

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

Road to Recovery:  
Impact of the Pandemic on the  
Scottish Labour Market



September 2022

## Premise

The Covid-19 pandemic has had an impact across sectors, including the labour market. It has been recognised that the pandemic has resulted in a persistently high number of economically inactive people: those who have not been in employment, or who have not been seeking work with the last four weeks and/or unable to start work within the next two weeks. As a result, the Scottish Government are attempting to understand why this trend is continuing, and potential solutions.

They are particularly interested in the higher rates of sickness being seen within economically inactive people, as well as whether early retirement is a key driver behind levels of economic inactivity. Furthermore, there has also been a focus on minority groups, and whether they have been significantly disadvantaged by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The points and recommendations made within this consultation, which have been guided by Scottish women's voices, will be taken to the Scottish Government to make suggestions and influence policy. The purpose of these policies will be to help those who are economically inactive to re-enter the labour market, if possible.



## 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 key factors driving the increase in labour market inactivity?**

When consulting with women across the country, they indicated that mental health concerns were large contributors to them not wanting to return to work. They explained that the pandemic has put them under enormous strain, increasing their stress and anxiety levels, as well as isolating some women who lack support networks. These factors have intertwined to create poor mental wellbeing across Scotland, with women finding support difficult to access from both public services and friends/family. They put forward that despite a movement 'back to normal', they do not feel ready to embrace that mentality and that they are instead feeling like they have been "left behind" by a society which does not care for them. It would therefore be valuable for the Scottish Government to provide improved mental health support for the people of Scotland, as well as continue to discuss preventative measures surrounding Covid-19 to alleviate anxiety.

- "I have been cut off and I have felt very isolated... at first it was quite good because my neighbours were very good at coming out, but we haven't been able to mix in the same way."
- "Nobody knocked on my door to see if I was okay. I ended up knocking on other people's doors, older ladies than me, to see if I could help them because I knew how isolated I felt."
- "I suffered with mental health prior to lockdowns but I've found that it's been worse because I've not been able to see any family."
- "The isolation was just terrible, and it doesn't just go away because we're still in a period where a lot of people aren't getting out and we're finding it's affecting people's mental health very badly."

Labour inactivity also remains high amongst women as they lack support to enter the labour market. This trend was apparent in pre-pandemic times, with women explaining that due to caring commitments including childcare, caring for elderly parents or disabled family members, they were unable to meet the requirements of full-time employment contracts. As women are more likely to be the primary carer for these groups, they require flexibility from employers, and better childcare offerings.

Furthermore, women have spoken to us about the complicated process of accessing benefits, which hinders them greatly and discourages them from applying. However due to the systemic issues that remain around employment, this does not push them into jobs, it instead pushes them into further poverty. They also highlighted that even in scenarios where they were employed pre-pandemic, some lost their jobs due to a lack of employment security (zero-hour contracts) or that the inability to take on overtime financially crippled them. Therefore, we at the Scottish Women's Convention believe that the current support networks in place for unemployed women are not good enough, as is the employability regulation for women who work.

- "...women have a lot of responsibility – often still looking after their children but also having to take on caring responsibilities for their parents."
- "When the pandemic first hit it went into complete chaos, because women overnight had literally lost their jobs... and we're talking about women with small children or teenagers, various different dynamics going on in the house and it was just horrendous for them, and they didn't know where to go."
- "Zero-hour contracts don't give security to workers, childcare costs are out of reach for most individuals – especially single parents. And job opportunities are there but sometimes the wages don't meet outgoings."

### **Has long-COVID been a factor in current levels of labour market inactivity? If so, is it likely to be a permanent feature of the labour market?**

Long-COVID has not been an issue that women have spoken to us about, they have generally instead chosen to talk about other health conditions and how these were mishandled during the pandemic. However long-COVID is a relatively new illness, which requires further investigation from both an academic and public provision perspective. From initial research being released, long-COVID is far more likely to affect women than men. Therefore, we recommend that there is increased investment in research to understand why this difference exists, as well as improved support for women suffering from long-COVID.

### **What has been the labour market impact of the pandemic on people with pre-existing health conditions?**

Women with pre-existing health conditions have told us that the Covid-19 pandemic has had an impact on most facets of their lives. They have experienced increased isolation, poorer mental health, and difficulty in receiving physical healthcare - due to the strains placed on the NHS over the past two years. This group have also explained that accessing financial help during this period has been frustrating and difficult. It is clear from women with pre-existing health conditions that they feel let-down and left behind by society. They have not been able to access the support they need easily and because of poor health provisions, some have experienced worsened health and even death.

- "I have found the processes so hard due to my illness and being alone and having severe pain... I have had to navigate this alone... I am so confused by the information thrown at me very fast. I am very sick, and it is terrifying to be in this position."
- "I have found it very hard to get any help that I desperately needed – such as home help, as I did not qualify for Universal Credit due to savings. Yet the savings were from a personal injury from a very traumatic event, so I have been stuck fending for myself and watching all my money go and my health decline."

I'm unable to rest, wash my own hair or clean my house, which has made me feel more depressed, more exhausted and more shame. I have had to wait until things were desperate and I had spent most of my savings in order to qualify for any help."

- "Able-bodied people see disabled people as an inconvenience at times and we have to shout so hard to have our needs met. 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."
- "I've had several friends who have sadly passed away. They have committed suicide because they couldn't live with the pain, and obviously no-one listened to them when they were complaining. For me it's the fact we need to do much more to highlight that chronic conditions are real for many women and most women are tired of calling their GP's and not getting answers."

### **What factors have influenced some people to take early retirement?**

Women have chosen to take early retirement for a multitude of reasons: caring for grandchildren, partners or their own parents, their own health may force them to leave, or they can feel overwhelmed by increasingly computer-based workplaces. Older workers, particularly women, have also spoken of feeling a pressure to leave making way for younger people. They do not want to feel like a 'burden' or 'in the way' within organisations, and as such leave early to provide space for the next generation. Each of these issues can be rectified through increased collaboration with older workers, as well as better support networks which encourage flexible working patterns. In a lot of cases older workers are unaware of the potential different working types available to them within companies, due to a lack of information provided. Companies therefore must do better to make their workforce aware of these options which will help in the retention of employees. It would also be of value for employers to give increased in-person training focusing on IT literacy and computer skills, reducing the impact of intimidating online work.

- "I need to make way for younger workers."
- "My employers are doing me a favour letting me work part-time. I can't work even less."
- "In my workplace, several women have left to care for their own children or grandchildren... It's the women in the lowest paid roles that are moving out of the workplace."

### **Thinking about labour market participation, have certain groups of society and parts of the country been impacted more than others?**

Certain groups within Scotland have undeniably been more negatively affected by the Covid-19 pandemic than others, specifically women and children. Throughout the recent, tumultuous years women and children have lacked adequate financial and

social support, with this only likely to worsen due to the rising cost of living. Women have told us about the intense worry they live with daily because of this recent crisis, unable to afford food or bills. As an organisation which prioritises the wellbeing of women and children, we are highly concerned that not enough is currently being done to relieve the economic pressures that the winter will inevitably bring. Increased labour market participation by this group would of course guarantee an improved income, but unless workplaces become more welcoming and amenable to the needs of women social security provision must be improved.

Furthermore, the pandemic has deepened structural issues that prevent minority groups, such as ethnic minorities and LGBTQ+ communities, from accessing essential services. This lack of support has a knock-on effect on life quality: for example, through poor access to educational opportunities, individuals are less likely to enter the labour market at a higher level. However, an undercurrent of stigma and discrimination exists across sectors resulting in these groups having less opportunities, regardless of qualifications or skill. Therefore, it is essential that the Government strive to ensure equality across public services and limit the impact Covid-19 has had on those most marginalised, while also considering intersectional barriers.

- “I would say the barriers for this group [LGBTQ+] must be so much harder, especially with self-identification and underlying health issues.”
- “White is the default privilege setting in Western society, and white people hate admitting that. Take all the issues women have to deal with and multiply trauma and gaslighting for women of colour.”
- “There is an overrepresentation of minority groups in minimum wage jobs, even when they have the qualifications to get better paid jobs... And with the increasing inflation and living costs rising, their situation can quickly become very precarious.”

### **Have there been sectoral differences from economic inactivity – for example, have Health and Hospitality sectors been more exposed than, for example, Finance?**

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused sectoral differences across economic markets. The examples given - health, hospitality, and finance - are on opposite sides of a spectrum, which essentially values profitable and privatised companies above those which provide care and safety. The past two years have evidenced that such services were funded inadequately prior to the pandemic, with the tightened health and social care budgets resulting in an overburdened system. Meanwhile financial and energy sectors have seen huge profits, with staff receiving massive bonuses. We feel that the continued undervaluing of health and social services, as well as hospitality, is the result of structural sexism. These sectors are far more likely to have female staff members – 84% of social service workers in Scotland are women, and over three quarters of NHS Scotland staff are women. Women we have spoken to who work

within this sector feel unappreciated and taken for granted and explain that despite the essential work they carry out, they do not have wages which represent this.

- “On the coal face, we’re all working and we’re all trying to give that support and everything... we will always find opportunities to support and connect with people, but I think there needs to be an actual layer of resources that potentially we’re not getting at the moment, and that can only come from the government.”
- “The state has relied too long on the goodwill of workforces such as health workers, public servants, social care workers etc. The cost of living crisis is increasingly making it impossible to live on the low wages we reward them with.”
- “NHS pay is depleting each year, and we will ultimately lose skilled professionals as a result.”
- “I work in the NHS; for years cost of living pay awards were frozen, now they remain low, which ultimately results in skilled NHS being underpaid.”

### **What policies might encourage people to re-enter the labour market?**

Policies such as the roll-out of a 4-day working week across labour markets, may result in more women entering employment. Such a decision would enable women to balance their busy home lives with work life, ensuring good personal wellbeing. A further consideration to encourage more women to re-enter the labour market would be increased flexible working across sectors and job-shares; with these adjustments made women would have the opportunity to fit their work around caring responsibilities. Childcare provisions would also be welcomed by women, who have explained that the rising cost of childcare has been a major barrier to entering the labour market. We also believe that through improved paternity offerings, men would be empowered to enter the domestic labour sphere with more confidence – while giving women the freedom to work. In addition to these measures, ensuring that all people in Scotland have access to good quality education and opportunities for further training, through apprenticeships, college or university courses, gives women increased job security.

- “A 4-day working week needs to be implemented – so does pension rights and travel concessions for workers.”
- “It’s better to have people in work than not – flexible working methodologies are needed. A review of contracts of employment and a move to a 4-day week.”
- “Greater societal uptake of things like shared parental leave, child friendly employers and flexibility in working patterns would help support this.”

## **Conclusion**

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

- Workplaces must incorporate flexible work patterns, such as job sharing or 4-day working weeks, to encourage women to enter the labour market.
- Older women can be supported more through increased training opportunities and flexible working, empowering them to choose to stay within employment.
- Mental health provisions must be improved to support those who do not currently feel ready to re-enter the labour market.

The SWC is grateful for the opportunity to respond to the Scottish Government's consultation on **Road to Recovery: Impact of the Pandemic on the Scottish Labour Market**. 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.

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