

Women, Work and Care

Policy Briefing

Dr Louise Lawson is a Lecturer in Urban Studies and Social Policy at the University of Glasgow. Her research examines poverty, health inequalities, and the gendered dynamics of work and care. She led a three-year Nuffield Foundation–funded study (2020–2024) on women in multiple low-paid employment (MLPE) and is currently researching the employment trajectories of women with caring responsibilities.

Working Carers: An Under-Recognised Social and Economic Asset

“Among working carers, 35% have reduced their hours; one in five have taken a lower-paid or more junior role. For many, flexibility comes at the price of progression. What begins as a pragmatic adjustment to manage care can harden into reduced earnings and narrower prospects, with consequences that persist long after caring changes or ends”¹

Unpaid care is one of the most significant, and least recognised, drivers of economic inactivity in the UK. Women perform the vast majority of unpaid caring including childcare, yet these responsibilities remain undervalued and insufficiently supported. As the UK Government seeks to reduce economic inactivity² and progress reforms through the Employment Rights Act³, the persistent gender imbalance in unpaid care poses a major barrier to equality, financial security, and family wellbeing.

Why This Is a Problem

- Caring responsibilities remain undervalued and disproportionately undertaken by women, limiting job opportunities, career progression, earning potential, and long-term financial security.
- Women continue to be concentrated in low-paid, low-status, traditionally female-dominated jobs, reinforcing gendered inequalities in work and income.
- Despite funded early learning and childcare for 3–5-year-olds in Scotland, provision rarely aligns with non-standard work hours (early mornings, evenings, weekends) or supports families with children of different ages.
- UK-wide, there is lack of provision for children with additional support needs and disabilities, putting extra pressure on parents and families.
- Scotland faces a deepening social care crisis marked by underfunding, rising demand, and limited formal support for older and disabled people, which disproportionately affects women who take on this role.

¹ Centre for Care 2025 [Unpaid care in 2025: rising hours, rising costs | the Centre for Care](#)

² Department for Work and Pensions (2025) [Get Britain Working White Paper - GOV.UK](#)

³ [Employment Rights Act 2025: factsheets - GOV.UK](#)

- Social security protections remain inadequate, even with the Scottish Child Payment and Carer Support Payment.
- Gaps in childcare, social care, and social security force families, especially women, to fill in through unpaid labour, compounding pressure on time, income, and wellbeing.

Research: Women in Multiple Low-Paid Employment (MLPE)

“My second job’s there to keep me afloat.” – Shannon age 26, lone parent, NHS worker and sandwich shop employee

This mixed-methods study (2020–2024)⁴ was the first to examine the nature and extent of women’s MLPE in the UK. It analysed three large-scale UK datasets and conducted in-depth interviews with 105 women in the West of Scotland⁵.

“My mum has Alzheimer’s and I help look after her...so what I can be doing during the day is running the house, doing the washing, looking after my stepkids, helping out at my mum’s and then at night after I’ve done all that is when I do all my sewing (paid work)” - Colleen, age 42, 2 teenage step children and carer for mum, ex college lecturer, 2 part-time self-employed jobs.

Key findings:

- Women in MLPE are more likely to have caring responsibilities than all working women.
- Lack of support was evident for school-age childcare, children with additional needs and disabilities, women working non-standard working hours, and for lone parents.
- Government-funded childcare and social care are often insufficient, inflexible, or inaccessible for women in MLPE.
- Combining MLPE with caring responsibilities limits job choice and career progression and heightens stress.
- Women in MLPE work across a wide variety of jobs and can have complicated employment configurations. Around six-in-ten of women in MLPE have jobs that span across different industry sectors and/or occupations and face a higher degree of insecure employment than all working women.

⁴ Full report available at [Women in multiple low-paid employment: pathways between work, care and health - Nuffield Foundation](#)

⁵ MLPE is defined as holding more than one job (including self-employment) with combined earnings ≤ two-thirds of UK median weekly earnings or can be self-defined, often characterized by low wages, job insecurity, and a lack of benefits, which can lead to financial precarity despite working multiple jobs.

Statistics:

- **3%** of working women have been in MLPE each year since 2007—**425,000 women** in 2019.
- **Almost 20%** of women experience at least one spell of MLPE over a decade.
- Women in MLPE earn **two-thirds less per hour** and **40% less per week** than all working women.
- **40%** of women in MLPE are in receipt of working-age benefits.
- Most are subject to the **Universal Credit taper**, which reduces support as earnings rise, creating a poverty trap—especially for mothers.
- **15%** of women in MLPE provide unpaid care (vs **10%** of the general workforce).
- Only **5%** of unpaid carers in MLPE received Carer's Allowance (prior to the introduction of the Carer Support Payment in Scotland) despite eligibility.
- **47%** of women in MLPE hold a degree qualification or equivalent.

Policy Challenges

- Inflexible social security rules penalise carers, predominantly women, who work.
- Childcare provision is insufficient for school-age children, those with additional needs, and during non-standard hours.
- Social care provision remains inadequate and under-funded.
- Workplaces often lack flexibility and paid carers' leave.
- MLPE reinforces gendered and economic inequalities, highlighting the need for a gender and care lens in employment and welfare policy.

Policy Recommendations for Reform

We call on:

UK and Scottish Governments, Local Authorities, and Childcare Providers to:

- Expand and reform childcare so women in low-paid work can access affordable, high-quality provision, including specialist support, school-age childcare, and full wrap-around provision.

UK and Scottish Governments to:

- Fully fund social care and deliver provision that enables families to thrive, not merely cope. Investment in high-quality social care is essential to reducing the burden of unpaid caring, which falls disproportionately on women.

Employers to:

- Pay at least the real Living Wage and implement the Living Hours Standard, guaranteeing secure, predictable work with a minimum of 16 hours per week unless employees opt out.
- Recognise that fair pay and predictable hours are critical to reducing precarity and closing gendered inequalities.

Third Sector, advocacy, and campaigning organisations to:

- Drive national debate on “women’s work and care”, championing its social and economic value.
- Advocate for caring to be named in equality legislation to tackle discrimination in recruitment, progression, job design, and access to services.
- Promote caring as a shared social responsibility, not a private burden shouldered by women and families alone.

UK Government: Specific Actions

- Reform Carer’s Allowance: peg to the National Living Wage, raise the earnings threshold, expand eligibility, and support flexible work–care combinations.
- Adjust Universal Credit: enhance the carer element, reduce conditionality, and allow annualised hours.
- Simplify Social Security eligibility and improve uptake through awareness campaigns.
- Mandate paid carers’ leave and strengthen flexible working rights.

Scottish Government: Specific Actions

- Expand Carer Support Payment and maintain the Carer’s Allowance Supplement.
- Increase funding for school-age and out-of-hours childcare; innovate provision for families with additional needs.
- Promote Universal Credit take-up as a route to childcare cost recovery and the Scottish Child Payment.
- Support the Minimum Income Guarantee pilot for unpaid carers.

Contact

Dr Louise Lawson

Email: Louise.Lawson@glasgow.ac.uk