

The Scottish Women's Convention's  
response to the Scottish Parliament's  
consultation on:

# Addressing Child Poverty through Parental Employment



April 2023

## **Premise**

The Social Justice and Social Security Committee is currently undertaking an inquiry to understand how child poverty can be prevented through parental employment. They have carried out multiple focus groups in Glasgow, North Ayrshire and Uist to collect lived experience and understand the variance of local issues. To build on this work, the Scottish Parliament have released this consultation, with particular interest in the views of employers, lone parents, young mothers (under 25), and minority groups.

The consultation focuses on ways in which the Scottish Government can better support parents into paid employment, how employers can create a more family friendly work environment, and what changes in childcare parents would like to see in Scotland.

After the Scottish Parliament have received consultation responses, they shall consider alterations that are required and rectify their plan accordingly – incorporating suggestions made.



## **The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC)**

The SWC is funded to engage with women across Scotland to ensure that their views are represented in policy and decision-making processes. The SWC uses the views of women to respond to a variety of parliamentary, governmental, and organisational consultation papers at Scottish, UK, and international levels.

The SWC gathers information using different methods, including roadshows, thematic conferences, surveys, and both in-person and online roundtable events. This submission presents the views of a range of women, reflecting their opinions, ideas and lived experience. Working together with many other equalities organisations and community groups, we use our broad network to ensure that women from a range of backgrounds are heard and acknowledged. We are continually reviewing innovative ways of engaging with women and developing our trauma-informed and culturally sensitive practice to support vital contributions from as many women as possible.

## Childcare

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

The key alteration to current childcare provision that would have the greatest impact on child poverty would be the further expansion of free childcare. Currently, all children aged 3 and 4 are provided with free childcare with some 2 year olds being eligible. However, when consulting with women in Scotland, those we have spoken with have clarified that free childcare for all children aged 4 and under would greatly benefit them. By providing this vital service, women would be free to access paid employment, improving household finances.

- “...childcare costs are out of the reach for most individuals, especially single parents”
- “Childcare costs will make this less likely for people to work and may cause some to stop working altogether.”
- “In my workplace, several women have left to care for their own children or grandchildren rather than pay childcare costs.”

Alternatively, policy could be implemented to ensure that workplaces provide flexible care options: for example, creches and work schedules which align with school times. Women have stated that these changes would allow women in the workplace to balance their unpaid work more effectively. Despite some workplaces offering flexibility, low-paid jobs are far less likely to be willing to offer workers flexible work schedules – contributing to the major power disparities between full-time, highly educated women workers and those at the bottom of the economic ladder. Therefore, it would be highly beneficial for the Scottish Government to collaborate with workplaces to ensure that they are fulfilling their duty to provide equal workplace opportunities for all women.

- “Flexible working hours around school and nursery times or the possibility of working from home would be great.”
- “Incentivise workplaces to adjust workplace contracts, things like – flexibility, childcare vouchers, work from home ability”
- “It would be good if they had to provide a creche.”

Women in rural communities have also explained that there is a general lack of childcare which impacts women's ability to gain employment. They highlighted that due to poor transport and a lack of good connectivity between towns, childcare options are limited further. It is therefore vital for the Scottish Government to consider improving infrastructure across the Highlands and Islands, and also how they can increase the number of free childcare options within this region.

- “Childcare is a significant issue for us, and it means then, I feel, that women are always a step backwards, we cannot progress, there’s no childcare”
- “There are no childcare providers through there, so you’re constantly having to look into what family or friends are available...no women can develop in their work, or their career until their child has reached a high school age.”

### **Who should any extension of free of subsidised childcare be offered to?**

As an organisation, we believe in equality for all women, and as such, extensions to free or subsidised childcare should be offered for every woman in Scotland. However, we are aware that due to budgetary constraints this may not be possible and, therefore, key groups to tackle would be single parents and young mothers.

Single parents are most likely to be women, and due to the constraints of caring responsibilities can find it difficult to access full-time paid employment. These women have highlighted that due to the inflexibility of many workplaces, they struggle to enter the labour market and are increasingly reliant on social security payments. This has been significantly worsened by recent problems such as: the Covid-19 pandemic, Brexit, and the subsequent cost of living crisis. Women working with organisations that provide food packages have seen a significant rise in single parent families accessing food banks and explained that some women are choosing between heating and eating.

- “Not all single parents can access childcare to be able to work. Not everyone has family/friends they can go to for help.”
- “...the amount of people we are supporting with food, who are your low income families...they’re sitting on that cusp, and the food deprivation just now is so significant”
- “...the amount of food bags we’re getting asked for from families, probably 95% if it is the women or single parents, it’s a massive problem for us just now.”

Furthermore, young women (those aged 21 and younger) receive a poorer rate of pay than their older counterparts. The national minimum wage for this group is lower, making escaping poverty more difficult. This is then significantly worsened when childcare is included, with some young women struggling to juggle the two. The result in some cases is that claiming social security provides them with similar levels of cashflow, while also giving them time to care for their children. One cannot assume that these women have strong family connections which provide them with good levels of support. Instead, it is valuable to view these women as independent entities, who therefore, require independent support options which can be shaped to suit their specific circumstance. It would therefore be vital if the Scottish Government looked to provide free childcare for this group, as it could help to relieve the burden of low pay, or lobby for increases to the minimum rate of pay for those aged below 21.

**What type of childcare could work best to serve the needs of parents in employment or seeking employment? Please give examples if you are aware of any.**

Women we consulted with consistently stated that flexibility in childcare options, was key to improving parental employment rates. They explained that by ensuring workplaces offered flexible childcare arrangements, such as work schedules which fit around school/nursery hours, in-house creches and an increase in the availability of work-sharing, would make a significant difference to women's lives. This creates a more woman-friendly work model, moving away from patriarchal, male-breadwinner approaches of the past, while simultaneously creating a work-life balance which stimulates healthier personal welfare.

It was also highlighted that childcare can be expensive, with calls to incorporate affordability into policy. Women we spoke with have explained that the high costs are off-putting for those looking to enter the workplace, particularly those who may enter into low paid work. As explained above these workplaces are less likely to offer good quality childcare support, and so in order to cover childcare expenses, women are more likely to enter into poor quality employment. For many women across Scotland this is an unwelcome choice, worsening their mental wellbeing.

- “They need to pay them more. Pay an actual living wage. Provide flexible hours, and actually be flexible, don't just say that in the job ad and then go back on it, so parents can work around their kids.”
- “There should be affordable or free childcare to support mothers in employment.”
- “When parents are supported with childcare to go back to work or gain skills, they can get themselves out of poverty.”

## **Transport**

**What improvements to public transport could support parents?**

Women have consistently called for a move to a feminist town planning approach which has recently been adopted by Glasgow City Council. Such a method places marginalised groups at the centre of town/city planning and considers how these groups navigate urban spaces, developing techniques to combat inaccessibility and safety issues. It recognises that current towns and cities have been developed largely by men and are based around traditional workplaces. Due to the recent Covid-19 pandemic, work structures have changed, and as such local councils must also embrace dynamic planning methods, ensuring that town and city centres remain focal points of development.

- “I think they need to implement feminist town planning, like Glasgow City Council have done, to make women and girls feel safer. This would also make it easier for these groups to negotiate cities and towns.”
- “Infrastructure designed with women in mind is so important.”

A further solution to increasing parental entry to the labour market, would be improvements to the reliability and affordability of public transport. It was highlighted to us that current public transport options, particularly buses, were unaffordable for women on low pay. They explained that these high prices cut into their wages and have prevented some from returning to work. It was also felt that despite high prices, there was not a high quality service, particularly in rural communities, where buses between towns have reduced significantly. Rural woman also stated that bus stops could be on dangerous grass verges, making it difficult for those with accessibility limitations to utilise bus services. This was then worsened by the increase in large coaches across the Highland region which have high steps and, at times, unsympathetic drivers.

- “I cannot afford the daily fare.”
- “The lack of decent public transport does hinder my returning to work.”
- “I wait endlessly for buses and there’s no train availability.”
- “...they use those big coaches, where there’s like three or four steps to get into them, and yeah, I can quite believe that some of the drivers are tutting and things.”

### **Fair Work and Economic Development**

#### **Are population changes in your areas affecting local employment opportunities? If so, how?**

Population changes are significantly impacting rural communities across Scotland, with centralisation contributing to depopulation. Women from the Highland and Island regions have explained that due to the lack of infrastructure and job opportunities, many young people have little choice but to move to the central belt – with this process being sped up by a lack of educational/vocational options in these areas. Rural women have also stated that there has been an increase in individuals purchasing second homes in their communities, driving up housing prices for locals, and again, pushing young families away. The ultimate result of depopulation is fewer businesses and organisations choose these regions as viable options, and the cycle of depopulation continues.

- “...centralisation has been very bad for the area. No matter what people’s political persuasions, we can all agree that it has been very bad on so many levels, from health to roads, and all of these things interconnect.”

- “I think we would hate to see anymore centralisation; we just want to see things coming back to us.”
- “...one of the real problems here is housing, it's a massive, massive problem. There's a lot of houses that are just empty in the wintertime”

As well as a shrinking population, rural Scottish communities are ageing. Many retirees choose to relocate to the Highlands and Islands, placing a strain on already overburdened health and social care services. Despite contributing to the local economy, rural women have stated that retirees unfortunately do not bring an increase in services, and few wish to return to work. Therefore, the Scottish Government must work with rural communities in Scotland to understand the unique challenges they are facing and return vital services back, rather than increasing focus on the central belt.

- “...especially the influx in the past couple of years, people who have no, or very little connection to the islands, snapping up houses...People...who have come to retire here...and put pressure on social care.”

It is not just rural communities that are experiencing major shifts in population: towns and cities, such as Falkirk and Stirling are increasingly being seen as commuter towns/cities for Glasgow and Edinburgh. Due to their central location these areas have good transport links between the two major Scottish cities and as such, a higher proportion of people are choosing them as good, cheap alternatives to live within. However due to a lack of residents remaining within these localities for work, businesses have suffered, with this being worsened by the recent Covid-19 pandemic and the rise in online shopping. Traditional town centres have significantly declined, having an inevitable impact on women, who are more likely to work within retail and hospitality. It is, therefore, vital that the Scottish Government consider how market changes are having a disproportionate impact on women and how, through improvements to education, they can provide suitable alternatives.

### Employability

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

Those who are not in work have explained that they do not feel adequately supported by current social security provision, with this sentiment being particularly common amongst the disabled community. Disabled women have stated that they experience disbelief when presenting their case to members of staff, however, this has been reduced since working with the new Scottish social security system. Some have stated that this system does provide better information and advice than UK Government services, however, they still have to interact with UK Government systems at times, causing distress. Disabled women have claimed that the UK benefits system makes them feel like they are “begging” for money and that this money carries with it a sense of being unearned and undeserved. Therefore, it would be highly valuable for the



Scottish Government to continue developing Social Security Scotland and continue lobbying for the further devolution of social security powers.

- “I was made to feel like a benefit scrounger, as if I’m not contributing and that I’m a drain on society.”

Women who care for disabled children also do not feel robustly supported to re-enter work. They have explained that due to intense caring responsibilities they have a considerable burden upon them limiting their ability to enter into paid employment. Some women also stated that they would rather less emphasis was placed on returning to work, and rather, that the care work they do was financially recognised. It has been highlighted that the care work women carry out on a daily basis takes away an intense responsibility from social services, and as such there is cause to request that unpaid domestic work be seen as valuable and as a form of credible work.

- “At the moment I am caring for two children with complex needs and a parent that has caring needs, so I’m unable to return to work”
- “I feel constantly judged for not working, and I feel that caring for three people with different disabilities should be classed as a job as we can’t just have time off from our role.”
- “There needs to be recognition of and reimbursement for caring responsibilities.”

Women who currently claim benefits have also explained that once they have gained employment, their benefits are immediately cut causing further financial difficulties. They stated that it would instead be valuable if their payments were maintained for a period of time, particularly if the work they have taken on is low paid and irregular – such as zero-hour contracts. By providing this, the Scottish Government can give women the opportunity to escape the cycle of poverty.

- “I’m only working a few hours, but the benefit system doesn’t understand when work is casual or zero-hours – there’s no regularity.”
- “Stop cutting off benefits as soon as someone has a job, wait until they make a certain amount”

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

After consulting with women many stated that they did not feel adequately supported to re-enter or continue in education. This was highlighted mainly by women over the age of 30, who felt that most employers look to their younger employees when offering training and mentorship courses. Focusing energies on younger employees is common practice in many organisations, as younger women are less likely to have caring responsibilities. It has been highlighted that due to the ageing population in Scotland, it is vital to give older people higher levels of training, particularly around digital literacy,



as a way to keep a steady pool of potential employees. This was echoed by women we spoke with, who explained that they did not feel supported by workplaces and didn't want their professional development determined by their age. Providing training around technology is vital in ensuring women remain within the employment system, with the increase in STEM jobs in recent years being indisputable. Women are currently underrepresented across the STEM sector, and as a result more must be done to reduce this significant gap.

- “There are many programmes targeted towards young people and while this is much needed, it can often feel like women over the age of 30 are forgotten about.”
- “...more accessible and free education for people over 25 would be a great start so that our life chances could be improved.”

Some women also explained that education and training is too costly and not well advertised. It was stated that this pushes women into lower paid positions, as they are not properly supported to access higher education which could enable them to enter well-paid work. When one considers that women and girls are regularly outperforming their male peers throughout school, it is clear that they hold the capability, but lack the opportunity. It would therefore be valuable for the Scottish Government to consider extending commitments for free education, as well as grants/bursaries that could allow women from across the country access education. Due to the lack of general knowledge about educational opportunities available, it would also be valuable if better advertisement and signposting was carried out.

- “It's not well signposted, it took until my 3<sup>rd</sup> time unemployed to find any support to help me build the confidence to return to work.”
- “I would like to get back to work, but first I want to return to education to get the qualifications I need to get a career...It feels like I'm not meant to have the career I want, I'm just meant to pick up a minimum hour, no direction job and work myself to death”
- “...I personally have quite a lot of knowledge around those opportunities [modern apprenticeships] ...but again it might be the case that there isn't a lot of, it's not widely known that these opportunities are available”

## Employability

### **What can employers do to offer more family friendly and flexible working conditions?**

Women regularly explained that despite calls for more flexibility across workplaces, this was rarely carried through to practice. It would therefore be valuable for workplaces to make strong commitments to changing work dynamics, including job sharing and flexible hours. Currently, top-down management structures make it difficult to

implement these changes, and so it is key that the Scottish Government aim to alter workplace practice on a wider level, encouraging personal wellbeing and importantly for women, flexibility. It was also stated by some women that more women in higher positions would assist in creating long-term change. They explained that mentorship programmes and a sympathetic manager can make a huge difference giving women the opportunities they need to thrive at work.

- “We need more women in higher positions across all sectors.”
- “...we have a female manager, and she actively promotes women. She has everyone everywhere so no set rules.”

A further barrier to women accessing family friendly and flexible work, is the prevalence of misogyny and workplace harassment within Scotland. Women are paid less than men across all sectors, due to a continued belittlement of talent and widespread sexism. It has been explained to us that this misogyny prevents working mothers from furthering their career, and they are more likely to face discrimination in relation to promotions. Those we have spoken with have stated that they hope to see a world free of misogyny and the removal of the persistent gender-pay gap. It would therefore be valuable for the Scottish Government to continue their work to reduce the pay gap, and to consider how to properly implement misogyny law into workplaces.

- “There was a total lack of understanding of a woman’s role as a mother. Lack of leave, warnings for being off with my poorly children, whereas men in our workplace tend to have more leeway.”
- “At my work the men are often asked to be managers and to be trained but the girls aren’t, it’s unfair.”
- “Misogyny was a contributing factor to resigning from my previous employment.”
- “We need more flexibility for working mums and equal pay.”

## **Priorities**

### **What could the Scottish Government prioritise to help parents into work and better paid jobs?**

The most significant aim the Scottish Government can hope to achieve is the reduction, and ultimate removal, of poverty in Scotland. If this was to be achieved all individuals would be able to access good quality employment opportunities and social disadvantage would become limited. This is particularly vital in current times due to major events which have combined to worsen Scottish women’s economic prospects: e.g. Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost of living crisis. Despite consistent commitments to reduce poverty in Scotland, working-age poverty rates have remained stubborn: 18% between 1994-1997 and 21% between 2019-2022. Movement has been made to reduce child poverty in this time period, but still remains high at 24% in 2019-2022.

By actively focusing on the goal of reducing poverty, the Scottish Government can increase individuals' health and wellbeing, alongside educational opportunities, which can combine to improve women's life chances. Women have highlighted to us that when one lives in poverty, priorities change, meaning general survival becomes the focus. This prevents women from gaining employable skills through education, as they lack the time and resources to do so. Therefore, the Scottish Government must work with women living in poverty to understand their lived experience, allowing this knowledge to direct the focus of funding and policy.

- “I think there are a lot of key issues facing Scotland. We are currently in the midst of a cost-of-living crisis with lingering pressures from Covid-19 and Brexit. Deprivation and poverty have always been an issue in Scotland, and it isn't going away anytime soon.”
- “I think the issue of poverty that families face, and children experience, really needs to be improved in order for people to... for girls and women to be receptive of education. You won't learn if you're hungry or you're cold”

### Other

#### **Is there anything else you would like to tell us?**

We would like to highlight the experiences of women with no recourse to public funds. These women face increased hardship due to low public payments and are unable to enter into work as they do not have a settled status. In many instances asylum seeking women have useful skills which could be utilised across sectors, and despite an interest in taking on work, are prevented from doing so. It would therefore be valuable for the Scottish Government to consider how they can better support these women, and how they can further lobby the UK Government to devolve immigration powers to Scotland.

It has been highlighted by those working with asylum seeking women that despite immigration remaining reserved, other sectors such as education and housing are devolved. With regards to employment, it would therefore be valuable for the Scottish Government to provide improved training and educational opportunities for these women, which could fast-track processes once settlement statuses are agreed.

- “Allow women who are able to and who are qualified to, to be permitted to work while waiting for the Home Office decision without being afraid that it would affect their claim”

## Conclusion

Having listened to women, our three key recommendations on this topic are:

- Workplace culture must become more flexible and affordable to give women the freedom they need to work around caring commitments.
- Educational and training opportunities should be better advertised and signposted, to provide all women in Scotland with improved prospects.
- Continue developing Social Security Scotland, to create a more empathetic benefits system across the country.

The SWC is grateful for the opportunity to respond to the Scottish Parliament's consultation on **Addressing Child Poverty through Parental Employment**. As an organisation, we will continue to work with women from across Scotland to gather voices and experiences relating to this topic and its effects on women's equality.

For further information or to share your views, please contact:

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