

Every day tens of thousands of women across Northern Ireland undertake an exhausting juggling act balancing the already heavy duties of work and family with the additional responsibilities of caring for their loved ones. They provide vital services to family members and prop up a health service that would not be able to cope without them. Yet far too many go unseen and unsupported driving many out of the labour market, forcing many to cut back on their hours of work or to turn down promotions or stay stuck in less well qualified jobs. This holds them back from fulfilling their economic potential and impacts on their financial wellbeing often long into the future.

### Introduction

There are over 220,000 people providing unpaid care for sick or disabled family members in Northern Ireland, representing 1 in 8 of the population. This includes over 180,000 unpaid carers of working age.

For some a caring role will be life long, for others it will be a sudden, perhaps unexpected, role change. Some carers continue to provide care to children well into that child's adult life. The intensity of care provided also varies; for some it can be a few hours per week, others are caring around the clock.

### Gendered Nature of Care

Unpaid caring has a gendered dimension, with women making up 59% of all carers in Northern Ireland and 60% of carers of working age.

Women have a 70% chance of providing care in their adult life and are more likely to care early in their life, with many becoming carers whilst still at working age. By the time they are aged 46, half of women have been a carer; men have the same 50/50 chance by age 57 - eleven years later.

Article 11 of the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) states the responsibilities of Government to guarantee equal access to employment to women and men. This includes not only the right to work but also the right to the same employment opportunities. Ultimately those rights cannot be met while women continue to carry out the bulk of unpaid work.

### Impacts of Providing Care

**Identity** - work can be an important part of many women's identity. It can give a sense of meaning and purpose and provide an important place for making social connections. Three in ten women told the State of Caring survey that work gave them a break from caring.

**Career Opportunities** - many unpaid carers are unable to work unless they have flexibilities in their jobs like working from home or variable hours. Often they are trapped in jobs they are over qualified for or are unable to apply for promotions or full time work. This concept of the 'sticky floor' means that

women often became stuck in the lower ranks of jobs and cannot progress.

**Finances** – providing unpaid care can bring with it significant financial strain. Research by the Carer Poverty Commission shows that more than one in four local carers is living in poverty (28%). The financial impact of stopping or reducing hours of work to care is felt by women not only when providing care but throughout their whole life course. The State of Caring Survey found that four in ten women (41%) felt they may need to retire later than planned due to caring and over one in four are worried they will end up in debt (27%).

**Health & Wellbeing** - providing unpaid care can be an exhausting and overwhelming role. Whilst being able to go to work can have a positive impact on some carers' mental health, for others it can also add to the stress and exhaustion they experience trying to juggle their caring responsibilities with the demands of a job. The State of Caring Survey showed that one in four women (27%) felt anxious about caring while they were working and over one in three (36%) described feeling tired at work due to their caring role.

### **Barriers to Work**

**The Unpredictability of Care Needs** – leaving work at short notice and dealing with emergencies can make it difficult to work even with a supportive employer.

**Frequency of Appointments** – medical and other appointments often happen during the working day and have to be kept or they could face long waits.

**Finding suitable work and lack of flexibility** – there are not enough jobs

suitable for carers including part-time and flexible working. When mixed with negative attitudes from employers it makes it hard to get suitable work.

**Gendered expectations of care** – care work has traditionally been seen as 'women's work'. Gendered assumptions of care place a burden on women to provide care in families and communities often at the expense of their careers.

**Accessibility of Support Services** – having a network of support across various systems including social care and childcare was vital to ensure women could enter/stay in work.

**The social security system** – the rate of Carer's Allowance is too low and its low earnings threshold is too restrictive and unfairly punishes carers for earning a wage.

**Society's attitude to caring** – care is not valued and unpaid carers often feel their work is invisible and that they are the last to be thought of in terms of recognition and support.

**Returning to work after a caring role has ended** – taking time out to care can create difficulties in returning to work because of gaps in CVs and knowledge creating a need for training/education for unpaid carers.

### **Importance of Support Services**

Women often rely heavily on the support they receive from Carer's Groups and Women's Centres. Supports provided by these groups often mean that unpaid carers can find out the information they need, receive support and understanding and a range of additional supports including childcare, education and financial help. However, this critical support is often provided by charities with limited funding.

## Findings

This report has shown that while many women providing unpaid care want to enter or remain in the workplace alongside their caring responsibilities, a lack of workplace protections and support from the health, social care, childcare and education systems often means leaving employment, substantially reducing their working hours or facing a daily struggle trying to balance caring with work. For some women it is impossible for them to work whilst caring due to the intensity and unpredictability of their caring role. All of this has a detrimental impact on women's own health, finances and career progression.

## Key Points

- ♀ One in three (34%) women have given up work to care.
- ♀ One in four (28%) women have decreased their working hours due to a caring role.
- ♀ One in six (17%) women have taken on a less qualified job or turned down promotion to fit around caring responsibilities.
- ♀ Women “juggle” their caring role and employment often at the detriment of their own career, finances and health and wellbeing.
- ♀ The financial impact of stopping or reducing work to provide care is felt by women not only whilst providing the care but also throughout their life course.
- ♀ Carer’s Allowance in terms of monetary value and the low earnings threshold is inadequate to support women to balance caring and employment.
- ♀ Support for carers in employment is often a lottery, dependent on individual employers and line managers.
- ♀ Inadequacies in wider support services, including social services, healthcare, education and childcare, are stopping women from working altogether or limiting the amount of work they can do.
- ♀ For some women work can be positive in terms of mental health and wellbeing and gives them a break from their caring role. For others the intensity and unpredictability of their caring role makes employment very challenging and in some cases simply impossible.
- ♀ Women feel reliable, accessible, affordable support services; a range of flexible working options; carer’s leave; and a change to the eligibility criteria for Carer’s Allowance would help balance work and care.
- ♀ A lack of support for carers in the workplace results in a loss of valuable and skilled individuals to the labour market.

### What women said:

*“Government value you to the point of £10/day – what are you going to do with a tenner? It wouldn’t even get you a wee bag of shopping. Almost £77 a week is nothing. You’d be lucky to fill your car, get a loaf and two litres of milk.”*

*“Issues with domiciliary care are having a bigger impact on me, it means having to stay at home to work from home more. The carers are not doing what I need them to do to let me be out of the house.”*

*“You’re balanced on a knife edge – you never know what’s going to happen from one week to the next. If you have to leave in an emergency some employers just think you’re too much hassle.”*

*“There is definitely a gender imbalance. My mum expected me to be the carer. Even she had those gendered expectations that my job wasn’t important, that I would give it up to care for her.”*

## Recommendations – For Employers

- ♀ Identify and support staff with caring roles - including through line manager training to recognise and support unpaid carers and young carers entering the labour market for the first time.
- ♀ Engage with carers and carer organisations to introduce carer friendly policies and supportive workplace cultures for carers including flexible working options as a day one right and paid carers leave that is separate to holiday entitlement.
- ♀ Adopt Carers UK's Carer Confident benchmark to move towards becoming a carer friendly employer.
- ♀ Develop work placements and training schemes to support young adult carers and carers returning to work to enter the labour market.

## Recommendations – For the NI Assembly

- ♀ Enshrine carers rights in legislation to ensure consistency across employers.
- ♀ Legislate for paid carer's leave from work that is separate to annual leave and a day one right to request flexible working for all unpaid carers.
- ♀ Raise the Carer's Allowance earnings threshold to the equivalent of 21 hours/week at the National Living Wage and introduce an interim Carer's Allowance Supplement scheme with a view to increasing the level of Carer's Allowance to £120/week.
- ♀ Reform the social care system to provide reliable, consistent, high quality replacement and support care, including domiciliary care, respite and day care services.
- ♀ Deliver a fit for purpose and affordable childcare system across the whole of Northern Ireland including appropriate childcare for children with special needs.

## Recommendations – For Wider Society

- ♀ Recognise and value the immense contribution unpaid carers make to society.
- ♀ Adopt a universal caregiver approach where unpaid caring no longer has such a gendered dimension.

### What women said:

*"What I find limiting is being able to move jobs or apply for promotions. I'm too afraid to leave the set up I have now in case it wouldn't be as flexible or understand that my number one priority is my mum."*

*"I don't see myself being able to work full-time as a result of my caring responsibilities. It does leave things tight, if I was working full-time it would be easier especially with the cost of living crisis."*

*"To be honest anyone who was a registered childminder and could have met my son's needs we couldn't have afforded to pay them. The cost of childcare kept me out of work as well as all the appointments."*

*"It's the energy levels, I feel like I'm in a state of exhaustion all the time. Juggling appointments, arranging transport and everything else around work."*

The full report **Career or Care: Women, Unpaid Care and Employment** produced by the Women's Regional Consortium & Carers NI is available from the Women's Regional Consortium website at:

[www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/research/](http://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/research/)

February 2024

