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Scotland's futures: Women and care

This briefing is part of a series that sets out how power and responsibility to tackle critical gender equality issues is divided between Holyrood and Westminster. It is part of Engender's contribution to the independence referendum debate.

Women's unpaid care and reproductive work props up the so-called 'real' economy. Women still provide the majority of unpaid childcare in Scotland, and women comprise 62% of carers for disabled people, elderly people and people with long-term conditions within the home and community.

The overwhelmingly female workforce in the formal care economy commands low wages, and public investment in training and development is low. Unpaid care work is not captured by our economic models or counted as productive. Culturally, all care work is significantly undervalued in Scotland.

Childcare

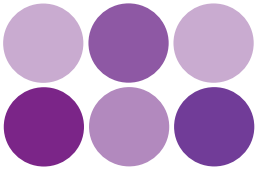
Lack of affordable, quality childcare remains the most immediate barrier to the labour market for women. In particular, childcare issues prevent women from accessing secure, well-paid jobs in the formal labour market and thus underpin the gender pay gap. International evidence suggests a strong link between universal access to childcare and gender equality, linking women and children with benefits to the economy.

In Scotland and the UK the understanding that investment in childcare benefits the whole of society is yet to be widely shared. Childcare in Scotland is more expensive than anywhere else in the UK and among the most expensive in Europe. Feminist economists understand childcare as vital 'infrastructure' that enables parents to access paid work, in the same way as roads or public transport. This thinking is gaining traction within Scottish politics, including amongst senior politicians and within Scottish Government policy documents.

Carers

There are an estimated 650,000 unpaid carers in Scotland, of whom around 62% are women (Census 2001). Female carers' earning potential is undermined significantly; women are twice as likely to be in receipt of Carers' Allowance as men.





Scotland's strategy *Caring Together* acknowledges the gender profile of carers and the need to mainstream equalities issues. Areas of focus within the strategy are highly gendered, including access to services and resources, financial exclusion, and the skills and employability needs of carers. However, gender dimensions of these key issues are not raised, nor is gender mentioned in the implementation plan or latest annual progress report.

What has happened since devolution?

Childcare is devolved to Scotland, but the debate around expanding provision and rethinking childcare as infrastructure is a very recent development. Proposals for substantial shifts in childcare have formed part of the independence referendum debate.

- The Scottish Government white paper on independence includes proposals for a universal childcare system. It represents a significant expansion in provision, but the maximum proposed allowance is equivalent to the primary school day and additional “wraparound” care would therefore be needed to enable two parents to work full-time.
- The Scottish Labour party ‘red paper’ recognises the need for flexible and affordable childcare and identifies that such investment will benefit the economy.
- The UK Government’s ‘Scotland analysis paper’ on Work and Pensions highlights childcare support for tax-payers under Universal Credit.

Power and responsibility

- Scottish Government has control over social services, including childcare.
- Power over childcare policy has been contested, with Scottish Government arguing delivery of its ambition is holistic and requires full economic powers.
- Social security, including the formulation of welfare benefits such as Employment and Support Allowance and Carers’ Allowance, is reserved to Westminster.

Power and responsibility rest with: Westminster and Scottish Government