

Engender submission of evidence to the Scottish Parliament Social Justice and Social Security Committee's Inquiry into 'Addressing child poverty through parental employment'

5th April 2023

1. INTRODUCTION

Engender is Scotland's feminist policy and advocacy organisation. We work to realise a Scotland where women and men have equal access to power, resources, rights and safety. We work across Scottish, UK and International policymaking to ensure that systematic inequality between women and men is made visible and addressed.

2. WHAT CHANGES TO CHILDCARE PROVISION IN SCOTLAND COULD HAVE THE GREATEST IMPACT ON CHILD POVERTY?

Engender welcomes the Social Justice and Social Security Committee's inquiry into addressing child poverty through parental employment. It is positive that the Committee have recognised the fundamental link between childcare provision and poverty alleviation, by understanding childcare as vital 'infrastructure' that enables parents to access paid work, in the same way as roads or public transport.

We have set out a number of factors which the Committee should consider when assessing which changes to childcare provision will have the greatest impact on poverty in Scotland.

2.1 Make the link between gender inequality, women's poverty and child poverty explicit, and design integrated solutions

We strongly encourage the Committee to frame the task of tackling child poverty as a highly gendered issue that requires the tackling of women's poverty when considering the findings of this inquiry. It is only by focusing on the gendered impact of poverty that the root causes of child poverty can be understood and effective policy solutions created. Women are the main managers of family poverty, and this is amplified by the inequality women face in the labour market, the inaccessible and often unclear access to services, and diminishing and inadequate financial support and social security for those not currently in paid work.

Reductions in child poverty in Scotland have continually stalled because of a fundamental and consistent failure to gender child poverty issues. Despite progress, the existing cultural and social norms of ‘family’ and ‘parenthood’ remain highly gendered and unequal across most of Scottish society. Failure to acknowledge the relationship between child poverty and gender inequality, brought about by the lack of value given to women’s social and reproductive roles and in employment, undermines strategies for change.

Childcare provision is an area that needs to be recognised as profoundly gendered in both the workforce who provide it and the parents and carers who are most impacted by its delivery. Any expansion of affordable or free childcare would have a significant impact on women’s poverty and, as a result, child poverty.

2.2 Recommend a universal funded childcare entitlement of 50 hours per week for children aged six months and above that is free at the point of use for all families

We fully support the position of Close the Gap and One Parent Families Scotland that the Committee should adopt their recommendation of a universal funded entitlement of 50 hours per week for children aged six months and above that is free at the point of use for all families. This call has also been supported by the First Minister’s National Advisory Council on Women and Girls; the Poverty and Inequality Commission; the Social Renewal Advisory Board; Poverty Alliance; and the Child Poverty Action Group.

The extension of the funded entitlement would benefit families in Scotland in a number of ways, including tackling in-work poverty by enabling women to work additional hours; ensuring eligibility criteria and stigma do not create barriers to uptake; advancing women’s equality; and reducing women’s risk of poverty in the longer-term.

2.3 Understand the gendered dynamics of in-work poverty and precarious work and ensure childcare policies are developed alongside action to address these challenges

If a primary aim of childcare provision is to support parents into employment who are not undertaking paid work – often the female caregiver – it is crucial to also consider the dynamics and prevalence of in-work poverty. It is true that ‘work offers a sustainable route out of poverty for many families and has a strong role to play in a balanced approach to tackling poverty’ – but the quality and pay associated with that work must be significantly improved for women who are primary caregivers and often carry a disproportionate amount of unpaid caring and domestic work for their households.

Changing the provision of childcare must be done in tandem with action to tackle the quality and security of jobs available to parents in Scotland. It is well

established that women are more likely to be impacted by in-work poverty, as they are the majority of those in temporary work and on zero-hours contracts in Scotland. This means that they are disproportionately exposed to risks of reduced hours, unemployment or underemployment associated with precarious work. Improving childcare provision must not result in pushing more women into in-work poverty.

This is especially important when understanding the challenges to the labour market for women who are parents and experience intersecting inequalities. For example, Black and minority ethnic women (BME) and disabled women are more likely to be in in-work poverty than white women and non-disabled women. Changing the provision of childcare must be done in tandem with action to tackle the quality and security of jobs available to parents in Scotland.

2.4 Reflect the current reality of caring responsibilities within families by recognising the value of Scotland's Care Economy when shaping changes to childcare provision

Supporting parents into paid work is one of the key routes towards addressing poverty. However, policy development in this area needs to reflect the realities of caring responsibilities within families and support parents of all genders to be able to care for their children and access financial support to do so. Caring work is chronically undervalued in Scotland, and whether being delivered by a paid childcare worker or as an assumed part of the unpaid burden of women's work, government policy needs to consider and respond to the 'care economy' and how it currently functions alongside the formal labour market more fully.

Survey data from Carers UK suggested that in 2021 there may now be as many as 1.1 million unpaid carers in Scotland, 61 per cent of which are women. In 2018, 85 per cent of people aged 16-64 who were 'inactive' economically due to caring were women. Considering the evidence around women's unpaid work is the first step to designing adequate childcare and care services.

From recent research from the Scottish Women's Budget Group (SWBG),¹ we know that the provision and availability of childcare continues to be a significant issue. In June 2022, they reported that: 'The commitment to provide 1140 hours of childcare to over-threes helps many women to undertake paid work and addresses the barrier this can create for many. However, the lack of capacity in some areas, a lack of flexibility in how this is provided and a lack of wrap-around care leaves many gaps that are often filled by other women providing unpaid care.'

¹ SWBG (2022) 'Women's experiences of childcare shared through our survey' Scottish Women's Budget Group. Available at: <https://www.swbg.org.uk/news/blog/womens-experiences-of-childcare-shared-through-our-survey/>.

2.5 Value the workforce delivering childcare

We ask that the Committee actively consider the paid workforce who make up the childcare and early years sector. Any changes to childcare provision must include appropriately valuing and paying the mostly female workforce who deliver childcare in Scotland. This is far from being realised in Scotland. The Scottish Trades Union Congress reported that in 2017, of over 200,000 staff employed in the social care sector, 83 per cent were women. The Fair Work Convention's 2019 report on working conditions in the sector found that 13 per cent of that workforce works over 50 hours a week; 20 per cent of the workforce are not on permanent contracts; 15 per cent of social care workers work unpaid overtime; 11 per cent of the workforce are on zero hours contracts; and that the average hourly pay was £9.79.

3. WHAT IMPROVEMENTS TO PUBLIC TRANSPORT COULD SUPPORT PARENTS?

Weaknesses in the design of Scotland's public transport system create significant cost and time implications for women, which are being exacerbated by the rising cost of living and transport fares. The current system is not compatible with the needs of women, particularly those caring for children and disabled people - despite the fact women make up the majority of public transport users.

Women in Scotland take on a higher share of unpaid caring responsibilities and make up the majority of part-time workers. Balancing these responsibilities causes women to take more complex and frequent journeys across towns and cities throughout the day. However, our public transport systems are based on an outdated male breadwinner model that largely serves commuters working 9-5 and travelling between suburbs and urban centres. This system benefits men more than women, who instead need an integrated system of orbital transport routes available at flexible times of the day.

Moreover, fears about safety affect women's decisions about travelling on public transport. Evidence suggests that public transport is a "hotspot" for gendered abuse and sexual harassment. Their fears are further exacerbated by unstaffed services and termini, as well as services that are poorly connected. These are concerns for women travelling alone at night and have even caused some women to decline job opportunities, including night shifts which pay more, as a result.

Transport Scotland's recent 2023 report, *'Women's and girls' views and experiences of personal safety when using public transport,'* provides further detail.²

² Orr K S, Smith E W, Barry M and Sharp L (2023) Summary Report: Women's and girls views and experiences of personal safety when using public transport. Transport Scotland. Available at:

The Scottish Trades Union Congress have also been delivering a ‘Safe Home’ campaign,³ which was launched following a women in leadership course where workers from hospitality, fast food and the retail sector shared their own frightening experiences of getting home after a late shift. Experiences such as sexual assault, verbal harassment, violence and stalking were cited as common, and this had a knock-on impact in other areas of the worker’s life, often resulting in stress and anxiety.

The evidence of how public transport impacts women’s ability to access work demonstrates the need for a gender mainstreaming approach to be applied throughout all transport planning. It is only by considering the gender inequality women face accessing public transport that there can be better access to economic opportunities in the labour market for parents. Public transport must be made easily accessible and safe for women users, including those balancing caring responsibilities and employment in their daily lives. This is especially important for lone parents, part-time workers, and women caring for young children and disabled people.

We also would encourage Committee members to look at barriers to active travel, alongside public transport, for women who care for children.⁴

4. WHAT CAN THE SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT DO TO INCREASE THE SUPPLY OF WELL-PAID, SECURE EMPLOYMENT THAT WORKS FOR PARENTS?

As stated, we ask that the Committee explicitly recognise the gendered nature of access to employment for parents, with women making up the majority of parents who are not engaged in well-paid, secure employment.

We strongly encourage the Committee to consider the response to this inquiry submitted by Close the Gap, who specialise in developing policy solutions in Scotland to improve women’s participation in the labour market. We fully support Close the Gap’s positions on how to support women into the labour market, the role employers have in improving conditions, pay and flexibility and the solutions needed to remove the significant barriers to women accessing education and training, in order to enter higher paying labour market sectors.

<https://www.transport.gov.scot/publication/summary-report-womens-and-girls-views-and-experiences-of-personal-safety-when-using-public-transport/>.

³ NACWG (2023) Get Home Safe: Safe Home Campaign Case Study. National Advisory Council on Women and Girls. Available at: <https://www.generationequal.scot/get-home-safe-safe-home-campaign/>.

⁴ Sustrans (2018) Exploring gender and active travel. Sustrans. Available here: <https://www.sustrans.org.uk/our-blog/research/all-themes/all/exploring-gender-and-active-travel>.

We also encourage the Committee to consider the intersectional experiences of women when approaching questions on labour market participation by parents. For example, we know that disabled women experience gendered labour market inequalities, such as lack of access to childcare and a lack of flexible working, in addition to the range of barriers faced by all disabled people in the labour market, including discrimination, inaccessible workplaces and a lack of employer support.

We also direct the committee to the evidence and expertise of One Parent Families Scotland, who have extensive evidence that lone parents are more severely impacted by poverty, with the majority of lone parent households being headed by women at 92 per cent. The needs of lone parents must be actively included in any policy recommendations on employment resulting from the inquiry.

5. WHAT COULD THE SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT PRIORITISE TO HELP PARENTS INTO WORK AND BETTER PAID JOBS?

Work by Close the Gap, Scotland's expert policy advocacy organisation working on women's labour market participation, provides a comprehensive analysis of women's experience in the labour market, including that women are more likely to work in part-time roles at lower pay, are a higher and increasing proportion of workers on zero-hours contracts, and are more likely to be 'second earner' in opposite sex couples. All of these features of women's labour market participation are a product of gendered assumptions about women's roles and preferences that are reinforced by the way in which our society has organised work and domestic life.

6. IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE YOU WOULD LIKE TO TELL US?

6.1 Intersectional gender analysis must underpin all approaches to tackling child poverty

The Committee must look at the intersectional inequality that different groups of women face in terms of financial security and the impact of the current cost of living crisis when exploring the alleviation of child poverty in Scotland. As we have stated, women make up the majority of parents carrying out unpaid childcare and women are more likely to be balancing this with insecure and precarious work or be unable to take up paid work as a result.

We know that women that experience intersecting forms of discrimination and oppression are denied equal access to resources, power and safety. These communities of women will be most acutely affected by poverty, and therefore their children are most at risk of child poverty. However, there are large evidence gaps regarding minoritised women's experiences and needs which must be addressed. It is likely that older women, Black and minority ethnic women, LGBT

women, and women in rural areas, for instance, will experience specific impacts of financial deprivation. An intersectional analysis of the impact of structural discrimination – including racism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia and ageism – on women’s financial security is urgently required to understand how childcare provision can tackle child poverty. Intersections with unpaid care and lone motherhood should also be mapped.

6.2 Childcare provision must be understood as one part of poverty alleviation

We ask that the Committee consider other vital policy areas of structural gender inequality alongside the role of childcare in alleviating women’s and, therefore, children’s poverty in Scotland – for example, the current depreciating value of social security and other forms of financial support.

Engender has compiled evidence, alongside other organisations, demonstrating that the current cost of living crisis is a crisis for women’s equality. We know that women are already feeling the ramifications of the cost of living crisis in numerous gendered ways. One study by Mintango in 2022 of people in full-time employment showed that 67 per cent of women had seen their finances worsen since the beginning of 2022, compared with 58 per cent of men. It is no accident that child poverty has also risen sharply in the same period.

Again, this is reflected in research into women’s experiences of the cost of living crisis in Scotland by the Scottish Women’s Budget Group (SWBG) and The Poverty Alliance.⁵ This found that poverty for women is deepening and that women are falling into debt, including energy debt and rent arrears.

We urge the Committee to ensure Scotland’s approach to tackling child poverty actively includes tackling the gendered nature of poverty – and fully understands the drivers behind it. Childcare provision and expansion, to support parents locked out of the labour market, is an important part of the solution – but if we fail to recognise and respond to the fact that the majority of those parents are women, we ignore the gendered solutions we need to tackle poverty in Scotland.

Alongside adopting the Close the Gap and OPFS recommendation to create a universal funded childcare entitlement of 50 hours per week for children aged six months and above that is free at the point of use for all families, we ask Committee members to consider additional recommendations from our Cost of Living report. These provide additional solutions to tackling child poverty in Scotland, alongside childcare provision expansion:

⁵ SWBG and The Poverty Alliance (2022) “I don’t live, I survive”: Women’s experience of the cost-of-living crisis. Available at: <https://www.swbg.org.uk/content/publications/Womens-experience-of-the-cost-of-living-crisis---research-briefing.pdf>.

1. Uprate all social security payments delivered by Social Security Scotland in line with the rate of inflation as a matter of urgency.
2. Increase the Scottish Child Payment to a minimum of £40 per week.
3. Ensure that all public sector wages rise in line with the rate of inflation.

Our full report on the impact of the cost of living crisis on women, with further detail on these recommendations, is available on Engender's website.⁶

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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ABOUT US

Engender is Scotland's feminist policy and advocacy organisation, working to increase women's social, political and economic equality, enable women's rights, and make visible the impact of sexism on women and wider society. We work at Scottish, UK and international level to produce research, analysis, and recommendations for intersectional feminist legislation and programmes.

⁶ Engender (2022) Women & the Cost of Living: A Crisis of Deepening Inequality. Available at: <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Women-and-the-cost-of-living---updated-copy.pdf>.