need for affordable, flexible, and funded childcare, including provision of before and after school hours, childcare that meets the needs of disabled children and children with additional support needs, simpler processes for accessing childcare support through the benefits system, and greater employer involvement in supporting childcare arrangements. Some also felt that tailored support was needed for care experienced young mothers, survivors of domestic abuse, and others who might require additional support to feel confident leaving their children in childcare.

These findings demonstrate that support networks, childcare provision, and employer flexibility are critical enablers of young mothers’ participation in paid work. While personal resilience and determination were evident throughout the research, access to employment was often dependent on the availability of practical, emotional, and financial support. Participants’ experiences suggest that the barriers identified throughout this report can be reduced where young mothers have access to reliable childcare, supportive relationships, responsive services, and flexible employers. The findings therefore highlight that improving young mothers’ labour market participation is not solely about helping individuals overcome barriers, but also about creating the conditions and support structures that make employment accessible and sustainable.

Conclusion

Overall, the findings demonstrate that young mothers' participation in paid work is shaped by a complex combination of structural, practical, financial, and social barriers that rarely occur in isolation. While childcare emerged as the most significant barrier, participants' experiences show that employment outcomes are also influenced by the interaction between caring responsibilities, health, financial security, workplace practices, and access to skills and qualifications. The challenge for many young mothers was not simply finding a job but finding paid work that could be reconciled with the realities of caring for children, managing household finances, maintaining their wellbeing, and meeting the needs of wider family members.

The findings suggest that many of the barriers faced by young mothers are embedded within the way paid work, childcare, and social security systems are organised. Participants often described being required to navigate complex trade-offs between employment and childcare costs, earnings and benefit entitlement, paid work and caring responsibilities, or immediate financial needs and longer-term skills development. These challenges were particularly acute for lone mothers, mothers of disabled children or children with additional support needs, and those with limited informal support networks.

At the same time, the findings strongly challenge negative stereotypes about young mothers. Participants consistently demonstrated ambition, resilience, and a desire to provide financially for their families, develop their careers, and build secure futures. Many valued paid work not only as a source of income, but also as a source of independence, confidence, routine, social connection, and wellbeing. However, stigma and assumptions about young motherhood often created additional emotional and psychological barriers, undermining confidence and affecting access to support.

Finally, the research highlights the importance of an intersectional understanding of young mothers' experiences. Although common themes were evident across the sample, the extent and nature of barriers were shaped by factors including disability, care experience, domestic abuse, migration, racial background, poverty, and the availability of family support. The evidence suggests that young mothers do not face a single barrier to employment but a series of interconnected challenges. Supporting young mothers' labour market participation therefore requires approaches that recognise both the diversity of their experiences and the cumulative nature of the barriers they face.

4.4 Employer perceptions of young mothers

This section examines employer perceptions of young mothers and considers how those perceptions may shape recruitment, retention, flexible working, progression, and workplace culture. The findings draw on an employer survey to explore both positive views of young mothers' skills and contribution, and the persistence of assumptions about reliability, ambition, flexibility, and risk. The chapter shows that many employers recognise young mothers' value in principle, but that support is uneven and often constrained by organisational size, sector, and workplace culture.

Attitudes towards young mothers as employees

Employer survey respondents (n=281) were asked to choose three words from a list that they felt best described young mothers as employees. The list included both positive and negative descriptors, reflecting recurring themes in how young mothers described themselves and the stigmatising attitudes they may encounter. Overall, employers selected more positive than negative descriptors, suggesting that they broadly value young mothers in the workplace. "Hardworking" was the most frequently selected descriptor, chosen by 54% of employers, while "unreliable" and "low-skilled" were the least frequently selected, each chosen by 13%. A fuller breakdown of responses to this question is shown in Table 6.

Table 6: How employers would describe young mothers as employees	
Descriptor	Percentage of employers who selected this as one of their three words (%)
Hardworking	54%
Committed	50%
Resilient	45%
Motivated	42%
Capable	36%
Distracted	23%
Unreliable	13%
Low-skilled	13%

Responses to this question varied by employer size. Larger employers were generally more likely to select positive descriptors while smaller employers, particularly those with fewer than 10 employees, were more likely to select negative descriptors. The smallest employers were more than twice as likely as the largest employers to select “distracted”, at 40% and 17% respectively. These differences are shown in Figure 3. This pattern may partly reflect larger employers’ greater concern with reputation and impression management, which could create a positive bias in how they report their attitudes towards young mothers. It may also reflect the fact that young mothers are more visible in smaller workplaces, where survey respondents may experience the operational challenges of flexible working more directly. At the same time, the findings point to some complexity in smaller employers’ attitudes. Employers with fewer than 10 employees were the most likely to describe young mothers as “hardworking”, suggesting that their views may be more nuanced than a simple small-versus-large employer comparison would imply.

Figure 3: Percentage of employers who selected descriptors by number of employees

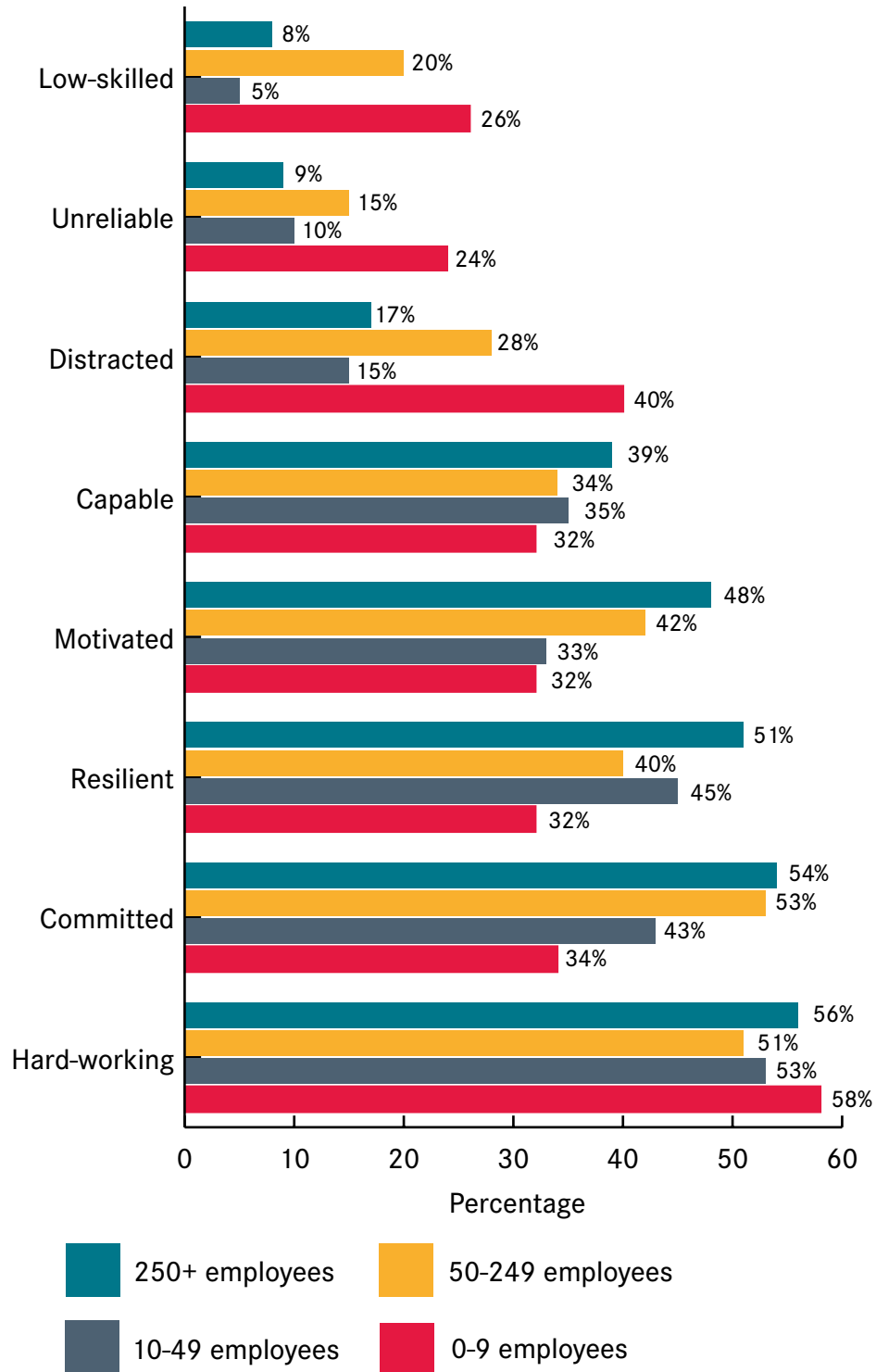


Table 7: Employer attitudes towards young mothers as employees	
Statement	Percentage who agreed or strongly agreed (%)
Young mothers are productive employees.	68%
Young mothers are committed to their job.	65%
Young mothers are reliable employees.	63%
My organisation actively supports career development for young mothers.	61%
Young mothers are ambitious and career focused.	54%
My organisation looks for potential in young mothers.	49%
Hiring a young mother is risky for employers.	27%

Respondents were also asked the extent to which they agreed with several statements about young mothers, for example: “Young mothers are reliable employees”. Employer responses indicated broadly positive attitudes, with approximately two thirds agreeing or strongly agreeing that young mothers are productive, committed, and reliable employees. However, agreement fell to around half for statements about young mothers being ambitious and career focused, and about respondents’ organisations looking for potential in them. These differences suggest that employers may be more likely to question young mothers’ ambition and career focus than their day-to-day performance at work. This appears to sit in tension with the finding that 61% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their organisation actively supports career development for young mothers. One possible explanation is that some employers assume that general family-friendly policies are sufficient to support young mothers’ progression, without recognising the more

specific gendered and other barriers they may face. This concern is reinforced by the finding that over a quarter of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that hiring a young mother is risky for employers. A fuller breakdown of responses to this question is shown in Table 7.

Employer size also influenced responses to these statements. Smaller employers were more likely than larger employers to disagree or strongly disagree that young mothers are productive, committed, and reliable employees. For example, the smallest employers were almost three times as likely as the largest employers to disagree or strongly disagree that young mothers are reliable employees (29% and 10% respectively). Employers with fewer than 10 employees were also notably more likely to disagree that young mothers are committed, productive, and ambitious employees.

Comparison with other groups

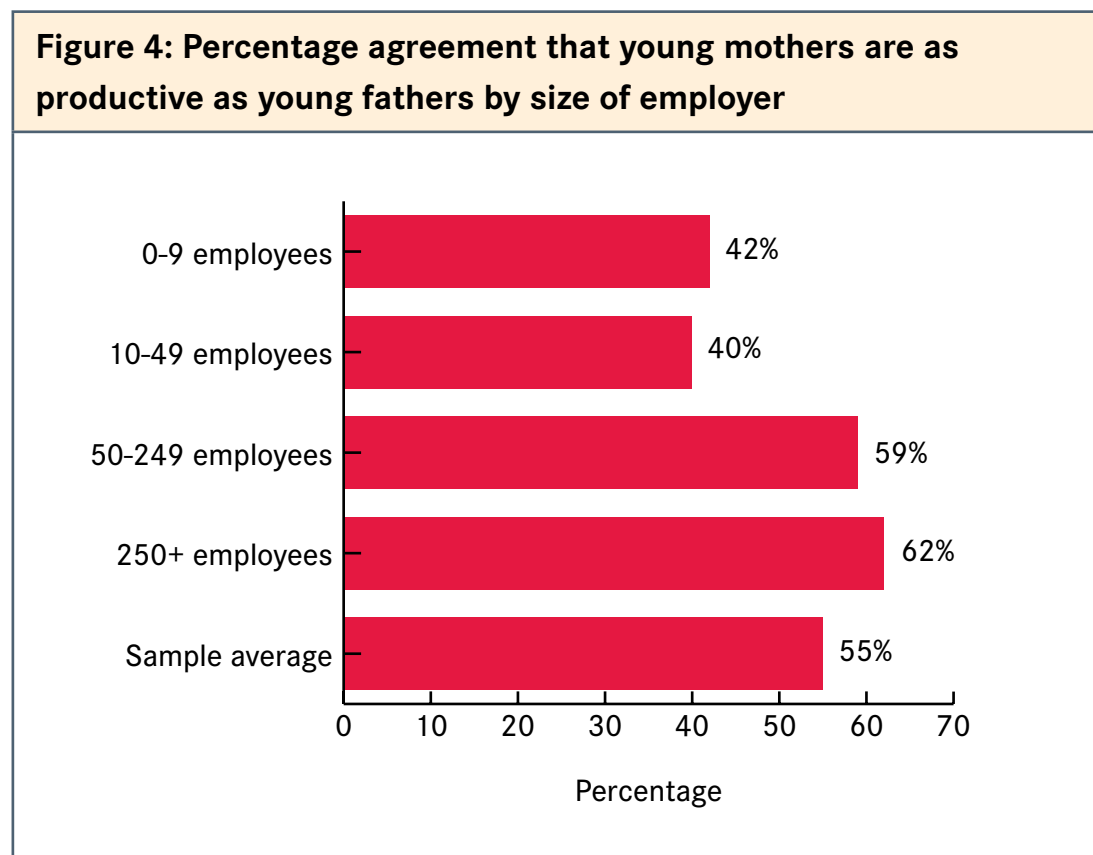
The survey also explored employer attitudes towards young mothers by asking respondents to compare them directly with other groups of employees. Overall, around half of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that young mothers are as productive, committed, reliable, ambitious, and career focused as these comparator groups:

- Mothers over 25
- Fathers over 25
- Pregnant women
- Young women (aged under 25) with no children
- Young men (aged under 25) with no children
- Women over 25 without children
- Men over 25 without children
- Young fathers

This means that a substantial proportion of employers did not agree that young mothers were comparable to other groups across these workplace attributes. Response patterns again suggest that smaller organisations

were more likely to hold less positive views of young mothers. For example, 48% of employers overall agreed or strongly agreed that young mothers are as productive as men over 25 with no children. Examining differences in responses by employer size shows that 57% of large employers agreed, compared with 39% of small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Agreement was lowest among employers with fewer than 10 employees, at 34%.

A similar pattern emerged when young mothers were compared with young fathers in the same age range. As shown in Figure 4, larger employers were around 20 percentage points more likely than smaller employers to agree or strongly agree that young mothers are as productive as young fathers. This suggests that smaller employers may be more likely to associate young mothers' caregiving responsibilities with reduced workplace productivity, while not applying the same assumption to young fathers.



Respondents were asked whether they saw hiring young mothers as carrying more risk for the business than hiring each comparator group. Perceived risk was highest when young mothers were compared with women over 25 with no children and fathers over 25: in both cases, 46% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that hiring a young mother carried more risk. Perceived risk was lower when young mothers were compared with pregnant women and mothers over 25, where 34% and 38% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that hiring a young mother carried more risk. These findings appear to indicate the continued presence of stereotyping around women with children in general when compared to men, as well as compared to women without children. Women with children are perceived to present a higher level of risk to prospective employers, possibly due to assumptions about caregiving responsibilities detracting from their ability to perform well in their role or sustain paid work without some level of flexibility from employers.

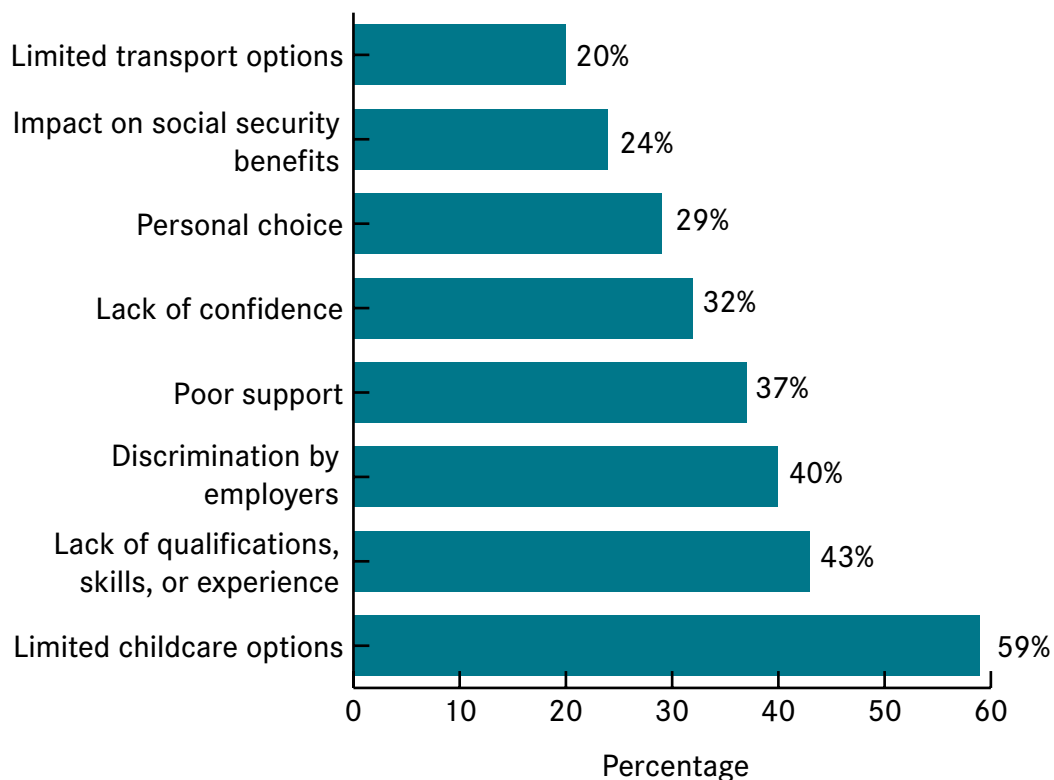
Workplace roles

Employers' responses show clear patterns in the job roles they associate with young mothers. Most respondents identified administrative or support roles (63%) and caring and service roles (61%) as the roles young mothers are most likely to be recruited into. Far fewer respondents selected professional or specialist roles (37%), supervisory or management roles (28%), or technical, skilled trades or manual roles (27%). These patterns may suggest that employers see young mothers as being better suited to lower-paid, feminised forms of work, reflecting assumptions about their qualifications, skills, and career ambitions.

Respondents were also asked to identify what they thought were the main reasons why young mothers are more likely to be in low-paid or insecure work. Employers could select as many options as they felt applied. As shown in Figure 5, the most commonly selected reasons were limited childcare options (59%) and lack of qualifications, skills, or experience (43%). This may indicate that employers view the principal drivers of young mothers' labour market inequality as sitting beyond their control or

power to influence. However, discrimination by employers was the third most selected reason (40%), suggesting that employers also recognise the role of stigma and poor workplace practices in shaping young mothers' employment outcomes. Limited transport options was the least selected reason, which may reflect the sample's concentration in urban centres such as Glasgow (26%) and Edinburgh (12%), alongside the comparatively smaller proportion of respondents from smaller and more rural local authorities.

Figure 5: Main reasons employers think young mothers are more likely to be in low-paid or insecure work



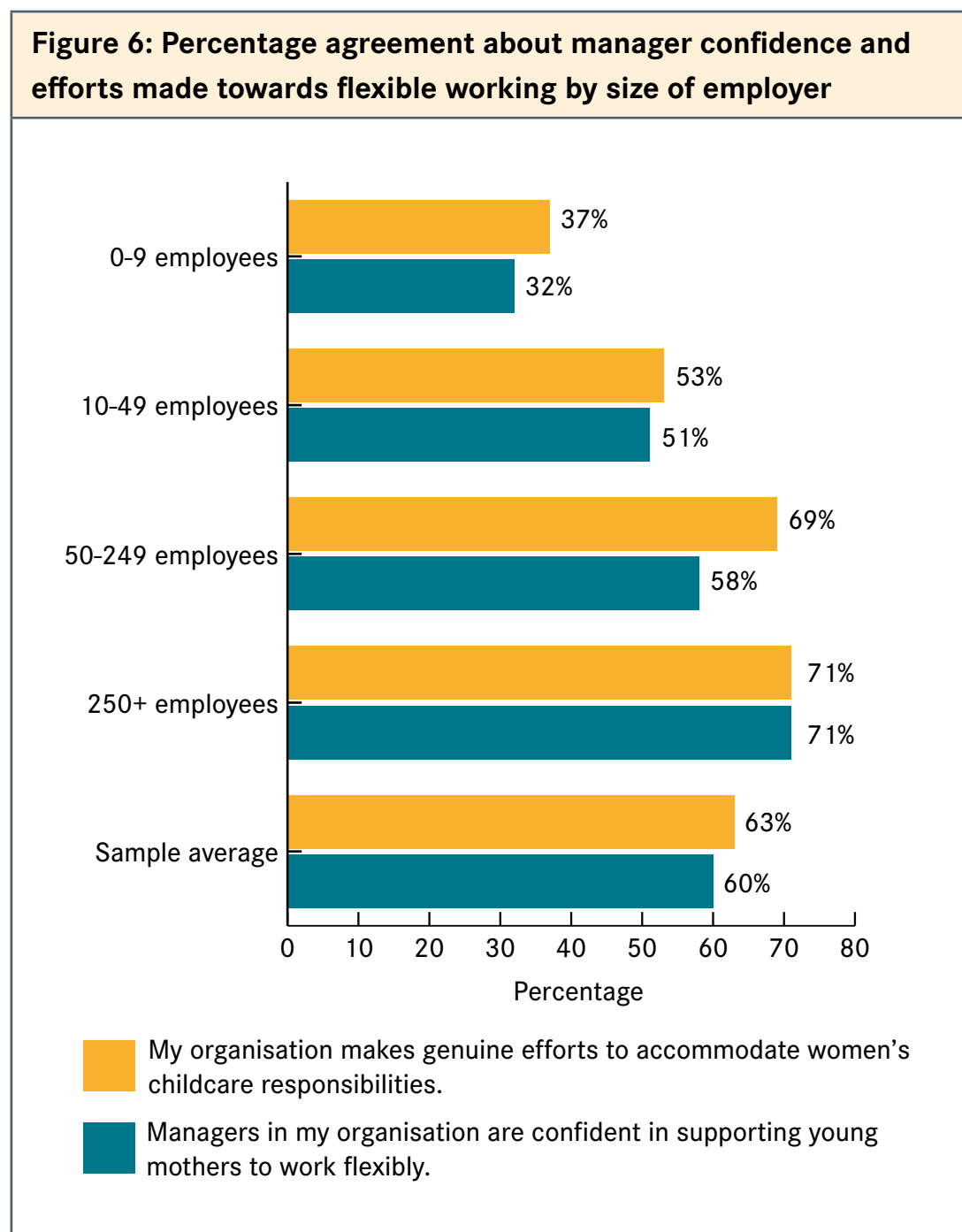
Views on flexible working and retention

Respondents were presented with a variety of statements about flexible working and asked to what extent they agreed with each of these. A breakdown of responses to this question is shown in Table 8.

Table 8: Employer attitudes towards flexible working	
Statement	Percentage who agreed or strongly agreed (%)
Offering flexible working (e.g. part-time work, compressed or reduced hours, flexitime, hybrid or remote working, etc) to young mothers is good for retention.	78%
My organisation makes genuine efforts to accommodate women's childcare responsibilities.	63%
Managers in my organisation are confident supporting young mothers to work flexibly.	60%
Flexible working requests from young mothers are sometimes viewed as inconvenient.	50%
Requests for flexibility from young mothers can cause operational difficulties.	49%
It's more difficult for young mothers to get flexible working agreed than for other staff.	43%

Most respondents agreed that offering flexible working, including part-time work, compressed or reduced hours, flexitime, and hybrid or remote working, supports the retention of young mothers. Overall, 78% agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, while most of the remaining respondents were neutral and only a very small proportion disagreed. Larger employers were more likely to agree that flexible working supports retention, possibly reflecting their greater capacity to accommodate different working patterns. They were also more likely than smaller

employers to agree that their organisation makes genuine efforts to accommodate women's childcare responsibilities and that managers are confident supporting young mothers to work flexibly. This is illustrated in Figure 6.



Around half of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that flexible working requests from young mothers can create operational difficulties or are sometimes viewed as inconvenient. Views differed by respondents' roles within their organisations. Owner/directors were twice as likely as line managers to agree or strongly agree with this statement, at 61% and 31% respectively. This suggests that concerns about the operational impact of flexible working may be more pronounced among respondents with greater responsibility for organisational strategy, resourcing, or business continuity, while line managers may have more direct experience of applying flexible working arrangements in practice.

Respondents were also asked how willing their organisation would be to offer flexible working for young mothers, for example through adjusted working hours, shift patterns, or remote working. Larger organisations were most likely to indicate that they were willing or very willing to do this, at 71%. In contrast, only 44% of the smallest employers said the same. This may reflect the perceived operational impact of flexible working being felt more acutely by smaller employers. Respondents in construction, manufacturing and health/social work were also less willing to offer flexible working, which is likely to reflect the lower availability of hybrid and remote working in these industries. Male dominated sectors such as construction and manufacturing tend to have fewer flexible working opportunities as standard, perhaps reflecting gendered assumptions about male employees not needing to balance paid work with caring responsibilities.

Taken together, these findings suggest that flexible working is widely recognised as important for retaining young mothers but is still too often framed as an operational challenge rather than a route to equality and progression. Concerns about flexibility can reinforce wider assumptions about young mothers' capability, commitment, and suitability for particular roles.

Capability and stigma

Throughout the poll respondents were asked the extent to which they agreed with a series of statements relating to the perceived “fit” of young mothers within their organisation, career progression, and potential. Levels of agreement with these statements are collated in Table 9.

Table 9: Employer attitudes towards young mothers’ fit, progression, and potential	
Statement	Percentage who agreed or strongly agreed
Young mothers are as capable of taking on demanding roles as other employees.	66%
Having young mothers on our staff team benefits our organisation through the skills and perspectives they bring.	61%
Expectations about long hours or being “always available” can make it harder for young mothers to succeed.	58%
Addressing stigma around young mothers should be a business-priority issue.	57%
Young mothers in my organisation are encouraged to progress and take on new challenges.	56%
Colleagues sometimes assume young mothers won’t want additional responsibility.	54%
Young mothers are judged more harshly when they struggle to balance paid work and childcare.	52%

Workplace culture plays a significant role in limiting young mothers' opportunities.	51%
Negative media portrayals of young mothers influence employer behaviour.	47%
Young mothers tend to prioritise work less than other employees.	42%
In my organisation, young mothers are sometimes seen as less reliable.	39%
It can be difficult for young mothers to meet the standards expected in my organisation.	36%
Young mothers are less likely to be a good fit with our workplace culture.	29%

Two thirds (66%) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that young mothers are as capable of taking on demanding roles as other employees, suggesting a broadly positive view of their capability. However, only 36% of employers selected “capable” as a descriptor of young mothers as employees, making it the least frequently selected positive descriptor. This tension may indicate that employers are willing to endorse young mothers' capability in principle, but are less likely to associate capability with them spontaneously. At the same time, 61% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that having young mothers on their staff team benefits their organisation through the skills and perspectives they bring, suggesting that many employers do recognise and value young mothers' contribution to the workplace.

Employers' reflections on the barriers young mothers face are also notable. Over half of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that expectations to work long hours or be “always available” can make it harder for young mothers to succeed (58%), that colleagues may make assumptions about young mothers' desire to take on additional

responsibilities at work (54%), that young mothers are judged more harshly when they struggle to balance paid work and childcare (52%), and that workplace culture plays a significant role in limiting young mothers' opportunities (51%). This suggests that employers are aware of the impact of workplace structures and attitudes, even where those barriers are not always addressed in practice.

There was also variation in how strongly different employers viewed stigma as a business issue. Public sector respondents were more likely than private sector respondents to agree or strongly agree that addressing stigma around young mothers should be a business-priority issue (65% compared with 53%). Employer size also shaped responses: 62% of large employers agreed or strongly agreed, compared to 39% of respondents from the smallest organisations. Responses also varied by job role, with HR/People Leads most likely to agree (74%), followed by owner/directors (60%), line managers (56%), and senior managers (52%). These differences suggest that recognition of stigma is itself shaped by organisational context. Employers closest to equality practice or with greater institutional capacity appear more likely to frame addressing stigma as something which requires deliberate business action.

Conclusion

Taken together, these findings suggest that while many employers recognise the value, resilience, and capability that young mothers bring to the workplace, stigma and stereotypical assumptions remain embedded in perceptions of reliability, ambition, progression, and flexibility. Employers generally identified childcare and structural barriers as key challenges for young mothers, yet there was also evidence that workplace cultures, recruitment practices, and assumptions about caregiving responsibilities themselves contribute to young mothers' labour market disadvantage. The findings also indicate that organisational size shapes attitudes and practices, with smaller employers often reporting greater concerns about flexibility and perceived risk.

Importantly, these findings sit in tension with young mothers' own accounts elsewhere in this research. While many employers described young mothers as hardworking, committed, and reliable, participants reported experiences of pregnancy and maternity discrimination, inflexible working practices, limited support when caring responsibilities affected paid work, and assumptions about their suitability for certain roles or working patterns. This disconnect suggests that positive attitudes expressed in principle do not always translate into supportive experiences in practice.

Applying an anti-racist lens to employer responses

It is important to consider that employers may have responded to the poll with an implicit image of a young mother that reflects dominant stereotypes or perceived norms, rather than the diversity of young mothers' lived experience. As a result, apparently positive attitudes towards young mothers as a group may obscure important differences in how racially minoritised young mothers are viewed, recruited, supported, and progressed within workplaces.

Similarly, organisational policies and practices that appear neutral to employers may nonetheless reproduce inequalities where they fail to account for the specific barriers faced by racially minoritised women, including racism, discrimination, bias, or limited access to informal workplace networks. These findings should therefore be interpreted with an awareness that employer perceptions are shaped by wider social and cultural assumptions about young mothers.



5. Conclusion

This research demonstrates that young mothers' labour market outcomes are shaped by the interaction between young motherhood and wider structural inequalities, including poverty, low pay, occupational segregation, inflexible jobs, discrimination, stigma, unaffordable or unsuitable childcare, and aspects of the social security system. Across Scotland- and UK-level data, interviews with young mothers, and employer polling, the central finding is consistent: young motherhood operates as a point at which existing gendered, age-based, and socioeconomic inequalities are intensified. Young mothers are disproportionately likely to experience poverty, low pay, insecure work, and unequal caring responsibilities. These inequalities are not created by young motherhood, but they are often intensified at the point when young women become mothers and begin navigating paid work and caring responsibilities simultaneously.

Structural inequalities shape young mothers' labour market outcomes

Quantitative data provides important evidence of the structural conditions that shape young mothers' labour market participation. Young women are already concentrated in lower-paid, female-dominated occupations and sectors before motherhood, and are more likely than young men to be economically inactive because of their responsibility for unpaid care. The evidence shows that younger mothers experience the most acute labour market disadvantage, particularly those under 20. The widening part-time pay penalty between the 18-21 and 22-29 age groups suggests that the consequences of caring responsibilities begin to shape women's earnings and progression very early in working life.

These patterns suggest that young motherhood is a critical point at which existing gendered and age-based labour market inequalities become more pronounced.

Interconnected barriers constrain young mothers' choices

Young mothers' own accounts reflect and deepen this analysis.

Participants consistently described wanting to work, study, provide for their families, and build secure futures for themselves and their children. Many valued paid work not only as a source of income, but also as a source of independence, routine, confidence, social connection, and wellbeing. However, their ability to enter, sustain, or progress in paid work was constrained by a series of interconnected barriers. Childcare was the most significant and consistent barrier, but it was rarely experienced in isolation. Affordability, availability, flexibility, and suitability of childcare interacted with low pay, social security, transport, health, children's additional support needs, wider unpaid caring responsibilities, and the availability of informal support.

One of the clearest learning points from the research is that young mothers are not simply making choices between paid work and caring responsibilities in a neutral context. They are making decisions within systems that often make every option costly. Participants described trade-offs between earning and childcare costs, working more hours and losing benefit entitlement, or studying to improve future prospects and needing income now. These trade-offs were particularly acute for lone mothers, disabled young mothers, mothers of disabled children or children with additional support needs, care experienced young mothers, young mothers affected by domestic abuse, and racially minoritised and migrant young mothers. An intersectional lens is therefore essential. Common barriers were visible across the research, but their intensity and consequences varied significantly depending on young mothers' wider circumstances. Policy and practice responses must therefore recognise young mothers as a diverse group whose experiences cannot be understood through age, gender, or parenthood alone.

Employer awareness does not always translate into good practice

The employer survey both reinforces and complicates these findings. Many employers expressed broadly positive views of young mothers, describing them as hardworking, committed, and resilient. Employers also recognised childcare and flexible working as important issues, and many acknowledged that workplace culture, assumptions, and stigma can limit young mothers' opportunities. This indicates a good degree of employer awareness. However, the survey also revealed important contradictions. Employers were less likely to associate young mothers with ambition, career focus, or capability, than with day-to-day reliability. A significant minority viewed hiring young mothers as risky, and many associated them with administrative, caring, and service roles rather than professional, technical, supervisory, or higher-paid work. These findings suggest that positive attitudes in principle can coexist with assumptions that restrict young mothers' opportunities in practice.

This contradiction is particularly important when set against young mothers' lived experiences. While employers often reported that they supported flexibility and recognised young mothers' value, participants described pregnancy and maternity discrimination, punitive responses to having to take time off when children were sick (despite the statutory right to a reasonable amount of time off for emergencies involving dependents), inflexible hours, limited progression, and being judged as less committed or capable because of their age and caring responsibilities. The gap between employer perceptions and young mothers' experiences is a significant finding of this research, suggesting that formal policies and generally positive views are not enough. Without changes to workplace culture, management practice, job design, recruitment, and progression pathways, young mothers will continue to encounter barriers even in organisations that consider themselves supportive.

What the findings tell us

There are also clear similarities across the different research elements. The literature review, quantitative data, interview findings, and employer survey all point to childcare, flexibility, low pay, occupational segregation, stigma, and unequal caring responsibilities as central issues. Each evidence strand shows that young mothers' employment outcomes are shaped by the interaction between care and the structure of paid work. However, there are also differences in emphasis. The literature review and quantitative data highlights the scale and patterning of inequality; young mothers' accounts show how those inequalities are experienced in everyday life; and the employer survey reveals how workplace perceptions can either mitigate or reinforce disadvantage. Taken together, the research elements show that young mothers' labour market participation is not caused by a single barrier or institution, but by the compounding effect of systems and structures that do not adequately recognise or accommodate young mothers' needs.

The findings also challenge deficit-based narratives about young mothers. Participants consistently demonstrated resilience, responsibility, ambition, and commitment to building better futures for themselves and their children. Motherhood was often described as a source of motivation, maturity, and purpose. Yet the research also makes clear that resilience should not be used to obscure structural inequality. Young mothers' determination was evident, but it was frequently required because systems were difficult to navigate, support was fragmented, and employment opportunities were poorly matched to the realities of young motherhood.

What needs to change

Addressing young mothers' labour market inequality will require co-ordinated action across multiple policy frameworks and systems. Affordable, flexible, and inclusive childcare is foundational, particularly for children under the age of two, disabled children, children with additional support needs, and families in rural or remote areas. Fair

work must include predictable hours, secure contracts, the Real Living Wage, genuine flexibility without fear of reprisal, support for caring responsibilities, and progression routes that do not assume full-time availability or uninterrupted careers. Social security must reduce, rather than increase, financial risk when young mothers move into paid work or learning. Employers must go beyond compliance and examine how assumptions about age, gender, motherhood, race, disability, care experience, violence against women and girls, and socioeconomic background shape recruitment, support, and progression. Policymakers and service providers must also recognise that some young mothers need additional support to access childcare, trust service providers, recover from trauma, manage health conditions, or rebuild confidence.

Ultimately, this research points to a clear conclusion: young mothers value paid work. The issue is that the labour market, childcare system, social security system, and workplace cultures do not currently enable young mothers to access, sustain, and progress in fair, secure, and meaningful work. Supporting young mothers' participation in paid work is therefore not only an employability issue. It is a question of gender equality, child poverty, fair work, and economic justice. The challenge is therefore to change the conditions that limit their choices.



6. Recommendations

The evidence presented in this research demonstrates that young mothers' labour market inequalities are not the result of individual choices or aspirations, but of structural barriers that emerge at the intersection of gender, age, parenthood, and wider structural inequalities. Across the quantitative analysis, young mothers' lived experiences, and employer polling, a consistent picture emerges. Young mothers face systemic disadvantages in accessing, sustaining, and progressing in fair work, with these disadvantages compounded by inadequate childcare provision, occupational segregation, low pay, insecure work, unequal caring responsibilities, and assumptions about their capabilities and commitment.

These findings have significant implications for policymaking, service design, and employer practice. Improving young mothers' labour market outcomes is critical not only for advancing gender equality, but also for delivering on Scotland's ambition to reduce child poverty, promote fair work, improve economic growth, and realise equality and rights. Young mothers are disproportionately represented among groups at greatest risk of poverty and economic insecurity, meaning that action to address the barriers they face will directly contribute to achieving broader national policy objectives.

A key finding of this research is that young mothers are not a homogenous group. The barriers identified are experienced differently, and often more acutely, by disabled young mothers, lone mothers, care experienced young mothers, racially minoritised and migrant young

mothers, those with disabled children or children with additional support needs, and young mothers affected by domestic abuse and other forms of violence against women. An intersectional approach is therefore essential. Policies and interventions that focus solely on age, gender, or parenthood risk overlooking those facing the greatest disadvantage and may fail to address the cumulative effects of multiple forms of inequality.

The recommendations that follow are grounded in the evidence generated through this research and are designed to support coordinated action across government, employers, and trade unions. They seek to address the structural inequalities that limit young mothers' choices, strengthen accountability for tackling inequality, and ensure that all young mothers can access, sustain, and progress in fair, secure, and meaningful employment.

Recommendations for policymakers

Scottish Government should:

- 1.** Centre young mothers in the implementation of the child poverty delivery plan by designing and implementing targeted interventions which are informed by a young mothers' lived experience advisory group.
- 2.** Ensure the planned review of employability support is informed by young mothers' lived experience and delivers support that is accessible, flexible, and appropriate to skill level, and that proactively challenges occupational segregation and provides good quality employment opportunities.
- 3.** Design and deliver sustainable further education and higher education pathways for young mothers that are accessible, flexible, appropriate to skill level, and that proactively challenge occupational segregation, using key learning from projects such as One Parent

Families Scotland's pilot project with Public Health Scotland on single parents' employment.³³

4. Build capacity in the career ecosystem on the intersection of gender, age, and motherhood and on the barriers young mothers face in accessing, and progressing in, work.
5. Use regulation 11 of the Public Sector Equality Duty to direct public bodies to develop equality outcomes informed by young mothers' lived experience to tackle the causes of young mothers' inequality in the workplace.
6. Improve the collection of intersectional data about young mothers to better understand and reflect their experiences of employment, education and training, employability programmes, childcare, and social security.
7. Ensure that the provision for a right to breaks in the Care Reform (Scotland) Act 2025 centres the lived experience of young mothers who have additional unpaid caring responsibilities.
8. Prioritise fair work for young mothers and ensure that the inequalities they face in employment are core to future fair work policy.
9. Require that work on addressing economic inactivity is gender competent and recognises young mothers' experiences of unpaid caring, and design targeted action to tackle the barriers they face in entering and sustaining employment.
10. Establish a universal, funded system of childcare that is high-quality, flexible, affordable, and accessible to all young mothers, including those working shifts, atypical hours, or non-standard work patterns,

³³ One Parent Families Scotland (2024) *Making work, work for single parents*. Available: <https://opfs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/OPFS-PHS-2024-SP-ISurvey-Insight-Group-Report.pdf>

so they can choose to work full time or part time if they need to or want to. This includes:

- a.** Providing 50 hours per week of early learning and childcare for children from six months old, combining early years education with flexible care across a range of hours and settings.
 - b.** Providing out-of-school care before and after the school day for primary-age children, extending to older children where their needs require it, using learning from the Early Adopter Communities pilots on what works.
 - c.** Providing holiday childcare covering school holiday periods, at a scale and pattern that removes the childcare ‘cliff edge’ young mothers face outside term time.
 - d.** Fund specialist childcare for disabled children and children with additional support needs to ensure that young mothers can engage in employment, training, or education.
- 11.** Deliver more flexible childcare, using key learning from sector leaders on flexible services including Flexible Childcare Services Scotland and learning from early adopter communities to ensure that young mothers can access childcare when they want or need to.
 - 12.** Fund specialist childcare for disabled children and children with additional support needs to ensure that young mothers can engage in employment, training or education.
 - 13.** Deliver an immediate increase to the Scottish Child Payment to at least £40 per week, rising to £55 by the end of this parliament.

UK Government should:

- 1.** Reinstate the exemption for single parents to the lower standard allowance of Universal Credit for under 25s in recognition of the costs of raising a child alone.

2. Ensure clear gender analysis in the delivery of the UK Tackling Child Poverty Strategy and gather intersectional data to monitor the outcomes of children with a young mother.
3. Transform the Child Maintenance Service into a system that works for young mothers by removing fees; investing in consistent, timely and responsive enforcement and case handling; and improving procedures so young mothers who have experienced domestic abuse are protected.
4. Accelerate action to equalise the minimum wage rate for young people aged 16-20 and address the unfair pay disadvantage they face compared with those aged 21 and over.

Recommendations for employers

1. Work with trade unions to review employment policy and practice around young mothers' experiences to identify where barriers are preventing them from accessing, and progressing in, the workplace.
2. Build capacity in senior leaders, HR, hiring managers, and line managers on the intersection of gender, age, and motherhood, including how stereotypes, assumptions, and bias can affect recruitment, progression, performance management, and workplace culture.
3. Senior leaders should visibly foster positive workplace culture for young mothers and hold managers accountable for delivering supportive and flexible working environments.
4. Develop and implement a plan to become a real Living Wage and Living Pension employer.
5. Endorse the Living Hours Standard, ensuring employees a minimum of 16 hours per week (unless they opt out) to provide young mothers with security of contracted working hours.

6. Adopt a 'default yes' approach to flexible working requests and consider flexibility at the job design stage, ensuring that all vacancies are advertised with the widest possible range of flexible working options.
7. Develop accessible, flexible, and inclusive career development planning for young mothers to support their progression, including mentoring, sponsorship, and remote, part-time or self-paced learning to allow them to upskill and progress.
8. Work with Close the Gap and other experts on gender equality to provide training for senior leaders, HR, and line managers on creating a flexible and inclusive workplace for young mothers.
9. Record leave relating to caring responsibilities, children's illness or children's medical appointments separately from other sick leave to avoid triggering absence management processes which disproportionately affect young mothers who may not have family members to support them.
10. Provide paid time off for dependants so that young mothers can manage unexpected or emergency situations, including providing the flexibility to manage childcare issues.
11. Review formal and informal performance management practice to identify where young mothers may be disproportionately and unfairly affected.
12. Gather and analyse intersectional data on sickness absence management, performance management, disciplinarys, and violence against women to identify patterns in young mothers' experiences.
13. Build capacity in line managers to recognise potential signs of domestic abuse, which some young mothers may be at higher risk of, and an appropriate response can ensure staff are supported safely and effectively.

14. Embed anti-racism practice across all gender equality measures to ensure the overlapping impact of racism and sexism is recognised and racially minoritised young mothers are not left behind.
15. Embed accessibility, flexibility, and reasonable adjustments at all levels in the organisation to support disabled young mothers to manage their health and caring responsibilities while still being supported to thrive in the workplace.
16. Join the Equally Safe at Work³⁴ community of practice to build knowledge and practice on supporting young mothers who are victim-survivors of violence against women.
17. Use the Think Business, Think Equality³⁵ resource to get a tailored action plan that will tackle the inequalities young mothers face in the organisation.
18. Consider the experiences of young mothers when analysing workforce data and developing gender pay gap action plans, particularly where young mothers are concentrated in lower-paid roles, part-time work, or experience barriers to progression.
19. Review recruitment practice to identify and remove barriers that may disadvantage young mothers, including unnecessary qualification requirements, inflexible working patterns, recruitment processes that do not accommodate caring responsibilities, and assumptions about availability or commitment.

³⁴ Equally Safe at Work is Close the Gap's employer accreditation programme. It is designed to enable employers to develop improved gender-competent employment practice and prevent violence against women and girls (VAWG). See www.equallysafeatwork.scot

³⁵ Close the Gap's Think Business, Think Equality is an online self-assessment resource that enables smaller employers to identify and tackle the causes of women's workplace inequality in their organisation. See www.thinkbusinessstinkequality.org.uk

20. Work with organisations that support young mothers to provide opportunities such as paid work experience, mentoring, and to do targeted recruitment for job vacancies.
21. Review pregnancy, maternity, adoption, and parental leave policies and practice to ensure young mothers are not disadvantaged during recruitment, pregnancy, maternity leave, or their return to work.

Recommendations for trade unions

1. Build capacity among trade union representatives on young mothers' experiences and rights, and in securing flexible working arrangements.
2. Ensure that young mothers are made aware of their employment rights and understand how to access support from their union.
3. Prioritise young mothers' workplace equality in the bargaining agenda, and work with employers to review policies and practice including flexible working arrangements, performance management, reasonable adjustments, professional development, and sexual harassment.
4. Work with employers to ensure young mothers' needs are centred in gender pay gap reporting and related action plans.
5. Make achieving fair work for young mothers, flexible workplaces, and supportive policies a trade union priority, and hold employers to account for meeting fair work standards.
6. Enable young mothers' union membership activism by designing and delivering targeted membership campaigns to prioritise building union density, particularly in sectors associated with lower pay and/or status where young mothers are more likely to work.



7. Glossary of terms

Anti-racism

Anti-racism is an active and ongoing commitment to identify, challenge, and change the systems, structures, and behaviours that sustain racism. It goes beyond being ‘not racist’ – it requires deliberate and continuous action to dismantle inequality and redistribute power. It means recognising the causes of discrimination and inequality and understanding how they operate, not only in the labour market, but throughout society.

Domestic abuse

Domestic abuse is a pattern of abuse that causes harm, whether emotional, physical, financial, or psychological, and it is a crime. It is usually perpetrated by men against women, and it is a form of violence against women. It can be perpetrated by partners or ex partners and can include coercive control (where a woman’s life is controlled through threats, isolation or constant pressure), physical abuse emotional or psychological abuse, sexual abuse, economic abuse, financial abuse, harassment, stalking, and technology abuse. For more information, go to Scottish Women’s Aid www.womensaid.scot.

Fair work

Fair work is vital in tackling poverty, and it balances the rights of employers and workers to the benefit of the economy and wider society. It means providing secure employment with fair pay and conditions, offering an environment in which all workers have an effective voice, are treated with respect, are fulfilled in their roles, and have opportunities to progress.

Intersectionality

A term originally coined by civil rights advocate and critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw, taking an intersectional approach means recognising that women are not a homogenous group and do not experience inequality in the same way. Different groups of women experience multiple, intersecting inequalities and discriminations that overlap and combine to create different levels of inequality.

For example, sexism, racism, and Islamophobia together shape racially minoritised Muslim women's experiences of inequality and discrimination.

Occupational segregation

Refers to the clustering of men and women into different types of work (horizontal segregation) and into different levels of work (vertical segregation). It is a defining feature of the labour market and a key driver of women's in-work poverty and the gender pay gap.

Racially minoritised

Racialisation is a complex social process through which groups of people are designated as belonging to a particular race and are treated differently and/or discriminated against as a result. All groups of people are racialised, but racialisation affects groups differently. White people are racialised based on ideas of what it is to be white. The critical difference is that whiteness is associated with greater power and status than other racial groups. Unlike racially minoritised groups, white people therefore do not experience inequality and discrimination as a result of racialisation, or racism.

There are many different terms used when talking about racially minoritised women. Some people use terms such as women of colour, Black and racialised women, BME (Black and minority ethnic) women, or BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) women. Women will identify with different terms, and some may not feel comfortable with any single term. This report uses the terms 'racialised minoritised young mothers' and

‘racially minoritised women’ to denote how racism shapes these women’s experiences of paid work, recognising that white women are differently racialised and have different experiences and outcomes as a result.

Violence against women

Violence against women (VAW) refers to violent and abusive behaviour that is carried out against women, primarily by men, because of their gender. It is a cause and consequence of women’s deep-rooted inequality in all aspects of society. This abusive behaviour can be physical, emotional, psychological, sexual or economic. It is a violation of women’s human rights and an enduring social problem that undermines workplaces and communities. VAW encompasses (but is not limited to):

- physical, sexual, and psychological violence including domestic abuse, rape, and incest;
- sexual harassment, bullying, and intimidation in any public or private space, including the workplace;
- commercial sexual exploitation, including prostitution, pornography, and trafficking;
- child sexual abuse, including familial sexual abuse, child sexual exploitation, and online abuse; and
- so-called ‘honour-based’ violence, including dowry related violence, female genital mutilation, forced and child marriages, and ‘honour’ crimes.

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Close the Gap

Close the Gap is Scotland's policy advocacy organisation working on women's labour market participation. We have been working with policymakers, employers and trade unions for 25 years to influence and enable action that will address the causes of the gender pay gap. Our vision is for a Scotland where all women have a good working life.

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