

**Scottish Women's Convention response to:  
The Scottish Parliament Economy, Energy and Fair Work Committee:  
Covid-19: Economic Impact on Young People  
July 2020**

**Introduction**

This specific consultation focuses on the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people. This is part of the Economy, Energy and Fair Work Committee's ongoing inquiry on the impact of COVID-19 on Scotland's economy, including businesses and workers.

**The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC)**

The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC) is funded to engage with women throughout Scotland in order that their views might influence public policy. The SWC uses the views of women to respond to a variety of Parliamentary, Governmental and organisational consultation papers at both a Scottish and UK level.

The Scottish Women's Convention engages with women using numerous communication channels including Roadshow events, Thematic Conferences and regional contact groups. This submission provides the views of women and reflects their opinions and experiences in a number of key areas relevant to women's equality.

The SWC is currently engaging with women through digital roadshows, online surveys, asking women to comment by email and by telephoning those who want to talk. We are also using our wide network to ask women to collate views in their local communities and forward these to us on a regular basis. We are continuing to review innovative ways of engaging with women throughout Scotland using whichever medium is appropriate to them.

## How can we ensure that young people have the skills needed to promote economic recovery and to ensure that they gain/remain in employment?

The disproportionate impact of employment opportunities for young people has become a pressing issue in the last number of years. For young women, particularly those who present with other intersectional characteristics, this can throw up additional obstacles due to societal and structural inequality.

This has become more profound in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008. An exponential rise in the precarity and under valuation of the work that much of Scotland's youth undertake has occurred as they move into the labour market. Such a system has seen many young women sequestered into low paying roles in certain industries which often offer little opportunity for upskilling or retraining.

The insecure nature of such work means a large proportion of young women have found themselves facing the current crisis with little to no means of security in terms of employment and loss of the income they did rely on for essential living. Additionally, there are acute concerns regarding young women and the detrimental and disproportionate impact that the pandemic and subsequent lockdown has had and will continue to have on them in all areas of life. With less opportunities for secure job creation and investment, this poses a very real threat for many young people.

A refocusing on the ways in which young women enter and remain in the labour market gives the opportunity to offset many of the most pressing issues that have been exacerbated by the current crisis. A commitment to investment in skills development which prioritises secure and well-paid jobs and a move away from temporary and gig economy contracts for young women is needed. Promotion of economic recovery for young women should include:

- A revaluation of jobs within sectors which have consistently been overlooked and undervalued within society. The social care sector, for instance, should be looked upon as a key site of career development for those entering the labour market. Opportunities to promote this as a skilled career path with heightened publicity and targeted career drives should be considered a priority.
- Committing to work in tandem with particular sectors, such as hospitality and retail, to provide targeted funding for training opportunities which can be worked alongside current employment.
- Committing to a digital skills drive that focuses on the pandemic's impact on those with little or no access to technology during the current lockdown.
- Ensuring all training and upskilling commitments adhere to robust equal representation measures.
- Providing a wider range of bursaries and scholarship options for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to be able to study long term career goals.
- Additional educational funding for careers advisors in schools who can identify gaps in subject choices and cater to skills advice and opportunities for all students.
- Provision of funding on a sector by sector basis to identify skills gaps in the workforce which can be offset by Government funding for young people to upskill whilst in their current profession.

**How can employers (including the public sector) be encouraged to employ young people? What levers does the Scottish Government have to incentivise employers to employ young people?**

One of the starkest impacts on workers due to the pandemic is the widescale disproportionate effect of the closure of workplaces regarded as non-essential, particularly in the retail and hospitality sectors. Young women make up the majority of staff in many of the most affected industries and tend to be clustered at the very bottom of the pay scale. With unemployment levels set to rise further, this will leave many of these individuals significantly worse off.

Many young women have anecdotally noted the tension within the employment and labour market opportunities they are afforded. There is often seen to be a major divergence whereby young women find themselves only able to take up low paying, insecure forms of work. This then needs a myriad of skills, experience and educational degrees just to be able to find some form of secure employment paying above the bare minimum. Extra burdens such as caring responsibilities and gender streaming into certain job roles place additional obstacles in young women's way. Responses targeted towards young people's employment should look to include:

- Targeted interventions for industries where young women dominate such as the services and hospitality industries to ensure long term solutions.
- Committing to additional funding for employment and advice services for those in insecure work whereby employers may threaten to use the current situation as leverage to cut terms and conditions accordingly.
- The expansion of Fair Work Principles to cater specifically to youth employment opportunities.
- Deploying a sector by sector consultative approach to understand the unequal impact of unemployment and underemployment for young women.
- Committing to continue working with businesses and trade unions to further promote the real living wage across all sectors.
- Committing to implementing the delayed Job Start Payment as a priority for young people.
- Ensuring stringent procurement procedures that are subject to continuous monitoring and analysis within the public sector. This should include working with employers, employees, and trade unions to identify where principles of fair work have fallen behind and what can be done to remedy this.
- Expansion of graduate programmes within the public sector.
- Ensuring that where possible the Scottish Government and local authorities commit to raising wages in real terms to account for inflation.
- Additional funding for those where low literacy or language barriers may be a hindrance.

### What is the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on graduate recruitment?

Ongoing socio-economic inequality places a disproportionate burden in many young people's ways when exiting university for a chosen career path. Unpaid internships and work experience as well as family connections often work against many young women whose career prospects suffer as a result.

The current situation has galvanised this issue with lockdown requirements seeing many, particularly those with caring responsibilities, facing additional pressures. This can include taking on caring roles as a result of the loss of services during lockdown.

These issues coupled with the inequality gap has the potential to see many young women losing out on much graduate recruitment. For many, this will mean reliance on casual jobs as they struggle to find graduate work. Many workplaces suffering from the effects of the pandemic and lockdown restrictions will refocus much of their energy on keeping their own staff. Whilst employee retention is clearly the right move, the lack of investment and job growth means less opportunities for graduates entering designated career paths.

### Do you agree that a Scottish Jobs Guarantee Scheme is needed? How effective would it be in addressing the potential scarring effect of the crisis on the lives of young people? What practical steps and resources would be needed to implement it?

Whilst many young women have welcomed the announcement of the UK-wide Jobs Guarantee Scheme, there are certain restrictions within it that may leave it open to acting as a simple short-term solution. The current six-month limit of the initiative threatens to keep young people in a cycle of precarious employment as a temporary measure to much bigger issues. This, coupled with lower national minimum wage payments, threatens to push younger people into a normalised structure of low paid and temporary work with little collective bargaining rights.

There is a very real threat that without clear safeguards, many young women will be hired short term on subsidised wages and then let go when initiatives end. The current UK Job Retention Scheme, for instance, has seen a vast number of younger people disproportionately reliant on it to get by. The winding down of such policies with no permanent safeguards will see this cohort suffer even worse in future with long term unemployment a very real threat. Strategies to aid young people's prospects need to be able to show a long-term strategy which seeks to invest in secure employment and skills opportunities. Recommendations for a Scottish Jobs Guarantee Scheme would include:

- Ensuring any initiative committed to paying younger individuals the same as those over 25 years of age for equal work.
- Adopting safeguards to ensure businesses partaking in any new Scheme can access extra support and initiatives to keep staff on a permanent basis such as a gradual winding down of the policy.
- Using adequate procedures and Fair Work Principles as a means of safeguarding those taking part in such an initiative from being pushed into insecure temporary positions with no safety net by businesses.

- Placing a priority on emerging markets which prioritise digital skills and the green economy to provide secure and well-paid jobs in tandem with upskilling of young people.
- Ensuring equal representation within any such initiative with provisions laid out on a sector by sector basis.
- Accounting for mitigation for younger women participating in such schemes who may be more at risk and must shield in the event of a second wave of COVID-19.

### How can equal opportunities for young people be promoted during the crisis?

Many young women, particularly those with intersectional characteristics, have spoken of the distinct lack of support targeted towards their specific needs. The onset of the pandemic has left little room for manoeuvre in many of the ways that opportunities are afforded to young people. With the very real threat of a second wave of COVID-19 cases during the Winter months, robust contingency planning must look ahead and take a strategic approach as to the effects on this cohort.

For young women, particularly those living away from local connections and familial bonds, much help may be unavailable except at a bare minimum level leaving them at high risk. This in combination with burgeoning mental health issues poses a significant threat. Fears around the future coupled with bearing the ongoing economic and employment consequences of the pandemic has left many young women with much anxiety.

Recommendations would include:

- Ensuring robust consultation procedures are undertaken on an ongoing basis in terms of the UK's withdrawal from the EU and the impact this will have on young people and employment and educational opportunities.
- Ensuring targeted funding and interventions are prioritised for intersectional characteristics that recognises the additional barriers that they may have in their way.
- Ensuring opportunities, education, and potential career paths for women, particularly BAME, disabled women, and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds are further promoted.

### How can we ensure that young people have sufficient means to meet the cost of living during the crisis?

Many young women have noted the effect that the current situation has had in terms of the lack of strong economic safeguards for their generation. There is a need for innovative solutions that cater to young person's pressing issues such as wage stagnation and the housing crisis. Initiatives such as Universal Basic Income has been building momentum in terms of understanding how to shore up the income inequality that has been illustrated by the pandemic. Strategies such as this which attribute a

non means-tested sum on a universal basis would remove many additional burdens. This would also act to stop many young people with little to no income falling through the cracks.

The lack of social housing, for instance, has seen an upsurge in younger women within the private rental sector with few safeguards. Rent arrears and the threat of eviction is a very real threat for many who have already begun to see debt accumulate. Much of the legislation laid to offset the worst impacts of the pandemic has simply acted as a delay to many of these pressing issues. Solutions endowed on a universal basis may provide some form of reprieve rather than a temporary fix to such societal problems.

**In this time of unprecedented Government support for business, how can the Scottish Government ensure its “fair work first” principles are adhered to in terms of youth employment opportunities?**

Young women are broadly supportive of the Scottish Government’s initiatives including the Fair Work First Principles, particularly the commitment to the Real Living Wage. With the current situation, this should be looked upon as an opportunity to expand on such principles in a way that tailors specifically to the issues that young women face. This would include:

- Ensuring principles are adapted to fully consider and account for the impact on mental health for younger women in the workplace during the current pandemic.
- Using funding commitments such as the Workplace Equality Fund as an active way to incentivise employers to target young women into more employment opportunities.
- Working with all sectors and trade unions to understand the ongoing impacts of the crisis and developing support regarding gendered and other intersectional impacts of youth employment opportunities.

## Conclusion

The SWC is grateful for the opportunity to respond to the Scottish Parliament Economy, Energy and Fair Work Committee's call for evidence regarding the current COVID-19 pandemic and the impact on young women. As an organisation, we will continue to work with women from across Scotland to gather voices and experiences relating to the pandemic and the effect of this on equality at both a reserved and devolved level.

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