



Research Summary: Women, Skills & Barriers to Work

Women's experiences of being in the labour market or not are shaped by a range of factors including gendered expectations of care and rising levels of ill health/disability. The impacts of exclusion from the labour market 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. It is clear that action must be taken to address this longstanding problem particularly in a climate of labour shortages and with Government focus on growing the economy, encouraging those who are economically inactive back into the workplace and the creation of better-quality jobs.

Introduction

There is an increased focus from Government on getting people into work and into 'good jobs'. Being out of work and issues around low pay, poor quality and insecure work are likely to impact more on women because of the structural inequalities and barriers they face.

Economic Inactivity

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 worse than the male rate. The most common reason for economic inactivity for both men and women is 'long-term sick'.

Almost a quarter of women who were unavailable for work gave the reason for inactivity as 'family/home commitments' and this is the least common reason given for male economic inactivity.

Structural Inequalities

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 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.

Care Responsibilities

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. 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.

Prevailing gender norms mean there is also the assumption that women will provide unpaid care for sick or disabled family members. Women are more likely to provide this care at a younger age and are also more likely to leave the labour market due to their caring responsibilities.

Illness/Disability

Disability rates are much higher in Northern Ireland than in other UK countries. Research 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. Research shows that women are often more vulnerable to suffering from poor mental health. Higher levels of deprivation in Northern Ireland may also help to explain the higher rates of disability.

People with disabilities in Northern Ireland are at a greater disadvantage 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.

Other Barriers

There are a range of other barriers which have an impact on the labour market participation of women including receipt of social security benefits, poverty, a lack of confidence/self-esteem, the need for education, training

and skills development and issues around the availability of good quality jobs which ensure that it pays to get into work.

Importance of Community Education in Addressing Barriers to Work

Education and skills levels are critical to participation in the labour market and in obtaining a 'good job'.

Community-based women's education and training has emerged in response to the educational disadvantage women experience. It is generally delivered based on local community needs and takes account of the complexity of women's lives and the 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.

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 with person-centric programmes. These can have transformative impacts on the lives of adult learners with improved educational attainment for mothers leading to benefits for them, their children, families and communities.

Findings

The findings of this research clearly show that women often face multiple barriers to getting work and in trying to access the education and skills they need to get 'good jobs'. These barriers most commonly relate to their own illness and/or disability and the structural inequalities women face particularly around the provision of care.

Key Statistics:

- ♀ **Reasons for being out of work:** 45% looking after children, 17% cost/availability of childcare, 55% sickness/disability, 28% unpaid care, 22% lack of flexible working opportunities, 17% lack of confidence, 13% cost/availability of transport, 13% needed education/training, 12% not enough suitable jobs, 8% worse off in work.
- ♀ **Areas women would like to work:** 43% social care, 29% community work, 21% office/admin, 19% education/training, 17% Arts, Design, Entertainment & Media, 17% Hospitality, Catering & Tourism.
- ♀ **What's stopping women doing the job they want to do:** 43% sickness/ill health, 43% disability, 38% needed education/training/skills, 33% childcare cost/availability/flexibility, 30% lack of confidence, 30% lack of flexible working, 25% not enough suitable jobs, 22% unpaid care, 20% fear of coming off benefits, 20% cost/availability of transport.
- ♀ **What would help women move into work/training:** 52% jobs with flexible work, 50% better supports for illness/disability, 38% skills/training opportunities in more accessible venues, 36% flexible/affordable childcare, 28% more 'good' jobs, 21% cheaper/more accessible transport.
- ♀ **Other supports needed:** 56% benefits to continue after starting a job, 49% confidence building/encouragement, 49% mental health support, 38% help with CVs/application forms/interviews, 35% advice on finances/better-off calculations.
- ♀ **Where do women prefer to do skills/training course:** 97% Women's Centre, 32% charity/community group, 25% further education college, 20% Government training scheme, 17% didn't care where they did it.
- ♀ **What women think are 'good' jobs:** well-paid, flexible, secure, the ability to work from home, part-time, good working conditions including family friendly policies, understanding employers, local jobs, happy work environment.

What women said:

"It started off with childcare, then illness and then the kids have additional needs. My biggest barrier now is my own confidence after getting out of a domestic violence situation."

"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."

"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."

"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 could get out of bed, that's the way it is with mental health."

"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."

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

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

Recommendations:

- ♀ We recommend that Government provide long-term, sustainable funding for the full cost of delivery of community-based women-only, training and education.
- ♀ We recommend the creation of more Government funded training/education schemes to help those with no qualifications, those most likely to be economically inactive and those in low paid work. They should be free, open to all those of working age, part-time workers and those on out of work benefits.
- ♀ We want to see the enacted Good Jobs Employment Rights legislation provide for paid Carer's Leave, a day one right to flexible working and the banning of zero-hours contracts.
- ♀ We want to see delivery of a fit for purpose, accessible, affordable childcare system across NI including childcare for children with special educational needs and for those on the lowest incomes to enable them to access the education, training and skills they need to work.
- ♀ We recommend improving access to education and learning opportunities for people with disabilities and better integration between local health and employment support services focusing on the health conditions causing increases in economic inactivity.
- ♀ We want to see investment in improving access to mental health support services across NI.
- ♀ We want to see greater value placed on care work and for Government, employers and trade unions to work to improve the quality of these jobs, increase pay levels and invest in skills.
- ♀ We recommend that employers do more to make it easier for workers to combine work with caring responsibilities and illness/disability, including the provision of flexible working, family and carer's leave beyond the statutory minimum.
- ♀ We support the Essentials Guarantee in Universal Credit so that the basic rate of Universal Credit at least covers life's essentials to help address poverty as a barrier to work.
- ♀ We want to see a benefits run-on in the social security system to allow people to try work without losing benefits and a work allowance for second earners in Universal Credit to make it more financially worthwhile for women to take up paid work.

What women said:

"There's no money for training in areas of community work, youth work or care work, the things I'd be interested in."

"Being out of work for five years to have my children, language barriers and childcare stopped me from working for a long time."

"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."

"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."

"Coming to the Women's Centre is better for me, there's childcare, it's close to home and the times are flexible. There are a lot of courses and opportunities and I get great support from the project workers."

"Government need to take a more individual approach to everybody's employability."

The full report '**Women, Skills & Barriers to Work**' produced by the Women's Regional Consortium is available from the Women's Regional Consortium website:

www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/research/

