

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

Disabled Employment Gap Inquiry



February 2023

Premise

The Scottish Parliament is currently considering potential barriers that prevent disabled people from entering employment. Statistics show that disabled people in Scotland have lower employment rates than non-disabled people, and as such the Scottish Parliament would like to understand how they can help disabled people enter employment at higher rates.

The inquiry hopes to understand potential barriers, the policy which could be put in place to limit these barriers and how the Covid-19 pandemic has potentially impacted disabled people's experience of the labour market.

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.

Our Response

What are the remaining challenges, and why has progress been difficult?

Disabled women have highlighted that the key challenge with regards to gaining employment is the lack of financial support outside of work which can place them in precarious living situations. They have explained that due to increased living costs, such as carers and mobility equipment, they require more robust social security support. These additional requirements are necessary for disabled people to live a life with dignity and would provide increased security. Also, the current cost of living crisis is significantly worsening many disabled women's financial situation. By ensuring that disabled women have good economic backing, they would be more likely to enter full-time education or training, which could further their opportunities. Therefore, we recommend that further financial aid is supplied by the Scottish Government, as this will show a full commitment to a human rights based approach.

- "I've got a friend in a wheelchair, and she has a carer... she can't manage without the carer, and she doesn't know how she's going to manage to continue paying the carer, because the funding that she does get...won't cover all her expenses"
- "I'm not sure that the new social and welfare funding is going to cover the needs of these women... there's a huge range... from young women who are being cared for by their parents, mothers particularly, and need perhaps lots of equipment"
- "...many low income families are being brought to their knees by the rising costs of bills...and will continue on a downward spiral into debt and depression."
- "I have a severely disabled daughter who requires ceiling hoists, a hospital bed, etc. to ensure she is safe. All these increase the cost of my monthly bills drastically. I don't know how I'll cope"

A further barrier that disabled women face when entering the workplace is stigma. They have stated that they feel that general society still views disability in archaic ways, placing a disability before the person, and that until these well-engrained assumptions are challenged, widespread change is unlikely. We believe that through improved, inclusive education, able-bodied people can become more knowledgeable about disability and practices which include, rather than exclude. It is also key, however, that those with additional needs are given these, and that their differences are celebrated rather than stigmatised.

- "Social care is currently based on a problematic charity mentality, rather than a human rights based approach."
- "Able-bodied people see disabled people as an inconvenience at times and we have to shout so hard to have our needs met."

Disabled women have also stated that some workplaces are reluctant to make reasonable adjustments and are generally unsupportive. These adjustments can be physical, for example wheelchair access, or more related to workplace culture, with

work-sharing/part-time still being viewed with trepidation. Current workplace structures are focused on a male-breadwinner model, which ultimately does not align with the varied needs of women across Scotland – particularly when considering caring responsibilities. Therefore, by encouraging change within workplaces, the Scottish Government could tackle these issues, and as such more comprehensive policy must be put in place to better support disabled workers.

Furthermore, women have explained that workplace cultures can be actively ableist, and some have experienced mocking and discrimination at the hands of their colleagues and managers. This was particularly obvious when women experienced menopause, with some explaining that due to the poor adjustments made, and ridicule, they were forced to leave work. They felt that menopause should be viewed as a form of disability, and that menopause champions should be implemented into workplaces, alongside mental health champions to ensure a positive work environment for all employees.

- “I have also encountered fears and unwillingness to employ people with accessibility or reasonable adjustment requirements due to the economic cost to the organisation”
- [Speaking about their experience of employment after being diagnosed with dementia] “...I was told that if I had had cancer, they would've kept me on, but because it was a mental thing, it was cheerio. And that angered me...it made me such an angry person, and I'm not an angry person, but I cried more tears dealing with that than I did getting my diagnosis.”
- “...you know they think it's hilarious when you're late for a meeting...I've had that horrible feeling when you're making a point and then you just lose it... and it's gone. It's just awful and humiliating, and men in particular tend to make jokes about it”
- “We need to try and change our mindset...because the symptoms are across many years, and it is a disability. There is no reason why, if you're given the right support, you can't stay at work, and I think menopause champions would be the way to break through that barrier.”

A further barrier to many disabled women's lives, is poor public transport links and improper accessibility measures. Some disabled women are heavily reliant on buses and trains; however, these forms of transport have been described as unreliable and inconsistent, preventing many women from accessing their work or educational establishments. This was particularly evident across rural areas of Scotland, with disabled women explaining that they have fewer transport links than urban centres. Due to a less consistent bus service, rural women do not feel that they can properly make use of public transport, limiting their access to work. They have also stated that bus stops can be inaccessible, with some being on grass verges, preventing those with mobility needs from making use of them. Women also stated interest in further development of feminist town-planning across the country, with current plans from Glasgow City Council being an example of good practice. They have explained that by incorporating this into future policy, all groups of people can be properly considered. It

is therefore vital, that the Scottish Government aims to reduce public transport inequalities across the country.

- “...I just wanted to say that what is feedback by our group members is that buses are not suitable, especially if they have a walking aid. They really come up against discrimination, drivers quite often tut them, they won't lower the ramp for them.”
- “The train has been really unreliable this year, and it's four and a half hours to go down to Inverness and then that back, which is exhausting if you've got a long-term health condition.”
- “I think they need to implement feminist town planning like Glasgow City Council are doing to make women and girls feel safer. This would also make it easier for these groups to negotiate cities and towns.”

What policy measures would you like to see to support disabled people and employers to increase participation rates?

Firstly, it would be valuable to address the lack of data surrounding disabled people and work. Despite disability impacting a range of peoples, reliable disaggregated data is not collected across workplaces. It would be valuable if the Scottish Government implemented policy requiring all workplaces to collect in-depth, reliable statistical data on employees. It would also be valuable if this data was shared effectively across all devolved nations, as currently there is a lack of comparable monitoring frameworks, with each devolved nation collecting and reporting on data differently.

Another key policy implementation would be work towards limiting physical barriers, across buildings and transport. By fully incorporating a feminist town-planning methodology, the Scottish Government could encourage local councils to properly considering the needs of all peoples. Feminist town-planning prioritises safety and accessibility, over patriarchal public spaces, which suit male-breadwinner models. This form of planning also works more effectively in the current post-Covid-19 world, with how we work and live being ever changed.

Lastly, we believe that tackling discrimination and stigma is invaluable in the fight to support disabled people. By ensuring that inclusive education is available throughout an individual's school experience, and into the workplace, harmful stereotypes can be challenged. It is, therefore, also important for employers to provide good quality training for all employees, while ensuring that non-discriminatory practice is engrained in workplace cultures.

What has been the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on disabled people's experience of the labour market?

Covid-19 has been described as a great leveller across employment, with previously uncommon practices, such as videocalls, becoming standard. It can be argued that the increase in Zoom and Microsoft Teams meetings, have enabled those previously unable to enter the workplace physically, to do so virtually. Therefore, Covid-19 has brought about some positives for the disabled workforce.

However, those who do not work in office-based employment were unable to work from home, and as such some missed out on full pay, or were let-go. This was particularly evident across the retail and hospitality sector, which are more likely to hire women, resulting in a disproportionate impact felt by women across Scotland. Also, due to poor connectivity in rural areas, some disabled women found working from home difficult. Therefore, more must be done to limit the financial hardship felt by women after the Covid-19 pandemic, and connectivity divides should be shrunk to create a modern workforce.

Furthermore, some older women have expressed concern surrounding an increased reliance on technology. They have explained that this can cause anxiety and stress, as they do not always feel supported to learn new methods of working. The result of this is that many older women leave work, and with a continuously aging population in Scotland, it can be said that this is a real loss to the employment market.

- “I think there’s a frustration as well around... an assumption that technology is going to help but is it really?”

A further impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on disabled women’s experiences of the labour market, is a decline of mental health. Many disabled women still feel a level of vulnerability, particularly those who are immunocompromised, and the quick movement back to pre-pandemic measures has worsened anxiety and stress. Some have stated that they feel forgotten and isolated, and that, this was also the case during the pandemic – with feelings of loneliness being worsened as a result of lockdown measures. It is therefore vital that the Scottish Government seek to understand disabled women’s mental health needs, to enable them to live a life of dignity.

- “I’ve got friends who are disabled, and they over the past two years have really felt completely forgotten... and I think looking at the new crisis in energy, food, prices, etc. They are desperate, they’re really feeling depressed.”
- “This pandemic has shown how little so many people think of disabled people. We have been told to stay in and suck it up... like we matter less. During my PIP interview I had to perform my suffering and felt like she was trying to catch me out, it was horrific.”

Conclusion

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

- Incorporate comprehensive education across schools and workplaces, to ensure all people in Scotland are aware of inclusive practice.
- Public transport links must become more reliable and accessible, particularly in rural areas, to ensure disabled women equal access to society.
- More consultation must be done to understand the intersectional mental health needs of disabled women as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The SWC is grateful for the opportunity to respond to the Scottish Parliament's consultation on **Disabled Employment Gap Inquiry**. 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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