



CONFERENCE REPORT

3<sup>rd</sup> February 2024

Glasgow Grosvenor Hotel

The Scottish Women's Convention  
**What Should Childcare Look  
Like in Scotland?**



# Agnes Tolmie

## SWC Chair

Throughout my time as Chair of the SWC, women have compared organising their childcare to completing a jigsaw puzzle. I have heard stories of employers refusing to accommodate women's needs; childcare providers run-ragged by an increasingly bureaucratic system which has resulted in children across Scotland being negatively impacted.

The need for change is apparent, with comprehensive solutions being essential. So, our conference asked a simple question of women: 'What Should Childcare Look Like in Scotland?'. We invited women to give us their ideas and solutions, with their views being outlined in the following report. And I have no doubt that the women of Scotland will collectively succeed in finding all of the pieces of the childcare jigsaw.

## 5 Key Points & Recommendations

- A comprehensive review of early learning and childcare (ELC) provision is required, focusing on the direct impacts on children under the current system.
- Create a renewed childcare approach based on flexibility and accessibility, to give mothers greater choice in their professional and personal lives.
- Collaborate with ELC providers and parents when designing revised childcare options, considering the lived impacts of government policy.
- Align budgeting techniques across Scottish councils, which consider each child individually, to reduce gaps in childcare provision.
- Implement equity across maternity and paternity options in workplaces, to facilitate cultural change.

# Kaukab Stewart, MSP

Kaukab was first elected to Holyrood in 2021, representing the Glasgow Kelvin constituency. As of February 2024, Kaukab has been the Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development. She was the first woman of colour to ever be elected to the Scottish Parliament. Since being elected, Kaukab has served as the vice-convenor of Holyrood's Children and Young People Committee and is now the convenor of the Equalities, Human Rights, and Civil Justice Committee. Prior to public life, Kaukab worked as a teacher over three decades - during which time she was an active trade unionist, campaigning on workers' rights and numerous equalities issues.



Our first speaker was Kaukab Stewart, MSP, who attended to discuss her recent motion within the Scottish Parliament, where she proposed a national conversation on a 'kindergarten' stage in Scotland<sup>1</sup>. This stage is utilised across European countries and includes a raised starting school age and a focus on play-based learning. Kaukab's motion also proposed the benefits associated with a kindergarten stage, including improved long-term outcomes for children, which may reduce the current attainment gap seen across Scotland and act as an anti-poverty measure.

During our conference, Kaukab drew attention to her time as a school teacher, focusing on the negative impacts she saw on children's wellbeing as a result of the current education system. She proposed that a focus on performance from a young age resulted in the labelling of children, contributing to stereotypes and poor mental health.

- "...my thing was asking our children to be something or do something that they weren't actually ready for. And somehow, we started to label them as failing, when actually, they were just behaving like wains should be"
- "...that didn't help their confidence, their health and wellbeing when they were further up the school, because they weren't actually ready."

Going on to focus on childcare itself, the Minister proposed that a kindergarten model would also result in improved childcare outcomes for parents. She explained that despite initiatives by the Scottish Government, such as the 1140 hours of funded childcare, the system itself requires large-scale change. Kaukab highlighted that the current system is outdated and does not consider the needs of children and modern parents, in particular, mothers. She stated that through a child-focused approach which is universal, women will be given increased choice, bettering their economic and personal outcomes.

- "I'm proud of the fact that there are so many [childcare] initiatives in Scotland. But actually, I don't think we're getting the reward for all the...policies, because we're actually tweaking a system that was actually created in the Victorian Era."
- "But what I would like to see, is for every woman to be able to find, and have readily available, universal childcare...and they can then make the choice of what they would like to do."

“...so, my vision I suppose, is good quality childcare, early years provision, that is child-centred, age appropriate, play-based, that has a highly skilled and trained workforce that is well-paid and is flexible to the modern needs we have.”

<sup>1</sup> Scottish Parliament. (2024). National Conversation on a Kindergarten Stage in Scotland. Available at: <https://www.parliament.scot/chamber-and-committees/votes-and-motions/S6M-11999>



## Carmen Martinez

Carmen Martinez is the Coordinator at the Scottish Women's Budget Group (SWBG), an organisation that promotes equality using gender budgeting in economic decision-making, to build a fairer and more equal Scotland. Carmen coordinates all SWBG activities, including policy and projects with partners. Prior to this, Carmen spent a year in Brussels working with Horizon Europe funds and the Life Programme, in support of the European Green Deal.

The second speaker at our conference was Carmen Martinez, coordinator at the Scottish Women's Budget Group (SWBG). The SWBG advocates for the wide-range usage of gender budgeting techniques throughout policy decisions, with Carmen stating that childcare would likely benefit from such an approach. She highlighted that caring responsibilities have often been missed during economic decision-making, undervaluing the vital work carried out by women across Scotland. This viewpoint was further supported by a recent SWBG survey, which heard from 216 women who currently access or have accessed childcare in Scotland. Their survey highlighted multiple key themes, including affordability; accessibility; issues with the 30 hours a week funding and the impact on women<sup>2</sup>.

- **“And what do we mean by a gender equal economy? A key element of that is care, so recognising the value and role of care, it's place in our society and the need for it to be valued and invested in.”**

With regards to the key finding of affordability in the SWBG's childcare survey, Carmen stated that 54% of women had had to make changes to other areas of their household costs and as many as 74% had agreed that increases to other household costs, such as energy and food, had impacted their ability to manage childcare. She went on to explain that this was particularly relevant for families arranging care for one and two year olds, as this is not funded through the 1140 hours programme.

Carmen also highlighted the issue of accessibility with regards to childcare, with the survey finding that 38% of women had found accessing childcare difficult during school term-time. She also explained that this difficulty was more acute in rural locales and for those with disabled children, with fewer formal childcare options being available to parents. It was also stated that due to inflexibility and poor provision, mothers were more likely to have increased costs through private childcare arrangements.

- **“...accessing childcare in rural areas proved to be another challenge, with women having to travel for significant distances, impacting the time they have to do paid work.”**
- **“The availability of childcare for those with additional support needs is another key finding...15% of respondents had a disabled child...These respondents told us of the lack of after school and holiday clubs...And in relation to the extra costs that parents need to cover...these women highlighted multiple issues.”**

Consequently, both affordability and accessibility played a part in issues with the 30 hours a week funded care. Carmen explained that some respondents had struggled to utilise their entitled childcare, with 16% of those eligible for funding being able to access these hours due to the lack of flexibility in provision. Of those who could access these hours, 72% said that it partly meets their needs. Also, 39% of women residing in rural locations felt that the funded offer did not meet their

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<sup>2</sup> Scottish Women's Budget Group. (2023). Policy Briefing: Childcare Survey 2023. Available at: <https://www.swbg.org.uk/content/publications/Policy-Briefing---Childcare-Survey-2023.pdf>

needs. The most common reason given for these sentiments, was a lack of flexibility, resulting in women having to access privately funded alternatives.

- **“All responses, however, drew attention to the school nurseries being less flexible than the private ones, and would therefore influence women’s decision-making.”**

Carmen went on to explain how these difficulties can have detrimental impacts on women across Scotland. Firstly, she highlighted the economic impact, stating that 65% of respondents to the survey had felt that the cost of childcare had had an impact on the work they can do, and 66% stated that it impacted their financial wellbeing. Survey respondents explained that they had had to make changes to their working schedules, through reducing or compressing hours, with many stating that their partner’s did not have to make the same changes. Thus, ultimately worsening the gender pay gap and putting women more at risk of economic instability.

- **“...65% of women stated that the cost of childcare had an impact on the work they can do...This explains other issues such as the gender pay gap and shows that women are more vulnerable to any economic shocks.”**
- **“So, this highlights how the lack of social infrastructure, of affordable, accessible childcare, penalises women, contributing to gender inequality.”**

Respondents to the SWBG’s survey also explained that they had been negatively impacted on a personal level. 61% said that their mental health had been adversely affected by the management of childcare, and 48% had taken childcare into consideration when deciding whether to have another child. Carmen emphasised the potential economic and structural repercussions this may have, contributing to an ever-growing ageing population in Scotland.

Finally, Carmen provided the multiple recommendations made as a result of the SWBG’s childcare survey. She stated that 30 hours of funded childcare should come into immediate effect after paid maternity leave, rather than from three years old; free provision for those experiencing poverty and extended funding beyond the school term. She also recommended a review of the current implementation of early learning and childcare, to increase flexibility in services for under five-year-olds, as well as wraparound care for over five-year-olds. It was also highlighted that to improve accessibility, work must be done with childcare providers across the country, and that there should be consideration of the extra costs associated with caring for a disabled child throughout the design of policies, services and funding. If you would like to read more about the SWBG’s survey on childcare and their recommendations, you can access the briefing through [their website](#).

**“ So, the need for strong public services and reduced childcare costs, is therefore key to support families and women, in particular, through the cost of living in Scotland. ”**

# Satwat Rehman

Satwat is Chief Executive of One Parent Families Scotland (OPFS) and has more than 30 years' experience in the voluntary and public sector in Scotland and England, working in the fields of equalities, education, employability, economic development/regeneration and early years and childcare. Since joining OPFS in 2011, she has been a member of several commissions and advisory groups and is currently a member of the National Advisory Council for Women and Girls, and co-chair of the Just Transition Commission.



Our final speaker was Satwat Rehman, the Chief Executive of One Parent Families Scotland (OPFS), who focused her contribution on the impact childcare has on single parents. Satwat began by highlighting the lack of progress made with regards to childcare, despite being a regular topic of conversation throughout her career. She proposed that an effective childcare system would assist in increasing choice for families, contributing to a fairer Scotland.

- “What we should be doing is creating a system that’s there to enable families and women to make choices about what’s best for their family”

Satwat went on to emphasise the multiple issues facing single mothers, including high costs and flexibility. She also stated that the current system is fragmented through a lack of joined-up thinking, creating complex journeys for parents. Each of these issues are then further compounded by a lack of understanding from employers, forcing single parents out of the labour market.

- “...the issues that we hear...that then become significant barriers for single parents are the costs, the flexibility, particularly if you’re the sole-carer and breadwinner.”
- “We don’t have a labour market that works with people, we have a labour market that provides you with precarious, low-paid work...And which requires you to be there the hours that the employer needs you there, as opposed to the hours which fit with you”

Furthermore, from her experience as a member of the Commission for Childcare Reform, Satwat proposed that the competing priorities of working schedules and what is best for children work against one another, benefiting neither group. Instead, the Commission for Childcare Reform recommended a focus on a non-siloed approach, which incorporated flexibility, quality, accessibility and affordability across sectors. She also explained that including service-providers is vital in building sustainable childcare, alongside good quality training and working conditions. This should be underpinned by a commitment to fully value care work in all its forms, considering how it adds to the national economy.

- “So, some of the things we recommended in 2015...a clear strategy with a vision, that works for families as well as children. Let’s stop dealing with single issues in isolation...we want to deliver it in a way that doesn’t undermine the sustainability of providers.”
- “...we need to stop the siloed thinking, stop undervaluing it [care work]...And I think because it’s gendered...and the majority women workforce, it’s undervalued”

To finish, Satwat drew attendees attention to a joint report from OPFS and Close the Gap, which sets out their views for an effective childcare system in Scotland, which can be accessed through the [OPFS website](#).

“ ...I’ve been dealing with this issue for 20 years, and I have always argued that childcare should be part of our infrastructure, the social infrastructure, the economic infrastructure and the public service infrastructure of any country. ”

# Roundtable Discussions

After the contributions from our speakers, we opened the floor for a Q&A. Following this, in-person attendees were invited to share their lived experience and solutions to the childcare situation in Scotland during roundtable sessions.

## Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) Staff

Those working within the childcare sector expressed significant concerns over the longevity of the industry in its current form. They explained that due to the increasing 'schoolification' of early years provision, many childminders had left the profession, with the same being apparent across private and public sector providers. ELC workers also stated that the level of training seen in new recruits was poor, believing that further pressure is being placed on childcare workers to provide education within workplaces. This pressure was consistently discussed, contributing to poor work-life balance and increased risk of burn-out. Workers believed that to rectify these issues, local authority budgeting techniques had to change to provide funding on a child-by-child basis. Thus, allowing them to manage their workloads more easily and prioritise the needs of the children in their care.

- **"...we're not getting team meetings, you know, we're not actually getting any service development...so the standard drops."**
- **"...it's women who are delivering childcare, who are exhausted, who are then having to support women to go back to work. And we want to be able to do that, but we are all ran into the ground...We need to look after ourselves, as well as those children"**

## Employment

A key area of focus raised by women, was the significant impact organising and providing childcare has on their work. Many provided personal experiences of altering work schedules, either through reduced hours or workshare practices, with some choosing to leave work altogether. Some women went on to explain that their partners often did not have to make the same sacrifice, alluding to the wider issue of the gender pay gap. Women who did not have guaranteed informal childcare options, for example through partners or grandparents, were particularly impacted financially, with their ability to balance work and childcare lessened. As a result, attendees called for increased flexibility within workplaces in relation to working hours, alongside an equitable maternity/paternity leave option, to facilitate cultural change.

- **"...it was always a challenge for me...I didn't work until my kids went to school. And when they did, I worked in a call centre for two days a week...and that was only manageable because of my parents"**
- **"But, looking at that through a single parent lens, I mean, I never had the option. It was just all on me as a single parent."**
- **"They need to balance the amount of paternal against maternal leave, and stop having it so one-sided...And then companies need to reduce the prejudices and stereotypes towards parents"**

## Flexibility

Across discussions, flexibility was seen as a major factor in the struggle for childcare. Women explained that a lack of flexibility has prevented them from organising good work schedules, which compliment pre-existing childcare structures. This was then worsened when using publicly provided nurseries, with timings being strict for drop-offs and pick-ups. Women stated that this inflexibility contributed to poor mental health and wellbeing, while also contributing to their

inability to fully participate in the workforce. They hoped to see an altered childcare system which would fit around their schedules, focusing on flexibility to increase access.

- “For me, it was the flexibility...the biggest issue for me was that childcare generally opened at 8:30am and shut at 5:50pm. And so, you have to get there from your job at the other end of the city before they close”
- “The combination of flexible work for parents and flexible childcare could be such a game-changer for families. Being able to have that time to do drop offs and pick-ups and those kinds of things make such a huge, huge difference for people.”

## Funding

Women highlighted that increased funding across the childcare sector would make a significant difference in provision. As stated, those working in childcare would like to see an altered budgetary approach, providing improved finances per child, but added that this approach should be taken throughout Scottish councils. Women explained that funding varies by council, for example, ELC funded providers in West Lothian Council are given an hourly rate per 3-5 year-old child of £6.40, while North Ayrshire Council provides a rate of £5.31<sup>3</sup>. Workers and mothers argued that this variation creates gaps in provision, and felt that it was motivated by cost-cutting, rather than a want to improve childcare conditions. Also, in relation to funding, women proposed that the sector is consistently forgotten and undervalued, as the workforce is made up mostly of women. They explained that care on a wider scale, including social care and unpaid domestic work, is not viewed as important in an economic context. Women therefore proposing that cultural change is required, and that this should be backed by a political will to create a care-centred society.

- “It’s [childcare] pivotal to a healthy economy. It’s pivotal to women and children’s mental health and wellbeing, and if you could just shift the narrative to say, ‘we’re going to talk about budget and we’re going to put childcare absolutely centre and plan everything around it’ then that would make a huge difference.”
- “The other thing about funding is it’s actually different across the country. So, each council sets the rates for each individual child, and they’ve got different formulas”
- “Oh, it’s [childcare] definitely not valued, and you can see that in what they’re willing to pay for it...it’s like no, you can’t just base what you’re willing to spend on what’s the cheapest option, you need to look at the best interests of the children.”



<sup>3</sup> Scottish Government. (2022). Overview of Local Authority Funding and Support for Early Learning and Childcare Providers: 2022-23. Available at: [Overview of local authority funding and support for early learning and childcare providers: 2022-23 \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot)



# **Thank You!**

The Scottish Women's Convention would like to thank all of those who attended our conference, as well as those who contributed online and via email. We also thank our speakers for providing their wealth of knowledge and experience, as well as brilliantly contributing to our broader discussion.

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