

A Scottish Women's Convention report examining Women's Employment in Scotland

The report is prepared in response to the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) Priority Theme for 2016:

“Women’s Economic Empowerment in the Changing World of Work”



Scotland

Scotland is part of the United Kingdom, occupying the northern third of the island of Great Britain. It shares a border with England to the south and is bounded by the North Sea to the east and the Atlantic Ocean to the north and west. In addition to the mainland, Scotland is also made up of over 790 islands including the Northern Isles and the Hebrides. The land area of Scotland is 78,772 km (30,414 sq miles), roughly 30% of the area of the United Kingdom (UK). The mainland has 9,911 km (6,158 miles) of coastline. Scotland has a population of around 5.2 million people. The majority reside in urban areas.

Scotland has partial self-government within the United Kingdom as well as representation in the UK Parliament. Executive and legislative powers have been devolved to the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament at Holyrood in Edinburgh.

In September 2014 a referendum was held. The people of Scotland were asked to vote as to whether Scotland should become an independent country. 55% of the population voted for Scotland to remain a part of the UK. As a result of this historic decision and subsequent discussions, more powers are being devolved to the Scottish Parliament. These include the ability to legislate on certain taxes, including Income Tax and Value Added Tax; the ability to change the voting age for Scottish Parliament and Local Government elections; powers over onshore oil and gas licensing; employment programmes and certain aspects of social security.

In 2016, Scotland took part in a UK-wide referendum on whether Britain should remain a part of the European Union (EU). While the UK as a whole voted to leave the EU, Scotland overwhelmingly voted to remain.



The Scottish Women's Convention

The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC) is funded by the Scottish Government to consult with women in Scotland to influence public policy. The organisation was set up in 2003 to enable grassroots women to discuss issues relevant to them. Since its inception the SWC has engaged with a wide range of women throughout the country.

The SWC undertakes an annual series of 'roadshows' throughout Scotland. These events are unique, giving women the opportunity to express opinions or concerns, in their local area, on issues which directly affect them. Locations from the Shetland Islands to Dumfries have been visited. All information gathered from the women informs SWC responses to Scottish and UK Government consultations. The object is to ensure that women's voices are heard at the heart of the decision making process.

Online surveys and email consultation also provide processes for collating large responses to key discussion areas.

Thematic conferences offer women an opportunity to inform the policy areas under discussion. Listening to inspirational speakers and the prospect of networking with peers motivates individuals attending these events.

Geographical Information Groups (GIGs) throughout Scotland meet on a regular basis to discuss gender specific issues. These groups are facilitated by the organisation and provide vital input into the consultation process.

The SWC has used information and quotes gathered at ‘roadshows’ and conferences for this report. Further research regarding the legislation and current statistics has also been carried out. The views expressed represent the voices of women of various ages and locations throughout Scotland.

Further information regarding the organisation’s activities can be found at www.scottishwomensconvention.org

Legislation, Policy and Practice

Across the UK

The National Minimum Wage

Every worker in the UK is guaranteed to receive at a minimum hourly rate for that work that they do. This is protected under the terms of the National Minimum Wage Act 1998 (<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/39/contents>). There are five varying levels of minimum wage, which range from £7.20 per hour for adult worker over the age of 25 to £3.40 per hour for apprentices who are either under 19 years old or who are in their first year of an apprenticeship.

In July 2015 the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced that the UK Government would introduce a National Living Wage (NLW) for all staff over 25 years of age (<https://www.livingwage.gov.uk/>). This was introduced in April 2016 and the Government is committed to increasing this from its current figure of £7.20 every year. This has been welcomed by some; however there are organisations such as the Living Wage Foundation who do not believe this amount is enough to constitute a real living wage for workers.

The Working Time Directive

Most workers in the UK can only work a certain number of hours per week, under the Working Time Regulations (1998) (<http://www.acas.org.uk/index.aspx?articleid=1373>). These Regulations implement the European Working Time Directive and set limits on an average working week, statutory entitlement to paid leave for most workers and special protections for young workers.

The Regulations ensure, in general, a limit of an average 48 hour working week. Individuals do, however, have the ability to ‘opt out’ of this restriction when they sign their employment contract. The Regulations also allow for measures such as paid annual leave of 5.6 weeks per year and a 20 minute rest break for anyone working longer than a 6 hour day. There are special regulations for young workers, restricting their working hours to 8 hours per day and 40 hours per week.

Employment Rights Act 1996

The Employment Rights Act 1996 (<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1996/18/contents>) outlines a number of rights relating to work, including the right to receive a contract of employment, the right to leave for childcare and the right to request flexible working patterns.

Equalities, Protected Characteristics and the Law

The Equality Act 2010 (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/equality-act-2010-guidance>) brings together over 116 separate pieces of legislation into one single Act, the purpose of which is to protect the rights of individuals and advance equality of opportunity for all.

The Act merges a number of individual laws, such as the Equal Pay Act 1970 and the Sex Discrimination Act 1975. The other pieces of legislation are: Race Relations Act 1976, Disability Discrimination Act 1995, Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations 2003, Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations 2003, Employment Equality (Age) Regulations 2006, Equality Act 2006, Part 2, and Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations 2007.

The Act also contains a number of policy measures designed to ensure equal treatment for all workers. Part-time, agency workers and those on fixed term contracts are, for example, treated generally equally to full time or permanent staff.

Pregnancy and Maternity Rights

Pregnant employees have 4 main legal rights:

- paid time off for antenatal care
- maternity leave
- maternity pay or maternity allowance
- protection against unfair treatment, discrimination or dismissal.

(<https://www.gov.uk/working-when-pregnant-your-rights>)

These rights ensure that a pregnant employee's terms and conditions cannot be altered without agreement. If an employer does this, they are in breach of contract. Employers also have to give pregnant employees time off for antenatal care. Women must be paid their normal rate for this time off.

Statutory Maternity Leave (SML) is for 52 weeks. It is made up of 26 weeks Ordinary Maternity Leave and 26 weeks of Additional Maternity Leave. Women do not need to take the full 52 weeks. They must, however, take at least 2 weeks leave after their baby is born and 4 weeks if they work in a factory.

In general terms, the earliest a pregnant woman can start her maternity leave is 11 weeks before the expected week of childbirth. Leave begins the day after the birth if the baby is early, or automatically if a woman is off work for a pregnancy-related illness in the 4 weeks before the week that the baby is due. Women on maternity leave must give their employer at least 8 weeks' notice if they want to change their return to work date. The general assumption is that each woman will take the full 52 weeks leave.

Employees must tell their employer about the pregnancy at least 15 weeks before the beginning of the week the baby is due. If this isn't possible (e.g. because they didn't know they were pregnant), then the employer must be told as soon as possible. Women must also tell their employer when they want to start SML and Statutory Maternity Pay (SMP). Employees are unable to take time off for antenatal appointments until they have told the employer about the pregnancy. When a woman tells her employer she is pregnant, the employer should assess the risks to the woman and her baby. If there are risks, the employer must take reasonable steps to remove them, for example, by offering the employee different work or changing their hours. If they cannot remove the risks, the employer must suspend the employee on full pay.

If parents adopt, the maternity rights for the primary carer (most often the mother) are the same as those who have given birth.

The Additional Paternity Leave Regulations 2010 make it possible for the woman to transfer up to 26 weeks of her maternity leave entitlements to her partner. However, it still remains the case that women care more for children than men.

Scotland

Regional Employment Patterns in Scotland 2015

(<http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0050/00500647.pdf>)

Statistics show the following key trends:

- Record high employment levels seen in 2015.
- Employment rates for women increased to 70.2%, the highest since comparable records began.
- The gender employment gap in Scotland was 6.0 percentage points, 4.0 percentage points lower than the UK and the lowest since comparable records began.
- The overall gender pay gap, however, was recorded at 16.8%. This reflects all workers in full-time or part-time employment and shows that more women are channelled towards low paid, part time work. More information can be found at www.gov.scot/resource/0050/00502056.pdf.

'Working for Growth – A Refresh of the Employability Framework in Scotland'

(<http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0040/00402275.pdf>)

The Scottish Government published this document in 2012 to reflect how approaches to employability have developed since 2006. It provides a clear framework to strengthen the Scottish Government's focus on jobs and growth. It does so under the themes of strategy and effective leadership, better integration and partnership working, tackling inequality and improving performance.

The Framework highlights the importance of stimulating economic recovery through bringing employability and economic development agendas closer together. This is seen to encourage the social and economic value of a skilled, educated and creative workforce

To ensure that these priorities are properly addressed, the Scottish Government has set out to undertake a range of actions to promote effective leadership in employability. This includes refreshing the membership and remit of the Scottish Employability Forum and working more closely with the Strategic Forum and Economy Board. Commitment is also made to continue to support the development of the National Delivery Group and Third Sector Employability Forum.

'Opportunities for All' – supporting all young people to participate in post-16 learning, training or work'

(<http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0040/00408815.pdf>)

Opportunities for All is an explicit commitment to offer a place in learning or training to every 16-19 year old who is not currently in employment, education or training. 'Opportunities for All' ensures that all of Scotland's young people have access to a range of opportunities. These include staying on at school, undertaking national training programmes, university and college courses, Activity Agreements and other opportunities.

The Government's aim is to enable all young people to access and progress in learning and to give them the skills, knowledge and positive attitudes they need to participate and progress, where possible, to employment. One of the key aims is to improve the life chances of all of Scotland's young people, including those with additional support needs, through the provision of learning and training opportunities and the personal support they need to help them achieve and progress.

This strategy sets out the Scottish Government's ambition to create a more cohesive and resilient economy that improves the opportunities, life chances, and wellbeing of every citizen in the country. One of the Government's key purposes is to create a more successful country, with opportunities for all of Scotland to flourish through increasing sustainable economic growth.

The Scottish Government's approach is based on two key pillars - increasing competitiveness and tackling inequality. They have taken significant steps to boost Scotland's long-term competitiveness, but also recognise that inequality needs to be reduced. This is not only important in itself, but is vital to creating the conditions to deliver sustainable economic growth over the long term.



The Voices of Women in Scotland

[The Work Women Undertake](#)

The issue of women's economic participation is discussed at each and every event held by the Scottish Women's Convention. The complex issues which are attached to women's place in the labour market cannot be underestimated.

Many women continue to be steered towards and clustered into what are seen as traditionally female roles, such as caring, administration, cleaning, retail and hospitality. These jobs offer low wages and more often than not are on a part-time basis. Many are temporary, undertaken on a zero hours contract. There are little to no opportunities for flexible working or training and development in this type of employment.

Women undertake the majority of part time work in Scotland. While for some this is an informed choice, for many others it is the only option available to them. Family and caring responsibilities, as well as poor public transport in many areas, mean that part-time work is often the most feasible means of employment.

Women often have to undertake more than one part-time job as opposed to full-time employment. This contributes significantly to women's underemployment in Scotland and happens for a variety of reasons. Lack of accessible, affordable, appropriate childcare, poor public transport and limited job availability are some of the key contributing factors.

Only being able to find this type of work can be detrimental to women's confidence. There is not a lot of support available for those who wish to progress.

"How can a woman give up one or two part-time jobs (which suit family circumstances) to go to university to get a teaching degree or an accountancy degree, regardless of her abilities or ambition?"

There are significant issues around the training and development of part-time workers. Many employers do not invest in training for these workers because *"they're only part-time."* Opportunities for up skilling and development are missed out on as a result of the number of hours they choose or are able to work in a week. Earning capacity and future career prospects are impeded due to the lack of opportunity for development in the workplace.

Many of the jobs available in the current climate are undertaken as zero hours contracts. This type of work is often offered in areas where women predominate. Workers on zero hours contracts do not accrue holidays and are not paid for sick days. There are no guarantees of work from day to day, therefore no fixed income.

“It’s not right. People have to phone in every day to see if they have a shift or not. How can you plan your life around that?”

Women need work to be flexible, which is often an argument put forward for the use of zero hours contracts. The reality, however, is that they are not flexible and instead create uncertainty and, in many cases, poverty.

“Where I work, they’re trying to get people who are on full-time contracts to move to more ‘flexible’ contracts, saying they’ll be good for working parents. They’re really just zero hours contracts by another name.”

Women in these circumstances can be reluctant to refuse a shift, even at short notice, for fear they will be asked to work less than they already are. As well as providing too few hours some weeks, employers use zero hours contracts to exploit workers and make them work more hours than someone on a standard contract.

“I know one woman who works close to 100 hours in a week sometimes, and is expected to do the job of more than one person because it’s cheaper just to pay her. She has become quite ill as a result. She ended up having to take time off work which, due to her contract, meant no sick pay. Now she’s getting more stressed and it’s having a serious impact on her mental health.”

Organising childcare, or cover for other caring responsibilities, is extremely difficult. The nature of a zero hours contract also means that it is impossible to claim financial assistance through tax credits to top up income and pay for childcare costs, because there is no guaranteed income and therefore an assessment cannot be made.

Women continue to undertake the majority of unpaid work in Scotland. The value of the roles they do, such as caring and housekeeping, are all too often underestimated and undervalued in society.

“Not enough people understand the skills and abilities gained through unpaid work. A woman isn’t ‘just a mum’ or ‘just a housewife’. The reality is she’s juggling a number of responsibilities under that title and should be recognised and rewarded for the vital role that plays in society.”

Social Security and Employment

The lack of decent pay and conditions means there is a significant amount of in-work poverty in Scotland. Many women who work part-time are forced to apply for social security benefits in order to ‘top up’ their household budgets. Tax Credits (TC), Housing Benefit (HB) and Council Tax Benefit (CTB) are some of the most relied upon additional sources of money for low incomes families and lone parents in particular, the majority of whom are women. They would be at risk of in-work poverty without this additional financial help. The nature of this type of employment, however, means they are often unable to secure sufficient hours from their employer in order to secure the necessary support. The constant worry around their financial situation can have a significant impact on their mental health.

“For too many women, going to work is more of a financial strain than staying away from the labour market and relying solely on social security. This is down to a combination of low pay, high rents, council tax and expensive private childcare.”

In order to be able to claim tax credits, women must earn under a certain amount of money and be working a specified number of hours per week. Under the working tax credits system, the claimant receives support based on their previous year's earnings. This can be detrimental as it does not take into account current earnings. These may be lower and women can be led to rely on short-term, pay day loans.

At present, powers over these benefits are held by the UK Government at Westminster. As part of a raft of measures to reform the current system, the benefits which are most relied on are being consolidated into one, single payment known as Universal Credit (UC). Under this system the benefit will go to the household overall. In the future the Scottish Parliament will be able to decide how this is administered, as part of the package of devolved powers which are currently being discussed and debated through extensive consultation with civil society in Scotland.

Until this transfer of control takes place, however, only one claim per household can be made. The likelihood is that in many cases the man will receive the money. This has the potential to put women at risk of having little or no financial independence, particularly if they have an abusive or controlling partner.

UC will be paid monthly in arrears. Previously, individual payments were made on a weekly basis to claimants. Under the old system, housing and council tax benefits were paid directly to the landlord. These will now go directly to the claimant. There is a real worry that families will end up in debt as a result of these imposed changes. There is very little additional support or information around personal and household budgeting.

“Women are used to managing their money in a certain way, receiving small payments throughout the month which spreads their finances. There will be so many who fall into rent arrears or who have to rely on pay day loans because they don't know how to handle a lump sum once a month.”

The SWC fully supports the payment of a real Living Wage. It is not only beneficial to the workers who receive it, but the economy as a whole. More women in work mean more taxes are being paid, as well as more money being available to spend. This is extremely positive. It potentially lifts women and their families out of poverty, as well as reducing reliance on social security.

[Returning to the Labour Market](#)

A number of barriers exist for women who are attempting to enter or re-enter the labour market following time out, most often for caring responsibilities. Power over programmes to help those returning to work is currently held by the UK Parliament, however will transfer to the Scottish Parliament in due course. Women in Scotland have positive expectations of what will happen when the Scottish Government designs and runs employability services.

More needs to be done to assist women during the initial stages of seeking employment. One of the key issues faced by many is a lack of knowledge as to where to physically look for work.

“I was made redundant and decided to go to the Jobcentre to seek work. They were extremely vague, telling me to ‘look around online for a job’. I left feeling more confused than when I went in. There should be a centralised database of vacancies rather than having to trawl through agency sites, council sites etc.”

Many women do not have experience of using IT equipment on a regular basis, let alone preparing a CV, completing application forms or attending interviews. This can result from having been made redundant from a job they have been in for a number of years, or because they have spent a significant amount of time away from the labour market. This is often due to caring responsibilities, particularly for children.

As a result, women can find themselves applying for unsuitable jobs, or not securing the type of employment they are able to do, because they are not adequately prepared for an interview.

“An interview is an extremely daunting thing if you’ve never had to do one before. A bit of help beforehand can really make all the difference.”

Women are often unaware of the skills they possess when seeking work. This is particularly the case for those who have been away from the labour market for some time.

“Too many say ‘I’m just a mum’, not realising the wide variety of skills they possess as a result of running a home and raising children.”

For most women, support when seeking work is either very limited, or not available at all within their local area. While assistance is available in theory, there are often a number of barriers for women which prevent them from being able to physically take advantage of support.

For example, basic support from the Jobcentre is provided. However because staff are under so much pressure to deal with so many claimants, with varying skills, levels and competencies, it is extremely difficult to access the individual support that many require. There are also issues for women who have been made redundant and attend the Jobcentre in order to find a new job.

“While there is help available around applications and interview processes, it is at a very basic level. I have good computer skills and a good standard of education. I have, as a result, been turned away from attending courses as my CV as it stands is considered to be ‘good enough’. I don’t know where to go from here.”

Support provided by services within the voluntary sector is seen as “invaluable”, however can be withdrawn with very little notice due to precarious funding arrangements.

“With a lot of things, it’s a case of support being available until the money runs out.”

Similarly, where childcare does exist, funded places in Local Authority nurseries are very difficult to obtain and are generally only provided on the basis of sessions in the morning or the afternoon. This leads to a reliance on expensive private childcare, which is out of the financial reach of many families.

“Finding childcare is such a struggle. It means endlessly searching websites and the phone book, then making the necessary calls to see if there is availability in the local area. That then leads to trying to work out how to gather the necessary deposit. Most places look for one month upfront – how are you supposed to get that when you’re relying on benefits?”

Difficulty in accessing formal childcare provision, particularly in rural areas where there is very little availability, leads to a reliance on informal care from friends and family. More often than not, this falls upon other women, many of whom are already looking after other family members while maintaining employment. The strain can take a toll on their physical and mental health.

“I feel like I rely on my family, particularly my mum, too much and I feel bad about that. But there’s nothing I can do. If they didn’t look after my children then I can’t look for work, and if I can’t look for work then I’ll get sanctioned. If it wasn’t for them I would be in a really difficult financial situation – I’m lucky though, not everyone has a support network round about them.”

Employability services which are created by the Scottish Government must be aware that entering the labour market after a long time away, or for the first time, can be extremely daunting. The level of support will depend solely on the needs of the individual.

Assumptions cannot be made about what they need or do not need based on complex, inflexible forms and assessments.

“What is the point in making people apply for jobs they are not qualified to do or are unable to undertake because of e.g. caring responsibilities, just to be able to show that they have completed a specific number of applications in a week?”

BME women in particular can struggle to enter or re-enter the labour market. The qualifications of women who come to the UK are not always recognised. The training they have received previously may not meet the criteria of the UK. There are, however, often significant time and cost implications associated with obtaining the relevant qualifications in order to work in the UK. As a result, some highly qualified doctors are working in unskilled menial jobs because they are unable to meet the costs of study, while supporting children and the rest of the family.

“I’m a dentist who came to Scotland as a professional, fully qualified woman. When I came here I went to the Jobcentre to see what was available. I was directed towards roles such as cleaning/catering/customer service, all of which I am over-qualified to do. I undertook a job in home care and was given a contract however the terms were not set out. I was expected to be available between 7am and 7pm at all times. I live about twenty minutes away and have caring responsibilities. It became quite stressful trying to maintain this job.”

Some BME women who are not fluent English speakers have encountered difficulties with Jobcentre staff, who can be unable to understand their needs. This can cause benefit claim forms to be incorrectly filled in, which results in delays to payment of benefits. Women for whom English is not their first language are able to attend classes to learn the language on a basic level, however if women do not have a job and are then not able to mix with other English speakers, their language skills do not improve.

Similarly, there is little support available for disabled women who want to access sustainable employment.

“I went to the Jobcentre to seek work knowing I would need help with a disability. I was told that there would be external organisations which could help, however in reality very little support was provided. I was given a job in retail which involved lifting, despite telling my disability employment adviser that I would struggle due to my condition. I was basically given no choice but to take the job, which I ended up having to give up. Nobody is really listening to disabled people.”

Disabled people need a firm diagnosis before they can access certain benefits and assistance. This can be difficult, particularly for those with mental health issues, whose conditions can change on a daily basis.

Jobcentre staff need to be aware that many women who go there to seek work have never accessed the benefits system before, due to them having been in employment for a number of years.

“I was self-employed for a number of years. However, due to a big change in my circumstances, I now have to sign on while I look for work. This has been a real challenge for me. Jobcentre and DWP staff do not offer any sympathy or grant leniency towards women who are dealing with the psychological impact of having to cope with housing, feeding and raising children on their own with no support from family members. There’s not enough training to deal with women on a case by case, individual basis.”

Childcare and Caring

“If employment is the route out of poverty and onto a better life, then childcare is the bridge.”

There is not enough accessible, affordable and appropriate childcare in Scotland. The Children and Young Peoples (Scotland) Act 2014 raised the number of early years funding hours for 3-4 year olds and vulnerable 2 year olds from 475 hours per year to 600 hours per year. However it must be recognised that while this attempt to improve things for families is a step in the right direction, it is not enough to remove many of the barriers to women’s labour market participation.

Those 125 additional hours equate to sixteen minutes per day. They do not take into account children under the age of three, or those over the age of five. The need for childcare does not stop when a child turns 5 and goes to school. The lack of after-school care in Scotland is a real issue, and one which is all too often forgotten when childcare is being discussed. The Act also makes no provisions for the working conditions of those employed in the childcare sector.

Many of the jobs available to women have antisocial hours. There is no childcare to cover these shift patterns, which often involve evenings and weekends, apart from some childminders.

“They are few and far between and even then women still have to rely on one person – what happens if they take ill? Employers don’t take too kindly to mums needing time off to look after their kids in these circumstances.”

The cost of childcare is a particular barrier for women. This is especially the case for families with more than one child, a disabled child and lone parents.

Flexibility in childcare comes at a price. Private nurseries tend to provide longer opening hours, often taking children in from 0730 and closing at 1800. Local Authority nurseries, on the other hand, provide childcare in sessions, offering places either in the morning or the afternoon. Working patterns have changed, but the way in which children are looked after have not.

Local Authority provision still works on the notion that a woman will work on a part-time basis, a few mornings or afternoons a week in their local area, and the 16 hours and 20 minutes per week of funded provision will cover their childcare needs. The sessions they provide are designed around this ideal. The reality for many women, however, is that they are in low paid, low skilled employment, on zero hours contracts or in uncertain shift patterns.

“If you have to be in work for 8.30am and the nursery doesn’t take kids until 9.00am, what are you supposed to do? Anything before 9am is seen as wrap-around care. You have to pay extra for that.”

The lack of wrap-around, flexible provision, makes it extremely difficult for these women to access childcare. As a result they are forced to rely heavily on assistance from friends and family. The lack of flexibility, coupled with their working patterns, means that many children in Scotland are missing out on the free childcare places they are entitled to.

During school holidays many secondary school age children have to stay at home themselves because their parents have to work. If their families have little or no family or support networks round about them, they have no other option. Similarly, breakfast and after school clubs are not always available. Where they do exist, they are heavily relied on by many parents. It is often the case that the schools and organisations providing these services do not have enough places to cope with the demand. It can also be expensive to make use of this provision.

“After care costs anything up to £12.50 per day per child. If you work part-time you end up spending almost all of your wage on childcare. It’s not worth it.”

Informal caring is becoming increasingly relied upon, with many women in the *“middle layer of caring, looking after both young grandchildren and elderly parents.”* This can have a detrimental effect on their physical and mental health. This is particularly the case as many women hold down part-time jobs as well as undertaking caring responsibilities. It is also important to note that women who do not have support networks round about them, such as friends and family, have no choice but to rely on expensive private childcare.

“The lack of accessible, affordable childcare is holding so many women back.”

The geography of rural Scotland makes it difficult for women to access childcare which is near to their place of work or study. They can be forced to undertake long journeys by public transport to get their children dropped off, then to get to work or college, before doing the same again in the evening. Many of the women who have to juggle these responsibilities are in low paid employment.

Middle income families do not qualify for assistance with childcare costs. Sending a child to nursery takes *“a huge chunk”* out of household budgets, particularly if they have more than one child. Women often delay returning to work until their child goes to school as it is the only financially viable option. Those with more than one child often do not return to employment at all, or face significant barriers when they attempt to do so.

The childcare workforce, the overwhelming majority of whom are women, are too often forgotten about. They are vastly underpaid and grossly undervalued by society. It is also important to recognise that there are often significant disparities in the way those employed in the private sector and those employed in the public sector are treated.

Workers in private nurseries are open to more exploitation than their Local Authority counterparts. They are often only paid the minimum wage, and the younger workers who are in training through a Modern Apprenticeship or college placement are paid less than that. These workplaces are, more often than not, non-unionised. Once the young women are fully qualified, they are let go in favour of a younger, cheaper trainee.

“It’s exploitation in its most obvious form, which causes competition between recently qualified early years practitioners. Many are forced to work as supply or ‘bank’ staff, which means no guaranteed hours or income.”

Conversely Local Authority childcare workers are in nurseries and pre-five centres which receive better funding, where they are able to join a trade union, and where the payment of the Living Wage is a real possibility. Regardless of the type of childcare provider they use, parents should be assured that the women who are looking after their children are subject to the same working conditions, are well paid, and given the recognition they deserve for the vital work that they do.

A strong, flexible childcare system must be recognised as part of Scotland’s infrastructure. Until this is the case, the lack of availability will be women’s most significant barrier to full and meaningful participation in the labour market.

“Women make childcare work, but it’s a complicated jigsaw. Access to truly free, appropriate, flexible childcare would open up so many opportunities and more choices.”

As well as childcare issues, women who undertake unpaid caring face significant barriers to participation in the labour market.

“Of course the Scottish Government’s focus on childcare is a good thing, because it’s giving a lot of children a positive start in life. The amount of attention placed on that, however, can be detrimental in other ways.”

It means that women like me, who look after two of my grandchildren because my daughter has mental health issues and just can't cope, don't get the same focus and as a result we're missing out on the same level of support."

Carers save the economy a substantial amount of money each year. Their contribution, however, is extremely undervalued and grossly underpaid.

"It's insane that carers are only eligible for a very small amount of financial support for working 35 hours per week in their caring role. This then bars them from eligibility for learning and employment. Caring is stressful enough and the negative health impact it can have has been proven. Carers need to be encouraged and enabled to pursue their own personal goals, which will have a positive impact on their mental health, as well as ensuring they have the skills to be able to return to the labour market when their caring role ends. This makes sense, both socially and economically."

Many of those who provide kinship care are doing so while caring for their own children or other family members, such as older relatives, as well as holding down one or more jobs. This takes a significant toll on women's physical and mental health, particularly as many employers expect workers to be more and more flexible.

"It's a constant juggling act. I look after my sister's kids because she is in prison at the moment. I couldn't have them put into foster care, I want them with me, but it's so hard trying to make ends meet and make sure neither my children nor my sister's are missing out."

Many women have commented on the lack of recognition of the pressure, anxiety and stress suffered by carers. The lack of respite for those who undertake unpaid care is a real worry for many. Not being able to take a break has a significant impact on women's physical and mental health, especially as many are still in employment.

"There needs to be a proper recognition of the work we do – because it is work. It's like a full-time job on top of my actual job. Being able to get someone to help for a few hours a week would make such a difference. I need a bit of time to myself to feel human again."

Some women are entitled to claim state support for the care they undertake, in the form of Carer's Allowance. The working hours and earnings threshold, however, act as a disincentive for many to continue with or enter into employment, which is often an important way to ensure they maintain good mental health. They are caught between *"a rock and a hard place"*, not earning enough money to sustain themselves by not working but struggling to fully undertake their caring responsibilities by working. The expectation that those who provide care must spend at least 35 hours per week caring, not earn more than £110 per week and not be in full time education is completely unrealistic.

"So many women work 35 hours per week and then go home and provide 35 hours of care. It's as if unless they reach these almost impossible standards, they're not really caring. This is unfair – carers need to be treated with more respect."

Those who at present do not qualify for Carer's Allowance because they do not meet the strict criteria are being penalised. The work they undertake is not adequately valued, either by society or in financial terms.

"I rely on my family to care for me. My family all work, but they still have to care for me round that and it's a 24/7 job. They don't have a normal life when they get home – looking after me comes first. A person should qualify for this benefit if you care for your loved ones. Without my family's help, I would be an even bigger burden to the state, but we don't qualify for any assistance. It's as if I'm not 'disabled enough', or that the care they provide doesn't matter."

Employment in Rural Areas

While it can be difficult for women in urban areas to access employment, issues are exacerbated for those who live in more remote, rural and super sparse areas of the country. Due to the rural nature of Scotland's geography, there is a distinct lack of investment in employment opportunities within the regions. Tourism is one of the main employers in many parts, with women often working part-time, in seasonal, low paid work within this sector. Some women establish their own businesses relying on local support and networking to promote their enterprise. Physical access to employment can be difficult due to a lack of childcare and poor public transport.

“Buses in this area are extortionate. If you're paid the Minimum Wage then you end up working two or three hours a day just to be able to get to work.”

The public sector is a major employer within rural Scotland. The continued loss of public sector jobs is undoubtedly having a detrimental impact on rural communities, in particular those employed to provide necessary local services.

“The public sector employs 40% of the workers in this region, most of whom are women. It stands to reason we will be the most likely to feel the repercussions of policy decisions or a lack of action on employment.”

High speed broadband connections are not always available in many rural areas. Small, remote enterprises with poor transport links need to rely on internet services to promote and conduct their business. Some areas of rural Scotland have no access to broadband, resulting in restricted opportunities for trading. In areas where there is internet provision, there is often little competition between providers, meaning those in rural parts of the country pay more than those in more urban areas.

“Lack of high speed broadband limits so many social and business opportunities. Slow internet connection stops people working from home and being able to shop online.”

Online forms are the most common way of applying for jobs. It is, therefore, extremely difficult for those with poor or non-existent broadband to carry out what are taken for granted as simple tasks by many employers.

Occupational Segregation and Gender Streaming

Despite the intentions set out in legislation, policy and practice to improve women's position in the workplace, the glass ceiling undoubtedly still exists. Progression is too often denied to many women for a number of reasons. These include women not being considered for further training or promotion if they work part-time, if they are seen to be of 'childbearing' age, or they are unable to work more than the standard 9am – 5pm working patterns because of caring responsibilities.

“Women often find themselves stuck in the ‘marzipan layer’ at work. They have progressed to a certain level but are unable to be promoted to attain the ‘icing’ benefits worthy of their talents. In the main, this is due to child bearing and caring commitments.”

The Modern Apprenticeship (MA) scheme could be an excellent way to tackle occupational segregation. For individuals, an MA is a job which lets them earn a wage and gain an industry-recognised qualification. Each year, over 25,000 people start a Modern Apprenticeship, combining a qualification with on-the-job experience.

Skills Development Scotland (SDS) contributes towards the costs of their training, through a training provider who works with the business. There are over 80 Modern Apprenticeship frameworks – from healthcare and financial services to construction and IT. These have been developed by sector skills councils, in consultation with their industry.

Apprenticeships are highly gendered. Young men continue to be steered towards fields such as construction, joinery and engineering. Young women are encouraged to undertake MAs in subjects such as hairdressing, early years education, administration and retail. While young men are known to enter into what are traditionally 'female' roles, young women are unlikely to take up MAs in traditionally 'male' fields. While it is important to encourage and steer young women into non traditional roles, it is also vital that the value of the work traditionally carried out by women is fully recognised.

“Plumbers are paid more than Early Years Practitioners. Why is fixing pipes worth more than looking after our children?”

Young women are seldom offered information about Modern Apprenticeships through careers advice in school and are, therefore, often unaware of the range of training available. Careers in subjects such as engineering are encouraged through academic routes, i.e. a university degree, however that option is not suitable for all. As a result, many young women are missing out on opportunities to learn while working.

Older Women

There needs to be recognition that older women have significant experience, skills and abilities gained throughout the course of their working lives. Their value in the workplace cannot and must not be underestimated. Some women are reluctant to define themselves as older, as the way they feel about their own skills and abilities may change. Women who work in certain areas feel it necessary to keep a “*young attitude*” because of the nature of the work they do.

There are issues for many who work in particular jobs, many of which are subject to Equal Pay cases, in which women predominate. These women often undertake physically and mentally demanding roles, such as that of a carer, or a nurse, which can become more difficult with age. They have had to fight for the basic right to be paid fairly for the work they have done, and in many cases continue to do.

Restructuring and redundancies within workplaces can contribute to women feeling, or being made to feel, that they are older. They are being forced to compete for positions similar to those which they have occupied for years previously.

“It wasn't until I had to re-apply for jobs that management started to ask how old I was. Up until that point nobody had mentioned my age but when the reorganisation started all of a sudden it seemed to become relevant.”

This type of process can make women feel that they should be considering retirement, especially when they are “*displaced*” into another role. Adjusting to new roles and responsibilities can be challenging, and older women are often afforded little or no assistance to make this transition.

Certain working environments can be seen to be the domain of young people, such as contact centres. This can be off-putting for older women.

“I was 48 when I joined this particular company and didn't feel old. At that time there were a lot of older people working in the contact centre, and a lot of them had been displaced from the branches. The company were looking for people with experience to be able to properly assist customers. However over the last five years I have seen older women disappear.”

One of the most significant changes to work situations has, however, been the increased use of IT. Employers may offer inductions and training courses, however this is not always possible with the constant advances in technology. These training sessions rarely take into account the specific needs of older women, who may require more time and further information in order to be able to use systems. The increase in workloads across all forms of employment can also be problematic.

“We’re expected to do more and more, often with less time. In order to keep up with computer systems, I find I have to read up on things in my own time. There’s no policy for getting that time back. It becomes a debate where I end up having to explain that I’m not just slow at typing.”

The lack of recognition of the health issues faced by older women has become more apparent over the last five years.

“Women aren’t necessarily having major health issues, they’re just dealing with things that happen as you get older. They usually have to do this with little or no support at work.”

Often policies relating to menopause, for example, are extremely difficult to negotiate and implement. Misunderstandings and misinformation around menopause can cause difficulties for women who are experiencing it, which discourages them from seeking support from their employer.

It is vital that employers and other staff members recognise the skills and experience that older women bring to the workplace. There needs to be a basic understanding that although older women may, at times, require additional support, time and assistance, they are still more than capable of fulfilling their role and making a positive contribution. There needs to be a way of maximising the skills and experience older women possess, for example through mentoring other staff members or younger people.

“Employers need to understand the benefit they will get from having older women in the workplace.”

[Pregnancy, Maternity and Parental Leave](#)

Employers can make returning to work very difficult for women after maternity leave. Despite anti-discrimination legislation having been in place for a number of years, roles can be changed and lines of responsibility altered.

The lack of flexibility shown by employers can have a detrimental impact on women's future potential. This can be damaging for prospective earnings, as well as having the knock on impact of diminishing skills and making career progression even more difficult. As a result, many choose not to return to their previous job, but instead seek part-time employment which fits around their family and other responsibilities.

“I was a bank branch manager in a town approximately 30 miles away from where I live before I had my second baby. Travelling there and back plus the cost of childcare meant it was not worth my while to go back. I now work part-time at the weekends when my husband is at home so we don’t have to pay for childcare. He increased his hours slightly and because he is a lower wage earner we qualify for tax credits. It’s crazy how we are better off now than we were when I worked 6 days a week as a bank manager.”

Women who work or who have worked in senior roles find themselves extremely disadvantaged when they choose to have a family. Those returning from maternity leave can struggle to return to the role they held before they had their baby.

“I was made redundant whilst on maternity leave. I was told that due to business needs, when I returned to work I would have to travel to an office 40 miles from my home and be there for 6.30am. When I said I couldn’t do this, I was offered reduced hours. This was also unsuitable, so I was made redundant.”

Women have expressed concern at the attitude of some employers, often in the private sector, that women who have had children are not as committed or ambitious as others.

“I showed an interest in working part-time when I went back after having my baby. My male boss was surprised as prior to becoming a mother I was interested in a promotion. He didn’t see how this would work if I wasn’t working all the hours in the day.”

The lack of flexibility on the part of some employers is also a significant contributing factor.

“I was previously a sales manager. When I had my children I wanted to be able to keep my job but adapt my working hours so I could be at home more. This simply wasn’t an option for my employer. I now do part-time work in the evenings and at weekends, completely unrelated to the role I had in my career, because it fits better round my family responsibilities.”

Employers are entitled to ask for flexible working arrangements; however employers have the right to refuse. There is a perceived lack of knowledge among many around the right to make such a request. Women feel that they have to have a level of confidence and strength to be able to make this type of request.

“It’s not necessarily the first thing on someone’s mind when they come back to work after having children. Given the current climate, where jobs are difficult to come by, women can just be grateful to still be employed. Those who do know their rights often don’t want to be seen as a ‘burden’ or a ‘troublemaker’ by asking to work flexibly.”



Conclusion

Women in Scotland undoubtedly benefit from legislation, policy and practices which enhance women's economic empowerment. Despite these advances, however, it is clear that a number of barriers must be overcome in order to create equality in the world of work.

More women would be able to actively and meaningfully participate in the labour market if the following were addressed and tackled.

- Recognition that women undertake the majority of part-time, low paid, low skilled work and the impact this has on economic activity.
- Awareness of the unpaid work that women do and the amount of money this saves the economy each year.
- The prevalence of in-work poverty and the resulting reliance on top-up assistance through social security.
- The lack of accessible, affordable, appropriate, flexible childcare and the barriers this creates to women's participation in the labour market.
- Difficulties in accessing employment in rural areas.
- Occupational segregation and gender streaming, particularly in training programmes such as the Modern Apprenticeship scheme.
- The existence of the gender pay gap and the difficulties in closing this, particularly in certain job roles.
- The importance of older women in the workplace and the value, skills, knowledge and experience they bring.
- The difference between what is set out in legislation in relation to pregnancy and maternity working rights and parental leave, and how this works in practice.

The Scottish Women's Convention engages with women using numerous communication channels including Roadshow events, Thematic Conferences and regional contact groups. This submission paper provides the views of women and reflects their opinions and experiences in a number of key areas relevant to employment in Scotland.

The SWC would like to thank all of the women who have contributed to discussions around the issues outlined in this report.

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