

Scottish Women's Convention response
to the UK Government's Call for
Evidence on:

Parental Leave and Pay Review



August 2025

Premise

The UK Government have put in place four key objectives in relation to parental leave and pay, which they believe will improve the current system. These four objectives are:

- **Maternal health:** Support the physical and mental health, recovery and wellbeing of women during pregnancy and post-partum by giving them sufficient time away from work with an appropriate level of pay.
- **Economic growth through labour market participation:** Support economic growth by enabling more parents to stay in work and advance in their careers after starting a family, particularly to improve both women's labour market outcomes and the gender pay gap, reduce the 'motherhood penalty', and harness benefits for employers.
- **Best start in life:** Ensure sufficient resources and time away from work to support new and expectant parents' wellbeing and facilitate the best start in life for babies and young children, supporting health and development outcomes.
- **Childcare:** Support parents to make balanced childcare choices that work for their family situation, including enabling co-parenting, and provide flexibility to reflect the realities of modern work and childcare needs.

The following consultation asks respondents to consider the validity of these objectives, asking if additional aims are required. Responses will be assessed, with relevant revisions made to future parental leave and pay policy at a UK-level.



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

Do you think that the current parental leave and pay entitlements support the objectives, as set out in the Review Terms of Reference?

Providing sufficient time off work with adequate pay to support maternal health.

As a result of extensive investigation into women in Scotland's experiences of maternity services, the SWC can conclude that current parental leave and pay entitlements do not provide sufficient time off work to support maternal health.

Women in Scotland have expressed frustration surrounding the lack of effective financial remuneration when taking maternity leave. This has resulted in women returning to work quickly after birth, in the hopes of alleviating financial pressures. For those supporting children as a single parent, the return to work is difficult to avoid – with engrained assumptions surrounding familial make-up leaving single mothers disadvantaged. Single mothers often do not have family members to support them through their maternity journey, resulting in increased stress and anxiety.

- “...I see so many women who are limited from taking maternity leave because of the financial aspect.”
- “Personally, I had to take on another job; I worked full-time Monday to Friday, and then karaoke Saturdays and Sundays, just to be able to survive and pay my bills. When I went on maternity leave, I had to take a loan to pay the rest of my bills, I couldnae afford it. Then you're in that debt scenario, just to have a child.”

The poor pay available to women who take maternity leave is directly related to health levels – women experiencing poverty are more likely to experience pregnancy-related complications, including poor mental health and death¹. Poverty acts as a significant limiting factor for many women across Scotland, impacting their ability to eat healthily, exercise, and socialise. Each of these elements contributes to worsened physical and mental health for families, further entrenching poverty cycles. Improving outcomes for mothers should be a priority of any government. We would therefore conclude that increased investment is required with regards to maternity pay in the UK, with this directly improving outcomes for families.

- “...if you're poor, you have no access to the things that allow you to access opportunities around you; you're hungry; you're watching your children go without the essential things they need, that drags down your own health. The other way as well, is that because you're experiencing that, you don't have the opportunity to leave your children, knowing that they're well looked after, to go and get a job.”

¹ Jones, L et al. (2022). Understanding the Relationship Between Social Determinants of Health and Maternal Mortality. International Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, 67, pp. 1211-1227.

Support economic growth through labour market participation by enabling more parents to stay in work and advance their careers, including reducing the gender pay gap.

It can be estimated that the gender pay gap is largely fuelled through women's continued over-representation within part-time work, as well as the motherhood penalty. Organisations, such as Pregnant Then Screwed, have collected a wealth of evidence of the clear disadvantage pregnant women face within the labour market. They have estimated that 54,000 women a year lose their job after becoming pregnant and 390,000 working mothers experience discriminatory behaviour at work every year².

From speaking with women in Scotland, we can confidently state that discrimination remains rife. Women have explained that when returning from maternity leave, they face dismissal from superiors and are overlooked for promotions and training opportunities. When investigating women in Scotland's experiences within STEM sectors, we found this issue to be particularly prevalent. Women working and studying in male-dominated industries identified misogyny as a barrier to their professional advancement³.

- "...when you go on maternity leave, you're overlooked when you come back, it's that idea that you're going to go off again and have another kid."
- "...[misogynistic mentalities are] so demoralising, you just want to leave, because you don't want to stay in a job if you feel that there's no career progression, and someone else is getting that recognition."
- "...because of my age and gender, I will be discriminated against for job opportunities...they were actually hiring for a maternity leave role, and they didn't want to go with a woman, because they thought she would maybe go on maternity leave herself"

Women have suggested that improved parity between maternity leave and parental leave would positively impact their job prospects. However, poor take-up amongst superiors and men colleagues, limit this potential. They have instead suggested mandatory leave for men; a 'lead-by-example' approach from management; longer parental leave entitlements; and improved pay.

- "...because you know you can share the maternity leave, the actual uptake is still very poor. I think it's great we've got it in legislation that you can, but I think the actual cultural change for that to become a norm is still a long way away."
- "...in an ideal world, wouldn't it be great to have mandatory maternity and paternity leave that's exactly the same amount of time, so there's no bias?"
- "...men in my company, they do get paternity leave, but when they take a higher position, they tend not to take it."

² Pregnant Then Screwed. (2025). About Pregnant Then Screwed. Available at: <https://pregnantthenscrewed.com/about-maternity-discrimination/>

³ Scottish Women's Convention. (2023). STEMinism: What Needs to Change to Keep Women in STEM? Available at: <https://www.scottishwomensconvention.org/resources/stem-conference-report-2023.pdf>

Ensure adequate resources and leave for parents to facilitate the best start in life by supporting the healthy development of young children.

In Scotland, 24% of children reside in poverty, a figure which evidences significant government failure. SWC investigations into this area found that women's economic status, alongside poor governmental commitment, contribute to child poverty levels.

Women are more likely than men to be in low-paid employment, earning an average weekly wage of £529, compared to £709 for men⁴. This figure is largely driven by women's continued over-representation in part-time work, which can be attributed to domestic labour commitments. Women in low-paid work must then rely on Statutory Maternity Pay and Maternity Allowance. These amounts poorly sustain quality of life; after six weeks of maternity leave an individual's weekly earnings drops to just £184.03, only 46% of the minimum wage for a 35-hour week⁵. Low-income levels directly influence a parent's ability to facilitate a good start in life for young children; healthy food and exercise opportunities become a luxury, worsening overall wellbeing.

The poor provision of social security for new mothers furthers household poverty levels. Continuation of the two-child benefit limit retains 400,000 children in poverty⁶. Women have highlighted the two-child limit as severely damaging, preventing them from accessing adequate resources. While improved parental leave and pay would work to improve living conditions for many, 59% of families affected by the two-child limit have one parent working⁶.

Additionally, 55% of children with mums under the age of 25 live in relative poverty⁷. This is fuelled by age-based discrimination when accessing social security and pay; it has been estimated that a couple under 25 will lose £130.55 a month in social security compared to those over 25⁸. Therefore, we would argue that immediate social security revisions are required to effectively support households and enable a best start for all children in the UK.

- “Remove the two-child benefit cap!”
- “The system keeps women in poverty, particularly single women, single parents, they get limited support.”

Providing parents with the flexibility to make balanced childcare choices, including co-parenting.

⁴ Office for National Statistics. (2024). Employee Earnings in the UK: 2024. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/bulletins/annualsurveyofhoursandearnings/2024>

⁵ Maternity Action. (2024). The Real Facts about Maternity Pay. Available at: <https://maternityaction.org.uk/2024/10/the-real-facts-about-maternity-pay/>

⁶ Child Poverty Action Group. (2025). The Two-Child Limit: Our Position. Available at: <https://cpag.org.uk/policy-and-research/our-position/two-child-limit-our-position>

⁷ Scottish Government. (2022). Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/tackling-child-poverty-delivery-plan-fourth-year-progress-report-2021-22-focus-report-households-mothers-aged-25-under/pages/3/>

⁸ One Parent Families Scotland. (2025). End Young Parent Poverty. Available at: <https://opfs.org.uk/policy-and-campaigns/campaigns/end-young-parent-poverty/>

Childcare provision is commonly identified by women as a significant barrier to their full participation in the labour market. High costs and poor flexibility, work in conjunction to create a difficult childcare landscape in Scotland. While parents are entitled to 1140 hours of paid childcare each year, many women have highlighted that this policy has contributed to reduced flexibility through the increase in school-attached nurseries⁹. Public nurseries often have strict opening hours, preventing women from working hours out with the 9-5. The lack of flexibility results in many women paying for private childcare or taking time away from work to facilitate caring responsibilities.

Reduced flexibility can also be associated with the loss of childminders in Scotland; between 2014 and 2020, the childminding workforce declined by 28%¹⁰. Low childminder numbers disproportionately impact rural communities, with informal childcare remaining common. SWC investigations into rural women's experiences, have found that childcare acts as a significant barrier to their ability to work, and in some cases acts as a push factor, causing depopulation¹¹.

It can also be said that childcare costs have been increasing significantly over the past decade. In Scotland, parents pay 7% more for childcare for children aged two and under than in England, and there has been a 3.7% increase in childcare costs from 2024¹². Ultimately, the difficult childcare landscape does not facilitate women's employment, however current parental leave and pay further limits their ability to return to work.

- "...the reason why so many women are choosing to work part-time, for some, it is a positive choice, but for many, it's because they can't balance childcare and working."
- "...I've went without food to feed my family...I couldn't afford to feed my two kids, as well as pay nursery fees, so that I could actually go out and work."

Are there further/other objectives that you would like to see included as part of the Parental Leave and Pay Review?

Yes.

We propose that each of the objectives can be effectively met through the inclusion of anti-poverty commitments. The examples we have provided above clearly outline the struggles facing women across Scotland, with the issue of poverty underpinning each.

Poverty acts as a key driver of women's continued economic disadvantage, preventing many from living happy, healthy lives. It is commonly an underlying factor for poor levels of mental and physical health for many new mothers – women in economically deprived areas are more likely to have a first birth at a younger age, be overweight, have their baby

⁹ Scottish Women's Convention. (2024). What Should Childcare Look Like in Scotland? Available at: <https://www.scottishwomensconvention.org/resources/childcare-conference-report.pdf>

¹⁰ Scottish Government. (2022). Childminding Workforce Trends: Qualitative Research Report. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/childminding-workforce-trends-qualitative-research-report/documents/>

¹¹ Scottish Women's Convention. (2024). Isle of Skye and Kyle of Lochalsh. Available at: <https://www.scottishwomensconvention.org/resources/skye-and-kyle-report.pdf>

¹² Coram. (2025). Childcare Survey 2025. Available at: <https://www.coramfamilyandchildcare.org.uk/research/childcare-survey-2025/>

early, and have a low birthweight compared to those living in less deprived areas¹³. The impact of poverty on health, greatly impacts children, causing an increased risk of long-term health conditions and low life expectancy¹⁴.

- “...it’s this feedback between health inequalities and poverty. When you’re living in poverty, you have a propensity to be in diverse health challenges...the anxiety of not having your essentials, that’s going to drag down the quality of your health”

Poverty also prevents women from seeking education and training opportunities, limiting their time and energy to better their professional skillset. The current design of maternity pay reinforces poverty cycles by excluding those transitioning from education into work. These individuals, often younger women, are penalised for not meeting rigid eligibility thresholds, despite being in the most financially vulnerable stages of life.

High childcare costs and poor flexibility, further restricts women’s ability to fully participate within the UK economy. Poverty is commonly referred to as a cycle, maintaining many in its damaging clutches, restricting potential, and mounting the risk of poor life experiences. We would therefore argue that through a clear UK Government commitment to eliminate poverty in the UK, improved decision-making can occur, bettering the lives of those in need.

- “...if you’re experiencing health problems, then you’re less likely to get opportunities or be able to access those opportunities that would help you to get a better income and get out of poverty.”
- “...it was only in my 30s, [when my daughter] was like 12 and started to come home herself, I didn’t have to rely on childcare...we lived in poverty for the first 10 years, like fishing down the back of the couch for change, me not eating some days...and [the cost of] childcare played a big part in that.”

If you have any additional comments, evidence or suggestions that you have not had the opportunity to provide elsewhere, please do below.

We would highlight the continued disadvantage facing LGBT+ women in relation to parental leave and pay. 40% of LGB+ workers and 55% of trans workers have experienced conflict at work¹⁵. This data highlights a concerning employment picture for LGBT+ women.

Speaking with LGBT+ women in Scotland, issues surrounding parental leave and pay have arose. Current language used in policy remains heteronormative, dismissing the experiences of LGBT+ couples. This is exemplified in the use of the term ‘paternity’ rather than ‘parental’ in legislation. Non-biological mothers are entitled to only two-weeks of paternity leave in relation to birth and adoption. We believe that this two-week

¹³ Public Health Scotland. (2024). Births in Scotland. Available at: <https://publichealthscotland.scot/publications/births-in-scotland/births-in-scotland-year-ending-31-march-2024/>

¹⁴ Scottish Government. (2025). Understanding the Health Outcomes of Experiencing Poverty in the Early Years: Evidence Review. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/understanding-health-outcomes-experiencing-poverty-early-years-evidence-review/documents/>

¹⁵ CIPD. (2021). Inclusion at Work: Perspectives on LGBT+ Working Lives. Available at: https://www.cipd.org/globalassets/media/comms/news/as1inclusion-work-perspectives-report_tcm18-90359.pdf

period is insufficient and that the continued focus on a male/female relationship ignores LGBT+ women.

- “...I was always a bit miffed at folk calling it ‘paternity leave’. I’m pretty sure at the time the [HR] form I had to fill out said ‘mother and father’ too!”

Additionally, LGBT+ women have explained that the process of accessing paternity leave can be complicated. The combination of reduced understanding amongst HR staff and managers, prevents women from accessing parental rights. This can generally be accounted to continued discrimination within workplaces, as well as poor training. If the UK Government aims to effectively update current parental leave and pay policy, we would recommend changing language and attitudes to become LGBT+ inclusive.

- “I think employers can do more to make it clear how [parental leave] works and what different families look like, rather than the traditional male/female family.”

Conclusion

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

- Embed anti-poverty approaches across parental leave and pay policy.
- Improve parity between maternity leave and parental leave.
- Update parental leave and pay policy to reflect the experiences of LGBT+ women.

The SWC is grateful for the opportunity to respond to the UK Government's Call for Evidence on **Parental Leave and Pay Review**. 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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