



## **Consortium for the Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas**

## **Women, Skills & Barriers to Work**

**December 2024**

**Researched and written by: Siobhán Harding,  
Women's Support Network**



Foyle Women's  
Information  
Network



<b>Contents</b>	<b>Page</b>
<b>Executive Summary .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>1. Introduction .....</b>	<b>5</b>
1.1 Background .....	5
1.2 Overall aim and objectives .....	6
1.3 Methodology .....	7
1.4 Explanation of Key Terms .....	7
1.5 Acknowledgements .....	7
<b>2. Framing the research .....</b>	<b>9</b>
2.1 Economic Inactivity Levels in Northern Ireland .....	9
2.2 Good Jobs .....	12
2.3 Reasons why women are not in work .....	15
2.3.1 Meeting the Needs of Family Life .....	16
2.3.2 Sickness and Disability .....	18
2.3.3 Low Paid Work .....	20
2.4 Barriers to Work .....	22
2.4.1 Motherhood .....	23
2.4.2 Childcare Costs .....	24
2.4.3 Sickness and Disability .....	26
2.4.4 Unpaid Care Responsibilities .....	27
2.4.5 Rurality .....	29
2.4.6 Ethnicity .....	31
2.4.7 The Benefits System and Welfare Reform .....	33
2.5 Supports Needed .....	34
2.6 Women, Skills, Education and Lifelong Learning .....	42
2.7 Importance of Community Education in Women's Education and Skills Development .....	43
2.8 International Obligations .....	48
<b>3. Findings on Women's Economic Inactivity, Barriers to Work and Skills ...</b>	<b>50</b>
3.1 Participants .....	50
3.2 Questionnaire and Focus Group Findings .....	51
<b>4. Conclusion, summary of findings and recommendations .....</b>	<b>80</b>

## **Executive Summary**

High economic inactivity levels have been a feature of the Northern Ireland economy for many years. Although the female rate of economic inactivity has been declining over the last decade it remains consistently higher than the male rate. Women's experiences of being in the labour market, or not, and trying to access it are shaped by a range of factors including gendered expectations of care both for children and through unpaid care responsibilities. This is demonstrated by the large evidence base in research and also through the focus group discussions. Rising levels of ill health and disability are also having an impact on women's participation in the labour market. Broader social infrastructure issues including lengthy waiting lists including for access to mental health services and a lack of social care provision are contributing to women's economic inactivity levels among those researched for this paper.

The impacts of economic inactivity are significant in terms of reducing women's incomes over their lifetimes, increasing isolation, eroding confidence and robbing the labour market of valuable and skilled individuals. The burden of care work borne unequally by women limits the amount of time women can spend in paid work, the types of jobs which they can do and often restricts their progress when they are in work. It is clear therefore that action must be taken to address this longstanding problem particularly in a climate of labour shortages, Government efforts on growing the economy, encouraging those who are economically inactive back into work and also the focus on growth through greater productivity and a better quality of jobs.

The findings in this research show that women face multiple barriers to employment, most commonly their own illness and/or disability, childcare needs and unpaid care responsibilities. Being out of work or under-employed caused women to experience other barriers including lack of confidence/self-esteem issues and a need for training and education to enable them to get into work or to gain appropriate skills to access better-quality work. Issues of low pay, inflexible and insecure work, which are particularly relevant for women, lead to a fear of moving into work and losing social security benefits which could make them worse off.

Leaving the barriers to work aside, the majority of the women who participated in this research wanted to work in the area of social care including childcare, care in the community, social work, counselling and youth work. Despite the need for labour in these areas many of these jobs are low paid with low levels of job security and skills investment. This points to the need for investment in the caring economy to help raise the quality of this work in terms of pay, conditions and training.

The importance of women-only community education in terms of women's personal development, skills expansion and economic participation was very evident in the focus group research. The results of this research show the benefits of learning in a comfortable, trusted environment with personalised supports allowing women furthest from the labour market the chance to increase their skills and take steps to gain employment.

The women were unanimous in their views that 'good' jobs were flexible, well paid and had good working conditions including the availability of family friendly policies to allow them to juggle their work with their home lives. These asks are not excessive or unachievable with the provision of greater flexibility, more investment in skills, better pay and favourable conditions of work.

It was clear from the research that most of the women wanted to work but needed supports to be able to achieve this. This report recommends actions to help women address the barriers they face including accessible, affordable childcare, improving access to education and learning opportunities for people with disabilities, improving access to mental health support services, actions by government and employers to provide 'good jobs' and long-term sustainable funding for community education.

Addressing the barriers women face in accessing and staying in the labour market is critical for ensuring their economic participation, tackling labour shortages and supporting economic growth. The ability to access 'good jobs' is equally as important for women's personal and financial wellbeing. Work to remove the barriers faced by women and investing in the creation of 'good jobs' would have significant benefits for women, their families, communities and the economy as a whole.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background

In 2012 the DSD (now DfC) in partnership with the DARD (now DAERA) launched a programme aimed at providing regional support for women in ‘areas of greatest need’ across Northern Ireland, defined as disadvantaged and rural areas.<sup>1</sup> More precisely, the programme sought to ‘serve the needs of marginalised and isolated women’<sup>2</sup> in these areas by enabling them ‘to tackle disadvantage and fulfil their potential in overcoming the barriers that give rise to their marginalisation, experience of poverty and exclusion.’<sup>3</sup> The Women’s Regional Consortium is funded under this programme.

The **Women’s Regional Consortium** consists of seven established women’s sector organisations that are committed to working in partnership with each other, government, statutory organisations and women’s organisations, centres and groups in disadvantaged and rural areas, to ensure that organisations working for women are given the best possible support in the work they do in tackling disadvantage and social exclusion.<sup>4</sup> The seven groups are as follows:

- ♀ Training for Women Network (TWN) – Project lead
- ♀ Women’s Resource and Development Agency (WRDA)
- ♀ Women’s Support Network (WSN)
- ♀ Northern Ireland’s Rural Women’s Network (NIRWN)
- ♀ Women’s TEC
- ♀ Women’s Centre Derry
- ♀ Foyle Women’s Information Network (FWIN)

---

<sup>1</sup> Review of government funding for women’s groups and organisations, DSD/OFMDFM, August 2012, p32

[https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/ofmdfm\\_dev/review-report-funding-for-womens-groups-organisations-june-12.pdf](https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/ofmdfm_dev/review-report-funding-for-womens-groups-organisations-june-12.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p41

<sup>3</sup> Joint Policy Statement, Programme for Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged Areas and Rural Areas, DSD/DARD, June 2012, p5

<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/joint-policy-statement-programme-regional-support-women-disadvantaged-areas>

<sup>4</sup> The remaining paragraphs in this section represent the official description of the Consortium’s work, as agreed and authored by its seven partner organisations.

The Consortium is the established link and strategic partner between government and statutory agencies and women in disadvantaged and rural areas, including all groups, centres and organisations delivering essential frontline services, advice and support. The Consortium ensures that there is a continuous two-way flow of information between government and the sector. It also ensures that organisations/centres and groups are made aware of consultations, government planning and policy implementation. In turn, the Consortium ascertains the views, needs and aspirations of women in disadvantaged and rural areas and takes these views forward to influence policy development and future government planning, which ultimately results in the empowerment of local women in disadvantaged and rurally isolated communities.

*“Women have the power to change the way society works and how services are shaped. It happens when they are supported to step into the process with the confidence to tell their stories and demand action from those who make decisions.”<sup>5</sup>*

## **1.2 Overall aim and objectives**

The overall aim of the research project was to explore the following areas:

- The reasons why women are more likely to be economically inactive.
- The barriers to women’s participation in the workforce.
- The types of education, skills training and jobs that women most want to do.
- The existing supports which help women undertake education, skills training and/or make the move into work and possible future supports which could help women in these areas.
- To highlight the role of Women’s Centres in helping women to access education, skills training and work.

Based on the research findings a series of recommendations was formulated for policy makers.

---

<sup>5</sup> Women at the Heart of Public Consultation, A guide for Public Authorities and Women’s Organisations, WRDA, November 2017  
[https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/WRDA\\_WomenAtTheHeartOfPublicConsultation.pdf](https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/WRDA_WomenAtTheHeartOfPublicConsultation.pdf)

### 1.3 Methodology

The research used a mixed methodological approach, combining a literature review with focus group and questionnaire engagement to capture the experiences and views of women who are economically inactive. Participants in the research were of working age and defined as economically inactive. Nine focus group sessions were held across Northern Ireland in May and June 2024 and a further focus group with ethnic minority women was held in October 2024 with a total of 60 women attending all the focus groups. Questionnaires were completed by the women providing some quantitative detail around the reasons for economic inactivity, the barriers to employment and the jobs that women would most like to do.

### 1.4 Explanation of Key Terms

*Economically Inactive* - those without a job who have not sought work in the last four weeks and/or are not available to start work in the next two weeks.<sup>6</sup>

*Unemployed* – those who have been looking for work in the past four weeks and who are available to start work within the next two weeks.<sup>7</sup>

*Working Age* – usually refers to those aged 16-64.

*Retired* – in terms of economic inactivity this refers to people who have retired before the age of 64.

*Student* – in terms of economic inactivity this refers to those who are not looking for work as they are in full time education courses. It does not refer to those who are taking part in community education and training such as that referred to in this paper.

### 1.5 Acknowledgements

The Women's Regional Consortium wishes to thank:

- The individual women who took part in the focus group sessions and completed questionnaires. We thank them for their time and for sharing their experiences which form the centrepiece of this research and which are so valuable.

---

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-shared-prosperity-fund-prospectus/uk-shared-prosperity-fund-prospectus>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/news/northern-ireland-labour-force-survey-young-people-not-education-employment-or-training-neet-17>

- The Women's Centres and our Consortium partners for their contribution and for helping to organise focus group sessions. It would be impossible to do this work without their support. We want to acknowledge the important work Women's Centres do in relation to skills and in providing support to women who are out of work and those considering returning to work. This valuable work is carried out in an environment of funding reductions and cuts yet is vitally important to the women, their families and communities.
- Lisa King, Equality Commission and Alex Brennan, NI Women's Budget Group for their help with editing the final report and to Jude Hill, Save the Children for her help with communications.



## 2. Framing the research

The context of this research is set in high economic inactivity levels in Northern Ireland alongside a Government focus on supporting people into work and on the creation of ‘good jobs’. Women are more likely to be impacted by economic inactivity and issues around poor-quality work because of the structural inequalities and barriers they face. This chapter will look at economic inactivity levels in Northern Ireland and the focus on ‘good jobs’ before reviewing the issues for women in the order of the research project’s objectives - the reasons why women are not in work, the barriers they face, the types of support needed and the importance of community education in helping women to access education, skills, training and work.

### 2.1 ‘Economic Inactivity’ Levels in Northern Ireland

The Northern Ireland economic inactivity rate is 28.2%<sup>8</sup> and it is consistently above the UK average (now at 21.8%). Northern Ireland has the highest economic inactivity rate of the twelve UK regions. The female economic inactivity rate has also been consistently higher than the male economic inactivity rate – the most recent figures show the female rate at 31.8% compared to 24.6% for men.

The main reasons for economic inactivity<sup>9</sup> are: having a long-term sickness, family and home care, being a student, being retired and other. In July-September 2024, the most common reason for economic inactivity among the working age population was ‘long-term sick’. There were 139,000 long-term sick, accounting for 41.5% of the total economically inactive population (aged 16 to 64). In terms of gender, 51% of males gave the reason for economic inactivity as long-term sick compared to 48.2% of females. Northern Ireland performs significantly worse in terms of economic inactivity, due to long-term sickness and/or disability, when compared to the rest of the United Kingdom.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Northern Ireland Labour Market Report, NISRA, November 2024

<https://datavis.nisra.gov.uk/economy-and-labour-market/labour-market-report-november-2024.html#>

<sup>9</sup> Northern Ireland Labour Market Report, NISRA, October 2024

<https://datavis.nisra.gov.uk/economy-and-labour-market/labour-market-report-october-2024.html#>

<sup>10</sup> Economic inactivity, key employment barriers and childcare costs potentially impacting those barriers: initial considerations for Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland Assembly, May 2024  
[Assembly Research and Information Service Briefing Paper - Economic inactivity, key employment barriers and childcare costs potentially impacting those barriers: initial considerations for Northern Ireland \(niassembly.gov.uk\)](#)

The most recent figures (July-September 2024) show that almost a quarter (24.3%) of women who were unavailable for work gave the reason for inactivity as family/home commitments (46,000) compared to just 3.5% (5,000) for men.<sup>11</sup> Family and home care is the least common reason given for male economic inactivity. Approximately eight in ten women (79%) with dependent children were economically active in 2023, compared with 94% of men with dependent children.<sup>12</sup>

In discussing the reasons for economic inactivity and why levels are high in Northern Ireland, a report by Pivotal<sup>13</sup> said: *“people may be or remain inactive because of inadequate health care, an absence of social care for a loved one, or a lack of affordable childcare. Poor provision in each of these areas of public services in Northern Ireland at present is likely to be contributing to persistent rates of economic inactivity.”*

The UK Women’s Budget Group<sup>14</sup> has stated that women’s engagement in paid work is influenced by a blend of voluntary choices and compelled circumstances.

*“Analysis of labour market statistics by different characteristics underscores a need to understand the context behind inequalities, and to recognise that – perhaps for women especially – broader labour market policy is not divorceable from other policy areas. For example, the effect on women’s economic inactivity by the double whammy of caring responsibilities and rising ill health shows that there cannot be a strong labour market without strong social infrastructure. Investment in key public services is required to address lengthy NHS waitlists and inadequate social care and early years and childcare infrastructure.*

The costs of economic inactivity are high not only to the individual but to families, communities and the economy as a whole. A Northern Ireland Assembly Research

---

<sup>11</sup> Northern Ireland Labour Market Report, NISRA, November 2024

<https://datavis.nisra.gov.uk/economy-and-labour-market/labour-market-report-november-2024.html#>

<sup>12</sup> Women In Northern Ireland 2023, NISRA, November 2024

<https://datavis.nisra.gov.uk/economy-and-labour-market/women-in-northern-ireland-2023.html>

<sup>13</sup> Economic Inactivity in Northern Ireland, Pivotal, May 2024

[20240430-Economic-inactivity-FINAL-REPORT.pdf \(pivotalppf.org\)](https://pivotalppf.org/20240430-Economic-inactivity-FINAL-REPORT.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Women and the Labour Market, UK Women’s Budget Group, February 2024

<https://wbjg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Women-and-the-Labour-Market-Briefing-Final.pdf>

and Information Service Briefing Paper<sup>15</sup> has highlighted that relatively high economic inactivity can lead to a range of adverse socioeconomic consequences. These include higher benefit payments, poor health outcomes, increased poverty and reduced social inclusion as well as limiting the capacity of the economy to grow and placing additional reliance on migration for future labour supply.

It is clear that tackling economic inactivity will be a key priority for Governments both local and national considering not only its adverse consequences but also the impacts of early retirement and an ageing population causing labour shortages.<sup>16</sup>

#### *Problems with the term ‘Economic Inactivity’*

The women’s sector has long been critical of the use of the term ‘economically inactive’ to describe women who are outside of the formal labour market and who are not looking for work. Many are not working due to the structural inequalities that mean that women are much more likely to be providing care. This was highlighted by the Expert Panel for a Gender Equality Strategy in 2020:

*“The term “economically inactive” needs to be challenged in its dismissal of the high volume of women who are involuntarily unemployed due to family and home commitments, alongside other minorities that are considered inactive due to systemic barriers and discrimination”<sup>17</sup>*

The women’s sector continues to highlight<sup>18</sup> that unpaid care work and the contributions of women managing home and family commitments should not be considered to have no economic value. Indeed, the Covid-19 pandemic exposed the essential nature of care work which is very often carried out by women. The Expert Panel for a Gender Equality Strategy said:

---

<sup>15</sup> Economic inactivity, key employment barriers and childcare costs potentially impacting those barriers: initial considerations for Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland Assembly Research and Information Service Briefing Paper, May 2024

<https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/publications/2022-2027/2024/economy/1524.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> <https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/175/economic-affairs-committee/news/175197/early-retirement-and-our-ageing-population-are-causing-labour-shortages-says-lords-report/>

<sup>17</sup> Gender Equality Strategy Expert Advisory Panel Report, Ann Marie Gray, Louise Coyle, Rachel Powel & Siobhán Harding, December 2020

[Gender Equality Strategy \(communities-ni.gov.uk\)](https://communities-ni.gov.uk/gender-equality-strategy)

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

*“It is crucial to recognise the economic value of unpaid work and challenge terms such as “economic inactivity” as they perpetuate the undervaluing of women’s domestic work.”*

Research by Queen’s University and the Economic and Social Research Institute<sup>19</sup> said that critics of the term pointed to its failure to account for the contributions that so many non-employed people make in the home and the lives of others and the obvious importance of this for the economy and wider society. This research uncovered a strong encouragement for a change in the language used by government when discussing people not engaged in paid employment.

## 2.2 Good Jobs

*“Supporting people into good jobs is one of my four economic priorities. This means providing pathways for people from unemployment and economic inactivity into employment, while improving the quality of jobs so that they pay a decent wage, provide certainty and security, and are flexible enough to allow a work-life balance.”*

20

Minister for the Economy, Conor Murphy, speaking at NICVA’s Inclusive Employment Conference (12/06/24)

Economy Minister Conor Murphy has outlined one of the pillars of his economic vision is the improvement of living standards through the creation of ‘good jobs’. In his statement to the NI Assembly<sup>21</sup> on his economic vision he stated: *“It is not acceptable that being in work does not guarantee a reasonable standard of living. This is particularly the case for women and people with disabilities, who disproportionately make up the low-paid.”*

<sup>19</sup> Economic Inactivity Report 2: Qualitative insights into Economic Inactivity in Northern Ireland, Queen’s University Belfast and the Economic and Social Research Institute, October 2023 <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/economy/Economic-Inactivity-Report-2.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.nicva.org/article/tackling-economic-inactivity-voluntary-and-community-sector-leading-the-way#:~:text=Minister%20for%20Economy%20Conor%20Murphy%20said%3A,of%20my%20four%20economic%20priorities.>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/news/statement-minister-murphy-economic-vision>

The Department for the Economy is adopting the Carnegie framework to determine what is a good job. The Carnegie framework<sup>22</sup> has seven dimensions of job quality: terms of employment, pay and benefits, health, safety and psychosocial wellbeing, job design/nature of work, social support and cohesion, voice and representation and work life balance. The Minister has committed to progressing all seven dimensions and in July 2024 the Minister published a consultation<sup>23</sup> on proposals to strengthen employment rights to help deliver his good jobs agenda.

In 2021 the Department for the Economy published its economic vision for a 10x Economy – Northern Ireland’s Decade of Innovation<sup>24</sup> with the ambition of delivering a ten times better economy including work on job quality over the next decade. One of the guiding principles of this Strategy is to *“deliver improved outcomes for all including better jobs with better wages for all our people, with a more flexible work environment and a better overall quality of life.”* In 2022 the Department for the Economy published its Skills Strategy – Skills for a 10x Economy.<sup>25</sup> This Strategy sets the framework for the development of the skills system to 2030 with a focus on increasing skills levels and providing opportunities for more people to work in better jobs.

Evidence presented in research by Lisa Wilson at the Nevin Economic Institute<sup>26</sup> makes it clear that good jobs have the capacity to provide benefits not only to employees but to employers, the wider economy and society. *“When workers have access to quality jobs, they are healthier, more satisfied, and more productive. This*

---

<sup>22</sup> Measuring Good Work Executive Summary, The final report of the Measuring Job Quality Working Group, Carnegie UK Trust & The RSA Future Work Centre, September 2018  
[https://d1ssu070pg2v9i.cloudfront.net/pex/pex\\_carnegie2021/2018/09/06105001/Measuring-Good-Work-EXEC-SUMMARY-03-09-18.pdf](https://d1ssu070pg2v9i.cloudfront.net/pex/pex_carnegie2021/2018/09/06105001/Measuring-Good-Work-EXEC-SUMMARY-03-09-18.pdf)

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/news/minister-announces-consultation-good-jobs-and-improving-workers-rights>

<sup>24</sup> A 10x Economy, Northern Ireland’s Decade of Innovation, Department for the Economy, May 2021  
<https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/economy/10x-economy-ni-decade-innovation.pdf>

<sup>25</sup> Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland, Skills for a 10x Economy, Department for the Economy, March 2022  
<https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/economy/Skills-Strategy-for-Northern-Ireland-Skills-for-a-10x-economy.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> Good Jobs: What are they & How do we get more of them?, Nevin Economic Research Institute, November 2024  
[https://nerinstitute.net/sites/default/files/research/additional/2024/Good%20Jobs%20what%20are%20they%20and%20how%20do%20we%20get%20more%20Working%20Paper\\_final.pdf](https://nerinstitute.net/sites/default/files/research/additional/2024/Good%20Jobs%20what%20are%20they%20and%20how%20do%20we%20get%20more%20Working%20Paper_final.pdf)

*means businesses benefit from a more engaged workforce, lower turnover, and greater innovation. For society, good jobs help reduce inequality, strengthen communities, and drive economic growth.”* By contrast the negative consequences of bad jobs are evident with poor quality work leading to lower productivity, higher employee turnover and decreased motivation as well as impacting on workers’ health, wellbeing and financial stability which ultimately holds back businesses and the economy.

In looking at “Who has the ‘good jobs’?” analysis by the Nevin Economic Research Institute and University College Dublin<sup>27</sup> shows that it is mainly men who are in the jobs considered ‘good’. Men are almost three times more likely than women to occupy high quality jobs and men are significantly less likely to have poor quality jobs.<sup>28</sup> The research states: *“Significantly more women than men occupy jobs of relatively poor quality. These are precarious, low-paid jobs that often times demand high effort levels from their incumbents.”*

This research also makes the point that care workers do not fare well and this is a sector which is dominated by women. Across a broad range of job attributes, care workers exhibit poor job quality. As this research highlights the issues around gender inequality and job quality are *“deeply-rooted and multi-faceted”* and *“likely to be influenced by the distribution of domestic roles and by the choices men and women make in terms of balancing their work and private lives. But it is also related to how we value particular occupations.”*

In launching the consultation on the Good Jobs Bill,<sup>29</sup> Economy Minister Conor Murphy has sought to tackle the growth of insecure and precarious forms of employment including zero hours contracts. Zero hours contracts are synonymous with precarious, poor-quality work. They are often characterised by a lack of security resulting in unpredictable working schedules, difficult working environments, irregular

---

<sup>27</sup> Job quality in Ireland, NERI Report Series, No.27, December 2023

<https://www.nerinstitute.net/sites/default/files/research/2023/JOB%20QUALITY%20IN%20IRELAND.pdf>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.nerinstitute.net/blog/where-are-good-jobs-ireland-and-how-can-we-create-more-them-0>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/oral-statement-launch-good-jobs-employment-rights-bill-consultation-1-july-2024>

incomes and an inability of workers to assert their rights. This can impact on a worker's mental health and wellbeing with instability and lack of control leading to anxiety and stress.

National statistics show that people on zero hours contracts are more likely to be young, part-time, women or in full-time education when compared with other people in employment.<sup>30</sup> Single parents (who are mostly women) are twice as likely to have a zero-hours contract as other family types.<sup>31</sup> More recent statistics from the Work Foundation<sup>32</sup> show that women are 1.2 times more likely to be on zero-hour contracts than men. In Northern Ireland a disproportionate number of women, 545,000 compared to 487,000 men are on zero hours contracts.<sup>33</sup>

### 2.3 Reasons why women are not in work

*“Women are too easily written off from the labour market because we expect them to take on duties from dawn to dusk. Childcare, and now ever increasing adult social care responsibilities, are squeezing them from the workforce, destabilising our future financial security and draining talent from the economy in the process. It is imperative that we act now - both in government and as a society - to empower women to balance these competing demands.”*<sup>34</sup>

Stella Creasy, Labour MP for Walthamstow

Women's experiences of the labour market vary widely based on the impact of having dependent children, unpaid care responsibilities and existing gender stereotypes around education, training and employment. Women have considerably

<sup>30</sup> EMP17: People in employment on zero hours contracts, Office for National Statistics, August 2020 <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/datasets/emp17peopleinemploymentonzerohourscontracts>

<sup>31</sup> Caring without sharing, Gingerbread, November 2020 <https://www.gingerbread.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Gingerbread-Caringwithoutsharing-v3.pdf>

<sup>32</sup> Zero Choices: Swapping Zero-Hour Contracts for Secure, Flexible Working, The Work Foundation, March 2024 <https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/media/lancaster-university/content-assets/documents/lums/work-foundation/reports/ZeroChoices.pdf>

<sup>33</sup> The 'Good Jobs' Employment Rights Bill, Public Consultation, Department for the Economy, July 2024 <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/economy/good-jobs-consultation.PDF>

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.progressive-policy.net/publications/press-release-cpps-latest-report-finds-caring-responsibilities-are-disproportionately-impacting-women-in-the-uk>



different levels of uptake of employment and in the type and nature of employment. Women are less likely to be in any form of paid work than men and when they do undertake paid work are more likely to be in part-time and precarious work.<sup>35</sup>

### 2.3.1 Meeting the Needs of Family Life

Research shows that women who are married, cohabiting or in a civil partnership are more likely to be inactive to look after the home/family.<sup>36</sup> Women with any children in the family are 9 percentage points more likely than those without children in the family to be economically inactive to look after home/family. For each child under the age of 5 the likelihood of being inactive to look after home/family increases by 5 percentage points. These relationships are not evident for men – men with dependent children are 1 percentage point more likely than their peers without dependent children in the family to be inactive to look after the home/family. Women with the highest levels of education are also less likely to be inactive to look after the home/family than those with lower educational attainment and the same is not evident for men.

The Women's Budget Group (WBG) states that *"at the heart of gender inequality in the UK is the unequal division of unpaid work between men and women."*<sup>37</sup> Office for National Statistics (ONS)<sup>38</sup> figures show that women continue to spend more time than men on unpaid work including housework and caring for others. Women spent 57 more minutes than men doing unpaid work with women spending 3 hours and 32 minutes on unpaid work compared to 2 hours and 35 minutes for men.

<sup>35</sup> Spirals of Inequality, How unpaid care is at the heart of gender inequalities, Commission on a Gender-Equal Economy, April 2020

<https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Accompanying-paper-FINAL.pdf>

<sup>36</sup> Economic Inactivity Report 1: Literature, Context and Quantitative Analysis on Economic Inactivity in Northern Ireland; And A Review of the Welfare System in relation to Economic Inactivity in Northern Ireland, Queen's University Belfast and the Economic and Social Research Institute, October 2023

[Economic Inactivity in Northern Ireland - Report 1 \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](https://www.economicandsocialresearchinstitute.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/EIR1-report-1.pdf)

<sup>37</sup> Spirals of Inequality, How unpaid care is at the heart of gender inequalities, Women's Budget Group, April 2020

<https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Accompanying-paper-FINAL.pdf>

<sup>38</sup>

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/personalandhouseholdfinances/incomeandwealth/datasets/timeuseintheuk>



Providing care limits both the number of hours a person can work and the distance they travel for work. Census statistics show that women are significantly more likely to work part-time than men with almost 7 out of 10 part-time workers being female (69.7%) and nearly two thirds of full-time workers being male (61.8%).<sup>39</sup>

Approximately 60% of employed women with dependent children worked full-time, compared to 96% of employed males with dependent children.<sup>40</sup> This has a significant impact on women's incomes and can leave women locked in poverty especially when jobs are low paid. In addition, part-time jobs tend to be less available in higher-paying occupations which have a greater degree of career progression, further eroding the attractiveness of a return to work.<sup>41</sup>

A report by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, Northern Ireland Committee (NIC ICTU)<sup>42</sup> states that: *“there is consistent evidence that becoming a mother is the most important factor in explaining gender inequalities in the labour market. Women with children are much less likely to participate in the labour market, and when they do, they are more likely to work in insecure and parttime positions. In addition to this, the pay penalty for motherhood is large, and parental leave entitlements are skewed towards mothers staying at home.”*

A paper by the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre (UUEPC)<sup>43</sup> highlights data which shows that 38% of those who are inactive due to looking after the family or home are also unpaid carers. The report points to a significant difference in inactivity rates depending on the number of hours engaged in unpaid care, with this increasing from rates of 28% for those doing less than 19 hours, to rates of 58% for those providing more than 50 hours of unpaid care. These figures help to illustrate the

---

<sup>39</sup> Main statistics for Northern Ireland, Statistical bulletin, Labour market, NISRA, March 2023 <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/system/files/statistics/census-2021-main-statistics-for-northern-ireland-phase-3-statistical-bulletin-labour-market.pdf>

<sup>40</sup> Women In Northern Ireland 2023, NISRA, November 2024

<https://datavis.nisra.gov.uk/economy-and-labour-market/women-in-northern-ireland-2023.html>

<sup>41</sup> Economic inactivity, Who, what, where, why? Ulster University Economic Policy Centre, January 2024

[Economic inactivity. Who what, where, why? \(ulster.ac.uk\)](https://www.ulster.ac.uk/economic-inactivity-who-what-where-why/)

<sup>42</sup> Childcare in Northern Ireland: Care, Cost and Gender Equality, NIC ICTU, October 2020

<https://www.ictuni.org/publications/childcare-northern-ireland-care-cost-and-gender-equality>

<sup>43</sup> Economic inactivity, Who, what, where, why? Ulster University Economic Policy Centre, January 2024

[Economic inactivity. Who what, where, why? \(ulster.ac.uk\)](https://www.ulster.ac.uk/economic-inactivity-who-what-where-why/)

challenge of combining care responsibilities with work something which is more likely to affect women.

An OECD report<sup>44</sup> has shown that the unequal burden of family-related work contributes to a higher propensity of women to drop out of the labour force than men. On average across European countries, around 1.7% of employed and 4.6% of unemployed women in a given year move to inactivity to fulfil domestic tasks, compared to less than 0.2% of employed and 1% of unemployed men.

### 2.3.2 *Sickness and Disability*

Economic inactivity figures for Northern Ireland show that the most common reason for inactivity was 'long-term sick'. The Family Resources Survey<sup>45</sup> showed that almost one quarter of the Northern Ireland population had a disability (24%) and that 22% of working age adults were disabled. Disability rates are much higher in Northern Ireland than in other UK countries. A higher prevalence of disability in Northern Ireland is driven by higher rates amongst females and older age individuals (aged 50-64).<sup>46</sup> Research<sup>47</sup> discussing the causes of these higher levels of disability suggests among other things that this may be partly explained by higher rates of mental ill-health in Northern Ireland driven at least partly by the impact of 'The Troubles' and a lack of investment. It also suggests that higher levels of deprivation in Northern Ireland may also help to explain the higher rates of disability.

Family Resources Survey figures<sup>48</sup> show that more women report having a disability than men (245,000 females and 206,000 males). The number of males and females with a disability has risen over the last 10 years from 170,000 and 180,000

---

<sup>44</sup> Promoting Gender Equality to Strengthen Economic Growth and Resilience, OECD Economics Department Working Papers No.1776, November 2023  
[https://one.oecd.org/document/ECO/WKP\(2023\)29/en/pdf](https://one.oecd.org/document/ECO/WKP(2023)29/en/pdf)

<sup>45</sup> Family Resources Survey: Northern Ireland 2022/23, NISRA & Department for Communities, May 2024 [https://datavis.nisra.gov.uk/communities/FRS\\_report\\_2223.html#](https://datavis.nisra.gov.uk/communities/FRS_report_2223.html#)

<sup>46</sup> Maximising potential: A review of labour market outcomes for people with disabilities in Northern Ireland, Ulster University Economic Policy Centre, 2022  
<https://www.ulster.ac.uk/epc/pdf/2022/disability-and-the-labour-market/Disability-and-the-labour-market.pdf>

<sup>47</sup> Disability rates in Northern Ireland in a time of unprecedented budget cuts, Dr Anne Devlin, August 2023  
<https://qppl.qub.ac.uk/disability-rates-in-northern-ireland-in-a-time-of-unprecedented-budget-cuts/>

<sup>48</sup> Family Resources Survey: Northern Ireland 2022/23, NISRA & Department for Communities, May 2024 [https://datavis.nisra.gov.uk/communities/FRS\\_report\\_2223.html#](https://datavis.nisra.gov.uk/communities/FRS_report_2223.html#)

respectively in 2012/13. Research by Ulster University has highlighted that disability prevalence amongst females has been consistently higher and is a trend observed across the UK and at an international level, often linked to women being more likely to report non-fatal but debilitating health conditions (for example, arthritis, depression) relative to men.<sup>49</sup>

In terms of impairment type 46% of disabled people reported mobility and 27% reported mental health. Problems with mental health are pervasive in Northern Ireland and research shows that women are often more vulnerable to suffering from poor mental health. The Northern Ireland Health Survey shows<sup>50</sup> that around one in five adults (21%) showed indications of possible mental health problems, based on GHQ124 data. Levels were higher among women (25%), compared with men (16%). In addition, levels in the most deprived areas were around one and a half times those in the least deprived areas (30% compared to 20%).

A Mental Health Foundation NI report<sup>51</sup> points to research which shows that employment status is linked to mental health outcomes, with people who are unemployed or economically inactive having higher rates of common mental health problems than those employed.

The Northern Ireland Audit Office <sup>52</sup> outlined the significant cost of mental ill-health/problems for the economy, by pointing to research carried out by the London

<sup>49</sup> Maximising potential: A review of labour market outcomes for people with disabilities in Northern Ireland , Ulster University Economic Policy Centre, 2022

<https://www.ulster.ac.uk/epc/pdf/2022/disability-and-the-labour-market/Disability-and-the-labour-market.pdf>

<sup>50</sup> Mental Health Services in Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland Audit Office, May 2023 - GHQ 12 (General Health Questionnaire) is a screening tool which assesses the possibility of psychiatric morbidity in the general population. It is widely used, forming part of the Department of Health's Health Survey of Northern Ireland and similar surveys in England and Scotland. The questionnaire contains 12 questions about recent general levels of happiness, depression, anxiety and sleep disturbance, with scores of four or more (in a possible range from 0 to 12) indicating possible mental health problems – cited in NI Audit office report [00293490 - Mental Health Report WEB.pdf \(niauditoffice.gov.uk\)](#)

<sup>51</sup> Mental Health in Northern Ireland: Fundamental Facts, Mental Health Foundation NI & Office of Mental Health Champion, October 2023

<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-10/Northern%20Ireland%20Fundamental%20Facts%20October%202023.pdf>

<sup>52</sup> Mental Health Services in Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland Audit Office, May 2023 [https://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/files/niauditoffice/documents/2023-05/00293490%20-%20Mental%20Health%20Report WEB.pdf](https://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/files/niauditoffice/documents/2023-05/00293490%20-%20Mental%20Health%20Report%20WEB.pdf)

School of Economics and the Mental Health Foundation who determined that the cost of mental health in Northern Ireland is £3.4 billion. The bulk of this figure reflects the cost of informal care (£1.15 billion) and the cost of lost productivity associated with people living with mental health conditions (£1.07 billion).

Research by the Department for Communities<sup>53</sup> shows that people with disabilities in Northern Ireland are more disadvantaged against the equivalent UK groups across a range of labour market areas including a higher economic inactivity rate, lower employment rate, higher disability employment gap and lower levels of pay.

Latest labour market statistics<sup>54</sup> show that the employment rate of people with disabilities is 42.1% compared to 83.4% for people without a disability. That equates to a disability employment gap in Northern Ireland of just over 31%. In addition, the economic inactivity rate is higher for people with disabilities at 55.3% compared to 15.2% for people without a disability.

Historically the female employment rate for people with disabilities lagged behind the male employment rate but by 2020 the female employment rate had risen to be higher than the male rate. Department for Communities research<sup>55</sup> states that the exact reasons for this change to the employment gap are not known. The research highlights the shift in the underlying reasons for economic inactivity over the past 25 years with the proportion inactive due to family and home care reducing substantially (the majority of whom will be women).

### 2.3.3 Low Paid Work

Northern Ireland has the highest proportion of low-paid jobs in the UK with approximately 4.7% of all jobs in NI being low-paid. At £15.20, median hourly pay for

---

<sup>53</sup> Disability within the Northern Ireland Labour Market, DfC Professional Services Unit, July 2022  
<https://niopa.qub.ac.uk/bitstream/NIOPA/15721/1/dfc-disability-within-northern-ireland-labour-market-2022.pdf>

<sup>54</sup> <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/labour-force-survey-annual-tables-2023>

<sup>55</sup> Disability within the Northern Ireland Labour Market, DfC Professional Services Unit, July 2022  
<https://niopa.qub.ac.uk/bitstream/NIOPA/15721/1/dfc-disability-within-northern-ireland-labour-market-2022.pdf>

all employees (full-time and part-time combined) in Northern Ireland is the joint lowest of all the UK regions and is almost £2 below the UK median (£17.09).<sup>56</sup> Northern Ireland was one of the regions with above average proportion of jobs paid below the Living Wage in April 2023 at 15.6% third in the list behind the North East (15.9%) and the East Midlands (15.7%). Women are significantly more affected by low pay than men with more women earning less than the Living Wage in the UK (15.4% compared to 10.4%). Jobs held by women also accounted for 59.5% of all jobs paid below the Living Wage (2.2million in total). A higher proportion of part-time jobs (28.3%) were paid below the Living Wage in April 2023 than full-time jobs (7.5%).<sup>57</sup>

Northern Ireland also has highest rate of people being paid below the Real Living Wage (RLW) and only 1% of accredited employers are from Northern Ireland. According to the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE) provisional data for 2023, Northern Ireland has the highest rates of workers being paid below the RLW in the UK - almost 1 in 5 workers (16%) compared with around 10% in Scotland and 13% Wales with the UK average at 13%. Women are also more likely to be earning less than the RLW at 18% compared to 13.2% of men and 29.5% of part-time workers are paid less than the RLW – part-time workers are three times more likely to be paid below the RLW than their full-time counterparts at 10.1%.<sup>58</sup>

Research by the Economic & Social Research Institute (ESRI) has shown that women in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland are more likely than men to work in low paid jobs.<sup>59</sup> In 2022, 21% of females and 14% of males were low-paid in Northern Ireland using the definition of earning less than two-thirds of the median hourly pay. The ESRI report highlights the policy challenges that exist as a result of the disadvantages faced by lone parents (93% of lone parents in Northern Ireland

---

<sup>56</sup> Employee Earnings in Northern Ireland, NISRA, October 2024  
[https://datavis.nisra.gov.uk/economy-and-labour-market/Employee-earnings-NI-2024.html#2\\_Low\\_and\\_high\\_pay\\_analysis](https://datavis.nisra.gov.uk/economy-and-labour-market/Employee-earnings-NI-2024.html#2_Low_and_high_pay_analysis)

<sup>57</sup> Employee jobs paid below the Living Wage: 2023, Living Wage Foundation, February 2024  
[https://www.livingwage.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-02/Employee%20Jobs%20Below%20The%20Living%20Wage\\_V7.pdf](https://www.livingwage.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-02/Employee%20Jobs%20Below%20The%20Living%20Wage_V7.pdf)

<sup>58</sup> <https://www.adviceni.net/about/news/real-living-wage-northern-ireland>

<sup>59</sup> Gender and Labour Market Inclusion on the Island of Ireland, Economic & Social Research Institute, April 2024  
[https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/RS176\\_0.pdf](https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/RS176_0.pdf)

are women) both in accessing employment and in the conditions of employment:  
*“The emphasis on labour market activation in the welfare system is stronger in Northern Ireland, yet the participation rate is lower. This points to the persistence of barriers that go beyond welfare disincentives. Tackling low pay among lone parents is a key concern if they are not to be activated into in-work poverty.”*

An analysis of the Northern Ireland labour market statistics around occupation<sup>60</sup> shows the jobs where women are more likely to work. Among women the most common occupation groups were ‘professional occupations’ (97,300 females), ‘caring, leisure and other service occupations’ (74,600 females) and ‘administrative and secretarial occupations’ (67,400 females). In terms of men, the most common occupation groups were ‘skilled trades occupations’ (99,100 males), ‘professional occupations’ (74,900 males) and ‘process, plant and machine operatives’ (56,400 males). These figures also show that women are less likely to be employed as ‘managers, directors and senior officials’ (27,500 females) compared to 48,600 males and are more likely to work in ‘sales and customer service’ (47,600 females) compared to men (31,300 males). It is evident from these figures that women are more likely to work in jobs which are lower paid than men.

## 2.4 Barriers to Work

In looking at the reasons why people do not return to employment a briefing paper by the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre (UUEPC)<sup>61</sup> stated: *“much of the research points to the many barriers to re-entering the labour market which individuals identify, but also increasingly that these are multiple barriers being faced simultaneously, as opposed to a singular issue which can be easily removed.”* This paper listed a number of barriers which are often mentioned by those who are economically inactive including previous/recent work experience, household finances, qualifications, access to childcare, age, the benefits system, local

---

<sup>60</sup> Main statistics for Northern Ireland, Statistical bulletin, Labour market, NISRA, March 2023  
<https://www.nisra.gov.uk/system/files/statistics/census-2021-main-statistics-for-northern-ireland-phase-3-statistical-bulletin-labour-market.pdf>

<sup>61</sup> Economic inactivity, Who, what, where, why? Ulster University Economic Policy Centre, January 2024  
[Economic inactivity. Who what, where, why? \(ulster.ac.uk\)](https://www.ulster.ac.uk/economic-inactivity-who-what-where-why/)



opportunities and access to healthcare. Research by ESRI<sup>62</sup> also highlights issues around intersectionality as barriers to work: *“Women are not a homogenous group and gender interacts with other dimensions of inequality to shape access to the labour market.”*

#### 2.4.1 Motherhood

Gender roles and norms have meant that the responsibility for caring for children has fallen disproportionately on women, limiting their ability to participate in the labour market and often restricting the progress of women who are in employment.

Statistics outlined in the Women in Northern Ireland report<sup>63</sup> show that the economic activity rate for women with pre-school age children was 20 percentage points lower (72%) than for men with pre-school age children (92%). Analysis of household units showed that 79.4% of women who were inactive due to family/home commitments had a dependent child.

This report also highlighted that the group with the lowest economic activity is women with a youngest child of pre-school age (71.7%) with a 20.6 percentage points difference in the economic activity rate for men and women with a youngest child of pre-school age. It also showed how the working pattern of women relates to the age of their youngest child with 50.6% of women whose youngest child was of pre-school age working full-time. This increased to 63.0% of women whose youngest child was of secondary school age.

A report by NIC ICTU<sup>64</sup> has said that what becomes clear from an examination of the data is that a large proportion of the difference between males and females in terms of the nature of labour force participation is in many cases better described as a ‘motherhood gap’ rather than a gender gap. This report stated that: *“Despite some high level commitments to gender equality, the NI Executive is not making the most of women’s economic potential, and particularly the potential of mothers. There is*

---

<sup>62</sup> Gender and Labour Market Inclusion on the Island of Ireland, Economic & Social Research Institute, April 2024

[https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/RS176\\_0.pdf](https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/RS176_0.pdf)

<sup>63</sup> Women in Northern Ireland 2020/21, NISRA, March 2022

<https://www.nisra.gov.uk/system/files/statistics/women-in-Northern-Ireland-2020-2021.pdf>

<sup>64</sup> Childcare in Northern Ireland: Care, Cost and Gender Equality, NIC ICTU, October 2020

<https://www.ictuni.org/publications/childcare-northern-ireland-care-cost-and-gender-equality>

*consistent evidence that becoming a mother is the most important factor in explaining gender inequalities in the labour market.”*

### 2.4.2 Childcare Costs

High childcare costs and poor financial gains from working is often the reason why many low-income mothers do not enter or remain in work. Lone parents often face persistent barriers in the labour market with limits on the number of hours they can work due to childcare needs, low pay and a greater likelihood of being in working poverty.

An OECD report<sup>65</sup> states: *“Low quality or unaffordable childcare can be a significant hindrance to women’s labour market participation. Adequate childcare supply facilitates an earlier return to work after childbirth and provides the option for both parents to take on full-time work.”*

The World Economic Forum has found that the UK has some of the highest childcare costs in the world.<sup>66</sup> Compared with OECD (the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) member states, Northern Ireland is ranked third highest for the highest share of average household income spent on childcare costs.<sup>67</sup>

The CEDAW Committee specifically raised the issue of childcare costs in Northern Ireland in its most recent examination of the UK and said that it is: *“concerned that childcare costs remain excessive, particularly in Northern Ireland, which constitutes an obstacle for women to enter and progress in the workplace.”*<sup>68</sup> The Committee

<sup>65</sup> Promoting Gender Equality to Strengthen Economic Growth and Resilience, OECD Economics Department Working Papers No.1776, November 2023

[https://one.oecd.org/document/ECO/WKP\(2023\)29/en/pdf](https://one.oecd.org/document/ECO/WKP(2023)29/en/pdf)

<sup>66</sup> <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/07/highest-childcare-costs-by-country/>

<sup>67</sup> Economic inactivity, key employment barriers and childcare costs potentially impacting those barriers: initial considerations for Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland Assembly, May 2024  
[Assembly Research and Information Service Briefing Paper - Economic inactivity, key employment barriers and childcare costs potentially impacting those barriers: initial considerations for Northern Ireland \(niassembly.gov.uk\)](#)

<sup>68</sup> Concluding Observations on the eighth periodic report of United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, CEDAW/C/GBR/CO/8, March 2019, para 45  
[https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW/C/GBR/CO/8&Lang=En](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW/C/GBR/CO/8&Lang=En)



recommended that government should ensure the availability of affordable and accessible childcare particularly in Northern Ireland.<sup>69</sup>

Research by Employers For Childcare<sup>70</sup> showed that the high cost of childcare affected parents' ability to work and particularly the ability of mothers. The research found that mothers are more likely to have reduced their working hours or limited their career prospects and 4% of working mothers had to stop working altogether due to the cost of childcare. In addition, it showed that 3% of working mothers had to stop working altogether due to being unable to find the childcare they would need. The Northern Ireland Childcare Survey report<sup>71</sup> has found that the cost of childcare has been rising in Northern Ireland and that it is impacting on parent's ability to work and their productivity while in work. The research showed that:

- The average cost of a full-time childcare place in Northern Ireland is £10,036 a year (an increase of 14% since 2021) and more than the maximum costs supported through Tax-Free Childcare.
- 56% of parents are using means other than their income to pay for childcare including savings, credit cards and loans.
- 81% of parents report there is not enough provision of childcare in their area.
- Parents are reducing their working hours, passing up on opportunities for career progression and, in some cases, leaving work altogether because of difficulties affording or accessing childcare.
- 88% of parents have had to change their work arrangements due to the cost of childcare.
- More than three quarters (76%) are likely or very likely to change their working arrangements in some way due to childcare.
- Most parents using childcare (95%) report that childcare stress impacts on productivity at work, 61% report this is at least weekly.

Crucially, in terms of parent's ability to take up or stay in work and the ability to progress in their work the Employers For Childcare research<sup>72</sup> found that:

---

<sup>69</sup> Ibid

<sup>70</sup> Northern Ireland Childcare Survey 2023, Employers For Childcare, December 2023  
<https://www.employersforchildcare.org/report/northern-ireland-childcare-survey-2023/>

<sup>71</sup> Ibid

<sup>72</sup> Ibid

- Parents in lower income households are more likely to have had to stop work due to the cost of childcare.
- 63% of stay-at-home parents said they would be able to get back into work if they could access more affordable childcare.
- 89% of working parents said being able to access more affordable childcare would impact on their career including enabling them to progress (63%), or to participate in education, training or skills development (48%).

High childcare costs have even greater impacts for low-income families. Of parents from lower income households,<sup>73</sup> 17% with a household income of up to £20,000 reported that they had had to stop working altogether due to the cost of childcare compared to just 1% of parents with a household income of over £70,000.

It is clear from the research that the high cost of childcare in Northern Ireland affects the ability of parents to work and that childcare costs act as a significant barrier to parents entering and staying in the workforce. This is even more the case for women with gendered expectations of care meaning that women are more likely to have responsibility for the care of children.

#### *2.4.3 Sickness and Disability*

There is evidence of additional labour market issues for people with disabilities. Department for Communities research<sup>74</sup> highlights that employees with a disability were more likely to work part-time, report lower opportunities for career progression and receive lower earnings in Northern Ireland. This research also reported that people with a disability are over-represented in low skilled occupations and under-represented in high skilled occupations. Figures in relation to qualifications and learning also give cause for concern.

Ulster University research<sup>75</sup> shows that qualification levels are relatively low among disabled people where two-fifths have a highest qualification below level 2 (GCSE at

---

<sup>73</sup> Ibid

<sup>74</sup> Ibid

<sup>75</sup> Maximising potential: A review of labour market outcomes for people with disabilities in Northern Ireland, Ulster University Economic Policy Centre, 2022

grade C or above), compared to less than one-fifth of non-disabled people. The research also highlights that Northern Ireland has the lowest participation rate in lifelong learning among disabled people.

Action for Children research<sup>76</sup> has highlighted the reasons why parents on sickness benefits struggle to get back into work. Their findings suggest a complicated picture and a range of barriers to work including being too unwell to work/work more right now (35%), not getting the treatment they needed from the NHS (23%), a lack of suitable or flexible jobs (23%), a lack of remote jobs (20%) and a fear of losing benefits if they try to work (20%). This research showed that 38% of parents on incapacity benefits and not in paid work said their health or disability ruled them out of paid work completely.

Article 27 of United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD) recognises the right of persons with disabilities to work, on an equal basis with others; this includes the right to the opportunity to gain a living by work freely chosen or accepted in a labour market and work environment that is open, inclusive and accessible to persons with disabilities.<sup>77</sup>

#### 2.4.4 Unpaid Care Responsibilities

*“Each and 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 simply not be able to cope without them. Yet far too many go unseen and unsupported. Indeed, the failure of government on this issue drives thousands of people out of the labour market every year, forcing mostly women to cut back on hours or leave employment*

---

<https://www.ulster.ac.uk/epc/pdf/2022/disability-and-the-labour-market/Disability-and-the-labour-market.pdf>

<sup>76</sup> Sick and tired: A look at the hardships and work prospects of sick and disabled parents relying on incapacity benefits, Action for Children, October 2024

<https://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/our-work-and-impact/policy-work-campaigns-and-research/policy-reports/sick-and-tired-the-hardships-and-work-prospects-of-sick-and-disabled-parents-on-incapacity-benefits/>

<sup>77</sup> <https://social.desa.un.org/issues/disability/crpd/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities-crpd>

*altogether, holding them back from fulfilling their economic potential and acting as a handbrake on our economy.”*

Sinead McLaughlin MLA, Member of the Committee for the Economy<sup>78</sup>

Census figures show<sup>79</sup> that there are over 220,000 people providing unpaid care for sick or disabled family members in Northern Ireland, with over 180,000 of those unpaid carers of working age. Prevailing gender norms mean there is often the assumption that women will provide unpaid care. The latest Census figures for Northern Ireland show that nearly 60% of unpaid carers are women<sup>80</sup> and in the UK as a whole, research shows<sup>81</sup> that 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.

The Family Resources Survey<sup>82</sup> shows that carers were more likely to be economically inactive due to sickness/disability – 21% of adult carers were economically inactive due to being permanently sick/disabled compared to 9% of all adults.

Research by the Women’s Regional Consortium and Carers NI<sup>83</sup> highlights that more than 1 in 6 women in employment are providing unpaid care (approximately 71,000 women). The findings of this research also show the issues that women with care responsibilities face in relation to balancing unpaid care with work:

- One in three women have given up work to care (34%).

---

<sup>78</sup> Career or Care: Women, unpaid caring and employment in Northern Ireland, February 2024, Carers NI & the Women’s Regional Consortium  
<https://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Career-or-care-Women-unpaid-caring-and-employment-in-Northern-Ireland.pdf>

<sup>79</sup> Ibid

<sup>80</sup> Career or Care: Women, unpaid caring and employment in Northern Ireland, February 2024, Carers NI & the Women’s Regional Consortium  
<https://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Career-or-care-Women-unpaid-caring-and-employment-in-Northern-Ireland.pdf>

<sup>81</sup> Will I care? The likelihood of being a carer in adult life, CarersUK, November 2019  
[http://www.carersuk.org/images/News\\_campaigns/CarersRightsDay\\_Nov19\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.carersuk.org/images/News_campaigns/CarersRightsDay_Nov19_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>82</sup> Family Resources Survey: Northern Ireland 2022/23, NISRA & Department for Communities, May 2024 [https://datavis.nisra.gov.uk/communities/FRS\\_report\\_2223.html#](https://datavis.nisra.gov.uk/communities/FRS_report_2223.html#)

<sup>83</sup> Career or Care: Women, unpaid caring and employment in Northern Ireland, February 2024, Carers NI & the Women’s Regional Consortium  
<https://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Career-or-care-Women-unpaid-caring-and-employment-in-Northern-Ireland.pdf>

- One in four women have decreased their working hours due to a caring role (28%).
- One in six women have taken on a less qualified job or turned down a promotion to fit around caring responsibilities (17%).
- 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.
- A lack of support for carers in the workplace results in a loss of valuable and skilled individuals to the labour market.

The inability to take up or maintain employment can have significant effects on a carer's life. Research undertaken by the Carer Poverty Commission NI<sup>84</sup> identified the difficulty in combining paid employment with unpaid care as one of the main drivers of carer poverty in Northern Ireland. It detailed that more than half (55%) of unpaid carers who are out of work live in poverty.

#### 2.4.5 *Rurality*

Northern Ireland has a large rural population with more than a third (36%) of the population living in a rural area.<sup>85</sup> Statistics show that compared to their rural counterparts rural people are more likely to be in full time employment (59%), young people from rural areas are more likely to leave school with 5 or more GCSEs (83%), are also more likely to enter higher education (48%) and workers from rural areas report being more highly skilled (58%).<sup>86</sup> While these are positive figures there remains a disproportionate impact on rural women in terms of accessing good jobs according to the Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network.

---

<sup>84</sup> Policy measures to tackle poverty among unpaid carers in Northern Ireland, Carer Poverty Commission NI, October 2023  
<https://www.carersuk.org/media/vpala4ts/policy-measures-to-tackle-poverty-among-unpaid-carers-in-northern-ireland.pdf>

<sup>85</sup> Key Rural Issues, Northern Ireland 2023, Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, February 2024  
<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/daera/Key%20Rural%20Issues%202023.pdf>

<sup>86</sup> Key Rural Issues, Northern Ireland 2023, Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, February 2024  
<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/daera/Key%20Rural%20Issues%202023.pdf>

Business size and job sectors impact on the availability of good jobs for women. More than half (58%) of Northern Ireland businesses are in rural areas, yet rural businesses account for less than a quarter (21%) of employees and around a quarter (25%) of total business turnover meaning fewer employees and smaller budgets for job creation. For women in rural areas this is compounded by the fact that rural businesses predominantly engage in agriculture, forestry, fishing and construction (57%) with urban businesses more widely spread across a variety of sectors. These sectors are predominantly male oriented and strong levels of gender segregation in the labour markets in the UK and Ireland are evidenced very plainly in rural areas.

Connectivity, particularly access to transport is often cited by rural women as a major barrier to accessing work. Rural workers are more likely to use their own transport to commute (90%)<sup>87</sup> than those from urban areas (82%) with the average commute of workers from rural areas being almost double that of urban-based workers, travelling on average more than 600 miles more during the year to get to work.

Employers for Childcare research<sup>88</sup> shows that the greatest percentage increase (15%) in the cost of childcare places across the Trust areas in Northern Ireland was in three Trust areas outside the Belfast Trust area. In addition, the research found that families in counties Tyrone, Derry/Londonderry and Fermanagh are more likely to report using casual childcare. In Tyrone, almost 1 in 5 families report using casual childcare at least regularly.

While many of the barriers to work for women are the same as their urban counterparts (care commitments, ill health/disability, etc) rural women experience even greater difficulties accessing services such as public transport, childcare or social care services. Adding in the time needed to commute, the necessity of having access to your own vehicle, being unable to work where you live and difficulties

---

<sup>87</sup> Key Rural Issues, Northern Ireland 2023, Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, February 2024

<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/daera/Key%20Rural%20Issues%202023.pdf>

<sup>88</sup> NI Childcare Survey 2023 Employers for Childcare, December 2023

<https://www.employersforchildcare.org/report/northern-ireland-childcare-survey-2023>

accessing suitable jobs in rural areas means that many rural women struggle to work or have difficulties juggling work with family life.

#### 2.4.6 Ethnicity

Census figures show that in Northern Ireland the percentage of the population who stated they were from a white ethnic group was 96.55% of the total population. In total 3.45% stated they belonged to a minority ethnic group. Since 2001, minority ethnic groups, as a proportion of All Usual Residents in Northern Ireland, have grown by 2.6 percentage points.<sup>89</sup>

There are difficulties with identifying the scale of the barriers facing minority ethnic people particularly around the lack of data or very small baseline numbers. But we do know that those from minority ethnic communities are significantly less likely to be in employment and are more likely to be unemployed than the white population from the general patterns for the UK as a whole. Department for Work and Pensions research<sup>90</sup> suggests that the female inactivity rates of certain minority ethnic groups are much higher than that of the total female inactivity rate.

The barriers to work faced by minority ethnic women are comparable to women of any ethnicity including the well documented issues around gendered expectations of care and issues with affordability and access to childcare. While some minority ethnic women may not choose to work others may want to engage with the labour market but lack the confidence, language and skills to do so. Research by the Department for Work & Pensions (DWP) on interventions supporting ethnic minority labour market participation identified that language barriers, disadvantage, family background and education, racial discrimination and culture all play a part in structuring the labour market position of minority ethnic people.<sup>91</sup>

---

<sup>89</sup> Equality Commission for Northern Ireland Census 2021 Briefing: Release 2, Phase 1 Results January 2023

<https://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Corporate/Commission%20Meetings/2023/cmeeting250123/EC-23-01-11-Census21databriefingnoteAC.pdf>

<sup>90</sup> Interventions supporting Ethnic Minority labour market participation: Part two, Department for Work and Pensions, October 2019

<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5d9df75d40f0b607f3e67994/interventions-supporting-ethnic-minority-labour-market-participation-part-2.pdf>

<sup>91</sup> Interventions supporting ethnic minority labour market participation: part one, Department for Work and Pensions, Race Disparity Unit, October 2019



Analysis of Census 2021 Data by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland<sup>92</sup> on economic activity shows that the majority of the economically active population were white (96.8%). The lowest rates of economic activity were for Irish Traveller (21.7%) and Arab (34.3%) ethnic groups. Further analysis by ethnic group and gender shows that the rates of female economic activity within each of the ethnic groups was lower than the male rates of economic activity. The economic activity rates for Irish Travellers were the lowest among all the ethnic groups and was even lower for female Irish Travellers who had the lowest rate of economic activity (17.5%) across all the ethnic groups by gender. In analysing the reasons for economic inactivity rates it shows that looking after home and family (21.9%) was higher for ethnic groups than the white population (12%).

Research into minority ethnic women entrepreneurs<sup>93</sup> from 2006 highlighted barriers to participation in the labour market for minority ethnic communities in Northern Ireland. The research identified: exploitation in employment, poor working conditions, lack of information, language barriers, lack of cultural understanding, harassment and racism. For women the lack of adequate childcare was also identified as a barrier to participation. This research highlighted that a significant problem facing minority ethnic communities in Northern Ireland is racism.

Racism and discrimination remains an issue which can have a severe impact on the ability of women from ethnic minority communities in participating in the labour market. Racist violence and hate displays in Northern Ireland in summer 2024 have been reported as further increasing a sense of fear in minority ethnic communities and will undoubtedly add to the difficulties around labour market participation for these groups.

---

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ethnic-minority-labour-market-participation-interventions-part-1/interventions-supporting-ethnic-minority-labour-market-participation-part-one>

<sup>92</sup> Economic Activity by Section 75 grounds, Census 2021 Briefing Paper, Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, October 2023

<https://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Delivering%20Equality/Census2021-BriefingPaper-EconomicActivityNI.pdf>

<sup>93</sup> Minority Ethnic Women Entrepreneurs in Northern Ireland, Michael Potter, 2006

<https://www.community-relations.org.uk/files/communityrelations/media-files/Minority%20Ethnic%20Women.pdf>



#### 2.4.7 The Benefits System and Welfare Reform

In addition to the many barriers economically inactive people face which have already been outlined in this paper, research by ESRI<sup>94</sup> identifies that patterns of employment are also sensitive to social welfare provision and eligibility criteria, especially for lone mothers. Women are more likely to have to rely on social security benefits as their only household income. Women also are more likely to receive benefits as the carer for another, such as dependent children and/or disabled family members.

Research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation<sup>95</sup> shows that around nine in ten low-income households receiving Universal Credit are unable to afford essentials and that this level of inadequate income can act as a barrier to work. A safety net that allows incomes to fall so low can add to the challenges people face getting back into work including deprivation, social exclusion, homelessness and struggling with the costs associated with a job (including transport, clothing and food costs).

A lack of income can cause mental strain leaving people able to think about little else than how to make ends meet, managing loans and rent arrears. This leaves less capacity for effective job searching and does not put people in the right mindset to look for work. Living with constant precarity over money increases the likelihood of experiencing poor mental health which in turn can impact employment outcomes. An APPG on Poverty report<sup>96</sup> concluded that *“the inadequate rates of benefits are counterproductive to the Government’s aim of getting more people into work.”*

Research by Queen’s University and ESRI<sup>97</sup> noted a theme for those not in work was the fear of losing benefits if they moved into work and frustration more generally with

---

<sup>94</sup> Gender and Labour Market Inclusion on the Island of Ireland, Economic & Social Research Institute, April 2024

[https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/RS176\\_0.pdf](https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/RS176_0.pdf)

<sup>95</sup> Inadequate Universal Credit and barriers to work, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, July 2023

<https://www.jrf.org.uk/social-security/inadequate-universal-credit-and-barriers-to-work>

<sup>96</sup> “Enough to be able to live, not just survive” A report by the APPG on Poverty following its inquiry into the (in)adequacy of social security, June 2023

<https://www.appgpoverty.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/APPG-on-Poverty-Social-Security-Report.pdf>

<sup>97</sup> Economic Inactivity Report 2: Qualitative insights into Economic Inactivity in Northern Ireland, Queen’s University Belfast and the Economic and Social Research Institute, October 2023

the welfare system for being cumbersome, inflexible and untrustworthy. Therefore, threats or restrictions to the benefits of inactive people were seen as a major barrier in either seeking out formal employment or taking a risk with the creation of new businesses/entrepreneurial activities.

A key part of the welfare reform agenda has been welfare conditionality and this presents a significant barrier for accessing work. The University of York Welfare Conditionality Project<sup>98</sup> explains that: *“Welfare conditionality is about linking welfare rights to ‘responsible’ behaviour. A principle of conditionality holds that access to certain basic, publicly provided welfare benefits and services should be dependent on an individual agreeing to meet particular obligations or patterns of behaviour.”* One of the key findings of the project’s research work was the ineffectiveness of welfare conditionality in facilitating people’s movement off social security benefits and entry into, or progression within, the paid labour market over time.

A Pathways to Work Commission Report for Barnsley<sup>99</sup> (a market town in the North of England with above average rates of economic activity strongly correlated to bad health, low wages and inadequate skills) argues that how the benefits system works, based on targeting claimants with sanctions if they do not find employment, is helping to drive economic inactivity. This report also found that the role of ill-health in driving lower levels of labour market participation is undeniable. The report states that there is not one single factor driving higher rates of economic inactivity and the reasons are often complex but that ill-health is the biggest driver of rising levels of economic inactivity.

## 2.5 Supports Needed

Following the analysis of the barriers to work outlined in this chapter this section will take a brief look at some of the possible areas of support that are needed to overcome the barriers outlined.

---

<https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/economy/Economic-Inactivity-Report-2.pdf>

<sup>98</sup> <https://www.york.ac.uk/research/impact/welfare-conditionality-project/#:~:text=Welfare%20conditionality%20is%20about%20linking,obligations%20or%20patterns%20of%20behaviour.>

<sup>99</sup> Pathways to Work Commission Report, July 2024

<https://www.barnsley.gov.uk/media/opbpxxkz/bmbc-pathways-to-work-commission-report.pdf>

### *Support with Childcare*

Despite commitments in the New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) agreement Northern Ireland still has no Childcare Strategy in place. With the restoration of the Northern Ireland Assembly in February 2024 childcare was stated to be a priority for the Assembly and Executive and has been included as one of the nine immediate priority areas in the draft Programme for Government. While there is a commitment to develop an Early Learning and Childcare Strategy in the draft Programme for Government there are no ambitious targets set or details around timescales for delivery.

In May 2024 Education Minister Paul Givan announced a Northern Ireland Childcare Subsidy Scheme.<sup>100</sup> This Scheme will entitle some working parents in Northern Ireland to get help with their childcare bills through the tax-free childcare scheme. The scheme includes a 15% subsidy on top of the 20% provided by the Government. The Northern Ireland Executive has set aside £25million for childcare in the budget but this falls far short of the £400million investment needed to fully fund an Early Learning and Childcare Strategy for Northern Ireland.<sup>101</sup>

A report by Employers For Childcare and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation<sup>102</sup> found that the high costs of childcare and barriers to access make it difficult for parents to afford the childcare they need, which can prevent them generating income through work. The report stated that: *“Lower-income families are least likely to benefit from quality childcare, reducing household incomes as a result of working fewer hours or stopping work altogether. Disadvantaged children are therefore missing the benefits of quality provision.”* The report stressed that the early learning and childcare system must be well designed to remove disadvantage rather than making it worse. It developed a series of proposals to deliver broader support with childcare including:

- The universal, free provision of 22.5 hours of early learning and childcare for children in their immediate pre-school year. This would benefit all families,

---

<sup>100</sup> <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/frequently-asked-questions-early-learning-and-childcare-measures-2024-25>

<sup>101</sup> [Childcare provision: NI strategy could cost up to £400m - BBC News](#)

<sup>102</sup> Tackling disadvantage through childcare in Northern Ireland, Employers for Childcare and Joseph Rowntree Foundation, January 2024  
<https://www.employersforchildcare.org/report/childcare-brief/>

including those who are disadvantaged, with no work or income-associated criteria for access.

- A core-funding subsidy for all registered childcare providers covering a portion of their costs of delivering quality early education and childcare, enabling them to reduce the fees they charge parents.
- A strengthening of the support aimed specifically at tackling disadvantage, including targeted subsidies for providers and expansion of Sure Start services.

### *Supports for Sickness & Disability*

The current rate of Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) is insufficient and has failed to keep pace with the cost of living, inflation and increases in the National Minimum Wage. Women are more likely to be in low-paid, insecure and part-time employment and therefore make up the majority of those in jobs that are ineligible for SSP. The Labour Government has announced plans through the Employment Rights Bill in Great Britain to strengthen statutory sick pay, remove the lower earnings limit to make it available to all workers and remove the waiting period. The Women's Budget Group has welcomed the plans as they will particularly benefit women given their current overrepresentation in ineligible jobs.<sup>103</sup> Women's Platform<sup>104</sup> have highlighted that the Good Jobs Bill in Northern Ireland should address existing gaps in legislation between Britain and Northern Ireland and include a review of sick pay in this legislation.

Action for Children research<sup>105</sup> found that 42% of parents on sickness benefits thought they could return to paid work in the future but this was dependent on their health improving and getting better support from the government and employers.

---

<sup>103</sup> The Feminist Future of Work, The Employment Rights Bill and the impact on women's working lives, Women's Budget Group, September 2024

<https://www.wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/The-feminist-future-of-work.pdf>

<sup>104</sup> <https://womensplatform.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Womens-Platform-response-to-Good-Jobs-consultation.pdf>

<sup>105</sup> Sick and tired: A look at the hardships and work prospects of sick and disabled parents relying on incapacity benefits, Action for Children, October 2024

<https://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/our-work-and-impact/policy-work-campaigns-and-research/policy-reports/sick-and-tired-the-hardships-and-work-prospects-of-sick-and-disabled-parents-on-incapacity-benefits/>

Commentary by the WBG<sup>106</sup> on the economic inactivity figures suggests that Government won't close the gender labour market gap without tackling the rise in women's ill health. The WBG outlined that "*Women face a double whammy, being more likely to be out of the labour market to care for children and relatives and to experience ill health themselves.*" It called for greater investment in health services including mental health support so that people are well enough to return to work.

The Pathways to Work Commission Report for Barnsley<sup>107</sup> found that ill-health is the biggest driver of rising levels of economic inactivity. Among its recommendations the Commission suggests that local health services should be better integrated with employment support services and that there is a need to strengthen work incentives by allowing people to try work without losing benefits.

### *Supports for Unpaid Carers*

Action is needed in a number of areas to help improve unpaid carers access to the labour market including adapting working practices to the needs of unpaid carers, spreading unpaid care responsibilities more equally between men and women and improving access to health and social care services. An OECD report<sup>108</sup> states that: "*Well-developed elderly care can also favour female employment, as women are more likely than men to interrupt their careers or work part-time to care for family members.*"

Women's Regional Consortium and Carers NI research<sup>109</sup> recommended that there is a need to see major changes from government, employers and Health and Social Care services in order to help women combine their caring role with paid employment and to help unpaid carers enter and stay in the labour market. The

---

<sup>106</sup> <https://www.wbg.org.uk/article/government-wont-close-gender-labour-market-gap-without-tackling-rise-in-womens-ill-health-says-wbg/>

<sup>107</sup> Pathways to Work Commission Report, July 2024

<https://www.barnsley.gov.uk/media/opbpxxkz/bmbc-pathways-to-work-commission-report.pdf>

<sup>108</sup> Promoting Gender Equality to Strengthen Economic Growth and Resilience, OECD Economics Department Working Papers, No. 1776, November 2023

[https://one.oecd.org/document/ECO/WKP\(2023\)29/en/pdf#:~:text=Low%20quality%20or%20unaffordable%20childcare,work%20\(OECD%2C%202022a\)](https://one.oecd.org/document/ECO/WKP(2023)29/en/pdf#:~:text=Low%20quality%20or%20unaffordable%20childcare,work%20(OECD%2C%202022a))

<sup>109</sup> Career or Care: Women, unpaid caring and employment in Northern Ireland, February 2024, Carers NI & the Women's Regional Consortium

<https://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Career-or-care-Women-unpaid-caring-and-employment-in-Northern-Ireland.pdf>

report made a number of recommendations for Government, employers and society to do more to value unpaid carers including calling for carers rights to be enshrined in legislation including important rights to flexible working and Carer's Leave.

### *Supports from Employers*

Employers have a key role in supporting people into work and in providing good quality work. The provision of family-friendly and flexible working policies can enable women to overcome some of the structural inequalities they face in employment. ESRI research<sup>110</sup> states that *“Employer provision of family-friendly supports, such as flexible work hours, parttime employment and additional leave, can also enhance female participation, especially in a context of low statutory provision.”*

NISRA Statistics on Work Quality<sup>111</sup> show that a higher proportion of females reported having flexible work than males (61.5% compared to 46.9%). Other work quality indicators do not, however, show the same favourable statistics for women in work. Self-reported opportunities for career progression were lower for females at 57.5% compared to 62% for males and self-reported opportunities for involvement in decision making were 54.9% for females compared to 60.7% for males. The proportion of employees with line manager support was lower for females at 78.4% compared to males at 83.9% and the proportion of employees who were not bullied or harassed was also higher for males (91.2%) compared to females (86.4%).

### *Supports in the Benefits System*

Research from the New Economics Foundation<sup>112</sup> has shown that strict and prescriptive benefits conditionality is pushing people into poor quality work they often struggle to stay in or away from employment support altogether. It suggests that a shift in focus from compliance to engagement would help more people into better

---

<sup>110</sup> Gender and Labour Market Inclusion on the Island of Ireland, Economic & Social Research Institute, April 2024

[https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/RS176\\_0.pdf](https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/RS176_0.pdf)

<sup>111</sup> Work Quality in Northern Ireland – July 2022 to June 2023, NISRA, February 2024

<https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/work-quality-july2022-june2023>

<sup>112</sup> Terms of engagement, Rethinking conditionality to support more people into better jobs, New Economics Foundation, July 2024

<https://neweconomics.org/2024/07/terms-of-engagement>

quality jobs. It would also make engaging with support much less daunting and risky for people facing additional barriers such as health conditions and disabilities.

Research from the New Economics Foundation<sup>113</sup> has shown many claimants felt that conditionality was a major barrier to engagement with accessing work, given the focus on compliance rather than support. The research recommended ending the most strict and prescriptive aspects of the current approach to conditionality, such as a specified number of hours per week of job search and the requirement to apply for and accept any job recommended by a work coach. It also recommended trialling an approach where conditionality is only used as a backstop, to encourage more genuine engagement.

### *Support in Rights and Legislation*

The Department for the Economy has consulted on The ‘Good Jobs’ Employment Rights Bill<sup>114</sup>. The stated goals of legislating include: to help attract and retain people in the workforce and help to reduce Northern Ireland’s high levels of economic inactivity. This Bill contains proposals across a range of areas including the terms of employment, pay and benefits, voice and representation and work-life balance. Many of the proposals in this Bill if enacted would benefit women including the introduction of Carer’s Leave, Neonatal Leave and Pay, enhancements to flexible working, stronger protections for pregnant women against redundancy and changes to paternity leave as well as replacing zero-hours contracts.

### *Support through investment in Care Skills, Valuing Unpaid Care and the need for a Caring Economy*

While removing the barriers that exist to participation in the labour market is important in helping to achieve gender equality it is not enough on its own. The quality of jobs that women work in is equally as important in closing the labour market gender gap. A report by NIC ICTU states: *“We must ensure that a policy which seeks to increase women’s employment is not one that leads to the continued*

---

<sup>113</sup> Terms of engagement, Rethinking conditionality to support more people into better jobs, New Economics Foundation, July 2024

<https://neweconomics.org/2024/07/terms-of-engagement>

<sup>114</sup> <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/oral-statement-launch-good-jobs-employment-rights-bill-consultation-1-july-2024>



*creation of poor-quality employment in the care sector. This obviously has important implications for gender equality within the labour market as the majority of childcare workers are female.”*<sup>115</sup>

WBG research<sup>116</sup> found that a 2% GDP investment in care (for example, social care, childcare, parental leave and care leave) creates double the number of jobs for women and almost as many for men than the same investment in construction. Investment in free, universal childcare especially returns almost all of its initial investment.

Unpaid working hours, disproportionately carried out by women, which are vital to the functioning of society and the economy are largely ignored by official statistics measuring economic activity meaning they are invisible in the formal economy and not valued properly. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) measures the value of goods and services produced and traded but it ignores crucial areas of our economy such as unpaid care.<sup>117</sup> The Gender Equality Strategy Expert Panel<sup>118</sup> reported that the economic value of unpaid work has been estimated to being equivalent to 56% of GDP for the UK, with unpaid childcare alone being equivalent to 18% of GDP and long-term care being equivalent to 3% of GDP. Feminist economists have long argued for it to be recognised on par with paid work in systems of national accounting.<sup>119</sup>

The Commission on a Gender-Equal Economy have proposed the creation of a ‘Caring Economy’<sup>120</sup> based on gender equality, wellbeing and sustainability. A Caring

<sup>115</sup> Childcare in Northern Ireland: Care, Cost and Gender Equality, NIC ICTU, October 2020 <https://www.ictuni.org/publications/childcare-northern-ireland-care-cost-and-gender-equality>

<sup>116</sup> Investing in the Care Economy: A gender analysis of employment stimulus in seven OECD countries, International Trade Union Confederation, March 2016 [Investing in the Care Economy - International Trade Union Confederation \(ituc-csi.org\)](https://www.ituc-csi.org/publications/investing-in-the-care-economy)

<sup>117</sup> Radical Pathways Beyond GDP, Oxfam, August 2023 <https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/621532/dp-radical-pathways-beyond-gdp-03082023-summ-en.pdf?sequence=5>

<sup>118</sup> Gender Equality Strategy Expert Advisory Panel Report, Ann Marie Gray, Louise Coyle, Rachel Powel & Siobhán Harding, December 2020 [Gender Equality Strategy \(communities-ni.gov.uk\)](https://communities-ni.gov.uk/gender-equality-strategy)

<sup>119</sup> Spirals of Inequality, How unpaid care is at the heart of gender inequalities, Women’s Budget Group, April 2020 <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Accompanying-paper-FINAL.pdf>

<sup>120</sup> Creating a Caring Economy: A Call to Action, Commission on a Gender-Equal Economy, Women’s Budget Group, October 2020



Economy would prioritise care for each other and for the environment in which we live. A caring economy extends beyond care services: it involves caring about the pay and conditions of workers, acting together to end discrimination, deprivation and poverty and eliminate violence and abuse, and caring about the planet on which we live together. A caring economy means acting together to improve wellbeing rather than to maximise economic growth.

Investing in a Caring Economy including care skills would help build the skills base, address skills shortages in the social care sector, promote gender equality, reduce economic inactivity and have positive impacts for a stronger and more sustainable economy.

### *Supports to access Skills, Education and Lifelong Learning*

Education and skills levels are critical to participation in the labour market and in obtaining a 'good job' as has been highlighted by ESRI research: *"The role of education in enhancing employment prospects and job quality means that ensuring access to education and training opportunities is a key policy lever."*<sup>121</sup>

For some of the most marginalised women (including ethnic minorities and lone parents) the prospect of increased economic participation can depend on the availability of appropriate integrated childcare and access to education/training opportunities at community level. A lack of appropriate integrated childcare and community education acts as a fundamental barrier to the engagement of socioeconomically disadvantaged women in education and training and in employment. Community-based women's education and training has emerged and evolved in response to this educational disadvantage with the express aim of accommodating unmet learner need.

---

<https://wbq.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/WBG-Report-v10.pdf>

<sup>121</sup> Gender and Labour Market Inclusion on the Island of Ireland, Economic & Social Research Institute, April 2024

[https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/RS176\\_0.pdf](https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/RS176_0.pdf)

The following sections of this chapter look at the issues around women's skills, the importance of community education and the Community and Voluntary Sector in women's education and skills development.

## 2.6 Women, Skills, Education and Lifelong Learning

The importance of education and training is particularly relevant in a Northern Ireland context where 7.6% of all young people aged 16 to 24 in Northern Ireland were not in education, employment or training (NEET). The NEET rate is higher for females at 8.2% compared to 7% for males.<sup>122</sup>

NISRA statistics show<sup>123</sup> a general increase in the proportion of working age adults with qualifications (87% in 2020) however the proportion with no qualifications (13%) remains high. A higher proportion of females were qualified to Level 2 and above (GCSE at grade C or above), however, a higher proportion of males held a highest qualification between Level 3 and 5. This data also shows that the lifelong learning rate in Northern Ireland is consistently lower than the UK average. The proportion of people participating in education or training in Northern Ireland in 2020 was 18.2%, compared to 25.3% in the UK and participation rates were higher for women than men.

Research by ESRI on gender and labour market inclusion<sup>124</sup> also highlights that while education attainment levels have been rising in both Ireland and Northern Ireland, the proportion of the working-age population in Northern Ireland holding degrees and post-secondary qualifications is significantly lower than in Ireland. This research suggests that: *“while significant improvements in the initial educational system would be needed to bring about large-scale change, access to lifelong learning could play an important role in enhancing job quality among women (and indeed men), an issue highlighted by policy stakeholders.”*

---

<sup>122</sup> <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/news/young-people-not-education-employment-or-training-neet-october-december-2023>

<sup>123</sup> Qualifications in Northern Ireland 2020, NISRA  
<https://www.nisra.gov.uk/system/files/statistics/Qualifications-in-northern-ireland-2020.pdf>

<sup>124</sup> Gender and Labour Market Inclusion on the Island of Ireland, Economic & Social Research Institute, April 2024  
[https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/RS176\\_0.pdf](https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/RS176_0.pdf)

While women are more likely to hold a qualification there are considerable issues with access to education, training and skills particularly for low-income women, lone-parents and women with caring responsibilities. Educational disadvantage can profoundly restrict the life prospects and wellbeing of these women and community education has developed in response to this disadvantage.

## 2.7 Importance of Community Education in Women's Education and Skills Development

*"The community and voluntary sector has a pivotal role to play in supporting pathways into good jobs. The sector has been a leader in collaboration for many years and I look forward to working in partnership in the time ahead."*

Minister for the Economy, Conor Murphy<sup>125</sup>

*"I value the services and supports delivered by the sector (voluntary and community sector) and the partnership and collaboration which allows greater expertise, reach and responsiveness to the needs of our customers."*

Minister for Communities, Gordon Lyons<sup>126</sup>

These quotes from the Minister for the Economy and the Minister for Communities at a Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) event on Inclusive Employment (held on 12 June 2024) show the importance of the community and voluntary sector in responding to education and skills needs and supporting people into good jobs. Community education is a key part of the solutions to addressing economic inactivity and the ability to access better quality jobs.

Community based education and training is generally delivered based on local community needs and takes account of the complexity of women's lives and the

<sup>125</sup> <https://www.nicva.org/article/tackling-economic-inactivity-voluntary-and-community-sector-leading-the-way#:~:text=Minister%20for%20Economy%20Conor%20Murphy%20said%3A,of%20my%20four%20economic%20priorities.>

<sup>126</sup> <https://www.nicva.org/article/tackling-economic-inactivity-voluntary-and-community-sector-leading-the-way#:~:text=Minister%20for%20Communities%20Gordon%20Lyons%20said%3A,the%20needs%20of%20our%20customers.>

barriers they face such as education, childcare, course fees and the academic environment. It provides a fundamental building block in supporting women to rebuild their confidence and their capability to enter the workplace and is a means to maintaining overall wellbeing. Improved employment prospects for mothers through education and training can also translate as improved outcomes for children

The women's sector has an important contribution to make to education, training, skills accessibility and development in Northern Ireland particularly for the most marginalised and disadvantaged women. Women's Centres are often best placed to address skills shortages and provide opportunities for lifelong learning because they operate within local communities and are trusted to do this work. They are able to reach and engage those who are the most marginalised and some of those most affected by the legacy of the Troubles, austerity/welfare reform policies and the impact of the Cost-of-Living Crisis.

Community education takes time, effort, commitment and care and it is successful because of these unique attributes. The following Case Study helps to explain this approach.

**Case Study – Community Education, Shankill Shared Women's Centre, October 2024**

**From a discussion with Betty Carlisle MBE, Chief Executive Officer and Joan Mercer, Shared Education Co-Ordinator**

There needs to be a serious look at women-only community education and what it provides. It is a major step in getting women into employment because of how it fits with their lifestyle and provides support accordingly. For example, we are flexible with the times of our courses knowing that women often have to drop children to school in the mornings and then make their way to the Centre. We don't start at 9! And of course, there's the backup childcare for helping women to access the classes and for interviews.

There's a lot of talk about childcare and of course that's really important but it's not the only thing. Even if free childcare was set up tomorrow, women wouldn't be flooding into work. It's about much more than that, there are many more barriers to work than just childcare, it's a combination of things – a lack of self-esteem, loss of confidence, lack of self-worth. We help them recognise they are worth more and that they know their value.

We provide Education and Training ranging from essential English and Maths to GCSE's and Personal Development which is really important in helping to build self-esteem before women might even consider going back to work. Many of the women come here thinking they're not worthy of an education or employment. They've often come out of school with no qualifications but they have a wealth of life experience. When they get that certificate it means a huge amount to them, they feel valued!

We are a 'placed-based' organisation right in the heart of the local area. We know the women, we know the community, we know their backgrounds and the things they're dealing with. This also ensures that we are accessible and often means they don't need to get transport to get here as we're near where they live.

Our staff are also accessible to the women. The women are not just a number in a class like they might be at another educational institution. If a woman hasn't been at class for a number of weeks, we will notice and check in with her to make sure everything is OK. There is that reassurance that someone is thinking about them, there's that follow up and support network. It's part of our strength and where we provide that 'extra support' which many other educational institutions don't.

Then you have the power of peer support too. It's a really important element which we encourage, they get a lot of support from their peer group within their class. We just recently finished a Classroom Assistant course and the women really helped each other get through the course. They met up to help each other and congratulated each other on successes throughout the course. They're all still in a network together and keep in touch and they've all got jobs! That peer support can really help a woman get through the training.

We also work with local employers. We talk to them about what they need and then put in place training and help with applications in the Centre. For example, a care home in the area was recruiting for staff so we put in place training around manual handling and help with interview preparation.

We have a class at the minute for some women who are working but want to upskill and get better paid jobs. As one of them said *"I want to better myself, I just want to get a decent job."* We have another woman who came in here as a volunteer and then got involved in our training. From this she went on to get a part-time job. She said *"I never thought I'd ever work again."* It's had such a positive impact on her self-esteem.

In order to be able to deliver community-based frontline services in disadvantaged and rural areas Women's Centres and groups must secure a cocktail of funding, often from different Departments either directly or through their agencies. Since 2012 these funds have been subject to austerity cuts which has resulted in little or no funding for overheads and in some cases a reduction in funded staff hours. Much greater value must be placed on these unique and trusted services which support statutory provision and are the most cost-effective way of ensuring that local needs are met ensuring the best outcomes for the communities they serve.

Irish research on Community Education and Lone Parents by The Centre for Effective Services<sup>127</sup> noted: *"the large body of international evidence telling us that person-centric educational programmes such as those at the core of community education can have a transformative impact on the lives of adult learners and that improved educational attainment for mothers can also lead to benefits for their children."* Ten key messages were identified from the research including that: participation by lone parents in community education results in personal transformation, strengthened self-confidence and personal agency which motivates progression to further and higher education; lone parents who complete community education are highly likely to progress to further and higher education, training, paid employment, and involvement in their community; and access to onsite childcare is the single biggest enabler of participation in community education for lone parents.

This research importantly draws out how powerful the community setting is: *"it is the trusted and safe environment that draws people in, particularly those who have poor experiences of formal education in the past and/or trauma during their lives."* It highlights the features that the community settings that participated in the research all encompass in their work in support of lone parents including: psychological safety, confidentiality and feelings of readiness and belonging as a foundation for learning; childcare and early years services (including a sliding scale of fee for childcare); high quality community education courses, tutors and facilitators; flexibility of the

---

<sup>127</sup> Community Education as a Support for Lone Parents: Thematic Analysis of Eight Case Studies. Dublin: The Centre for Effective Services, September 2023  
<https://www.communityfoundation.ie/wp-content/uploads/BeachaireApril2024.pdf>

tutors/staff and always finding a way to work around challenges that arise which supports the cultivation of resilience and self-efficacy, etc.

The Centre for Effective Services research also outlines the challenges faced by community education including the visibility and value of community education as a fully understood valuable form of education that fits within the full system of education, the number of funding streams that support community education programmes and the challenges of managing the administration relating to each and that a lack of childcare leads to an inability to participate and, at best, deferral of engagement by lone parents in community education until children are at school, etc.

The UK Government has invested £57million in Northern Ireland to date through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) in projects delivering on the UK Government's commitment to support many more people to move from economic inactivity into sustainable employment. There are over 100 organisations funded through UKSPF, currently supporting over 26,000+ people to access employment with evidence that it is having a real impact with rates of economic inactivity decreasing.

Many community and voluntary organisations and NICVA are concerned about the future of this funding which is due to come to an end in March 2025. In the Autumn Budget 2024, the Labour Government announced that it would extend this funding across the UK for one further year but at a significantly reduced rate (an in-year reduction of 40%). Where and how this reduction will be applied has not yet been decided but may have significant impacts on the delivery of projects across Northern Ireland. NICVA are calling for the Government to maintain funding levels, build on current projects and maintain progress: *"If a longer-term solution isn't found, funding for organisations will fall off a cliff edge and the people who rely on these services will be left without access to much needed support, further marginalising them from the current labour market."*<sup>128</sup>

---

<sup>128</sup> <https://www.nicva.org/article/nicva-call-for-recognition-of-the-voluntary-and-community-sector-s-role-in-tackling-economic>



### *Women Breaking Barriers*

The Women Breaking Barriers project<sup>129</sup> is a collaborative project, funded through UKSPF, involving multiple Women's Centres and network organisations across Northern Ireland. It provides tailored education and support to equip women with the skills necessary to overcome personal barriers to employment and education. The training provided is informed by Women's Centres who are experts on the barriers faced by women accessing adult education and includes approaches designed to address these. For example, considering the low confidence cited as a barrier for many women, participants will have the opportunity to participate in a range of personal development courses, in addition to accredited courses, such as the GOALS motivational programme, which has a track record of increasing participants' self-esteem and resilience.

## **2.8 International Obligations**

Northern Ireland is bound by the international human rights obligations of the UK, as State Party to all key human rights Conventions. A common thread across the international human rights framework is the right to employment, with adequate support infrastructure, protections and where required, adjustments such as reasonable adjustment for disability.

The most significant framework in relation to employment is the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which clearly sets out individuals' right to work, in safe and healthy conditions with fair pay and equal pay for equal work for all men and women.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) specifically requires States Parties to take action to promote gender equality on issues from equal pay for equal work, to ensuring protections for pregnancy and maternity, and promoting equal access to education, employment, and social protection.<sup>130</sup>

---

<sup>129</sup> <https://www.womenbreakingbarriersni.com/about>

<sup>130</sup> [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#) (CEDAW, 1979), articles 1-16. The UK signed the Convention in 1981 and ratified in 1986.

With regard to women and gender equality, it is relevant to note that the most recent CEDAW Concluding Observations for the UK express concern that protections for women in Northern Ireland are falling behind those of women elsewhere in the UK, and a key recommendation is to put protections in Northern Ireland on an equal footing with those in England, Scotland and Wales.<sup>131</sup>

The CEDAW Concluding Observations urge for a range of actions in relation to women's participation and employment some of which explicitly apply to Northern Ireland:

- ensuring the provisions regarding mandatory pay gap reporting are brought into effect in Northern Ireland,
- ensuring the availability and affordability of accessible childcare facilities in particular in Northern Ireland,
- considering the removal of the 26-week waiting period for employees to wish to apply for flexible working arrangements,
- providing further incentives for men to take parental leave, such as non-transferable leave, and encourage men to participate equally in childcare responsibilities,
- increasing opportunities for women to gain access to formal and secure employment and discouraging the use of zero-hours contracts by employers,
- increasing access for women to apprenticeships in fields where they are underrepresented,
- introducing a mandatory duty on employers to take reasonable steps to protect women from sexual harassment in the workplace,
- adopting specific measures to facilitate access for women belonging to marginalised groups, such as “Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic” women and women with disabilities to the labour market in order to increase employment rates among those groups of women and reduce the concentration of such women in low-paying jobs.

---

<sup>131</sup> CEDAW Committee (March 2019) [Concluding Observations on the 8<sup>th</sup> periodic report of the UK](#)

### 3. Findings on Women's Economic Inactivity, Barriers to Work and Skills

This chapter summarises the characteristics, experiences and views of women across Northern Ireland who took part in focus group sessions and completed questionnaires on their reasons for being out of work, the barriers they faced to work, the jobs they would most like to do, what would help them move into work and where they would prefer to access education and training to get into work. A total of 60 women completed questionnaires and participated in 10 focus group sessions all of whom were classed as economically inactive.

#### 3.1 Participants

AGE	
18-24	0
25-34	11
35-44	22
45-54	9
55-64	18

FAMILY TYPE	
Single adult (no children)	12
Single parent	25
Couple (no children)	4
Couple (with children)	18
Other	1

LOCATION	
City	45
Town/Village	7
Rural	8

DEPENDENT CHILDREN	
None	29
1	7
2	15
3	3
4+	6

BENEFITS	
PIP	26
Carer's Allowance	10
Universal Credit (not looking for work)	23
Employment & Support Allowance	13
Housing Benefit	16
No – not in receipt of benefits	6
Other	8

DISABILITY	
Physical Health	9
Mental Health	12
Physical & Mental Health	19
None	20

CARING RESPONSIBILITIES	
Unpaid Carer	24

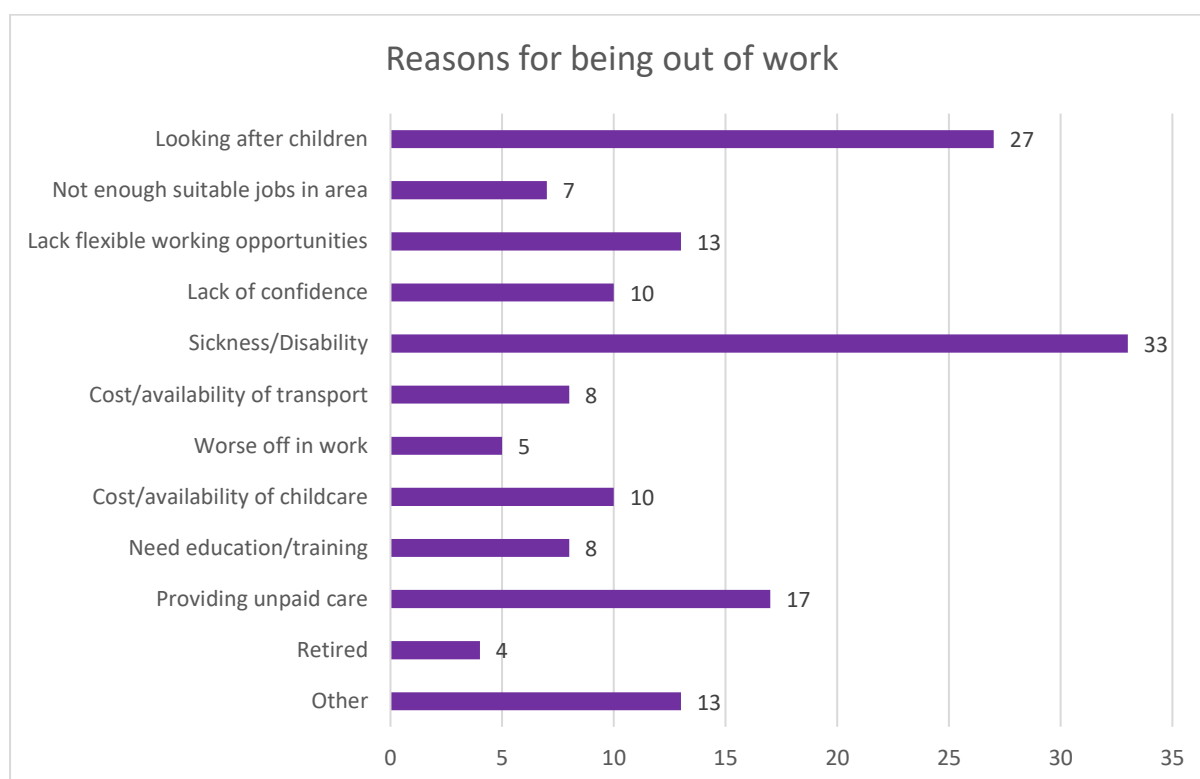
ETHNICITY	
White	54
Black/African	3
Asian	3

### 3.2 Questionnaire and Focus Group Findings

This section summaries the findings from the questionnaires and focus group discussions and includes quotes from the women who took part.

#### Women's reasons for being out of work

This graph shows the main reasons given by the women for being out of work. Most of the women selected more than one reason for being out of work.



*“I have 3 children at home, one who is getting tested for autism and I also care for my mother who is very poorly so for me the barrier is getting hours that work around my family life. I also need time to be a mum and sort out the house, do the shopping, etc. I do the shopping for my mum and dad and clean their house and look after anything they need as well as my children. I’m on my own so it would be hard to get an employer who could cater to my family needs – it’s like you’re a bag of troubles!”*

*“Mine started off with childcare, then illness and then the kids have additional needs. My biggest barrier now is my own confidence. About a year ago I got out of a domestic violence situation. I’d been living with someone that brought my confidence down, because you’re basically made to believe that you’re not good enough so it’s me trying to believe I’m good enough.”*

### *Motherhood & Childcare*

**The majority of the women reported issues around the care of children as a reason for being out of work with 45% giving the reason looking after children and 17% giving the reason as the cost/availability of childcare.** In discussing the issues around caring for children the women talked about how expensive childcare is and how going out to work meant that most if not all of their wage went on childcare costs so it often felt pointless going out to work. Others were trying to get work which fitted around their child's school day but that limited their working hours and the jobs they could apply for. Problems with accessing affordable childcare including for after schools and holiday periods were also reported. Mothers of children with additional needs reported significant barriers to being able to get suitable childcare for their children.

*“If you’ve no childcare you can’t do nothing, you can’t train, you can’t go to work if you’ve no one to mind your kids.”*

*“I could walk into a job tomorrow because I do have the qualifications/experience which is sad really. I could apply for a job and walk into it tomorrow if I had the childcare in place.”*

*“For me it’s double hard. I have 4 kids and two of my sons have autism, one has severe autism so it’s hard to find reliable childcare to suit his needs. It’s hard to find the childcare for them both. It’s hard to manage 4 kids anyway – to find childcare it’s very, very hard. At this age my son would be expected to stay home by himself, look after himself, but he can’t because of his autism.”*

*“Unless it’s a job that works between the hours of 9.30 and 1.45 then I can’t do it. By the time I would drop him off, get to work, get a couple of hours done then I’d have to go back and collect him and my other son. My son is only two and it’s just not viable to be doing any kind of full-time work.”*

*“Round here the after schools clubs don’t pick up from schools. My son is in after schools today. He’s in school to 1.45, I’ll pick him up then and drop him off at 2.15 and that’s him until 4. But I have to do it, I need that half hour to do the pick-up.”*

*“Even if a child is in nursery/school you’ve still got 6 weeks of the summer to sort out. It’s a big thing the lack of cover over the summer holidays. You don’t have cover for things like mid-term, even for strikes, there’s no one to look after your kids.”*

### *Unpaid Care*

#### **28% of the women reported that unpaid care was a reason for being out of**

**work.** The women discussed issues with the care of elderly relatives and children/young adults with additional needs. The unpredictability of care needs and the vulnerabilities around those needing care made it very difficult for these women to work. They discussed the difficulties their caring responsibilities could have in a working environment where you might need to drop everything with little notice and how difficult it would be to get a job with an employer who would be understanding of this.

*“Providing care for my mother who is 83 is a real barrier to work for me. I can’t work because I look after her.”*

*“If I got a job and I got a phone call from the school about my son with additional needs I couldn’t just say to my employer I’m leaving. And the amount of phone calls I get from the school is unreal.”*

*“My kids all have additional needs, this is a big barrier for me. Your children are always going to be your first priority.”*

*“I have two children at home, one with additional care needs. I’d end up losing any help I get if I went back to work. I’m a single parent – no job is going to let me just leave if my son has a meltdown or if something’s happened and the school can’t handle him and they want me to take him home. Imagine telling an employer that I need to go. They’ll say no you’re not.”*

### *Sickness and Disability*

#### **55% of the women reported that sickness/disability was a reason for being out**

**of work.** Sickness and disability were the most commonly reported reasons for being out of work particularly in the area of mental health. Wider issues of long health service waiting lists and delays in medical treatment were discussed with some of the women coping with the effects of their illness over long periods, waiting on tests, medical procedures or diagnoses. Dealing with the unpredictability of health conditions, getting support from an employer, delays in being able to access counselling services and lack of service provision for mental health issues were widely discussed in the focus group sessions. Some of the women reported fear of starting a job in case it made their mental health condition worse and some struggled to find suitable flexible work to allow them to balance work with their condition.

*“It’s the waiting lists for counselling for mental health. I’m on a waiting list and I’ve been waiting for 6 months. Counselling and support groups are underfunded for this work which could really help people to work and move on with their lives.”*

*“I’m waiting two years for an MRI, there are loads of people on waiting lists. If I don’t get my MRI I can’t get a diagnosis.”*

*“I’m disabled and you’re supposed to have things in jobs to help you but there isn’t anything especially for the mental health side of it. There’s nothing there to help with that.”*

*“You don’t know how you are from one day to the next. There’s classes I’ve missed because I didn’t know if I was going to be able to get out of bed, that’s the way it is with mental health.”*

*“The reason I’m out of work is my mental health. I’m trying to get a part-time job but there’s no part-time jobs. I don’t want to sound lazy but because I’ve been out of work so long I couldn’t throw myself into a full time job.”*

*“I can’t read or spell, I have a learning disability, so I can’t do certain things in a job role and I don’t want people looking at me saying look at her she can’t even do that. I’d hate that.”*

#### *Lack of flexible working opportunities*

**22% of the women reported that a lack of flexible working opportunities was a reason for being out of work.** This is often linked to sickness/disability or wider care responsibilities and the need to juggle these responsibilities with a job. The women discussed the need for a range of flexibilities to allow them to balance work with ill health, care and family life. They reported difficulties with being able to access good quality part-time work which is secure and well-paid.

*“I’m a single parent working full time but even with help through Universal Credit for childcare I’d be better off not working. I asked to go down to a 3-day week but my employer said no. I’m thinking of quitting until the baby is older.”*

*“My biggest problem is flexibility – getting a high enough wage to go part-time and be able to live on it. Flexible jobs are very low paid and it’s hard to get permanent part-time jobs.”*

*“There are some jobs that are more flexible like office jobs and higher up jobs but when you’re working down at the bottom it’s more like ‘do what I say’.”*

*“Employers need to be flexible for me to work – flexibility in hours and understanding that there will be days where I won’t be able to attend and that I*



*would then be able to make up those hours afterwards. There will be days where I just physically can't come to work because of my illness."*

### *Lack of Confidence*

**17% of the women reported that a lack of confidence was a reason for being out of work.** The women discussed the fear they felt about taking on a job especially if they had been out of work for some time. They also talked about how a lack of confidence can be very difficult to overcome.

*"It's a confidence thing. I've been out of work for 5 years since my son was born."*

*"I think with any job you have to sell yourself up a bit and if you have the confidence, you're able to do that you can talk about your skills but if you don't have the confidence, you're just like what's the point of even trying."*

*"When you lack confidence it's very hard to lift it."*

*"Your confidence does affect things. You think I couldn't really do that, you have that fear of putting yourself out there."*

### *Worse off in Work*

**8% of the women reported that they felt they would be worse off in work.**

There was considerable discussion about this issue at the focus group sessions and many of the women said they would be worse off in low paid work as they would lose some of the existing help that they get through the benefits system including help with their rent, free school meals, etc. It was clear that some of the women felt they were stuck in a benefits trap when low paid work was the only option open to them.

Added to this the complexity of the benefits system meant that some women found it difficult to work out if they were better off on benefits or in work. There was some discussion about conditionality requirements within the benefits system meaning that some women with young children were being put under pressure by their Universal Credit work coaches to increase the amount of time they spent looking for work. This was especially difficult for them given the lack of affordable childcare.

*"Sometimes you're better off on benefits than in low paid work and you get help with your rent."*

*“There are issues coming off benefits, you lose help with things like free school meals. When I was working and paying for school meals, breakfast club and after schools I was already in the negative. I wasn’t benefiting myself I was already in arrears.”*

*“If you’ve been out of work for a while you’re not sure about going back, there’s that fear what if I go back and it doesn’t work out then I have to go through the whole application, proving everything again.”*

*“As soon as you say you’re starting a job, they stop your money. Then you’ve no money for God knows how long. No money to get the things you need. At the end of the day you want your family to be better off not worse off. If you’re sitting with children you can’t take that risk.”*

*“The complexity of benefits makes it difficult to figure out if you’re better or worse off in a job. It’s so complicated to try and make an informed decision that the job is going to work out better and you’re going to be better off.”*

*“It seems like my daughter is sick every week, she’s only 3 and I feel like if I was in work I’d have to take lots of days off. My work coach has told me I have to do a 40-hour work search every week. How can you do that when you’ve got a 3-year-old? As soon as she gets into nursery I’m happy to go back to work, it’s just at the minute it would be very difficult.”*

#### *Cost/Availability of Transport*

**13% of the women reported that the cost and availability of transport was a reason for being out of work.** Lack of public transport was discussed by women in both urban and rural areas. The lack of public transport in rural areas was particularly highlighted where women often had no access to public transport at all. Where public transport was available women discussed restrictions to availability at night times and weekends which limited what they can do in terms of work or accessing education and training. The women also discussed the costs of both private and public transport which impacted on their earnings from work and for some in very low paid work made it not worth it.

*“Even if you look for a cleaning job you have to drive. If you’re paying for transport you’re not getting paid much for those jobs as so by the time you put your travel in place there’s not much point.”*

*“I don’t drive, I have learning difficulties so I can’t get the theory test. So I’m relying on public transport. If I could drive I could get a wee cleaning job for 2-3 hours in the morning. And I’m sure you could leave that if you did get a phone call from the school about the kids.”*

*“What public transport? We do have a school bus that takes kids into Newry but it’s often full. After the school bus goes there’s nothing and on school holidays there’s no transport. There used to be a bus years ago but it doesn’t go anymore, there’s nothing!”*

*“I have a car but it’s the fuel it’s so expensive.”*

*“There’s a bus service into Belfast but it’s not that frequent and it finishes at 8pm. Even if I wanted to do a course in the evenings how would I get home? And there’s a limited service only on a Sunday.”*

### *Need for Education/Training to get Work*

**13% of the women reported that they felt they needed education or training to be able to get work or get better quality work.** For some of the women the costs of the courses they wanted to do in further or higher education were a barrier. In some cases, it wasn’t just the cost of the course but the associated costs of equipment, etc. Some of the women felt there was little funding available for courses in the areas they wanted to work like community and youth work.

Many of the women discussed how they would be unable to meet their living costs if they had to come off benefits to do a course or study and that they were reluctant to put this financial burden on their families. The loss of benefits as well as having to pay course fees would leave them unable to pay for the essentials. There was also discussion around the eligibility criteria for some courses being a barrier – some required applicants to be out of work and others had an age limit meaning that older women were excluded.

*“There are jobs in retail and in social work but many want you to have GCSEs. The only thing I can do is care work and even some care jobs are expecting GCSEs. School wasn’t for me so I don’t have exams.”*

*“I would love to do a course at the TEC but I can’t afford it. There should be courses offered free to those on benefits. I would like to do an arts/beauty course but I can’t afford the course or the equipment. A course like that they give you an equipment list and you have to buy lots of things – some of the kits are hundreds of pounds.”*

*“An accounting/office job would suit me because it’s not as fast paced as hospitality would be. There was an accounting job and they had some sort of course for it but I was too old and I’m in my 30s!”*

*“With education I’m thinking how could I fit it in with my family? I would like to go to University, I could do it but I don’t want to put the financial burden on my family – them paying off the loans. Another thing if it’s five days a week and I need to do long hours then obviously someone needs to look after the kids too. What am I supposed to do?”*

*“There’s no money for training in areas of community work, youth work or care work, the things I’d be interested in.”*

*“If I did the course I wanted I’d have to pay for my flat myself as I’d lose my benefits. It’s very rare you’re going to get a good job from a part time TEC course, you need to do a full time one especially for me wanting to work with animals. If I want to go on the animal management course, I’ll lose my flat or I’ll have to work as well as doing the full-time course – there’s no way.”*

*“The TEC is very intimidating. If you go there you lose your benefits so you don’t want to go there. You could get a loan but it has to do you to the end of the course. It has to pay your rent, look after your children, pay your childcare if you need it, transport, shopping, because you can’t get any other help.”*

#### *Not enough Suitable Jobs*

**12% of the women reported that there weren’t enough suitable jobs in their area for them to apply for.** Some of the women discussed how poor quality, low paid jobs often meant that it made it difficult for them to consider work. Others found it difficult to get a job that fitted around their home and family life which was flexible enough to allow them to do things like the school drop offs and pick-ups for example.

*“With the benefits I’m getting at the minute I’m living in poverty. If I get a job, I’ll be living in poverty plus getting slaughtered in work unless I got a job with a good wage and good conditions there’s just no point.”*

*“If you’re only going to be £17/week better off and you’re working a 30-hour week the math doesn’t add up – you’re not going to go out to work. If you do try and work you lose everything straight away then you’re in arrears with your rent. If you need childcare you have to pay it in advance.”*

*“I need a job where I can start after the kids go to school at 9.30 and it’s close to home. I’d have to be out for 2.30 to collect the kids. It’s trying to find somewhere that allows this. A job that allows you to be a mum first.”*

*“There are fewer jobs in Derry and they are mostly low paid. There are a few big companies but they’re outsourcing jobs now and contracting work out and paying lower. Everything is centralised in Belfast.”*

### *Barriers faced by Rural Women*

Women in rural areas reported many of the same barriers to work as their urban counterparts and some additional issues many of which focused on lack of service provision in their local area. Lack of public transport and the cost of transport were frequently raised as barriers. In addition, a lack of job opportunities and availability of part-time working in rural areas meant they had to travel further to access these opportunities. The state of local roads was discussed and particularly in the winter this could be a considerable barrier to accessing training, education or work. Poor access to broadband was also raised as an issue and limited their ability to access information and Government services online.

Isolation was a significant issue in rural areas and lack of services in particular transport contributed to this. The women discussed the importance of their local women's group in addressing this isolation and in helping to address some of other barriers they faced. They stressed the value of having a local centre to come to, with free courses and a friendly and welcoming atmosphere where they feel comfortable and that they fit in.

*“Because we’re rural where we live is a big barrier. Jobs aren’t so local here so you have to go to the towns and then you need a full day childcare because of travel – between travel and childcare you’re working for nothing.”*

*“There’s very few part time jobs compared to bigger places - there would be more flexibility with employers and family friendly policies within the bigger organisations.”*

*“There’s no broadband here, they’ve broadband in one half of the school and the other half they’ve no broadband, I don’t know why. I’ve a satellite on my house that’s how I get my broadband. Even the phone coverage, everything! It’s really bad, it’s ridiculous.”*

*“If you go to log on to things online and it says we’ll send you a code to your email and you’re laughing, it’s not that easy in the country! We have to get in the car, drive down the road write the code down and go back to the house and put it in. For the Government Gateway you’re driving down the road in the car to get the code! People don’t understand in the city that we have these issues!”*

*“I’d be lost if the WALD Centre wasn’t here. It’s a big effort to get to Newry especially for early in the morning you’d have to have left really early. Then in the winter evenings you’re not going to go into town, you just say no whereas here you’re just over the road.”*

*“The roads are very bad. In the winter there’s no gritting so you don’t take yourself out of the house to go to anything. The winter can be very isolating. We get snow when others don’t. It would put you off going anywhere.”*

*“Isolation is a big thing in rural areas - they should run more courses in rural areas.”*

*“I prefer doing courses at the WALD Centre you’re always going to know someone and you’re not going to feel out of place. You just think to yourself she’s going so I’ll go.”*

*“There’s a lack of jobs in the area and I don’t drive. There are very few buses a day where I live and I can’t afford taxis.”*

#### *Barriers faced by Minority Ethnic Women*

Women from minority ethnic backgrounds who were new to Northern Ireland faced many of the barriers experienced by women born in Northern Ireland including childcare, unpaid care responsibilities, sickness, transport, etc. However, there were some additional barriers for these women which made it even more difficult for them to work and to get the education and skills they needed to help them move into work. For some of the women there were issues around language and this included the ability to write in English which was a barrier to education and skills development.

There was significant discussion about the impact of the race riots in Summer 2024 in Belfast and the impact of islamophobia in particular. This caused a lot of fear for the women and their families and in some cases limited where they felt safe to go to access work or education. Most of the women wore a hijab and stated that they felt it was a barrier to work as they were so easily identifiable as being Muslim. Experiences of racism were part of their lives and had an impact on their ability to get a job.

Some of the women were very well educated and had a number of qualifications from their home countries. There were often issues around the recognition of qualifications from overseas which limited what they were able to apply for. They felt



that their qualifications were actually a barrier to getting work in Northern Ireland as they were only able to get low paid work here. This meant that in some circumstances the women were hiding their qualifications in job applications/interviews to try and secure work. The women wanted to work in their area of expertise and with the knowledge and experience that they had but were unable to do so and felt forced to work in lower paid jobs or were unable to get work at all.

*“The hijab is a barrier for me. I volunteered for a year in a school as a classroom assistant and in the second year I applied for the job but I didn’t get it. I wasn’t sure if they really wanted someone in a hijab. There was only me with the hijab in the school. There were classroom assistants from other countries but no Muslims.”*

*“You feel like you have to be better than everyone else to get a job. Then you think is it me? Is it my language, accent, colour that means I’m not getting the job. It’s damaging to your self-confidence. The odds are stacked against you.”*

*“I was teaching computers for 10 years then I became a mother of twins and stopped for 5 years. I started to try and find a job in computers and programming and at interview they were asking why I had been at home for 5 years – it’s a big barrier. I’m looking for part time work but I can’t get it.”*

*“Many of us have courses, went to Uni, speak English! Sometimes I think to take off my hijab after all that happened in the city I was afraid to walk with my child with it on. They recognise me as Muslim with it on. I was wearing a cap instead because I was so scared.”*

*“Courses can be very expensive. Free courses are often very short and there’s not enough time to develop things – you get a skill but it doesn’t allow you to develop it into a career or make you an expert in it.”*

*“I was taking qualifications off my form to try and get jobs. After all the rejections I learned to make my CV less, shorter. When an employer asks you what you have done you’re having to hide your light under a bushel.”*

*“My big problem is the language, skills and qualifications. I worked in food production for a long time and had an accident and hurt my back. I want to work in childcare now but I need to improve my language and skills to do this.”*



*“I started an NVQ Level 2 in Childcare at Belfast MET in September but left the course in February because the written work was so difficult. I could understand the lessons and look after the children but the written work was very hard and I didn’t have the digital skills needed to upload my work.”*

*“I want to do what I used to do and understand. I was a teaching assistant in a University, a professor’s assistant using all my study and experience. I came here with my husband and I can’t get work. I applied for a job in a supermarket but I can’t stand all day without thinking. I am used to reading and writing reports.”*

### **Other Barriers**

Aside from the main barriers outlined above a number of other issues were raised in the focus group discussions and in the questionnaires. These include the impact of addiction issues on the ability to work, lack of knowledge of how to access courses to help with getting a job, issues around knowing how to apply for a job, preparation for an interview and having the money they need to afford the costs of work including suitable clothes/uniform.

*“For the bigger courses you have to fill out a form. I found that hard even in school. I wouldn’t have a clue how to do it now. I wouldn’t know what way to go about it, I’d need somebody to help me.”*

*“I wouldn’t have the clothes that you would be expected to go to work in. If I got a job say in a school I wouldn’t have the work clothes.”*

*“The thing that’s discouraging for me is if you go into lots of jobs you have to spend so much money to start working – to buy uniform for one thing – and you don’t have the money to buy the uniform that’s why you’re looking for the job. If they don’t supply uniforms it can be a barrier.”*

*“A lot of employers judge you because of your past as well. I have addiction problems but I’m in recovery now. It’s one of the hardest things I’ve had to come through in my life.”*

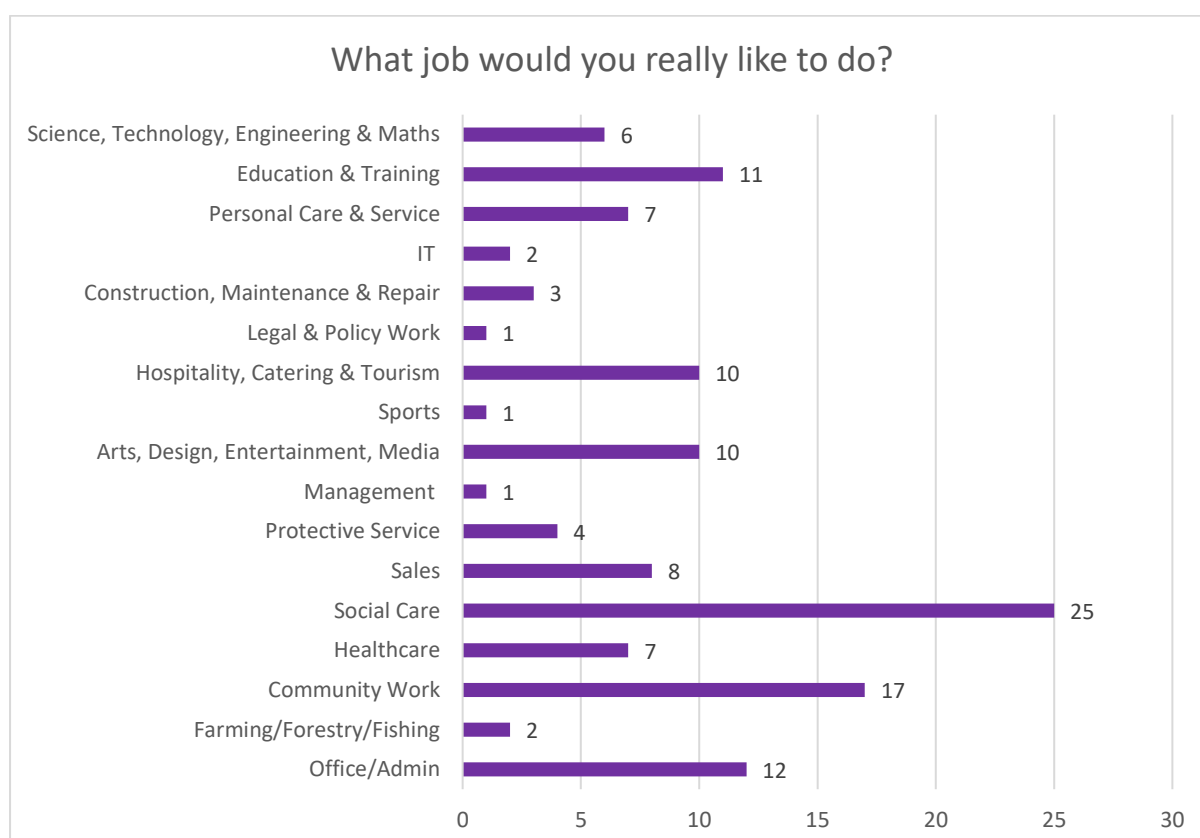
*“I wouldn’t know how to fill out a CV and I’m no good with technology or maths.”*

### **What jobs do women really want to do?**

The women were asked to choose the areas of work they would most like to do if there were no barriers in their way in terms of income, childcare, transport, qualifications, etc. The results are presented on the graph below and show that 43%

of the women would most like to work in Social Care including childcare, care in the community, social work, counselling and youth work. Following that 29% wanted to work in Community Work (including advocacy, research and campaigning work), 21% in Office/Admin work (including payroll and human resources), 19% in Education & Training (including teachers, teaching assistants, trainers), 17% in Arts, Design, Entertainment and Media and 17% in Hospitality Catering & Tourism.

In discussing why they wanted to work in these areas most of the women said it was because it was an area they felt passionate about. The women talked about wanting to work with children, being involved in youth work and having the ability to shape children's lives, working with people in the community to help with the issues they were facing, giving back in areas where they had their own personal experiences including mental health/counselling and wanting to work in areas where they had personal interests like arts, crafts, gardening, working with animals, etc.



*“At my age I have to be practical as well, certain areas would be very fulfilling like community work but money wise you still need to earn enough.”*

*“Practically I’d go back into schools and be a classroom assistant because that would work around the kids – that’s the ideal workaround for now. But I’d love to be a midwife, the only thing that’s putting me off is University. It takes years and I don’t have the money for it, it’s too dear. Say the childcare was sorted to allow you to do it, it’s the money it would take.”*

*“For me it would be community level youth work. There are quite a few jobs in this area but if you don’t have the experience, it’s hard to get them. You have to have a year’s experience but how do you get it?”*

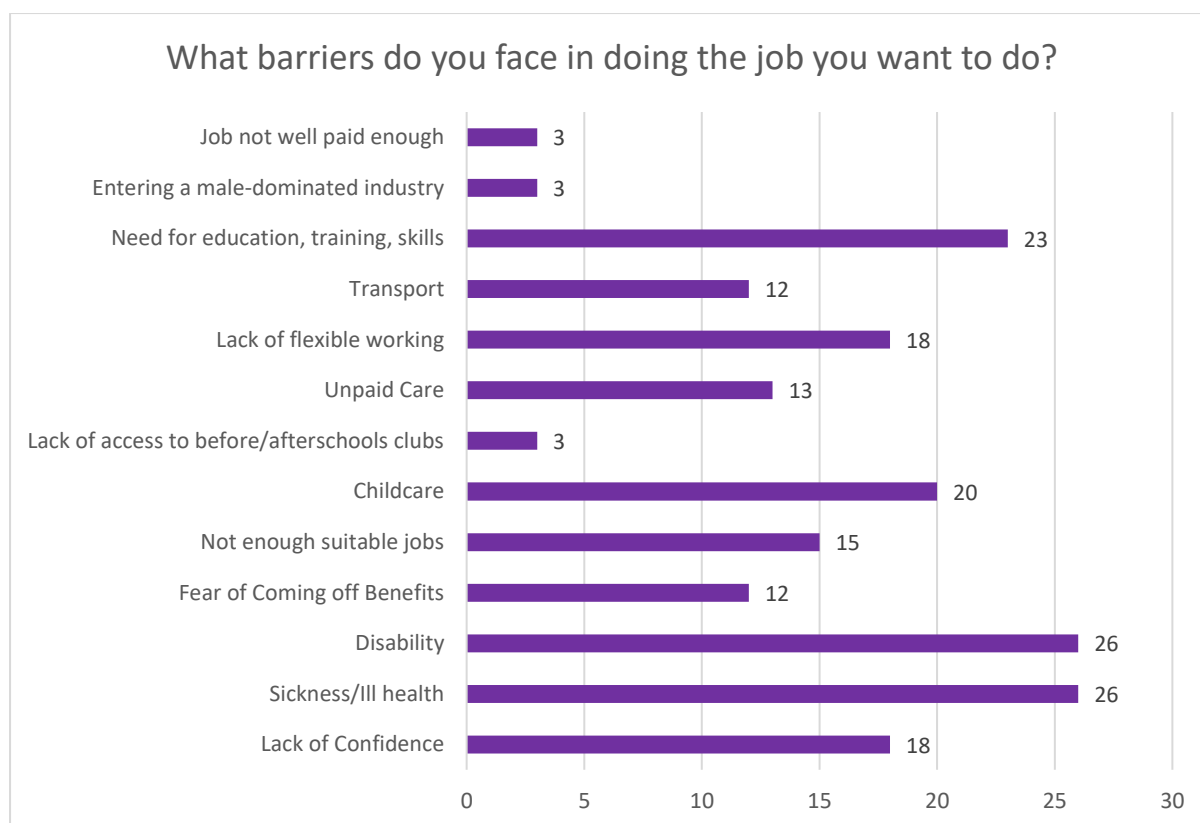
*“I want to work in care but you need to be able to drive. Because I don’t drive I’d have to work in a care home and I don’t want to do that, I want to work in care in the community.”*

*“I would like to work in jobs around mental health/counselling – to help other people.”*

*“I’d like to be able to have my own business of crafting/sewing – it’s something I can be focused on and I can do, it’s good for me.”*

### **What is currently stopping you from doing the job you really want to do?**

The women who took part in this research were asked about the barriers they face in doing the job they would most like to do. The results are presented in the graph below but highlight the biggest barriers are around sickness/ill health (43%), disability (43%), the need for education, training and skills (38%), childcare cost, availability and flexibility (33%), lack of confidence in themselves (30%), lack of flexible working including working from home, part-time work (30%), not enough suitable jobs in the area (25%), unpaid caring responsibilities (22%), fear of coming off benefits and being worse off (20%) and problems with the cost and availability of transport (20%).



***“I have been unable to work for the last year due to ill health and trying to focus on recovery from addictions. I have also had a lot of health appointments and I don’t drive.”***

***“I was made redundant then I had a baby and then another baby so I’m on maternity leave. I’m only able to look for work now as the children are starting school.”***

***“I have disabilities and mental health issues myself plus I care for my daughter who has extremely bad mental health.”***

***“There is a lack of part-time posts and poor health prevents me from full-time work.”***

***“I have a child with a disability and it’s hard to find suitable childcare so I need to have quite flexible hours or be my own boss.”***

***“My biggest problem is lack of confidence and finding a suitable job in the area as well as my age.”***

***“I care for my elderly parent and I would need lengthy and involved retraining to go back to work.”***

***“I would be interested in becoming self-employed but I’d need money to do that, the training to do it and support while I’m training.”***

**If you are unable to work due to sickness, ill health or disability, could you work if more supports were put in place to help you?**

Women who reported being unable to work due to sickness, ill health or disability were asked if they could work if more supports were put in place to help them. 47% of the women said that they could work if more supports were put in place and 51% said they could not. Most reported that more flexibilities in the workplace and understanding from employers would help them to move into work as well as more suitable job opportunities for those with ill health and disabilities.

*“More flexibility, work would need to be very flexible and have an understanding employer as my mental health can change from day to day. It would be good to be able to work from home and have part-time hours.”*

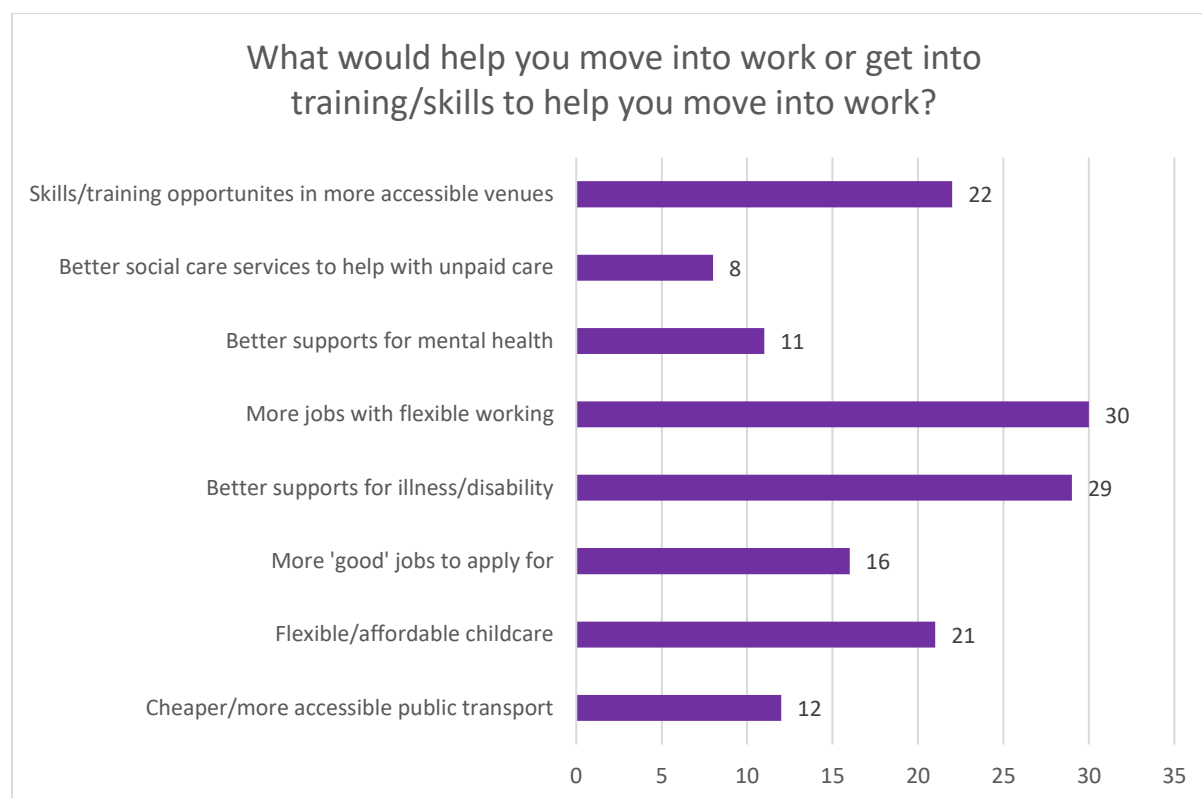
*“There is a need for more flexibility/understanding from employers who are willing to co-operate with you around your disability and for you not to lose benefits.”*

*“Understanding from the employer that sometimes in the mornings it may be hard to leave the house for me (due to the nature of my illness and the additional needs of my children) so I may be slightly late.”*

*“I have ADHD, in order to work I would need help and support. If I had had the help and support I needed this might have kept me working. But there was too much pressure on my mental health and it came out in my physical health too so I’m not working now.”*

**What would help you to make the move into paid work or get into a training/skills programme to help you move into work?**

In response to this question 52% of the women said that access to more jobs with flexible working would help them move into work. 50% said that better supports for illness/disability would help them and 38% wanted skills and training opportunities in more accessible venues to help them access training/skills programmes. Flexible, affordable childcare would help 36% of the women access work or training/skills and 28% reported that having more ‘good’ jobs to apply for in their area would help them. Cheaper, more accessible public transport was mentioned by 21% of the women.



***“You have to be mentally prepared to go to work – how are they going to get people back to work especially if they’ve suffered mental health issues. There needs to be more trained counsellors to help them get back to work.”***

***“More affordable childcare, after schools clubs and school holiday cover.”***

***“Help with the cost of transport. Flexibility, free training to help with skills to be ready for a job and to get benefits when in training.”***

***“Flexible working and adjustments made to sickness absence policies to accommodate those with chronic conditions.”***

***“More courses to learn language skills and opportunities to get skills and experience and jobs for women like us (minority ethnic group).”***

***“Travel cards would help. Half price on travel or something to help you with transport costs. I don’t drive so something to help with transport would really help me.”***

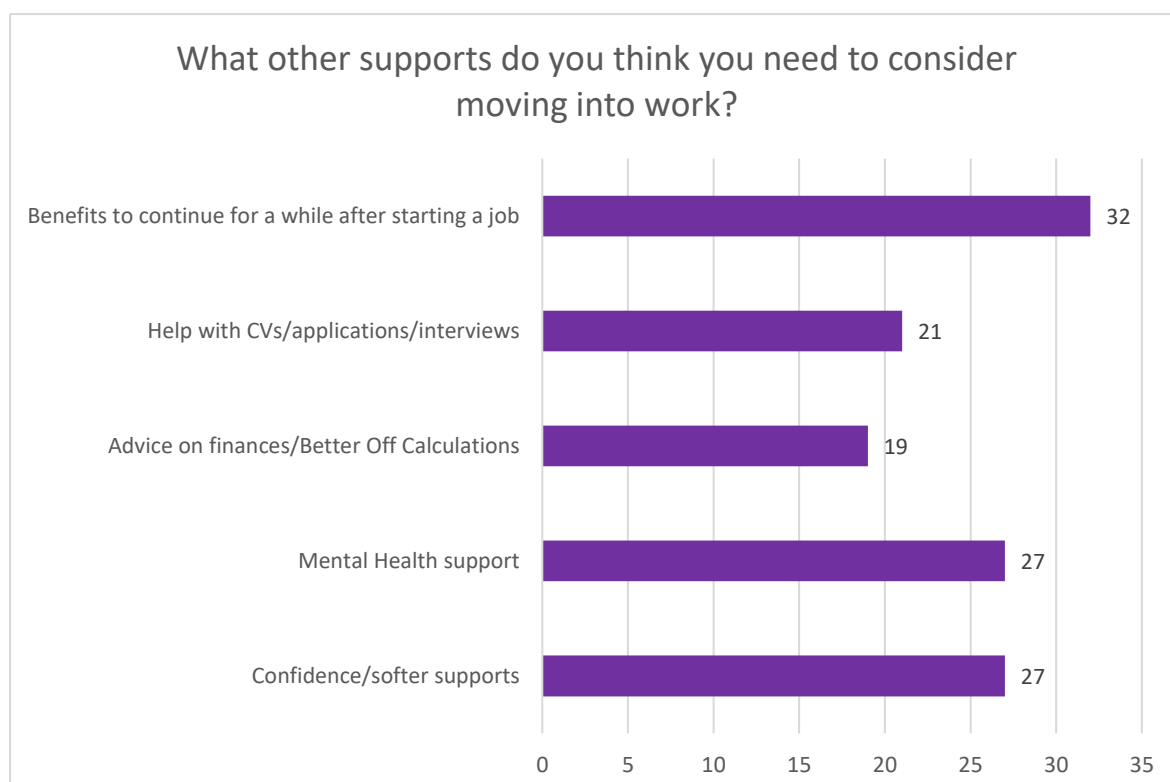
***“There was a course on working on TV/media but it went over the nursery school times which meant you can’t travel back and forth to get the kids. They need to make sure the window of training is more suited to mums.”***

*“Some qualifications are full time and there’s no help with your rent. It just encourages you to take on student loans and debt. It would help if courses were online so there are less barriers.”*

*“I live in Ballyclare, there’s a bus service into Belfast but it’s not that frequent and it finishes at 8pm. Even if I wanted to do a course in the evenings how would I get home?”*

**If you had the skills/education/training you needed for a job, what other supports do you think you would need to consider to move into work?**

In response to this question most of the women (56%) said they would like benefits to continue for a period after starting a job so that they had some additional financial support at the start of a job and wouldn’t have to reapply for benefits if the job didn’t work out. 49% of the women said they would need some softer supports in terms of confidence building and encouragement in relation to work and 49% stated that they felt they would need some mental health support to move into work. Help with CVs, application forms and interviews was reported by 38% of the women and 35% said they would like help with advice on finances/better off calculations to find out if taking a job is worthwhile.





*“At the moment a lot of it is fear and lack of confidence because I have been out of work due to illness for a year and before that when working I had extended periods off. I am now in recovery and in a much better position to return to work but the fear stops me.”*

*“Benefits run on – that would be perfect. If I was to go back to work now the only way we could break even would be for me to work full time. At the minute we’re getting Universal Credit and help with housing. If I was to go back to work that all goes away so we’re actually worse off. And you’d have to pay extra for childcare.”*

*“It’s a risk to take a job, there’s uncertainty around it, it’s really hard to figure it out, it’s a minefield what you’re entitled to. Monthly pay is a killer after coming off benefits. You should be allowed to keep your benefits for a while.”*

*“All the training is aimed at different skills but not enough for building confidence or self-esteem. That’s really important for people who have been out of work for so long. I mean mental health is the biggest thing. There isn’t enough support/workshops around that.”*

*“It would be good to have help with confidence building and applying for jobs. Sometimes you open up the job specification and it just puts the fear in you so much.”*

*“Everything is now sign up through the link but what do you do if you don’t know how to do that? Lots of people don’t have the computer skills they don’t have the confidence to do things online.”*

**If you wanted to do a skills/training course or get help to make the move into work where would you prefer to do it?**

The vast majority of the women would prefer to access education, skills development and training in a Women’s Centre (97%). The women were comfortable with the learning environment in Women’s Centres/groups and had a range of additional supports they needed including childcare, proximity to home/schools and flexibilities to enable them to attend/complete a course. 32% of the women said they would prefer to do a course with a charity or community organisation, 25% in a further education college, 20% in a Government training scheme and 17% said they didn’t care where they did a course/training.

Most of the women were put off accessing skills/training in venues other than Women’s Centres or community groups/charities because they were uncomfortable

with more the more formal and less flexible learning environments often with bigger class sizes. They also reported being put off by being in an unfamiliar environment and having anxieties around meeting new people. A number of the women felt intimidated by a lack of confidence, skills and knowledge and a feeling there was too much focus on work outcomes rather than personal development in other venues. Some of the women were put off by the venues being further away from their homes and having no childcare to allow them to undertake the course/training.



***“Falls Women’s Centre is more flexible, it’s more comfortable, there’s more support, patience, understanding, it feels more like home from home.”***

***“I was doing a course in childcare at the TEC but I left after 3 months. My mindset is in a totally different place from them. I couldn’t listen to a load of 16-year-old wee girls. We were all that age once but it just wasn’t for me.”***

***“It’s not just about the education at Atlas Women’s Centre, it’s also support through crisis situations. The support is for the whole family not just the mum. Atlas provides me with freedom – free training, opportunities to progress and achieve and childcare. Atlas puts the enjoyment back into learning because you feel like you want to learn and you know that your child is learning in the same building. You feel a part of a family when in Atlas.”***

*“I like coming into Women’s Centre Derry because it’s local and I don’t have to pay for a taxi. It provides childcare and the numbers in the rooms are much smaller. I just feel easier coming into the Women’s Centre.”*

*“There’s fear going into an environment that isn’t as friendly as we have in Footprints Women’s Centre. I just wouldn’t go near it. This is more like a family environment, I’d be here every day if there was a course on!”*

*“If you feel comfortable you’re going to learn better. You can ask questions in Falls Women’s Centre, you don’t feel stupid, you feel comfortable – you’re going to get the support and understanding so you’re going to flourish.”*

*“I wouldn’t have a problem going somewhere else (other than a Women’s Centre) to do training if I had the childcare. I wouldn’t have the anxiety about going in somewhere else. My only issue is childcare.”*

*“Greenway Women’s Centre know how to train in the community, they speak our language. They helped me to identify the skills in my own life to bring out to help apply for jobs – budgeting, running the house.”*

*“Coming to the WALD Centre is better, you don’t have to travel far, you’re always going to know someone and not feel out of place. If you go other places you think everybody else knows more than I do. You’re sitting there in the background hoping nobody asks you anything. It’s a smaller building, there’s no young ones hanging around and there’s parking!” (rural group)*

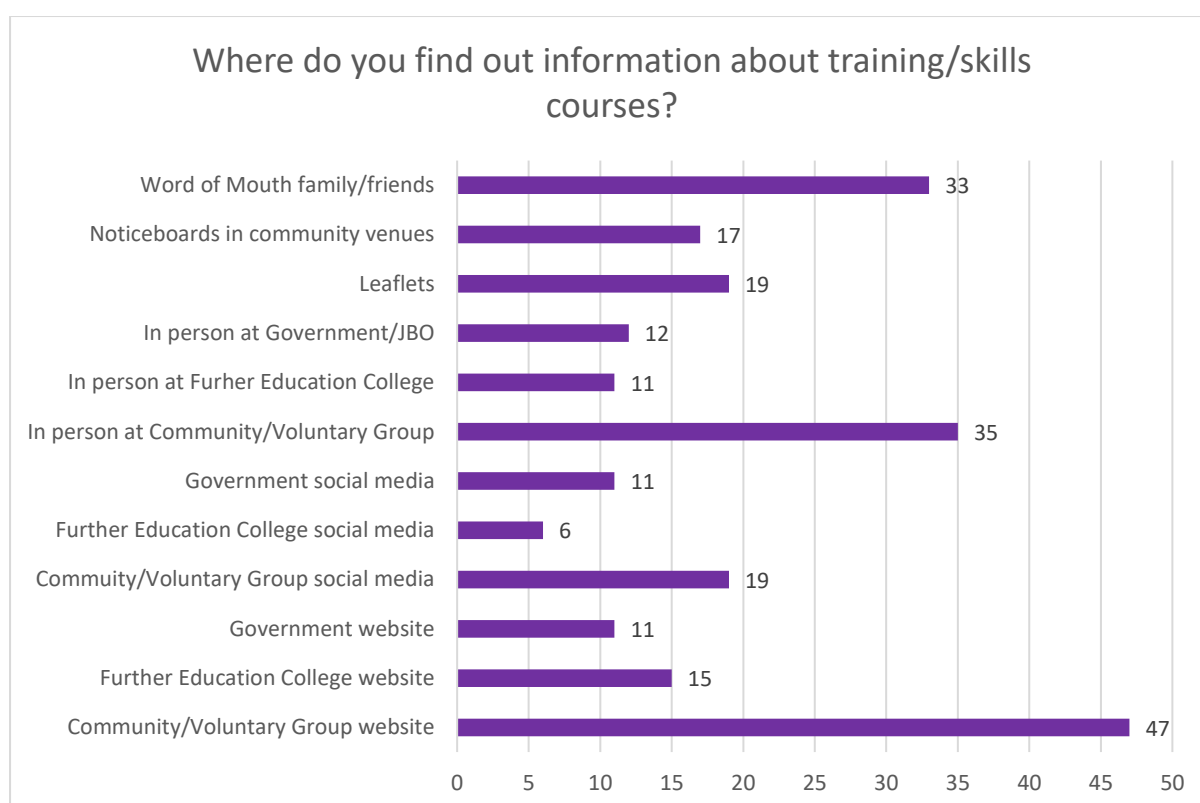
*“I prefer to do training in Windsor Women’s Centre – besides the fact the environment is friendly, it’s not intimidating, there’s childcare or flexibility if you have to bring your child. There’s understanding that you have these outside responsibilities.”*

*“I want to do a level 3 media course and I’m thinking about going back to full time education but the barrier is that everyone will be 16-24. In WomenSTEC the demographic doesn’t make you feel like you’re walking into a creche! I am so grateful that WomenSTEC exists. I’ve been able to do personal finance and a wee plumbing class. For me someone with mental health issues and a physical condition the supportive environment lets me do that and I can test the limits of my condition and see what I am able to do.”*

*“Coming to Windsor Women’s Centre is better for me, there’s childcare in the Centre. My house is not so far so it’s close for me and the time is flexible. There are a lot of courses and opportunities here and I get great support from the project workers who advised me to apply for a Masters which I hope will get me a good job here. The workers in the Centre understand us and they know our needs and circumstances.” (minority ethnic project)*

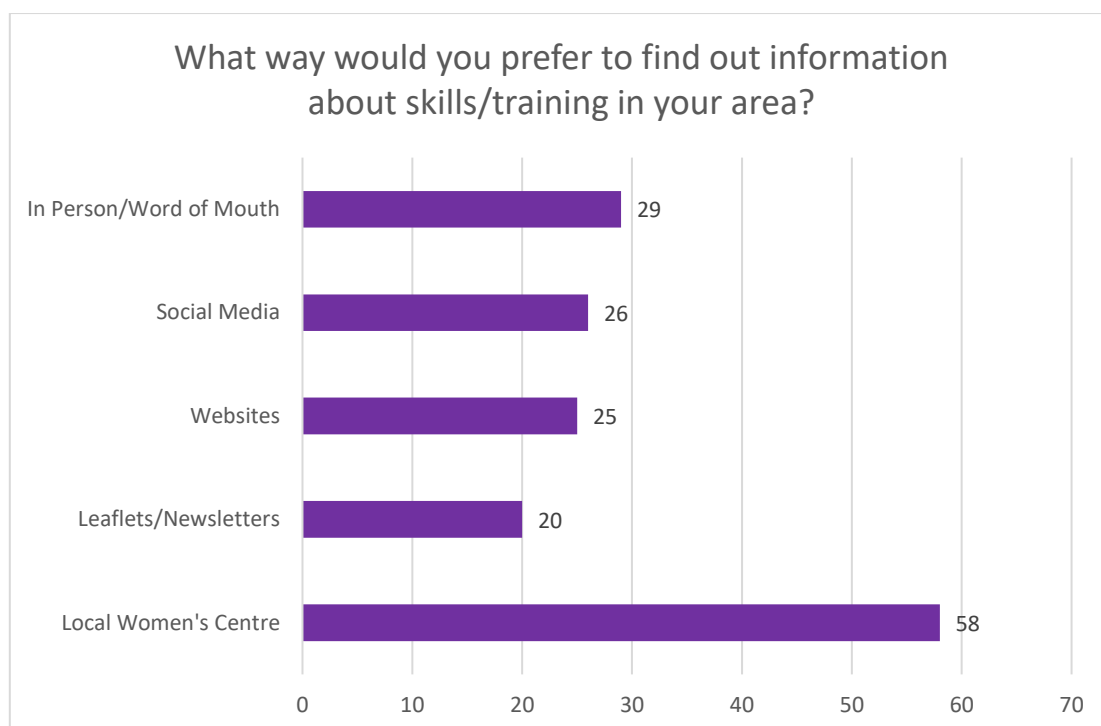
### Where do you currently go to find out information about the training courses/skills programmes in your area or where would you go if you wanted to find out this information?

The majority of the women found out information about training/skills courses from Community and Voluntary group sources – websites (80%), social media (32%) and in-person (59%). Word of mouth through family and friends was also reported by a significant number of the women (56%). Other more commonly used ways of finding out information were through leaflets (32%) and noticeboards (29%).



### What way would you prefer to find out information about skills/training opportunities in your area?

Almost all the women (97%) preferred to find out information about skills/training opportunities from their local Women's Centre. 48% preferred to find out this information in person through word of mouth, 43% preferred to find out via social media, 42% through websites and 33% through leaflets and newsletters.



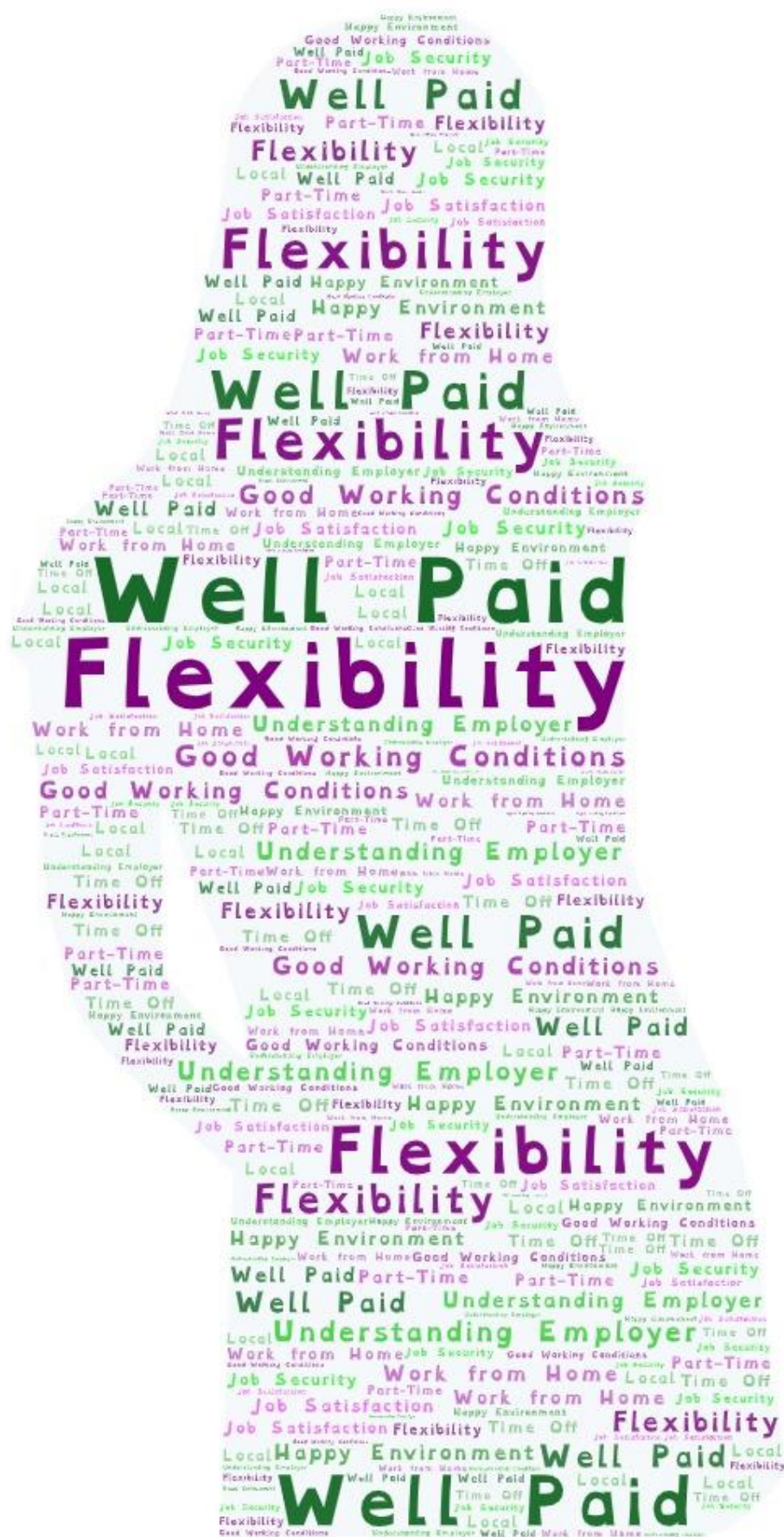
*“I’ve found out about jobs in a mixture of ways – word of mouth often – that’s how I found out about the Women Breaking Barriers project.”*

*“I never go on a Government website. I never look at Government sites I think I don’t have the qualifications for what they’re advertising for.”*

### What do you think is a ‘good job’?

The women were asked to provide some information around what they thought were ‘good jobs’ and the most commonly raised characteristics of good jobs are represented in the word cloud below. Most of the women raised issues around having flexibility in a job to allow them to balance their working life with their family commitments and childcare. Equally important was for jobs to be well paid to allow the women to pay their essential bills and to afford the costs of childcare and transport. The women also discussed patterns of work that would be most beneficial including part-time work, secure work and the ability to work from home. The women also thought that good jobs had good working conditions including access to family friendly policies and employers who were understanding of their personal circumstances whether that be illness/disability or caring responsibilities. Some of the women discussed the importance of a happy work environment where they felt supported and valued and others talked about the importance of having jobs that were local to them.





*“A good job is one that can work around you and what you need to do for your home and family.”*

*“A good job has nice working colleagues and of course money! You need to be paid enough to make ends meet and provide for your family.”*

*“The reason I stopped working in the company I worked for was because there was no flexibility with them, no family friendly policies. They didn’t care I was a mother. The company was very old school, run by men with no understanding whatsoever. I would have stayed if they had been better, they didn’t trust their staff and we weren’t allowed to work from home.”*

*“Good jobs are not just about the economic value and the pay it’s about flexibility and a good work life balance. Stress and feeling comfortable are issues for women – having to do it all! And then the pressure this puts on mental health services when women don’t have this.”*

*“For myself with three children and caring for my mother it would be the ability to work from home and for there to be more part-time jobs.”*

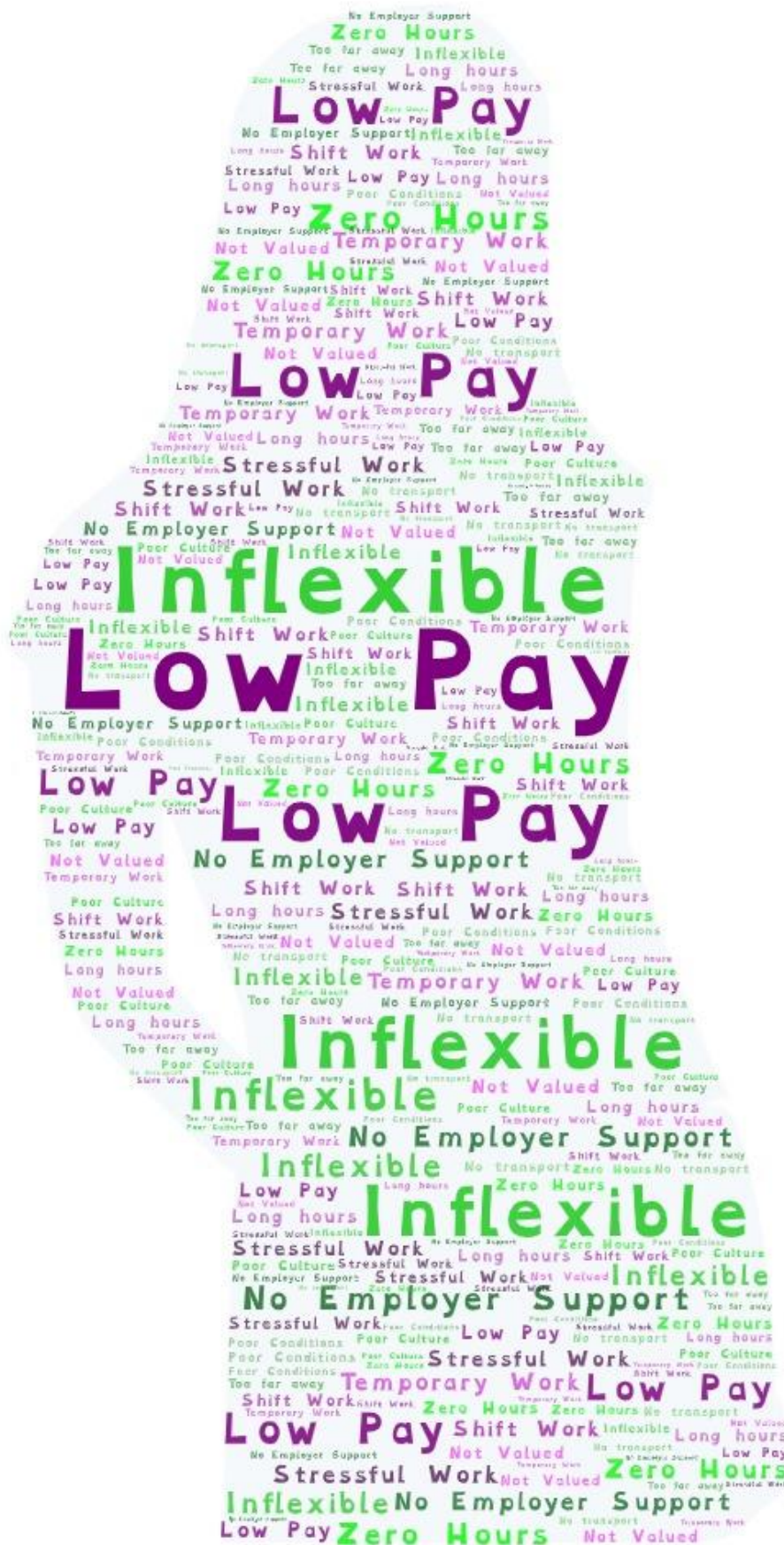
*“A job that you’re passionate about, where you are valued as an employee and where there is some flexibility to attend appointments, understanding of mental health issues and help with transport.”*

*“Flexible working hours to fit around caring responsibilities, sufficient wage to cover your bills, transport and the ability to work from home.”*

*“A job with flexible hours so that I wouldn’t have to worry about childcare and one that pays well enough to come off benefits and a happy environment to work in with good management.”*

### **What do you think is a ‘bad’ job?**

The women were asked to provide some information around what they thought were ‘bad jobs’ and the most commonly raised characteristics of bad jobs are represented in the word cloud below. These were mostly the converse to what was considered a good job namely low paid and inflexible work. Many of the women identified patterns of employment that they considered bad work such as Zero Hours Contracts, temporary work and shift work. They discussed lack of support and understanding from employers about their personal circumstances, issues around poor management, working long hours and stressful or demanding work. Poor conditions of work, poor workplace culture and feelings of not being valued in a job were also raised as being bad work.





*“Lots of jobs now are only temporary so there’s no permanent contract and you just get bits and pieces of work or term-time and then you get no pay over the summer.”*

*“Zero hours contracts are bad because you just don’t know. There’s no security, no consistency you just don’t know what you’re getting from week to week. You can’t plan your life or anything.”*

*“With zero hours you can get nothing then you can get completely engulfed and do 60-70 hours a week then radio silence. You feel so undervalued.”*

*“I did childcare to become a classroom assistant to get paid less than someone working in McDonalds. You shouldn’t have to train for a full year and pass an exam for a job that pays less than working in a supermarket.”*

*“A job that you aren’t passionate about and aren’t valued in. Jobs that are very strict/inflexible and have no consideration for mental health.”*

*“Temporary work, shift work, badly paid work, no childcare facilities.”*

*“A job that is high demanding and can’t be left at work, affecting my home life. One where you’re not treated well or have bad management and have unrealistic targets and deadlines.”*

*“Low appreciation, low paid, exhausting and stressful work.”*

### **What would you like to see Government do to help you increase your education/skills or help you to make the move into work?**

The majority of the women wanted to see more investment in women’s education and training at community level in the venues where they feel comfortable and supported. Some of the women suggested that Government did not understand enough about the community education that takes place in Women’s Centres and how it helps to overcome barriers and this meant they did not recognise the value of it in women’s lives. The women felt that Government needed to listen more to the experiences of women on the ground in terms of what they need and what works for them in order to make decisions and take action that would really help them to access training, education and work.

The women discussed the various barriers they face accessing education, training and work and wanted Government to do more to help overcome them. This included helping to provide more affordable childcare (including for children with additional

needs and school holiday childcare), more support for people with disabilities, cheaper transport and free access to courses with grants available to help them meet their essential bills while trying to improve their education and skills. A number of the women wanted to see more courses in areas like building confidence and self-esteem as these are often barriers to work for women.

Mental health issues were seen as a significant barrier and a wider lack of service provision to help address mental health problems was reported by the women. More Government funding for counselling services and other supports for mental health is needed to help people get back to work.

Some of the women wanted to see Government allow for a run-on in social security benefits to allow those starting work to continue receiving their benefits for a while until they were sure that the job was right for them and their families and to provide security and financial support at the start of a new job. They also stressed that it was harmful for Government to force people into jobs they were not interested in.

The women also discussed the opportunities through training schemes that were open to younger people but not available to them. They saw a need for investing in 'older' women who want to learn new skills, get into work or return to work after illness or having children. Minority ethnic women also wanted to see more recognition of their qualifications to enable them to get into work and into better quality work.

The role of employers was discussed and some of the women felt that they could do more to support people into work through family friendly policies and adjustments for people with disabilities. Some felt that this needed to be legislated for to ensure that employers could be held to account for their failure to support people. Some of the women suggested providing training and skills courses linked to employment opportunities so there was a possibility of a job at the end of the course.

***“Politicians need to see what it’s like to work in these jobs for a month to see what it’s like. They don’t understand the everyday struggles of people on the***

*ground. They should come to the Women's Centres and listen to what's going on in women's lives."*

*"It would be good to have a grant to be able to do the courses you want to do. It's OK to take me off benefits but give me a grant to help me live so that I can better myself and get a better job and pay taxes so I'm not relying on the Government."*

*"They need to take a holistic approach to everybody's employability, there needs to be a more individual approach."*

*"10% off travel to work or if there was some incentive that was tax deducted or something. Something like that to help you with part of your travel."*

*"If you could keep your benefits for three months so you can give the job a try, get used to the money, budget, just to support you while you try a job – give that wee bit of a cushion/breathing room when starting a job."*

*"If the Government were to put more money into childcare they would have more women out working. It absolutely would make a difference having cheaper childcare. I have twins and it just doesn't pay you to do it. You're working to pay your childcare costs and you've nothing left."*

*"A training course run by an employer would be brilliant – if you do this course and pass it there's the possibility they're going to pick someone to employ from that course. Training with the possibility of a job at the end."*

*"They should have a JobStart for older people – they need to increase the age of it or not have an age limit. They're expecting people to work into their 70s now so they should extend the age for schemes to help people into work."*

*"Need more free courses and childcare for people to be able to go to courses. If you're a parent and you don't have childcare you can't come."*

*"There's a role for employers to do more – but more than that it needs to be legislated for – they should be held to account when they fail to support people."*

*"Lots of people are struggling with their mental health, there are not enough places helping with mental health. Loads of people have lost their jobs and need help and counselling to get into work. It's so needed but there's no money for it."*

*"More confidence building/mental health/self-esteem courses and workshops. Government should not be forcing people into jobs that don't interest them."*

*"There needs to be more support for people with disabilities - most disabled people do want to work but are unable to find employers/positions that are understanding/suitable."*

## 4. Conclusions and Recommendations

***“A good job is one that pays the Living Wage and you have some flexibility in it and you can afford the essentials.”***

*(Participant in Focus Group Session)*

This quote from one of the women who took part in this research captures some of the major considerations for women around getting into work and what constitutes a ‘good job’. Good quality work which is secure, pays well, provides flexibility around caring responsibilities and other barriers and provides supports for sickness and disability can have clear benefits for gender equality, women’s financial wellbeing and their participation and progression within the economy.

The findings of this research clearly show that women face many barriers to work and in trying to access the education and skills they need to access good jobs. The structural inequalities which mean that women are more likely to provide care, particularly childcare, increasing levels of sickness and disability particularly around mental health and a lack of confidence and skills to access good quality work were frequently reported as barriers to work for women.

What is also evident from this research is the need for education and skills development for women particularly for those furthest from the labour market alongside other critical ‘softer’ supports including confidence building and managing stress. It is clear from discussions with women the highly valued role that Women’s Centres and women’s organisations play in providing access to education and skills and support into employment. These trusted local spaces provide the education and skills that women want and need to better their opportunities and access work in a welcoming and supportive environment that caters specifically for the barriers they face.

Throughout this research it is clear that economic inactivity has links with health including mental health, caring responsibilities including childcare, low-income and deprivation, poor educational attainment, social security, rurality and ethnicity. This illustrates the scale of the actions that need to be taken to make sustainable

improvements in the current high levels of women's economic inactivity. It is imperative therefore that a cross-departmental approach is taken to tackling this long-standing and engrained problem in Northern Ireland.

The key research findings which are summarised below show that action is needed to address the many barriers preventing women participating in the labour market. This includes the urgent need for accessible, affordable childcare including for children with additional needs, the availability of a range of workplace flexibility policies to cater for sickness, disability and unpaid care responsibilities, supports to encourage and bolster women's feelings of worth and confidence and actions within the social security system to allow for more and better supports for those considering moving into work after a period of inactivity.

The examples included in this report show the significant impacts for women of being out of work including financial hardship, poverty, loss of confidence, social isolation and health impacts particularly in the area of mental health. A lack of long-term, targeted actions to address the underlying causes of economic inactivity has consigned many women who want to work to a life outside of the labour market. In addition, a lack of investment in skills and education for these women, in the format which best works for them and with the supports they need, further prevents them from accessing work and particularly good quality work. The ongoing failure to address these issues continues to leave many women who want to work excluded from the workforce often condemning them to a life of poverty and robbing the economy of a valuable resource in a time of ongoing labour force shortages.

### *Summary of Key Findings*

- **Women's reasons for being out of work:** 45% said looking after children, 17% said the cost/availability of childcare, 55% said sickness/disability, 28% said unpaid care, 22% said a lack of flexible working opportunities, 17% said a lack of confidence in themselves, 13% said the cost/availability of transport, 13% said they needed education/training to be able to get work/get better

quality work, 12% said there weren't enough suitable jobs in their area, 8% said they would be worse off in work.

- Women in rural areas reported many similar reasons for being out of work and reported some additional barriers which were focused on lack of service provision in their area particularly around transport.
- Women from minority ethnic communities also reported many similar reasons for being out of work and reported some additional barriers which were focused on racism and language barriers.
- **Areas women would most like to work:** 43% said social care, 29% said community work, 21% said office/admin work, 19% said education or training, 17% said Arts, Design, Entertainment & Media and 17% said Hospitality, Catering & Tourism.
- **What is stopping women from doing the job they really want to do:** 43% said sickness/ill health, 43% said disability, 38% said they needed education, training & skills, 33% said childcare cost, availability and flexibility, 30% said lack of confidence, 30% said lack of flexible working, 25% said not enough suitable jobs in their area, 22% said unpaid care responsibilities, 20% said fear of coming off benefits and 20% said the cost/availability of transport.
- 47% of women who were not working due to sickness/ill health/disability said they could work if more supports were put in place.
- **What would help women make the move into work or training/skills to help get into work:** 52% said access to more jobs with flexible work, 50% said better supports for illness/disability, 38% said skills/training opportunities in more accessible venues, 36% said flexible/affordable childcare, 28% said having more 'good' jobs to apply for in their area and 21% said having cheaper/more accessible transport.
- **What other supports women felt they needed to work:** 56% said for benefits to continue after starting a job, 49% said softer supports like confidence building/encouragement, 49% said mental health support, 38% said help with CVs, application forms and interviews and 35% said advice on finances/better off calculations to find out if taking a job is worthwhile.
- **Where would women prefer to do a skills/training course:** 97% said a Women's Centre, 32% said a charity/community organisation, 25% said a

further education college, 20% said a Government training scheme and 17% said they didn't care where they did it.

- **Where do women find out information about training/skills programmes:** the majority found out from community/voluntary group sources including 80% from websites, 59% in-person and 32% from social media. 56% said word of mouth through family/friends, 32% said leaflets and 29% said noticeboards.
- **Where would women prefer to find out about skills/training in their area:** 97% said from their local Women's Centre, 48% said in-person/word of mouth, 43% said social media, 42% said websites and 33% said leaflets and newsletters.
- **What women think are 'good' jobs:** jobs which are well paid, flexible, secure work, the ability to work from home, the availability of part-time work, good working conditions including family friendly policies, understanding employers, local jobs and a happy working environment.
- **What women think are 'bad' jobs:** jobs which are low paid, inflexible, zero hours contracts, temporary work, shift work, unsupportive employers, poor management, long working hours, stressful/demanding work, poor conditions of work, poor workplace culture and not being valued in work.
- **What Government should do:** more investment in women's education and training at community level, listen to women's needs and what works for them, more affordable childcare, more support for people with disabilities, cheaper transport, free access to courses with grants for living costs, more courses in confidence and self-esteem, more funding for mental health support, a run-on in social security benefits when starting work, training/skills opportunities for women of all ages, more recognition of qualifications from other countries and employers doing more to support people into work.

Based on the research findings we have identified the following recommendations that are needed to support women to overcome the barriers they face entering the labour market and in accessing the education and skills they need to do so.



---

*Recommendations*

- Community education is vital in the lives of many women in deprived and rural areas of Northern Ireland helping to overcome the multiple barriers they face in accessing education, skills and work. The community education provided by Women's Centres and women's groups, situated at the heart of local communities, with a unique understanding of their women and supported by childcare, must be valued and invested in. **The Women's Regional Consortium recommends that Government provide long-term, sustainable funding for the full cost of delivery of community-based women-only, training and education provided by Women's Centres and groups.**
- There is a strong relationship between low levels of educational attainment, economic inactivity and under-employment. Education is a crucial pathway to work and to better quality work. **The Women's Regional Consortium recommends the creation of more Government funded training and education schemes to help those with no qualifications, those most likely to be economically inactive and those in low paid work. These schemes should be developed with local employers to address existing labour shortages so that there is a greater probability of a job on completion of the scheme. These schemes should be free, open to people of all age groups, those in part-time work and those on out of work benefits.**
- The Women's Regional Consortium supports many of the proposals outlined in the Good Jobs Employment Rights Bill recently consulted on by the Department for the Economy. **The Women's Regional Consortium want to see the enacted Good Jobs Employment Rights legislation provide for paid Carer's Leave (at the worker's normal rate of pay), a day one right to flexible working and the banning of zero-hours contracts. We also want to see the final legislation include a new day one right to sick pay, extending parental leave and protection from unfair dismissal which have all been included in the Employment Rights Bill in Westminster but which are missing from the current Bill in Northern Ireland.**
- Childcare is a major barrier to women's participation in the labour market. **The Women's Regional Consortium want to see delivery of a fit for purpose,**

**accessible, affordable childcare system across the whole of Northern Ireland including appropriate childcare for children with special needs. This must include childcare for those on the lowest incomes to enable them to access the education, training and skills they need to help them make the move into work and to remain in work.**

- The disability employment gap in Northern Ireland is high and qualification levels among disabled people are lower. **The Women's Regional Consortium recommends improving access to education and learning opportunities for people with disabilities including more targeted actions by employers in providing access to training and employment for those with a disability. The Consortium also wants to see local health services better integrated with employment support services focusing on the health conditions which are causing increasing rates of economic inactivity.**
- Economic inactivity due to mental health reasons is growing and there are higher rates of mental ill-health in Northern Ireland yet there are delays and long waiting lists to access mental health support services. **The Women's Regional Consortium is concerned about the impact of mental health issues on women including how it impacts on their ability to participate in the labour market and want to see investment in improving access to mental health support services across Northern Ireland.**
- Many women work in the care and service sectors which are often associated with insecure, low-paid work with poor terms and conditions. **The Women's Regional Consortium wants to see greater value placed on these jobs and for Government, employers and Trade Unions to work together to improve the quality of these jobs, increase pay levels and invest in skills development in these areas.**
- Employers have a key role to play in providing 'good jobs' with policies in place to help workers balance work with their personal circumstances backed up by supportive attitudes around asserting these rights. **The Women's Regional Consortium recommends that employers should do all they can to make it easier for workers to combine their work with caring responsibilities, sickness and disability, including the provision of flexible working, family and carer's leave which goes beyond the statutory minimum where**

**possible.**

- There is a need to address the poverty that many women face as a result of low levels of support in the social security system which can act as a barrier to both education and work. **The Women's Regional Consortium supports the Essentials Guarantee in Universal Credit so that the basic rate of Universal Credit at least covers life's essentials and can never be pulled below that level. We would also like to see the social security system provide greater levels of support to those undertaking education, training and skills development to allow them to meet their bills while trying to increase their employability.**
- Conditionality within the benefits system often pushes people into poor quality work they struggle to stay in or avoid. **The Women's Regional Consortium recommends changes to conditionality rules in the benefits system to allow those who are out of work the time and space to find a job that is more likely to last. A shift in focus from compliance to support would help more people get into better quality jobs.**
- Some women report fear of coming off benefits and into work in case they are worse off. **The Women's Regional Consortium want to see a strengthening of work incentives within the social security system to provide a benefits run-on allowing people to try work without losing their benefits and the introduction of a work allowance for second earners in Universal Credit to make it more financially worthwhile for women to take up paid work.**
- Living rurally can make it even more difficult to access a good job with fewer job opportunities and difficulties with poor infrastructure including access to childcare and transport networks. **The Women's Regional Consortium want to see increased investment in service provision in rural areas, including childcare and public transport, organised in ways which support people to increase their education and skills and to combine work with caring responsibilities.**
- Women are more likely to be economically inactive due to caring responsibilities, health issues and other structural inequalities. There is a need to prioritise policymaking that promotes women's economic equality which will ultimately strengthen economic growth. **The Women's Regional Consortium**

**recommends that in order to tackle the higher rates of inactivity among women it is important that gender mainstreaming approaches, such as gender budgeting, are adopted when designing policy responses to this issue, for example, developing gender sensitive skilling and reskilling initiatives.**