



Close the Gap



**Save the
Children**



Strengths not Stigma: Research on fair work for young mothers

Executive summary



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. 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 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.

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 are also more likely to experience overlapping forms of inequality and disadvantage. For example more than half (54%) of young mothers are also lone parents. 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.



2. 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. 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.



3. 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.¹ 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.² Around 42% of young mothers also experience in-work poverty.³ 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.

¹ 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/>

² 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/>

³ Ibid

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 gendered 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.⁴ 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.

⁴ 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)



4. 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.



5. 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 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.



6. 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 most persuasive finding of the research 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.

The evidence points to the need to tackle the inequalities and structural barriers that limit young mothers' employment choices. Young mothers are already seeking routes into paid work that offer an income, independence, confidence, improved wellbeing, and better futures for 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.



7. 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.

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, 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.⁵
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

⁵ 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>

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, 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. Reinststate 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 VAW 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 manage their health and caring responsibilities while still being supported to thrive in the workplace.
16. Join the Equally Safe at Work⁶ 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 Equality⁷ 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

⁶ 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

⁷ 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.thinkbusinessthinkequality.org.uk

requirements, inflexible working patterns, recruitment processes that do not accommodate caring responsibilities, and assumptions about availability or commitment.

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.

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.



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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**Save the
Children**

Save the Children Scotland works with children, families and partners across Scotland to challenge poverty, tackle its drivers and reduce its impact. We amplify the voices and experiences of children, young people, parents and communities, creating opportunities to challenge poverty and shape solutions.

We also work to reduce its impact on children's learning and development, particularly in the early years.

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