

Gendering Scotland's Employability Pipeline

Summary of a roundtable discussion held by Engender in February 2017

INTRODUCTION

As part of the Building Equality project,¹ Engender and Scottish Women's Aid brought together a small number of gender and employability specialists to discuss Scotland's employability services and some of the limitations of the employability pipeline, particularly when it comes to engaging with and responding to the different experiences and needs of women.

To date, Scotland's employability sector has neglected to engage fully with gender, and women's experience of employability services remains relatively underexplored. The employability pipeline - the core conceptual framework of employability in Scotland around which all programmes are designed – is no exception, criticised in particular by the (now defunct) Women onto Work for deprioritising forms of pre-employment support that were particularly necessary for women who had detached from the labour market to care, had poor mental health, or were survivors of domestic or sexual abuse.

SESSION 1: Problems with the Employability Pipeline

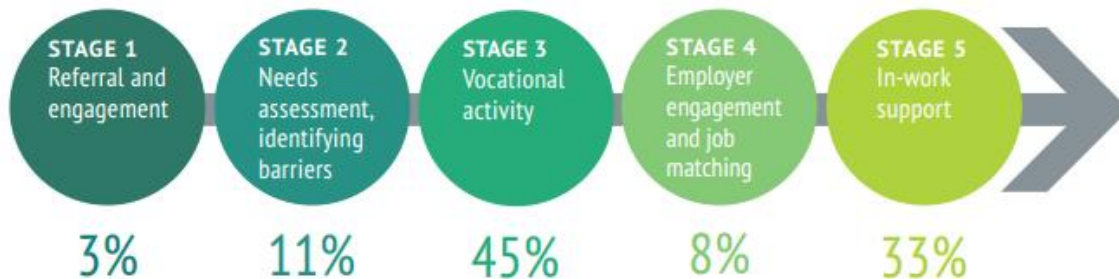
The first session began with sharing experiences of working with Scotland's employability pipeline.

The 'pipeline' is widely used across Scotland as a framework for employability to plan programmes, with most employability services adapted around it. It's a five stage process which the participants felt comes with certain advantages:

¹ <http://www.scottishwomensaid.org.uk/node/7689>

it's simple, uses a common language and has a clear focus on effective partnership and open communication.

Figure 1: Employability pipeline and proportion of expenditure by stage



While the pipeline is perhaps designed to enable a person-centred approach, this is becoming less evident at the service level, and it was felt that clients are increasingly pigeon-holed into a pre-set service. The overwhelming focus on jobs also eliminates a person centred focus and there's limited conversation with individuals about their future career after the initial job is secured.

It was also felt that there is a disconnect between the policy and the reality of the pipeline - which is characterised by low budgets and overly ambitious KPIs. Services connected to the pipeline are often subject to short-term grant funding, which doesn't allow for the kind of long-term investment needed for building effective partnerships (something that is supposed to be a core element on the pipeline model) or engaging with women throughout their journeys. Also, it was felt that as budgets reduce, targets are increasing and the opportunities and flexibilities offered to clients are increasingly narrowed. There's no funding for higher education opportunities, which are seen as too long, and there is also a disconnect between employability and career development, which are treated as two separate fields.

Once a routine of work is established it is important to think about progression/upskilling, but in-work support is often outsourced and diminishes once funding dries up. Participants were surprised to see the high spending figure in Stage 5 of the pipeline (Figure 1) as experiences of working with clients at this stage mainly consisted of occasional checking-in with clients to check sustainability of new job, not real support to progress. It was merely a case of checking if the client was still in the job.

Finally, the employability pipeline was not felt to match with how career choices are made in real life. Skills Development Scotland don't use the Employability Pipeline and view your career as a life long journey.

SESSION 2: Tailoring the pipeline for women?

Participants who had experience working within the pipeline felt that it doesn't engage with gender directly. Even in the Lone Parent programs, where the clients are predominantly women, the conversation is not about women. On the contrary, the fact that there are mainly women service users appeared to shift the focus onto the few men using the service. Participants pointed to a deficit in understanding of gender alongside race, disability, sexual orientation, and other protected characteristics within mainstream employability services.

The gendered impact of austerity on employability services was also recognised by participants. For example, provision of English as a second language (ESOL) classes have been reduced by public sector spending cuts, and mixed gender classes do not work for all women.

It was agreed that a gender blind employability system does not serve local economic development needs and this needs to be addressed. There are 32 Local Employability Partnerships and only 8 have any gender-focused projects within their funded portfolios. It was also highlighted that a review of each stage of the pipeline for its impact on gender should take place. The Scottish Government's Minister for Employability and Training, Jamie Hepburn, has promised an Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) for the new devolved employability services. Participants pointed out that this should be done as soon as possible in the development process, and involve external experts in an advisory capacity.

Addressing additional barriers to employment

Women who experience additional barriers are considered 'more challenging clients' in that it is harder for them to move from economic inactivity to labour market attachment. These barriers – including childcare and other caring responsibilities – are seen as an exceptional, extraordinary occurrence rather than entirely normal experiences or circumstances for women. Overall, it was

felt that the pipeline might work for those groups who don't have any additional structural barriers – essentially “the people who don't need it, for them it works’.

Two of the key barriers to women's employment were noted to be childcare and transport. The participants felt that if there was money put aside to address these this could make a massive difference. This was a particularly successful element of the Making it Work programme, which was able to offer flexible childcare and transportation to its clients.

Groups of women who face additional or specific barriers to employment – such as survivors of domestic abuse and refugees – often need more pre-Stage 1 support and aren't well supported by mainstream services. If you are an organisation doing work outside of the pipeline, you can often be overlooked or ignored by Local Employability Partnerships (LEPs). Other employability frameworks that are tailored to specific needs – such as the Bridges Programme for refugees and the new programmes on long-term health conditions – could be useful to learn from.

Using a non-linear pipeline

It was felt that for the employability pipeline to work better for women, it would need to be less linear and also longer on both ends, with more pre-stage 1 support and longer in-work support, and allowing for cyclical journeys.

Transition phases in careers should also be given greater attention, as these can be extremely stressful. Women tend to stay with employers that are seen as ‘women-friendly’, and there is a lack of proactive support for women to progress into higher paid jobs, away from these ‘women-friendly’ employers.

It was noted that a 2-stage-process of employability support (with the first job being a stepping stone in combination with aftercare to progress towards long-term job goal, which may help avoid the ‘5 Cs’ in the longer-term) did not work together with employer engagement work since it implies that employees leave as soon as possible/desired.

Collecting the right data

A lack of focus on the gendered elements of employability has come hand-in-hand with a lack of data collected on gender. “Caselink” is a database set up and run by Capital City Partnership for third sector employability delivery organisations (with no DWP involvement). The database is used to record information, integrate employability services and draw statistics for reporting. There is an option to pull out cases based on gender but any client-specific details, such as details relating to domestic abuse, would only be written up in notes (made by the employability advisers). The management information that can be pulled off is only the information on the “tick box form” and the only question that might identify specific gendered experiences for women at intake is phrased as “Emotional Difficulty” - there is no question on violence against women or domestic abuse, although domestic abuse is sometimes disclosed when asked this question. If domestic abuse was disclosed the information would be in those notes which are confidential and cannot be searched. Some participants felt that being required to ask about emotional difficulties at the first meeting could be inappropriate.

The general consensus was that the information on this system would have massive gaps and might not be all that meaningful. A National Employability Database could be helpful, but given a city-wide one is currently not very effective a national version that goes beyond local authority level could prove even more difficult.

For Further Information

Contact: Emma Trottier, Policy Manager, Engender

Email: emma.trottier@engender.org.uk

Mobile: 07889 805787

About Engender

Engender has a vision for a Scotland in which women and men have equal opportunities in life, equal access to resources and power, and are equally safe and secure from harm. Engender is a feminist organisation that has worked in Scotland for 20 years to advance equality between women and men.