

Scottish Women's Convention response
to the Women and Equalities
Committee's Call for Evidence on:

Equality at Work: Paternity and Shared Parental Leave



January 2025

Premise

In the UK, parents are entitled to shared parental leave and statutory shared parental leave, with up to 50 weeks of leave and up to 37 weeks of pay shared between them. This is applicable for parents having a baby, using a surrogate to have a baby, adopting a child, and fostering a child who they are planning to adopt. To find out more about this process, see the [UK Government website](#).

Despite the shared parental leave process being put in place to enable more women into the labour market, unequal division of childcare responsibilities remains a key driver of wider gender inequality and the gender pay gap. To understand the role shared parental leave plays in childcare dividing, the Women and Equalities Committee at the UK Parliament have carried out the following consultation.

After receiving all submissions, the Women and Equalities Committee will summarise responses, and combined with oral evidence, recommendations will be made regarding this subject.



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

To what extent has the statutory shared parental leave scheme given parents (including different sex and same sex parents, adoptive parents, and parents through surrogacy) choice and flexibility in how they share parenting responsibilities in the first year?

Women who have made use of shared parental leave have reported an improvement in flexibility. Through this scheme heterosexual parents can work together to build bonds with children and share domestic chores. The same can be said for women in same-sex relationships, with those consulted stating that the scheme had improved flexibility.

- “I think the leave does provide parents with the choice to be flexible”

However, with take-up remaining low, this increased flexibility has not been enjoyed by the majority of parents in Scotland. Women remain the general care providers across Scottish households, sacrificing careers and opportunities. In November 2024, the SWC embarked on a project to understand women in Scotland's experiences of poverty, finding that caring responsibilities were often reported as barriers to employment¹. Women also explained that they were often under incredible strain to balance care alongside employment, worsening overall wellbeing. While shared parental leave can provide relief from these issues, low participation rates lessen the impact of the policy. A wider focus must be taken, which aims to reassess gender stereotypes across society, enabling men to become more involved in care work.

What have been the longer-term equality impacts of the scheme, for example on equal sharing of responsibilities for children as they grow up and wider domestic responsibilities?

It can be said that men have become more involved within the home, with this change being attributed to the reduction in the nuclear family model and changes in work habits. Yet, women continue to carry out the majority of caring responsibilities within the home: the National Centre for Social Research found that 63% of women felt that they were doing more than their 'fair share' of household labour compared to 22% of men². Women regularly organise the needs of households, taking on significant levels of emotional labour, alongside professional tasks. These responsibilities vary from childcare, caring for elderly and/or disabled relatives and domestic chores, to general household management. The combination of these activities, alongside professional careers, is of great difficulty for many, pushing women into part-time, low-paid employment. It can therefore be argued that the shared parental leave scheme has had little impact, with domestic labour levels remaining unequal. However, we remain

¹ Scottish Women's Convention. (2024). The Impact of Poverty on Women. Available at: <https://www.scottishwomensconvention.org/resources/poverty-full-report-2024.pdf>

² National Centre for Social Research. (2023). BSA 40: Gender Roles. Available at: <https://natcen.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2023-09/BSA%2040%20Gender%20roles.pdf>

hopeful that schemes, such as shared parental leave, will facilitate change, to enable women's improved participation in the workplace.

What have been the labour market impacts of the scheme, particularly for women?

When discussing maternity leave with women in Scotland, conversations regularly turn to childcare. Despite women viewing shared parental leave positively, few have experienced the benefits of such a scheme. Instead, women regularly manage childcare responsibilities independently, forced to relinquish work to manage household tasks. This has been a growing issue in recent years, with childcare costs increasing, alongside a reduction in provision.

While we welcome the focus on shared parental leave, childcare provision must be central to debates. In Scotland, the Scottish Government provide 1140 hours of free childcare for all three- and four-year-olds, and some qualifying under three's, equating to roughly 30 hours per week during term time. The SWC carried out direct work on this topic in February 2024, finding that current free childcare offerings are insufficient to enable women's re-entrance into the employment market³. Women also stated that as childcare has moved further into the public sector, services have lost flexibility, with drop-off and pick-up times becoming rigid. They explained that this had prevented them from taking on full-time hours and, in some cases, work more generally.

- "Access to affordable and flexible childcare would be great. I'm having to pay upfront for childcare, sometimes a month in advance."
- "For me, it was the flexibility...childcare generally opened at 8:30am and shut at...5:50pm...so, you have to get from your job at the other end of the city to there before they close."

Additionally, women residing in rural Scotland have explained that childcare is almost "non-existent". When on the Isle of Skye, the SWC found that the only childcare available was that provided through local authority led nurseries and schools, with childminders completely lacking⁴. There has been a significant reduction in childminders across Scotland, negatively impacting women's employment opportunities. Without comprehensive wraparound care, parents are prevented from re-entering workplaces. In heterosexual relationships, women are then more likely to take on childcare, enabling partners to advance in their careers. We would recommend increased focus on childcare as a driver of poor uptake of shared parental leave, with costs and availability preventing parents from sharing caring responsibilities.

³ Scottish Women's Convention. (2024). What Should Childcare Look Like in Scotland? Available at: <https://www.scottishwomensconvention.org/resources/childcare-conference-report.pdf>

⁴ Scottish Women's Convention. (2024). Isle of Skye and Kyle of Lochalsh. Available at: <https://www.scottishwomensconvention.org/resources/skye-and-kyle-report.pdf>

- “My main thing is childcare; it’s definitely a problem. I mean for me, my wee boy is a wee bit older now, but we don’t even have afterschool care...my work has become a split shift”
- “...there’s no afterschool care, no childminders, there’s literally nothing!”

Why has take up of statutory shared parental leave been low and what could be done to increase take up?

Ultimately, statutory parental leave rates remain low as a result of wide-reaching stereotypes, which limit men from actively engaging in family life. Women have stated that engrained gender norms make it difficult for men to ask for leave, with assumptions made surrounding their capacity and interest in childcare. These norms significantly impact women, leaving many mothers with little choice but to use full maternity leave allowances. It is during this time away from work that the gender pay gap begins to widen, with women overlooked for promotions and opportunities.

- “I still don’t think there is enough awareness of it [shared parental leave] though; how it works, how the payment works, and there is stigma around male colleagues asking for time off – this still very much falls traditionally on women.”

To counteract this issue, women believed a wider cultural change was required, one which could be facilitated through improved advertisement of shared parental leave in workplaces. They explained that if awareness of shared parental leave was increased and enabled through a positive, non-discriminatory method, men would be more empowered to take leave. It was viewed that a ‘lead by example’ approach should be elected, with managerial staff using shared leave entitlement. This would likely positively impact women, with time away to care for children becoming normalised across hierarchal workplace systems.

- “I also think employers should lead by example and encourage senior members of staff to take [shared parental] leave.”
- “I mean men, in my company, they do get a paternity leave, but when they take a higher position, they tend not to take it.”

Furthermore, women who had made use of the scheme pointed to complicated bureaucratic processes and misinformation as a significant barrier. They explained that information about shared parental leave is not freely available, with multiple steps adding layers of confusion. This confusion could also be shared with employers themselves, with HR departments and managers unable to answer questions relating to shared parental leave. Women proposed increased training for all staff surrounding shared parental leave, alongside awareness campaigns.

- “My previous employer, another council, had a standalone policy, with enhanced pay information detailed, none of that was available without emailing 10 different people, and it still wasn’t very clear. The forms to complete are complicated and

some HR colleagues are unsure, which is a little off-putting when you already have loads to think about.”

- “Perhaps more can be done around staff training...I think if we can encourage managers to have conversations...then that would make a safer more approachable environment for male colleagues to reply, rather than finding the courage to ask.”

How can inequalities in take up of shared parental leave, including by ethnicity, income, qualification level and occupational status, be addressed?

Current maternity and paternity models are inherently flawed, focusing on a male-breadwinner relationship. This approach often considers maternity leave as an inconvenience to be managed across workplaces, detrimentally impacting the livelihoods and prospects of women. Shared parental leave has been shown to positively impact baby and parent, increasing health and wellbeing scores⁵. We should therefore, as a country, be encouraging all parents to utilise their parental leave entitlements. As such, women have stated that parental leave should become mandatory for both parents. While this may be viewed as radical, women remain an untapped resource of potential, with many careers cut short. Through the enforcement of such a policy, an equal footing can be established between those who bear children and those who do not, positively impacting women's employment stance.

- “...in an ideal world, wouldn't it be great to have mandatory maternity and paternity leave, that's the exact same amount of time...it would take away that bias and make it an even playing field when you're looking at progress, because at the moment, women are tending to take out more time from their career, of which I think is stopping them from getting to those higher managerial levels.”
- “Mandatory! [Parental leave] has to be mandatory; it has to be enforced”

We have also consulted with women in same-sex relationships, finding that inequalities remain when accessing shared parental leave. It was stated that workplaces retain a heteronormative mindset, overlooking the needs of gay women. They explained that language and outdated forms resulted in a sense of frustration, adding additional negative emotions during a stressful period. Those in same sex relationships highlighted that improved training for managers would assist in rectifying this issue, stating that this must be developed alongside LGBT+ parents, to ensure all family models are considered.

- “I think employers can do more to make it clear how [shared parental leave] works and what different families look like – rather than your traditional

⁵ Cardenas, S. I. et al. (2021). Associations Between Paid Paternity Leave and Parental Mental Health Across the Transition to Parenthood: Evidence from a Repeated-Measure Study of First-Time Parents in California. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 30, pp. 3080-3094.

male/female family...I think language around this can change...I'm pretty sure at the time, the form said mother and father”

Additionally, it has been noted that those working in low-paid employment, are less likely to use shared parental leave⁶. Many part-time workplaces provide few benefits for workers, resulting in poor awareness of such policies. Also, with sectors such as retail and hospitality struggling to achieve profitability in the current climate, it is highly unlikely that these companies will actively promote such a policy. Therefore, the Government must work to ensure private entities provide comprehensive, fair employment benefits for employees, but more importantly, that these companies are empowering staff to make use of such policies. The Government must outline clear processes to be taken in all workplaces, including accountability mechanisms which evidence progress.

⁶ Bendall, C and Mitchell, G. (2023). The Shared Parental Leave Framework: Failing to Fit Working-Class Families. *International Journal of Discrimination and the Law*, 23(4), pp. 299-320.

Conclusion

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

- Apply mandatory requirements on shared parental leave, to create equity between men and women in the workplace.
- Recognise inadequate childcare as a driver of poor shared parental leave uptake and work to rectify this issue.
- Ensure that all organisations consider different family models throughout the development of shared parental leave guidance.

The SWC is grateful for the opportunity to respond to the Women and Equalities Committee's Call for Evidence on **Equality at Work: Paternity and Shared Parental Leave**. 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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